

ELAINE FORD

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## IN THE MARROW

**I**N THE JOHN AMY FILLED HER PALMS with the gritty soap powder and rubbed her hands together until the skin was about to come off. The ball-point pens always leaked on her fingers, and the print on handbills and flyers stuck to her hands like blurred tattoos no matter how careful she was. Two minutes to twelve. Back in the front office she yanked open the humidity-swollen desk drawer and took out her lunch bag, praying Georgene wouldn't find one more thing for her to do before she could escape.

"Be back at twelve-thirty sharp," Georgene said. She worried about the girl, felt she was her responsibility, one she hadn't asked for. Amy's grandmother thought she ate her lunch right here in the office, and Georgene had to cover for her when the old lady telephoned: "She just went in the bathroom, I'll have her call you back." Or "I had to send her over to State Street, rush job." Georgene didn't like to tell falsehoods, wasn't good at it, feared getting caught.

Amy pulled the jangling door shut behind her. She knew Georgene would turn on the radio and eat her sandwich at her desk. Georgene had been working here since before the Flood. Never got married, had no life except the print shop, and the Baptist Church, and the Thursday night card game with the "girls." Amy would rather die than have a life like Georgene's.

Or Gapp's, for that matter. Her grandfather worked in the back where

the presses were, fed paper into them, made sure they were oiled and aligned, fixed them when they jammed or broke down. When she was a kid, before she had to spend every summer in the print shop as a regular job, Amy thought operating the presses was exciting. She'd beg to go to work with Gapp, to hang around and watch. Magic the way the blank sheets leaped into one end of the machinery and flipped out all printed at the other, faster than your eye could follow. The sweating men tossed jokes above her head. "Remember that cute little blonde girl worked here once?" they'd say. "Hair got caught in one of the presses and she came out scalped."

Now, though, Amy thought of Gapp as being chained to the machinery, a prisoner. He'd gone deaf from the din and did his work as if in a coma.

Amy sprinted across Water Street, making a guy in a florist's van jam on his brakes and swear at her, and cut between two factory buildings. The brick one had long ago been abandoned, birds flying in and out of the broken windows. The other, an auto muffler factory, was a metal prefab, corrugated iron streaked with rust.

On the *river side* of the buildings the air felt different. Cool on her skin, and if she licked her arm she'd taste salt. She followed a rough dirt path down to the bank and sat on a crate that bore a peeling, weather-soaked label from Guatemala.

Fumes from the factories and mills hung over the river. The water, scummy with oil and algae, sawdust and bits of straw, lapped against the bank. Gulls shrieked. Eating her sandwich, Amy watched a convoy of scows filled with gravel proceeding in a stately way down the river. She'd like to be riding on the tug, feeling the powerful engine rumble underneath her. Even better, she'd like to be on a really fast boat, heading far out to sea, the wind whipping her hair.

After a few minutes she heard someone coming down the path, a man she'd never seen here before. He was smoking a cigar not much bigger than a cigarette, and he wore a blue work shirt, faded with many washings, the sleeves rolled back to the upper arms. His arms swelled there, making her think of a snake that has swallowed something large. His hair was nut-brown, thinning. He must be thirty, at least.

"I saw you from the window," he said. He meant from the muffler factory up on the rise. "I noticed you because of your skirt."

Amy glanced down at her cotton skirt, which had a pattern of multi-

colored Xs and Os, like a ticktacktoe game gone out of control. The material fell loosely around her bare calves.

"I like that in a girl," he said. "Wearing a skirt." That was a lie. What he'd noticed was her hair — pale, lit by the sun, curling wispily on her thin shoulders. It made you want to stroke it the way you'd pet a young animal.

The man's green eyes, the intent way they studied her, unsettled Amy. Cigar ash fell near her sandal. She rolled her sandwich crusts into the paper bag and got up from the crate. So as not to have to pass by him, she walked away among weeds along the riverbank.

"Hey," he called, "I don't bite."

**A**MY PROMISED HERSELF she would not go back to the river. The guy from the muffler factory made her nervous because he was so old, even though he was cute, or at least the girls at school would think so. But at lunchtime the next day she couldn't face eating in the messy front office with Georgene, who would be leaning greedily over her tuna fish sandwich, the wax paper spread out on top of order blanks, crumbs stuck to her cheek. Anyway, Amy had as much right to be by the river as the muffler guy did.

In the night it had rained, bringing out the melon smell in her crate. She imagined a ship landing on a tropical island. A beach with the shells of giant snails on it, pink and pearly and smooth as silk inside. Footsteps in the sand, not her own.

She started to eat her sandwich and soon she was aware of the smoke of his cigar. He said, "We meet again."

She looked up at him. In the breeze off the river her skirt flapped around her calves. Her breasts swelled gently under a hideous blouse, out-of-date rayon or some fabric like that, heart-shaped imitation mother-of-pearl buttons, machine-made embroidery on the pressed collar. How old could she be? Sixteen? Seventeen?

"You work over there?" she asked, lifting her head at the stained corrugated rear of the muffler factory.

He explained that he was in shipping, not the greatest job, but it was okay for the time being. So long as he succeeded in keeping the supervisor off his back. "What about you?" he asked. She worked in a print shop, she said, filling out order slips and filing. Sometimes she made

deliveries, which she liked, because it got her out of the shop. In moments, it seemed, a buzzer went off inside the muffler factory, and she watched him stroll up the hill. His head had a bald spot on the crown, she noticed.

It became his habit to take his break outside when she sat on the riverbank, her skirt spread out around her, and they'd exchange a few words. One day he casually let slip that he'd done a tour in Vietnam. He wondered whether that would scare her off, almost hoped it would. But she wanted to hear about the war — *Did you ever kill anybody? Were you ever afraid you were going to die?* — more than he wanted to reveal. The next day he told her he'd spent some time in a V.A. hospital downstate. The sky was overcast, beginning to drizzle. She turned her head away, toward the river, and he saw droplets of rain caught in the fine spun web of her hair. He imagined she was guessing where his scars might be.

Another day he mentioned that he lived in a furnished room over a used clothing store. When she finally asked his name he considered lying — safer to make up a new one — but for some reason told the truth. Jack. "As in rabbit," he said, mock-leering, and she didn't quite get the joke. In a way he was glad she didn't, but at the same time her innocence made him uneasy. He could tell she was attracted to him, and it had been a long time since a pretty girl opened herself to him. Amy, her name was.

Back in the print shop she thought about how he'd looked standing near the crate, smiles crinkling the corners of his eyes. How would you describe the color of those eyes? She bought a notebook on her way home. She'd write down all the details she collected about him, to preserve them. Two-and-a-half weeks she'd known him now. In her room after supper she opened the spiral-bound notebook and wrote in careful backhand: *Things About Jack*. Underneath, she wrote, *Jack's eyes*. She thought for a while and then wrote, *Green. Not transparent, like emeralds. Green like bright stones that you find at the beach, worn smooth by the waves, still wet from the sea.*

*His hair is straight and medium brown, parted on the left side. You'd find it soft if you touched it.*

*He always wears a blue work shirt.*

In fact, she guessed it was the same shirt, washed out at night with bar soap and hung over a bathtub to dry, because, along with the smell of the cigar, he gave off, very faintly, the aroma of sour washcloth. She

could summon him at night by burying her face in her own washcloth.

*He was wounded in the war, but you can't see any scars, and he doesn't limp or anything.*

*He hates working in the muffler factory.*

*He has a brother in Los Angeles.*

*Someday he's going to raise Labrador retrievers. He likes the black ones.*

*The brand of cigars he smokes is \_\_\_\_\_.* (On Monday she'd be sure to notice when he tore off the cellophane wrapper. Maybe save it and tape it into her notebook.)

