

## Tides

### I

The sudden, coral-sharp rawness in her bowels woke Marion from a sound sleep early one Sunday. She couldn't move. Her bony frame merely quivered as wave after wave of pain teathed on the soft shores inside her. It was odd, though. While her body shook, Marion's mind remained lucid and cool. She perceived with equal fidelity the crackle of her own phlegmy breathing and the wistful, half-hearted cooing of turtledoves outside her open window.

The first attack, though intense, was brief, and as the pain drained from her body, eddying hotly in some black grotto of pelvic geology, the idea came to her, pure and irrefutable: This agony wasn't her own.

With the sort of clarity she'd believed quite lost after her seventieth birthday, Marion's mind raced through mazes testing the logic, the implications, sniffing at each dead end for a secret door

that might give into some forgotten yard, sequestered by a tall unkempt hedge, the bushy grass flowing over ancient rock gardens . . . and at the yard's center a shallow pond, and in the pond's mirror a brilliant golden fish circling, circling like a tongue of fire.

“Bull,” she whispered to the bedroom's leprous ceiling.

And yet, for a few seconds there, she'd felt an exhilaration, a delight in the pursuit of insight, which she hadn't experienced since the first few years of her youthful married life. She closed her eyes. Spontaneously, a dozen sharp and moody scenes flickered through her skull, scenes of tender philosophic bantering with William, his oval face tilting now left, now right like an aroused dog's. She'd loved him more than anything for the cool thrill of their arguments. She'd loved to push him, forcing his intellect to dance with hers — a civil waltz at first, then a tango, then a sultry eurhythmic encounter in the modern style, followed at last by a furious Charleston — until he would take down from its polished shelf his own translation of Democritus or Empedocles and brandish it like a billyclub. He once actually struck her a glancing blow with her beloved Plato, but dissolved immediately into frantic apologies. Eventually he'd tired of her games, which both of them realized were at best merely clever, and turned to translating Diogenes and Heraclitus. He began spending most of his time in his study, perfecting (so he told her) his stodgy Latin. . . .

When the pain had completely gone, Marion found herself feeling strangely invigorated. Fitfully, the dry late-summer wind poured into her room. The willow drooping just outside her window wheezed with each gust, gasped weakly as a sleeper shaken by a nightmare, and fell silent. She glanced at the telephone on her nightstand and thought about calling her sister Ruth, but knew what Ruth would say. A dream, she'd tell her. An old woman's dream. A single turtledove languidly cooed, then sang no more.

The attacks continued, each new one worse than the last. At irregular intervals Marion would crumple and burning pain would gush up from her abdomen; yet it always left her strong, whole, wonderfully lucid. She began to look forward to each onslaught for the sheer pleasure that would fill her afterwards.

On Wednesday morning, needing a physical outlet for her new energies, Marion was bent over boxes. Last week, putting together her initial donation, she'd gone from room to room, at random, pulling curios from knick-knack shelves, lace bedcovers yellowed by years from the dark drawers, a pair of ankle-strap shoes and one garish, fruit-bedecked hat from their musty closets. The girl at the State Historical Museum — Theresa, as Marion recalled — had suggested her new method: one room at a time; artifacts (that's what Theresa had called them) sorted into boxes representing the decades of their purchase; and, before giving it irretrievably to the museum's collection, Marion carefully considered each item's real and personal worth. The process was tedious and really unnecessary: the clear-eyed, olive-complexioned girl whom Marion had liked so well had promised to come help her select the second donation.

“How does a week from tomorrow sound?” Theresa had asked.

“I'm afraid my old brain has mislaid both today and tomorrow,” Marion answered. “What day will that be?”

Theresa tapped her blotter calendar lightly with the tip of her pen. “That would be Saturday, the twenty-first.”

“You work Saturdays?” Marion asked.

“Half-days. Mornings, usually. But this kind of thing . . . you know, expanding the collection, touching the past . . . it's my passion, I guess.”

“Passion,” Marion repeated. “Very important. *Most* important! So — Saturday, then.”

The women rose from their chairs and shook hands. “I’m looking forward to it, Missus Seabury.”