But Monday he didn't appear. She couldn't even find any of his old cigar wrappers amid the rubbish near the crate. Bite by tiny bite she ate her sandwich, telling herself that something had held up his break. Probably the mean supervisor chewing him out. By the time she finished her lunch she'd hear his work boots hurrying down the path so as not to miss her. She threw the crusts to a gull and turned toward the factory. Maybe he'd be at a window and call to her or wave. Nobody there, though, no sign of life at all. She waited, watching the gull gobble the crusts, then poke hopefully at a fast-food wrapper. At last the buzzer sounded, the end of break.

She thought he might be sick, stricken by a summer cold or the flu. He'd be all alone in his hot little furnished room over the used clothing store, too sick to go out and buy food. He could be too weak to dial the emergency number. Maybe he didn't even have a telephone.

He didn't appear on Tuesday, either. On Wednesday, she worked up enough courage to go right into the front door of the factory. In the big open area stacked with boxes, a man in a jumpsuit was riding around on a forklift. Over the noise of the machine she asked him if he knew somebody named Jack who worked there. "Jack? What's his other name?" Well, she wasn't exactly sure. He gave her a quick amused look and directed her to a partitioned cubicle at the rear.

Inside she found a woman wearing a blouse so tight the sleeves cut into her plump arms. When she finally got off the phone, Amy asked her about a person named Jack. "Jack?" Lazily she flipped through a card file and then said, "I find a Jack Gilley. That the one you mean?"

Amy said she supposed so, and the woman told her he'd been terminated, as of the end of last week.

"Terminated?" The word sounded awful to Amy. "Why?"

The woman shrugged.

"Do you have an address for him?"

"We don't give out that information," she said, picking up the phone again.

"But it's important."

Over her eyeglasses the fat woman peered thoughtfully at Amy. "You in trouble, dear?"

"Trouble?"

The woman ripped a sheet off an order pad and scribbled down an address on the back. "You make sure he helps you out. Then, if you want my advice, you'll tell him to get lost."

Four days after that, a Sunday, Amy dressed as if going to church so as to deceive her grandmother. She walked up State Street and across the old bridge, over to Exchange and Park and Center Street, up Center as far as Cobb. The whole way she was worried that he wouldn't remember who she was. That he'd laugh at her the way the man in the jumpsuit had. That he'd be with somebody else. That he'd have moved to another apartment or out of the city altogether and left no forwarding address. Out of her purse she took the page from the order pad, though she'd read it so many times she knew it by heart. 11 B Cobb.

When she found, at 11 Cobb, a used clothing store, she felt a thump in her chest like a mallet blow. The store occupied the ground floor of a two-story frame structure, an ordinary building you could walk by every day and never notice. Hanging in the shop window were wrinkled suits and dresses with ragged hem lines, bravely trying to tempt passersby inside. Somebody'd left a donation of old clothes in the doorway—the bag had fallen over and was spilling slippers with straps and ruffled dresses onto the sidewalk.

Around at the back she found 11 B. The name on the mailbox said Phipps, not Gilley, but she pressed the doorbell anyway. For ages there was no answer. A kid who was delivering Sunday papers, pushing

them along the driveway in a rusty supermarket cart, stopped to stare at her as she waited. "Looking for somebody?" he called out to her. She turned away and pressed the bell again, but even after she heard the shopping cart's wonky wheels scraping over the sidewalk on Cobb Street, the kid's insolent voice echoed in her head: *Looking for somebody?*

The sky, which had been a brilliant blue when she started out, was now clotted with low clouds, and she began to be chilly in her Sunday dress. The summer's over, she thought in despair. She'd be back in school and. . . And then suddenly there he was at the door, a day's growth of beard on his face, his soft hair unbrushed. He held not a cigar but a half-smoked cigarette in his hand.

Christ, it's the kid, he thought. The blue taffeta affair she wore made her look like she was playing dress-up in her mother's clothes. "Hi, Amy," he said, not very pleased to see her. The riverbank was one thing. A full-scale invasion of his place was another.

"You stopped coming," she said. She felt her face go red.

"I don't work there anymore."

"I know, I. . ."

He put his cigarette to his lips and inhaled. Now what? He considered telling her he was busy and shutting the door. He pictured her limping away in those ridiculous high-heeled shoes, puffy raw blisters forming on her feet. So instead he asked, "Do you want to come upstairs?"

At his question she realized all at once what he must think, the reason she'd come here. "No," she said, "that's not what I want." She wasn't going to fling herself on him. She'd die of misery first.

She backed off the stoop and ran up the driveway and along the uneven sidewalk, half stumbling, and then she heard footsteps behind her, and she knew he was coming after her. At the corner she had to stop, halted by traffic, and when he caught up to her he grabbed her arm. "What's the matter with you?" he asked, panting. His fingers tightened on her upper arm, and it occurred to her that she didn't know him at all.

"I made a mistake," she said. "I'm sorry." She hated herself for whimpering. She needed to get a tissue out of her purse, but his fingers held her. "Please let me go," she said, and when he released her she fumbled

inside the purse and several coins and pens and a lipstick fell out and went bouncing onto the pavement. He made no move to pick them up. He just waited while she wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

"You're acting like an idiot," he told her, and she answered, "I know it," and hiccupped. "Why don't you come on back," he said.

She followed him along Cobb Street, stumbling a little in her heels as she tried to keep up with him, forgetting all about the objects she'd left on the sidewalk.

The steps were dark, narrow, unswept, sagging a little under their feet. She smelled mildew and stale smoke. Inside his apartment he ordered her to sit and she obeyed, pulling a chair up to bare Formica. She didn't want to look at the bed, on which was a tangle of yellowish sheets. While he did something at the stove she fixed her eyes on an electric guitar propped against a wall.

"You can let go of your purse," he said, placing a mug of coffee in front of her. "I'm not going to steal it."

She realized she'd been clutching the purse so hard the black grosgrain had moist smeary spots from her palm. She set it on the table, the damp side down, and carefully lifted the mug with both hands. Her fingers were trembling.

But he wasn't watching her, he was digging into his corn flakes. She must have interrupted his breakfast. The cereal looked totally soggy by now, and he was going to punish her by ignoring her. She didn't know how much of the acrid coffee she was going to be able to put on an empty stomach, but she had to keep her hands clamped on the cup so they wouldn't shake. After some minutes, desperate for something to say, she asked, "Do you play?"

"Play?" He turned the word around in his head, amused at the possibilities.

"That," she said, nodding at the dusty, ruby-red instrument.

"No, not me." He reached across the table for a matchbook, and she saw again how firmly muscled was his upper arm. "My brother left it behind when he moved to L.A., and I've been lugging it from pillar to post ever since." He tore off a match and rubbed it against the matchbook three or four times before it would light. "I don't know why I bother. I doubt the thing's worth more than a few bucks."



“What does he do in L.A. — your brother?” She thought about her spiral-bound notebook, how she’d be able to enter this information when she got home.

Putting the match to his cigarette, he told her Lee’s idea had been to get into the film business, on the technical end. He knew something about lighting, used to do lighting for a band. Jack laughed and dragged on the cigarette. “Last I heard, though, he was working in a car wash. I don’t know how serious he was about the movie industry, as a matter of fact. I think it was just something Lee told people, an excuse to go to the West Coast.”

*Jack’s brother works in a car wash, she wrote in her head. No, cross that out. Jack’s brother plans to work in the film industry. His name is Lee.*

Jack leaned back in his chair and drew smoke into his lungs. The girl’s stiff dress stood away from her chest, so without even trying he was able to see the strap of her white bra, part of the cup. Her breast made him think of a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“Do?”

“Now that you’re not working in the factory anymore.”

Suddenly she was sure he was going to the West Coast, too. People did that all the time, just got into cars or vans or pickups and took off. The older brothers of people she knew in school. Her own mother, so long ago Amy had almost no memory of her. Mostly those people never came back.

Jack didn’t say anything for a while, just went on drawing on the cigarette and blowing out the smoke. She looked at the mug he’d given her and saw that a duck carrying a red umbrella was painted on the side. Why would a duck need to carry an umbrella? she wondered.

He got up from the table and tapped his cigarette ash on top of rinds and coffee grounds in the garbage pail. Why not tell her? She might be just a kid, but it wasn’t like anybody else gave a shit what he did. “The thing is,” he said, “the deal’s not signed, sealed, and delivered yet.”

“I can keep a secret.”

He looked at her innocent face, lightly freckled, without guile, and felt impelled to trust her. He told her about the piece of land out on Goose-neck Road, in Holland. Kind of swampy, but it had a little house on it. It would do all right. He found himself telling her about Panther, the perfect bitch, won best-of-breed at a show in western Massachusetts a couple of years ago. Only four years old and already'd had a couple of gorgeous litters, brought top prices.

Amy imagined him stroking Panther's silky black coat, the dog's tongue licking his fingers.

"I'm going to pick her up next week, Wednesday or Thursday," he said. "She's at a kennel downstate." He dropped the cigarette into the pail, and it sizzled against an orange rind. Before he knew what he was saying, he asked, "Why don't you come along for the ride?"

She'd have to cut school, which she'd never done in her life. She'd have to lie to her grandmother. "Okay," she said.

**O**N A SUNDAY AFTERNOON a couple of weeks later they were putting up bread and butter pickles, Amy and her grandmother. Amy hated being stuck in that dim and congested kitchen, the old linoleum so coated with damp from the boiling vinegar that her shoes kept sticking to it or skidding on it as she tried to maneuver around Gam's bulk...while Jack, her lover, was out in the cool countryside cutting down trees to make space for his kennels, the muscles in his arms flexing as he manipulated saw or ax or winched out stumps. He could be pausing now for a cigarette. If she was with him, he could be lifting her skirt, touching her, his hands smelling of earth and spruce gum...

One of the quart jars failed to seal. Impatiently Amy wiped mustard seeds off the rim and replaced the lid, returning the jar with a splash to the canner.

"I'm not going to let you wreck your life," Gam said, "over some pimply boy."

Right out of the blue, she said that. Well, Jack wasn't pimply and he wasn't a boy. Amy had already made love with him twice and felt the jagged row of stitches winding in the small of his back. She was certain she knew far more about such things than her grandmother ever had.

"There isn't any boy," Amy said.

"I'm not deaf and dumb, Amy." Her grandmother wiped her hands on her apron.

"I won't wreck my life."

"When I was your age I had nothing."

"I know, Gam." Of course she did, knew the story by heart. Hard times. Leaving the potato farm as a girl, traveling down to Bangor on her own and living in a room in a rich family's house, scrubbing floors and washing dishes to pay part of her rent. Humiliating jobs that hardly paid enough to keep body and soul together, but at least she wasn't trapped on those few acres of dirt, which produced more rocks than potatoes. Amy'd heard her grandmother's story so many times she was sick of it.

"You have it easy, compared to me. Don't thumb your nose at your luck the way your mother did."

"I *won't*, Gam."

Ethel looked at her granddaughter's thin arms, her tangle of wheat-colored hair, the secretive downcast eyes that were altogether too much like Ruth's. Under her grandmother's gaze, Amy pulled a damp dish towel from her shoulder and threw it on the table.

"You haven't finished here, Miss. Where do you think you're going?"

"Nowhere. Where is there to go?"

Down the hall the girl's bedroom door opened and slammed shut. Ethel made herself a cup of tea and sat at the table, thinking. She felt a pain inside her, imagined the mouth of a worm attached to her stomach lining.

Ruth, the beloved child of her middle age, somehow grown up wild and defiant. Wanting it all and wanting it *now*, and see where it got her. Ethel groaned and heaved herself out of the chair. In a kitchen drawer, amid a jumble of rubber bands and thumbtacks and milk-bottle wires, she found an old key. She carried it into the hall and turned it in the lock on her granddaughter's door.

Amy heard the rough scrape and whine. For a second, absorbed in her notebook, she did not understand what the sound meant. Then she ran to the door and pounded on it. "You can't do that! Let me out!"

Silence. Just crickets in the crabgrass outside her window, the television set in the neighbor's house, the faraway drone of a lawnmower. She lifted the window as far as it would go and pulled at the rim of the screen, but it was rusted in the frame. Frantically she searched the room for something that would cut it. Everything blunt in here, soft and bendable, as if she'd been deliberately stripped of weapons. Finally she took her nail scissors from the top of the dresser and jabbed them into the screen. While she was cutting she thought about her mother. Now Amy understood how her mother had been driven to pay such a price — her baby daughter — for her freedom. So what if in the end she'd died alone in a rented room? At least she'd lived first.

Amy took with her a few clothes in a plastic shopping bag, the dangly gold earrings that had been her mother's, and her birth certificate. Climbing down through the pricklebushes that grew against the foundation, she scratched her arms and legs. For once in her life she was grateful for the overgrown cedars under which the house cowered in darkness, since their thick branches hid her from prying eyes. She got her bicycle out of the shed, stuffed the bag of clothes into the saddle basket, and rode away.

**T**HEY STOPPED FOR GAS just over the state line, and she used the pay phone to tell her grandmother not to worry about her. She would be needing her money, Amy said, the money she'd been working for every summer, which had been saved in the bank for her future.

"You won't see a dime of that money," Gam said. "Not unless you come to your senses."

Amy was sick into the toilet in the Ladies. She rinsed out her mouth under the tap and combed her hair and ran out to the truck where Jack was waiting for her, his fingers tapping on the steering wheel. He didn't ask what her grandmother's reaction had been, and she didn't say. It was September, and already the leaves were turning, and as they drove along the mountain roads the smell of wood smoke drifted in Jack's open window along with the chilly, foggy air.

For three days they stayed in a motel on a back-country route. Their cabin had two metal lawn chairs out front, which they never sat in on account of the bugs, and plastic flowers in a vase on the bureau. They ate carry-out meals sitting on the chenille spread of the saggy double bed — he'd drink beer and she'd drink sodas — and a dozen times a day they made love. She'd wake him in the night she was so hungry for him. She never felt like she got enough.

On the fourth day they went to a justice of the peace in a nearby village, and Jack took a plain ring out of his jacket pocket and put it on her finger. They'd bought the ring in a second-hand shop, must have been gold-plated, at least, because it didn't turn her finger green. It was a little too big, and she worried she was going to lose it.

After they got back to Holland, to the cape hastily furnished with things bought at flea markets and the thrift store in the basement of the Union Church, he asked about the nine hundred dollars in her bank account. Bills coming due for the chain-link fencing, the concrete, the wood planks that lay stacked in the yard.

"I won't be able to give it to you, after all."

He thought she was kidding.

"When I called her from the pay phone, she said if I married you I wouldn't see a dime of it."

"She didn't mean it. She flew off the handle, that's all."

"She meant it, Jack."

"But the money's yours," he said. "You earned it."

"What can I do? The account's in her name."

"Get your grandfather to help you."

"Gapp always does what she tells him."