“Listen,” Marion said. “I don’t have many visitors any more. Most everyone I know is dead, except for my sister. And I’m not too sure about her,” she added with a wicked grin. “So why don’t you stay for supper when you come?”

Theresa smiled broadly. “I’d love it — if you’re sure it won’t be a bother.”

“Bother?” Marion said. “Don’t be silly. What I hate most about old age is having to eat alone.”

“All right, then. Saturday it is. And thanks again for these donations,” she said, patting one of the boxes on her desk.

“It’s nothing,” Marion said.

“Oh, not ‘nothing,’ Missus Seabury! Really, there are some wonderful artifacts here.”

Once in the taxi, Marion gave in to the coldness of the word *artifact* and wept softly all the way home.

But now the psychic break had been made. She cast a cold eye on even the most personal belongings — photographs, small ribbon-tied bundles of letters (each bunch representing one of the trips that William, during the middle years of their marriage, had begun taking without her), and even the expensive jewelry William had purchased in various exotic cities to appease her — though the things she’d been most attached to she’d already given away in her first donation. Now the weighing of emotional and financial needs against the *avoirdupois* realities in her hands was becoming very easy. She only wished it were as easy on her sister Ruth.

“Well I just don’t *know*,” Ruth had huffed earlier that afternoon. She shook her gray head and glared at Marion over the silver rims of her spectacles.

Marion looked at her frankly. “What does it matter? I just feel like giving it all up.”

“But this,” Ruth said, waving a liver-spotted hand, “is your *home*.”

Marion nodded and lifted a cup of mint tea to her lips.

Ruth sighed, then said with ill-disguised malice, “I suppose you’ll be giving William’s books away to some little college.”

“Now that you mention it,” Marion snapped.

“You could at least have consulted me.”

“This is, as you have pointed out, *my* house.”

Ruth looked away. Once her sister was angered there was no use talking sense to her. Nervously, she tapped her teacup with a lavender fingernail.

“I just don’t know,” Ruth repeated.

The kitchen clock, a black cat whose tail and eyes moved back and forth in opposite directions, ticked and ticked.

At last Marion pushed a plate stacked with coffee-brown cookies across the table and said, “Ginger snaps?”

Ruth eyed the cookies, then picked one up and said distantly, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Marion answered, echoing her sister’s tone of voice.

The women sat for a long time, Ruth munching daintily, Marion dunking one sugary wafer after another. When one too-soggy morsel plopped into Marion’s tea, Ruth rolled her eyes and said, “Your eating habits are so *gauche*.”

Marion flashed her favorite wicked grin. “It’s something I cultivate.”

The frown on Ruth’s lips loosened. “I truly believe you do!” she laughed at last.

Marion rose and moved to the stove to put a fresh kettle of water on to boil.

“If only . . .” Ruth began, but thought better of it.

Marion fired up the burner under the kettle, then finished her sister’s sentence. “If only I’d had children.”

“Yes.”

Marion shrugged and returned to the table, muttering as she sat back down, “It didn’t do you much good.” She glanced at Ruth and was a little taken aback by her hurt expression. “Sorry. Shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s all right.”

“I didn’t mean —”

“I know,” Ruth interrupted. She stared down at the table. “God damned wars.”

Marion nodded. “Amen.”

“Still,” Ruth went on, “you might have had *someone* to pass things on to.”

“That’s true.”

“I tried to tell you.”

“You did. I remember.”

“I guess you had to go your own way.”

“It *was* what we wanted.”

Ruth began skating her fingertip around the rim of her cup and sighed.

“Well it *was*,” Marion insisted.

“I know.”

They both sat gazing into their empty cups.

“Still,” Marion mused, letting her thought hang unfinished between them.

## II

The tea-kettle's whistle pinched a nerve between Theresa's ears. Wincing, she hurried to the chrome-and-avocado stove, punched the off-button, lifted the kettle that shook and spouted steam, and carried it to the table. She filled her cup and returned the kettle to a cold burner. Finally seated, she stirred in a teaspoon of coffee crystals, one of non-dairy creamer, and a third of Sweet 'N' Low. The concoction tasted like toasted Styrofoam, but Theresa didn't drink it for pleasure. She feared that without caffeine the curator might find her some morning slumped forward into a noisy snooze at her computer.