Jack walked out of the house and she heard the rented machine start up. He was drilling post holes for the first lot of fencing. All afternoon he worked without stopping, and she thought the sound of the drilling was going to drive her crazy. She felt her bones vibrate, thought her teeth would be shaken out of her head.

Later, in bed, he said, "The old witch will come around."

**T**HE NEXT SUNDAY she got Jack to shave with a new razor blade and to put on a dress shirt she'd laundered by hand and hung out to dry on a rope strung between two trees in the yard, then pressed with a clumsy, heavy old steam iron from the church thrift store. He combed his hair with water. It was chilly as they drove along Gooseneck Road, the swamp maples flaring red, a touch of frost on the

dry weeds in the meadow. The love she had for him was like the way you feel when you haven't eaten breakfast. A vague uneasiness, something's missing or forgotten but you're not sure what.

Jack parked the pickup in front of the house on Knollwood Lane and turned off the ignition. It'll be okay, she said to herself. I'm not like Ruth, my mother, coming home with a bastard baby in my belly, itching to take off again the minute the kid is born. Jack is nice-looking, well spoken. He'll listen to Gapp talk about the new press, imported at great expense from some foreign country. He'll clear his plate and say yes to seconds, praise Gam's cooking. They'll see how serious he is about our future.

She ran up the front steps and took her house key out of her purse. But she couldn't make it go in the lock.

"What's the matter?" Jack asked.

She laughed. "I've been gone so long I've forgotten how to work the key."

"Let me do it." He tossed his half-smoked cigarette into the bush under the window and fiddled around with the key, turned it over and tried it upside down. "You sure this is the right one?"

"Of course," she said.

He swore under his breath. "They must have had the lock changed."

She couldn't believe Gam would do that. She rang the bell, rapped on the door. They never went anywhere on a Sunday morning, that's why she picked Sunday for the first visit. Gam would be in her house dress, scraping the vegetables for midday dinner. Gapp would have reached one of the back sections of the paper by now. There'd be a pot of cold coffee on the stove, the smell of meat roasting in the oven, fat sputtering into the pan. Always enough food for leftovers on Monday, for the sandwiches Gapp took to the shop.

After about five minutes the window next to the front door was raised a little. Furtively Gapp leaned down into the crack and said she'd better come back another time.

She saw that the unshaven stubble on his cheek caught the light like grains of white sand. His eyes were watery, the sockets the color of a bloody cloth soaked and wrung out. How much he seemed to have

aged in only a couple of weeks. "Gapp, open the door. It'll be all right."

"She says when you come back, come by yourself."

"Tell her I'm not going to do that," Amy said.

Turned out she did, though. She needed cold-weather clothes from her closet, her winter boots. And the truth was she felt homesick for Gapp, and for her grandmother too, couldn't bring herself to make a complete break. At the beginning of November she drove the pickup to the house, ate a meal with them. Before she left Gam rummaged through the kitchen cupboards and gave her an old mixing bowl Amy had always liked, the color of caramel with a blue stripe under the rim, a well-seasoned iron skillet, a handful of mismatched utensils. But her grandmother wouldn't talk about Amy's husband, refused to hear his name mentioned.

"What about the money?" Jack asked when she got back.

"I didn't bring it up."

Anyway, even if she'd been able to talk Gam out of the nine hundred dollars, it wouldn't go very far, she realized. She knew she'd have to look for a job, and before long she found one, pecking out contracts and letters to clients on the old Underwood in Ewell Dyer's law office. Only paid minimum wage, but she didn't even have a high-school diploma, and she guessed it was better than cooking up burgers in a truck stop.

SHE THOUGHT IT WAS THE FLU, because it was March, and everybody was talking about how bad it was that year. She couldn't put anything on her stomach, and she felt faint as she stood at the stove frying Jack's bacon. She had to sit on the toilet with the cover down and put her head between her legs, the wretched fatty smell of the bacon seeping around the bathroom door.

"What's the matter with you?" Jack asked. "You look like death warmed over."

"I must be coming down with something. The flu."

Ewell Dyer's wife had it, and the woman Amy talked to sometimes in the laundrymat. Amy overheard somebody in the post office say it had killed her mother in the nursing home. Some kind of special Asian strain of virus nobody had any resistance to.

“Well, for Crissake don’t give it to me,” Jack said, thinking about Rosie in heat and the appointment he had to keep with her down in Massachusetts. How was he going to drive down there with the flu?

So that night, and the night after, Amy lay on the couch in the living room, trying to sleep, listening to the black bitch Rose of Tralee whining in the kennel outside the window.

Amy didn’t come down with the other symptoms—sore throat and fever and cough—and gradually she realized she wasn’t going to get the flu. Her nipples chafed inside her bra. She felt pressure in her bladder. In the late afternoons, sitting at the old Underwood in the office, she felt so exhausted she thought she’d be able to sleep with her cheek resting on the keys.

Then it was April, and one day, with that tiny clump of life in her belly, she got in Jack’s pickup and drove way out in the country, somewhere north and west of town. Now if she looked at a map she’d never be able to trace the route, and she couldn’t have at the time, either. It was almost as if she invented the countryside as she drove along and it disappeared after she passed through it.

She left the pickup by the side of an unpaved road and walked through a field. It wasn’t soggy, like the open land on Gooseneck Road, and everywhere in the field some kind of tiny wildflower was blooming, acres of billowing white. She thought it was a sign that it would be okay, he wouldn’t mind. He’d be pleased, even.

When she got home she blurted out the news. The dirty dog food pan he was carrying dropped into the kitchen sink and clattered against the enamel. “Well, you’ll just have to do something about it,” he told her, “because we can’t afford it right now.” He bent to unlace his boots. “You know that as well as I do.”

Silently she went to the sink and picked up the dishrag and started washing out the pan. Her neck muscles would be clenched, her jaw tight with the effort of not speaking. A strong streak of the martyr in her, he thought, annoyed. “It’s the wrong time, Amy. Maybe next year.”

She couldn’t press him, she mustn’t. After all, it was her own decision to be here, she could blame no one but herself for that. And she knew he was right, they couldn’t afford a child. Later he made love to her. She felt his heart beating hard an inch away from hers and the rough snake of stitches winding across his spine.



The next day she asked her friend in the laundromat if she knew a doctor who'd understand a woman's problems, and the friend guessed what she meant and wrote a name on the back of a candy wrapper she found on the laundromat floor. At the office Amy looked up the name in the phone book and called and made an appointment.

She tried not to think about it, but she couldn't get rid of the image of the little black-handled paring knife she'd bought for a quarter in the church basement. She pictured the knife coring the offending cluster of cells, like a rotten spot in a piece of fruit. Afterward she felt sick for days, dizzy and sore and passing clots, trailing scarves of membrane, but went to work anyway.

Not long after the abortion she tripped on the stoop and chipped a front tooth. Punishment, she knew.

**R**OSE OF TRALEE HAD HER PUPS, five coal-black wriggling blind babies, at the end of May. The summer was the hottest in living memory. In July a nearby barn burned, and the fire spread into neighboring fields. Jack told Amy to get in the pickup. "I'm not going to leave you," she said. "The hell you aren't," he replied. He loaded Rosie and the pups into the truck bed, ordered Amy to drive fast as the vehicle would go to the opposite end of Gooseneck Road. He stayed and held the hose, ready to douse the kennels if the fire should leap from tree to tree through the marsh and reach their place. When the firemen finally got the blaze under control and it was safe to come home, she found Jack drinking a beer in the kitchen. Specks of cinder had fallen from the sky and burned tiny holes in his shirt.

She wanted to talk about it then. Say something like: Shouldn't we stick together in times of trouble? Impossible to come up with just the right words, though. She knew how irritated he'd get by what he labeled "hearts and flowers." And she was afraid if she asked who he'd been rescuing from the fire, her or the dogs, he might tell her something she didn't want to hear.

In August Gapp retired from the print shop. The owner planned on throwing a party for him at the big Italian restaurant out on Broadway Extension, all the workers and their families invited. Amy told her grandmother she wouldn't go without Jack, and Gam said she wouldn't go if Jack went. In the end it didn't matter because Gapp died in his sleep a few days before the party. Just like him, Amy thought. Never liked being the center of attention. Couldn't stand fuss.

After Gapp was in his grave the arthritis that had troubled Gam for years grew worse. With cold weather came attacks in her knuckle joints and knees, in her spine. Other pains came out of nowhere, stabbing her for no reason in heart or groin. She took to using a big black cane she found in the attic, could hardly make it as far as the corner store.

Jack complained about Amy's spending so much time at Knollwood Lane. Now they had three bitches, a yelping gaggle of half-grown pups. He could use more help hosing down dog runs, mixing up the vitamin-laced puppy mash the vet recommended, brushing the dogs' coats. "The more you wait on the old bag, the more she'll demand," he said, and Amy answered, "I have to. She doesn't have anybody else."

Amy couldn't explain it to Jack, but she discovered a kind of pleasure, or maybe it was only relief, in trying to make up for past sins.

**M**ARCH. AT THE HOUSE on Knollwood Lane there was still a crust of snow, tough and dense as asphalt, under an overgrown cedar in the yard. In one trip Amy hauled the two bags of groceries from the pickup—enough, she hoped, to keep her grandmother going in the week until her return. All week Gam pored over the ads and coupons in the supermarket flyers that came in the mail, making lists of instructions for Amy to carry out at the IGA and the Super Value. Lists written in her crabbed, nearly illegible hand, the pen pressed down so hard it punctured the scrap paper.

Most of the stuff Gam didn't even need. Squirreled away on closet shelves, in the attic and down cellar, she had toilet rolls and bars of soap and cans of food enough to last her a hundred years. She must figure she's immortal, Amy thought. Yet in a way Amy could understand the kind of hunger that fueled Gam's hoarding. Things don't go away and leave you. Things don't die.

"That you, Amy?" Gam called from the den, where she'd probably been dozing in her chair.

"Yes, it's me." Amy shed her coat and carried the kettle to the sink to fill it. She was dying for a cup of coffee. Tedious day in the office, and then the hassle of two supermarkets, crowded as they always were at that hour of the day.

While the kettle was coming to a boil she began to unpack the groceries onto the counter and kitchen table. She didn't put them away, since Gam would examine each item and check it against the list. Each week something was wrong, Amy had made some mistake. She'd be doomed

the following Wednesday to stand in line at the customer service counter in Super Value or IGA with the flyer and the offending item in hand. The kettle whistled thinly, and Amy fixed two cups of coffee.

Her grandmother, wearing a crocheted hair net like a fish seine and flesh-colored cotton stockings, limped into the kitchen. Leaning on the big black cane, of a size made for a man, she lifted her cup from the table and slurped the milky coffee. "You didn't get boric acid, I suppose."

"Boric acid? It wasn't on the list, was it?"

"I didn't realize I was almost out until this morning."

No point in asking why she didn't call the house. Jack might pick up the phone. Or the office—the woman they had answering the phone needed a hearing aid, Gam claimed, she couldn't understand a word Gam said. Instead, Amy was supposed to be a mind reader. "I'll bring some by tomorrow."

"Pain's bad today, right in the small of my back."

"I'm sorry, Gam. Did you remember to take your pills?"

Of course she didn't take them. The pills made her dizzy, Ethel didn't know why Amy kept forgetting that. Amy's long-suffering expression was like a dose of gall to her, smile as false as a three-dollar bill. When the girl opened her mouth she couldn't help showing the chipped front tooth. Ethel did not doubt that man gave it to her, the only thing he would ever give her.

The old woman set the cup down, rattling it dangerously in its saucer, and started to sort through cans and boxes with her arthritic claw of a hand. "I saw your husband has an ad in the paper," Gam said.

Amy sat at the table with her cup, untied her shoes, and pulled them from her feet.

"It's not about dogs for once. Bicycle. Garden tools. Fishing gear. I don't remember what-all else. Must be hard up for cash."

Always, Amy thought. Always.

"That wouldn't be the bicycle you stole from the shed, would it?"

"It was my bike. Gapp gave it to me."

"Not to run away on, he didn't give it to you for that."

"It's old and rusty."

Ethel remembered unlocking Amy's door and finding torn pieces of screen littering the floor, the ruined manicure scissors open beside them, the room swarming with mosquitoes. "Wouldn't be old and rusty if you'd taken care of it."

"That's like saying you wouldn't have rheumatism if you'd taken care of your joints."

Gam lifted the big black cane and brought it down hard on Amy's forearm. The cup flew out of Amy's hand and crashed against the stove, breaking into four or five pieces. Amy was so surprised that for a moment all she could do was stare at the brownish liquid dripping off the oven door onto the linoleum. The old woman calmly resumed checking off the items on the table against her list. If it hadn't been for the pain in her arm and the broken cup on the floor, Amy almost would not have believed it happened. Then Gam muttered, "Time you learned to keep a civil tongue in your head."

Amy stood. Her hands were shaking. She said, "Gam, I'm not a little girl. I'm twenty years old, a married woman."

"Twenty years old and stuck like a fly in a web."

Amy cleaned up the coffee and broken china, then set about preparing her grandmother's supper.

**M**ORE LITTERS OF PUPS WERE BORN and then, after eight or ten weeks, sold through classified ads in the paper. *Black labs, excellent blood lines, all shots, wormed.* Amy never got used to the expense involved in the raising of pedigreed dogs: stud fees, show fees, vet bills, propane gas to heat the kennels, kibble by the hundred-pound bag. Each new statement that appeared in the mail made sweat prickle in her armpits as she tried to figure out which creditor could be stalled a month or two, which corner cut. She'd get a sick headache and swallow so many aspirin she imagined them corroding her stomach lining, but Jack seemed indifferent to the invoices collecting in a pile on the kitchen counter. Apparently he assumed that God would provide. Or failing that, Amy.

One year a virus wiped out two entire litters, except for an ugly runt that Jack never found a buyer for. Clumsy and fawning, the animal hung around in the back kennel, a daily reminder of their bad luck. Another year a young bitch Jack paid a thousand dollars for developed a brain tumor and had to be put down. All that money gone, might just as well have flung it into the dustbin, Amy thought, put it out with the trash.

Neither of them ever mentioned it, but the plain truth was that without Amy's job to pay the mortgage and the electricity and fuel bills, buy the groceries, they would have no home. They'd starve.

Often Jack had terrible dreams, which he refused to talk about. As far as he was concerned, she'd imagined the screams that woke her in the night. He'd push the bedcovers back and get up. She'd hear the toilet flush, the kitchen door open and close, footsteps outside crunching dead grass. She didn't know whether he was checking on the dogs, smoking a cigarette, or just looking at the stars hanging over the marsh. Still inside his war dream maybe, too scary and dark a place for her to go.

Of course, he was a solitary, private person. She'd loved that about him, because it made her special that he'd allowed her into his life. Now, though, she wondered why he had no friends, scarcely left the place except to exhibit the dogs in what she'd come to realize were third-rate backwater shows. Even a blue ribbon didn't mean much, wouldn't result in more sales or higher prices.