"What do you *do* at night," the old man had leered on Wednesday, "when good girls are sleeping?"

She'd had to swallow her disgust and nicely shrug his damp, pallid hand off her shoulder. Her position at the museum, unlike those of women who'd let the curator take them to bed, was precarious; until more firmly established as the registrar, she would have to appear naïve in order to excuse her unresponsiveness. So she'd not told anyone about Adrian — neither their liaison, nor his sudden illness. She found it easy to hide her anxiety, but her physical weariness, a result of the past seven sleepless nights, was becoming more and more uncontrollable. This weekend should have been a welcome respite, but after visiting Adrian she would have to dine with Marion Seabury and then help her go through a lifetime's accumulation of things. She only hoped that job would go smoothly. On Thursday morning, Ruth Sadler had begun lobbying Theresa behind her sister's back.

"I don't believe she should be allowed to just give it away," the woman had argued over the phone.

“She has every right, Missus Sadler.”

“I could get my lawyer to come down there, young lady.”

“Fine. Do that.”

“Fine, then. I will.”

The lawyer never showed up. Apparently he’d counseled Mrs. Sadler away from the fruitless undertaking. But the old woman stubbornly persisted in calling two or three times a day.

“Marion’s not in her right mind,” she’d complain.

“I don’t think I’m qualified to discuss that,” Theresa would say.

By late that Friday they’d become almost friends.

“Do *you* think it’s right, Theresa?” Ruth asked. “For a person to throw away . . . everything?”

“Not everything,” said Theresa. “Just *things*.”

“Keepsakes. Mementos.”

“Things, Ruth. Artifacts. Besides, I’m sure Marion will keep anything that still feels important to her.”

“I must not know my sister, then. She’s packed up every gift her husband ever gave her.”

Theresa sighed silently. “Why, do you think.”

There was a brief, embarrassed pause. At last Ruth said, “Putting it all behind her, I suppose. She got rid of his name long ago. Went back to ‘Seabury.’” She paused again. “I guess it does make *some* kind of sense.”

Through all their conversations Theresa sensed that Ruth (a widow, she'd told her, who'd "lived too long") was lonely and that keeping tabs on her sister simply let her feel connected. Her impression had been reinforced when Ruth called her that morning, just before noon.

"I know you're about to leave," Ruth said. "Half-days on Saturdays!"

"I'm just clearing off my desk. Is there something you need?"

After a moment, Ruth said, "I'd like to meet you."

"Ruth, I'm afraid everything is settled. I'm seeing Marion this afternoon."

"I know. I mean when this is over. I'd like to meet you for . . . lunch, let's say."

The offer had flattered her — not because of Ruth's reputed wealth, but because she'd won over a woman essentially out of the past. "It would be a pleasure," she'd told her.

I wish it *was* over, Theresa thought now, sucking gingerly at her hot coffee and staring through the sliding screen door at the parched, red-brown mountains to the west. She meant not just the "it" with Marion Seabury, but the other "it" — the sudden illness that had landed her fiancé in the hospital a few days ago. She glanced at the thermometer nailed up in the shade on her balcony's south wall: 106 degrees. Her lips narrowed bitterly. The temperature outside was the same as Adrian's had been the last time she'd seen him. A nice irony, her father might say. But suddenly the irony gave way to fear, and for a moment her heart contracted. Like that . . . what did they call it? Sea anemone? Her father had taken her to see one at the children's zoo, all those years ago . . . and now here it was inside her, making a fist . . . making tears spring into her eyes. For a few seconds the mountains blurred and flowed together. But at last she was able to catch a breath, and her heart seemed to open, and no tears fell. She took another deep breath and flicked on the radio for distraction.

— *lowest monthly rainfall in recent memory*, the voice announced in the expected drone.

*Farmers in the eastern half of the state remain pessimistic, fearing the drought may extend into early September. The Department of Agriculture reports that late summer crops may produce only fifty percent of their expected yield. The U.S. Weather Service, however, predicts rain for this weekend, though some farmers point out that the Bureau's projections over the past five weeks have been optimistic but far from accurate.*

*In sports—*

Theresa clicked the voice off. It seemed like the drought, along with everything else, had blown right through her, hollowed her out. The clock read 1:15, but she had no wish to get up and go to the hospital. She did not want to face Adrian again, smiling with false cheer while his clay-colored, sunken features tore at her insides. She would always remember him healthy, full of exuberance, as he'd been the day they first met in the museum.