**S**PRING, JUST PAST MUD SEASON. Amy raised the kitchen window back of the sink and smelled the mingled odors of dog and the paper mill upriver. Days like this one — damp, low cloud cover — held the poisonous, acrid stench close to the soil. Near the edge of the yard was a granite boulder the size of a car. It just sat there for no reason, abandoned during the last ice age, too huge and heavy for anyone to think of moving. "Think how long that rock's been here," she'd said the day Jack brought her here to show off his new property. Seventeen years old she was.

"And how long it will be here after we're gone," he'd replied, his hand lightly caressing the back of her neck. Her hands in dishwater, she shut her eyes, remembering. In no time they'd been inside the empty house, lying on the bare, hard living room floor, and she'd felt for the first time the jagged war scar on his back. He'd hurt her, but she hadn't cared. She'd wanted him so much.

Now she heard him outside in the dooryard, stamping his feet on the rubber mat, opening the storm door, pulling off his work boots, slinging his keys onto the table. She dipped a plate into the dishpan and rubbed it with the sponge. Amy always took care of the breakfast dishes before going to work, not only washing them but drying them and putting them away. It was one of the many things that baffled Jack about her.

"Vicky's gimpy this morning," he said, unwinding the red strip of cellophane from a fresh pack of cigarettes. Victory, the pick of Rose of Tralee's last litter, six months old now.

"It's not her hip, is it?"

"She's walking like she has a thorn or something in her left hind paw, but I couldn't see anything. Maybe you'd take a look."

She'd be late for work, but she told him she would. It was going to be a bad day, anyway. She had on brown slacks and a yellow pullover that was pilling in the armpits, ugly as sin, but too good yet to get rid of. All she had to make her lunch out of was the heel of a block of processed cheese she'd bought on sale. Jack hadn't cared for it, so she'd ended up eating most of it herself. The rotten-egg smell from the mill would linger in the office all day, putting everyone in a foul mood. All right, admit it, she was feeling sorry for herself. But give her credit for not whining out loud, at least.

Amy put the last dish on the drain board and as she turned to get a towel from the rack, she saw him sitting at the table. Just sitting, doing nothing.

She left the towel on the rack, pulled a chair away from the table, its legs scraping harshly over the asphalt-tile floor, and sat across from him. He looked at her, mildly surprised, his green eyes squinting in the light from the window behind her back. He lit a cigarette while he waited for her to say whatever she was going to say.

"Jack, I want a baby," she told him. "It's time, past time."

Behind him she could see the wall of bundled insulation, naked and now fraying because he'd never put the plasterboard back up after the brief foray into home improvement soon after they'd moved in. She hadn't once nagged about the plasterboard, because she'd hear her grandmother's voice in her own.

"You're the one pays the bills," Jack said. "You know how much is left in the bank at the end of the month." They'd been through all this before, a million times it seemed like. What if there weren't so many dogs? she'd say. If we had only half as many to feed, we'd have enough for a baby, more than enough. Well maybe so, but how did she think he was going to develop a good breeding stock if he sold half of it off? It would be like killing the goose that laid the golden egg, before it even laid one goddamn egg. Besides, babies didn't stay little. Before you knew it they were needing braces on their teeth, ten-speed bicycles. Demanding to be taken to Disney World.

Sometimes Jack thought about how much easier it would be to forget about breeding the best damn Labrador retriever the world has ever seen, just get in the pickup and head out. Stay for a while with his brother Lee in L.A., maybe. He still had that old guitar around somewhere, he thought, unless they'd sold it in one of their yard sales. "What happened to Lee's guitar?" he asked.

"Lee's guitar! What has Lee's guitar got to do with this?" Amy knotted her hands together under the table. "Listen, Jack. Every damn bitch on the place has litter after litter. Except me."

"You aren't making sense," he said. "Pups bring in money. Babies don't."

"But pups don't bring in *enough* money, do they? So I have to type contracts and wills and divorce petitions until my fingers fall off. Until I croak."

"Maybe next year."

"No, Jack. This year. Now. Or I'm going to leave."

He exhaled, a long thin stream of smoke that trembled slightly in the draft of air from the window and then wrapped itself around the overhead light fixture. Inside the frosted glass were the carcasses of flies that had somehow found their way in there in summers past, though he knew how tight the globe was screwed into the metal base, how tight the base was jammed against the ceiling.

In truth it wasn't just a baby Amy craved. Or maybe not a baby at all, not really, not anymore. She felt crazy with restlessness, with a yearning she didn't know how to deal with. "You don't believe I'd leave, do you?"

"Where would you go?"

The voice he used was one in which he might ask if it was going to rain today or whether she'd remembered to gas up the truck. She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.

"What about Vicky's paw?"

"You'd just have to manage it yourself."

He knocked ash into a saucer. If he stayed cool, he thought, she'd calm down and admit to herself the foolishness of leaving. Maybe he could even laugh her out of it. "Better not go to your grandmother's house," he said. "The old witch would drive you nuts."

Amy got up and went to the sink, stared out the window. She imagined the boulder suddenly starting to move, flattening the wild azaleas that grew there, picking up speed as it rolled down the slope toward the house. The picture in her head was so vivid that for a moment she stood with her hands gripping the edge of the sink, bracing herself for the crash.

**A**MY TOOK THE FIRST APARTMENT she looked at, the cheapest advertised in the paper — a furnished attic efficiency in the city, near the old gas works. It had a low, pitched ceiling and on three walls beige wallpaper stained by roof leaks. Crammed against the back wall were a stove, a tiny icebox, and a sink. The landlord had stowed the toilet behind a particleboard partition so you couldn't see it, but she'd always hear it, the water in the tank endlessly dribbling.

The narrow, dark steps reminded her of the steps to Jack's room on Cobb Street, over the thrift store. If only she hadn't gone up those steps. If only she'd picked up the change and ball-point pens from the sidewalk and walked back home and left him be.

She didn't give Jack her new address, or anybody else in Holland, and she didn't tell her grandmother that she'd left her husband. Why listen to the old woman crow, "About time you came to your senses," or "I'm not one to say I told you so, but. . ." She quit typing for Ewell Dyer and took the G.E.D. exam and passed it. Then she found another position, in an insurance office on Exchange Street. For that job she had to learn to use a computer, but after the first few weeks she'd have been able to run the programs in her sleep. She bought a car, a serviceable hatchback with some body rust but low mileage for the price and reasonable monthly payments.



Sometimes she went out to lunch with another girl who worked in the office, who'd recently broken up with her boyfriend and was eager to have someone to unload her troubles on. A few times Amy was asked out on dates. One of the men, an adjuster, took her to a bar and ordered whisky sours. She drank half of hers and felt her face grow numb. Another man, who worked in a discount shoe store, talked to her about leather uppers over a meal of sweet and sour pork and shrimp fried rice. A third took her to a free movie at the business college and afterward tried to unbutton her blouse in his van. She wore her mother's gold earrings on these dates, but none of the men asked her out again. She wasn't sorry.

Spring turned to summer and summer to fall. She thought about Jack, wondering how he was managing without her, without her paycheck. Perhaps the rapidly dwindling bank account had forced him to look for work. Or perhaps he'd found someone else to pay his bills.

Often in her mind she'd get into the hatchback and cross the city, picking up Route 239 east of the old bridge. After eleven miles she'd bear right at the country store with the Getchell's ice chest out front and the sign in the window advertising Taylor's worms and crawlers for sale, then head out Gooseneck Road. Another six winding miles past some down-at-heels trailers and collapsing barns, fields with goldenrod blooming in them, acres of woods, an old granite quarry called Devil's Hole because so many kids have drowned in it, some more fields, and a marsh where alders and winterberries grow. Then the road stops being paved.

You wouldn't notice the house unless you were looking for it, a poky cape set back from the road, near a spindly growth of spruce and white pine. Attached to a chain-link cage next to the house is a weathered sign: *J. Gilley. Labrador Retrievers. Pedigreed. AKC Registered.* And under that, hand-lettered on raw plywood: *Dogs boarded. Pet supplies.* Amy hears dogs barking behind the house. The one Lab she can see, in the first run, is a pup, born since the spring.

There's something a little creepy about the place. Maybe it's the half-dead trees, some of which have knots of fuzzy moss adhering to naked branches. Or the mournfully aimless barking, or the shades pulled in the windows.

The concrete path is crumbling, with weeds forcing their way up through the cracks. What little grass there is between the side of the house and the woods needs cutting. The smell of dog smothers every-

thing. The pup has risen to its haunches and gazes at her as she knocks on the door frame.

After a while a man opens the inner door. Through the screen she sees that he's got a day's growth of stubble on his jaw, which seems to have gone somewhat slack. As she anticipated, he doesn't recognize the person at the door. "Yes?" he says.

She wonders what to say. Finally, as he's about to close the door on her, she tells him, "I came about the ad in the paper."

"Wait a minute."

He shuts the door in her face, leaving her to stand on the stoop. Then he reappears, a short leash in his hand. He leads her around the house to the rear, where there are five or six more chain-link dog runs, some sheds and outhouses, a little weed-choked garden plot, and a granite boulder that has lichen growing in its crevices. All the dogs—more than twenty of them—are now barking and hurling themselves against the fencing, obviously hot to get at her and rip her throat open. They don't recognize her, either. She glances back at the house, almost expecting to see a young woman with a round face and flushed cheeks and light wispy hair and a chipped front tooth staring at the stranger who is talking to her husband, but all the windows have their shades pulled down to the sills.

Jack is oblivious to the racket. He raises the latch on one of the cage doors and opens it just enough for a bitch to squeeze through. She's smaller than the others, but not a puppy. As he's clipping the leash to the chain around her neck, he begins to talk about her. "She's not a show dog," he says, "I'll be straight with you. You wouldn't want to breed her because she's got a genetic fault." He pauses, his luminous green eyes on the dog. "I'm not sure where it came from—must be some quirk in the dam's bloodline."

"A throwback?" Amy asks.

He shrugs. "Not bad enough to cripple her, you understand, but she can go a tad lame in wet weather. You have to take care to look for fractures."

He's scratching the dog's head and fondling her ears, and her eyes become slits in pleasure. "A good house dog, though, if you know how to handle her."

Tentatively, Amy pats the dog between her ears. The bitch lifts her head, nudging it into Amy's hand. The nap of the fur is so short and smooth Amy's aware of the bony ridge of the dog's skull just beneath it.

"If you're interested, I can make you a deal. Frankly, I'm a little pressed for cash right now. I said one-fifty in the ad, and she's actually worth at least two, but I'll let her go for a hundred. A check's okay if you don't have the cash."

The bitch begins to lick Amy's hand and she backs off from the dog, puts her hand in her pocket. "I'm not sure," she says.

"Better make your up mind pretty fast. She won't hang around long at that price."

Now the bitch has caught wind of something in a nearby tree, a squirrel maybe. She strains at the leash in Jack's hand, her neck pinched by the choke collar, her toenails scrabbling in the dirt.

"You seem kind of familiar," he says to Amy. "You been here before?"

**T**HE PLASTIC FILM BAG on her grandmother's newly dry-cleaned drapes read: *WARNING. To avoid danger of suffocation keep away from babies and small children. This bag is not a toy.* Amy ripped the bag from the hangers over which the curtains were folded and knotted it several times and threw it into the wastebasket. She began to jab the hooks into the strip of buckram behind the pleats. From the sun porch, which received no sun because of the cedars that hovered over the house, came her grandmother's snores. With any luck Amy would have the curtains hung by the time Gam arose from her nap.

But in only a few moments the old woman was stirring, the rubber tip of her cane punching the linoleum as she braced herself, hobbling. "I thought I heard somebody in here," she said in the doorway. She eyed the knotted plastic in the wastebasket. "I could have used that bag to protect my winter coat."

"But you never wear your winter coat." Amy poked a hook into the tough, tightly woven material. "You never go outside in winter anymore. Or in summer, either."

"What if I had to?" Gam said. She made her way to the shabby upholstered chair that was once Gapp's favorite. A puff of dust rose from the

cushion as she took possession. "The trouble with you is, you do things without thinking."

Impulsive girl, Amy. And stubborn. Never satisfied. Her mother's girl, through and through. What's in the marrow can't be knocked out of the bone.

"Sorry," Amy said, not sorry at all. The last hook in, impaling the last pleat, Amy pulled a footstool over to the window and climbed up, the heavy curtain dragging from her arm. She took a deep breath and, reaching up, maneuvered the sharp end of the hook into the metal eye dangling from the rod. One, two, three hooks into their eyes. The curtain felt a little lighter on her arm. But a muscle near her elbow trembled, unused to this kind of job. Four, five, six, seven, eight. The coarse fabric, stinking of dry-cleaning chemicals, chafed the skin of her inner arm. Nine, ten, eleven, twelve. That's one panel up. Three to go.

Amy stepped off the footstool and picked up the second panel. Her grandmother's eyes were three-quarters shut, the old woman peaceable as a toad sunning itself on a rock. Then she leaped. "Your husband's looking for you," Gam said.

"What?"

"Called me on the phone, Sunday I think it was." Amy's cheeks flushed, and for a moment Ethel thought she was going to fall right off the footstool. "Said you'd left him a year ago or more. Is that true, Amy?"

Amy pulled out a hook that wasn't straight, forced it back into the stiff buckram. "Yes, it's true."

"Where've you been living, if you haven't been with him?"

"I took an apartment. Over by the old gas works."

"You have a room here."

Whenever she had to open the door of that room Amy was sickened by the odors of unaired bedding, cold rusty water in the radiator, nail polish remover, pink acne cream, underarm odor, dimestore cologne, foot powder spilled in the rug. The drawers of the imitation-maple dresser were stuffed with bras and slips and blouses that fit a young-for-her-age seventeen-year-old. A *True Confessions* magazine must still be hidden inside a sanitary napkin box in the closet, along with the spiral-bound notebook she'd bought with grocery money on her way

home from the print shop. The lined pages filled with her backhand would be yellowed by now, her gushing dopiness humiliating to re-read, even to recall. She detested the faded pink wallpaper splashed everywhere with daisies, so busy it made the room seem to close in on you.

"You could've come here," Gam repeated.

"I thought it would be good for me to learn to live alone."

That possibility hadn't occurred to Ethel, though God knows she'd spent enough time mulling over the situation after the shock of the man's news wore off. Maybe there was some merit in what the girl said. Ethel could not live forever. She limbered her fingers by rubbing them, the way her own mother had done, and watched her granddaughter stretch to work a hook into a metal eye that dangled from the rod. To Amy's back she said, "Make sure you don't give that man any money. Remember how he tried to get mine away from me."

Gam was confused. That was *Amy's* money Jack hoped to wangle out of the old woman. But what difference did it make now?

**T**HE DOORBELL SURPRISED HER. It was a buzzer, actually, in a metal box mounted in the stairwell. The noise was shrill and threatening, and Amy resolved not to answer it. Who'd come calling on a Sunday morning? Probably Jehovah's Witnesses or somebody trying to find a tenant who'd moved out a long time ago. Then the buzzer went off again, and she knew exactly who it was. Gam must have spilled the beans. No, she thought, she wouldn't see him. He could send her a letter if he had something to say.

A third time the buzzer rang, a long high-pitched bleat that was probably going to short out the wiring and continue to scream forever like a deranged car alarm. She set her empty coffee mug in the sink and went down the two long flights. Through the glass pane in the door she saw Jack's face.

His hair was thinner. He smiled in that way he had, mostly with his eyes, his tongue lodged against the lining of his cheek. "Hello, Amy," he said when she opened the door.

There was a pause, and because the porch was down a step from the doorway where she stood, their heads were at the same level. Finally he said, "Can I come in?"

She smelled the raw turpentine odor of spruce gum on him. He must have been felling trees around the place, the way he'd done when he first bought the property. Hard to wash off, spruce gum. So many times she'd felt the stickiness on her skin when he took hold of her body and probed it. She backed up into the dark hallway, her heel catching on a curled loose end of linoleum, and said, "I'm just going out."

He guessed she was lying. "I don't have to stay long."

"A few minutes."

Jack followed her up the two flights of narrow steps and into the apartment. Early spring light seemed to give the room a greenish cast.

"Not enough room in here to swing a cat," he said. The sink was the kind on legs he remembered from the crummy apartments his mother rented when he and Lee were kids. Surprisingly, there was a small stack of dirty dishes in the sink. He sat on the couch, from behind which the wall sloped toward a sharply pitched roof. It gave him the feeling he'd crack his skull if he sat up straight.

He failed to understand how she could prefer this pokey attic room to the house in Holland, which might not be a palace but at least you had air to breathe. She always did enjoy the role of martyr, though, being the victim of other people's failings.

He took a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket but didn't light up. For a while they listened to the toilet tank dribbling behind the flimsy partition, a baby crying somewhere, her cheap battery-operated traveling clock ticking away on the window sill. Finally she said, "What is it you want, Jack?"

He would have asked her to sit beside him on the couch but was afraid if he laid a hand on her she'd stiffen. Arch her back. His mouth felt dry. "I'm having a hard time. . ." He realized that he'd bunched the rug up under his feet. With the heels of his work boots he made an effort to straighten it.

"I don't think I can help you," she said.

Pollen or something in his eyes, like somebody'd tossed grit into them. He dug at the inner corners with his thumbs. The room looked blurry. "Jesus, Amy, you're my wife. Why don't you just come on home with me?"

Home. The alders in the marsh would be strung with catkins, the shadow soon to unfold its delicate blossoms.

"Things could be different. If you came back, my luck would turn."

"We don't make other people's luck," she said. "We make our own."

He got up from the couch, his work boots heavy on the floorboards. "Think about it, okay?"

"I'll think about it." She figured she must owe him that much. She heard his footsteps receding down the two flights.

**A**MY FOUND HER GRANDMOTHER in the yard, on her knees, the cane beside her on the ground. Over her house dress the old woman was wearing an ancient cardigan that used to be Gapp's, and in her hand she held a serving spoon. "Gam, what in the world are you doing?"

"I buried it here, but now it's gone."

Amy shifted the grocery bag to her other arm and saw a shallow depression that her grandmother had managed to scrape out of the cement-hard soil. "What? What did you bury?"

"Money," Gam said. "Silver dollars in a tin box. Twenty of them. I know I buried them right in this spot. He must have stolen them."

"Who?"

"You know who," she said. The hole looked like a dog made it, scratching for a bone.

"Gam, please stop. You're going to catch pneumonia."

"You know who. He came in the night while I was asleep."

Amy set the bag on a front step and came back and crouched next to her grandmother. "I don't understand," she said.

"That man you were married to, he took my money."

"But that's crazy. How could Jack know you had money buried here or where to look for it?"

Her grandmother's neck was bent, and sparse hair was escaping from under the crocheted hair net. The backs of her legs were shiny, hairless, yellow. Feebly she tried to clean dirt from the spoon with her gnarled fingers. "He must have found out," she muttered. "Evil men have their evil ways."

"Jack's not evil, Gam. He's just ordinary."

Her grandmother tried to answer, but Amy couldn't make out the words. The only sound that came from her throat was a weak gurgle, like congested plumbing. The old woman struggled to heave herself to her feet, fell back, tried again. Then she allowed her granddaughter to help her up and brush the dirt from her knees. How light she felt, leaning on Amy's arm, as if suddenly she weighed nothing at all. The cane was left lying by the hole.

**K**NOLLWOOD LANE was a one-block dead-end street south of the river, not easy to find without a map, but Jack had been here once before. The houses were frame, mostly two-family, with straggly scraps of lawn. Nothing special about any of them, except the one down at the end. A bungalow with dark brown siding, hunkered down under enormous shaggy evergreens of some kind. He stopped the truck and turned off the ignition.

The last time he was here was right after they came back from getting married. They'd walked up the front steps and Amy tried the door. Wouldn't open, her key didn't fit the lock. Amy rang the doorbell, knocked on the frame. He'd said, "Come on, forget it, let's go," but then a grizzled old guy lifted a window. Looking scared, he'd said to Amy, "You better come back alone. Some other time." Jack hadn't known if the old witch was lurking inside or not.

Now Jack pocketed the keys to the pickup and started down the sidewalk. Snow had fallen during the night. The neighborhood seemed deserted. No traffic on the street, no other cars parked on it, even. No sounds coming from any of the houses. All the windows dark.

The brown bungalow was the quietest of all the houses, almost swallowed up under those huge trees, the branches scraping against the windows. He mounted the steps and pressed the bell, but no one came to the door. Why didn't she answer? Maybe the bell was busted. She had to be here. "Paid her last month's rent back in July," the landlord told him yesterday, when he went to look for her. "Went home to nurse her grandmother. Stroke, she said."



The door was warped or locked. Either way, he couldn't pull it open. The windows on either side of the door had Venetian blinds, and the slats were pulled tight. Jack trudged around to the back of the house, shoving through interwoven branches, clumps of wet snow pelting him like clubs. One window back there had its blind raised, but it was too high for him to see in. Amid the junk in a falling-down shed he found a lawn chair, the old-fashioned metal kind that didn't fold, made no compromise with your spine. The chair reminded him of the motel they'd stayed in when Amy ran away. He hadn't known what to do with her, but after three days of serious fucking, what else could he do but marry her? Just a kid, counting on him. He dragged the chair through the snow to the window and clambered up through the pricklebushes that guarded the foundation.

Inside, an ugly old woman wearing a black string hair net sat propped up in bed. Her head lolled to one side, her mouth open. Amy was lifting a spoon to it, cupping the old woman under the chin, gently tipping the contents of the spoon onto her tongue.

Jack rapped on the window and Amy turned toward him, the spoon in her hand. Her hair had grown long enough to pin up off her neck, darker than it used to be, the color of buckwheat honey. She was no kid anymore. He wanted her like he'd never wanted her in his life.

He imagined breaking the glass with his fist, climbing inside through the shards of glass, smothering the old witch in her bedclothes, carrying his wife to the pickup and back to the house in Holland. "Look," he'd say, showing her around. "The plasterboard is up in the kitchen. The front walk is mended. There's brand-new linoleum on the bathroom floor."

Amy didn't turn away from him, and for a moment he believed it would be all right. She'd understand how determined he was to make a good life for her. But as he gazed at her, something in her expression, as sealed and self-contained as an egg, let Jack know that she was simply not taking him in. He was no longer real to her. Her thoughts were fixed on a point far in the distance, a place much farther away than he could ever reach.