"Our photographer's here," the curator announced in a whisper. He'd come up behind her and placed his lips quite close to her ear as if hinting at a kiss.

Theresa shook her head like a fly-harassed horse and spun in her chair to face him. "Where?"

"Downstairs." The man slid his haunch unctuously onto the edge of her desk. "I ran into him on his way up and took him down myself. Told him you'd be right along." His bluish, fleshy lips stretched into a grin. "You watch his hands, now."

She *did* watch Adrian Cornell's hands. Quick and efficient, they took light-readings, adjusted lenses and angles, arranged each artifact to better catch its unique or most important features. He talked constantly, was engagingly nervous, asking after her work and how she liked it and did she plan to stay at it forever.

“A person needs stability,” she told him, quoting her father. “Some sort of center.”

“And your center . . . is it here?”

“It might be.”

He smiled and — annoyingly — shook his head.

“Do you have a center in *your* work, Mister West?”

“My work is centered here,” he said and tapped his chest.

Theresa smiled herself then, glancing around at the basement exhibits.

“Oh this,” he said, waving his hand, “is how I make money. Yes, and I photograph drooling cherubs and high school kids. I do passport photos. I’ve done nudes for the pulps and meatloaves for the Sunday supplements. But all that’s my job. Not my work.”

The next week Adrian brought in a picture of her. It showed her standing pensively before an exhibit of photographs from the Jackson expedition to the Tetons and Yellowstone.

“I snuck it in between the Chaco pottery and Baby Doe Tabor’s evening gloves,” Adrian laughed.

Theresa was speechless at first, unable even to thank him. He’d caught something more than her image, and not simply a mood. The picture made her feel most mysterious, imbued as it was with a curious mixture of vulnerability and strength.

“Do you . . . see me this way?”

“I do.”

She’d smiled at him tenderly. “Thank you.”

“I was hoping you’d like it.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said simply.

“Just part of my work,” he’d said.

The clock on her kitchen table read 1:40 now. Theresa downed the ounce of cold coffee left in the cup and rose from her chair. She noticed the clouds rolling in off the mountains, sliding dark blue and massive down over the piedmont. But these looked the same as the others . . . and like the other clouds these past few weeks they would no doubt sail low over the city, spilling thunder and even a little dry lightning, before dissolving at the edges of the plains.

“Well,” Theresa sighed to herself, “at least they might cool this damned Saturday off.”

### III

Out for the hundredth time into the garden, floating almost, over the deep grass, under the stars. Trees breathing. Huge apples glowing among black branches, their red light glazing the glass surface of the pond. His nakedness surprises him, as always, but he keeps running, cool night air ripping in and out of his lungs. The camera with its telephoto lens bounces heavily against his chest, a rhythm he can’t distinguish from his heart’s. And suddenly she’s there, a satin ghost drifting out from the willows. He lifts the camera. Through the viewfinder she is naked. The shutter blinks and she falls, blinks and they both fall, the ruddy light from the trees flows on their skin. Something leaps from her hand, flops onto the pond’s bright water. And the wind carries to him across the lawn, over the tide-shifting grass, her body’s fragrance . . . honeysuckle, and the salt smell of the sea. . . .

“Adrian?”

“Mmph.”

“Adrian?”

“Mm hmph.”

“Adrian.”

He forced his tongue out between sticky lips. “Yes.”

“Are you waking up?”

“Here I am.”

“You’ve slept a long time.”

“What?”

“Adrian?”

Slowly Theresa’s face came into focus. The room dim, her large eyes dark and clear as twin lakes. Still. Deep water. Irises flecked with gold.

“Do you want to sleep some more?”

“No.”

“I can come back tonight.”

“No. I’m awake now.” Adrian rubbed both hands over his face and smiled up at Theresa. “I’m not tired.”

She leaned close and kissed his forehead. “You look better.”

“I feel fine now,” he said. “How long’ve you been here?”

“Since two.”

“And what time —”

“Nearly six. You slept through my whole visit!”

Adrian frowned. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You were dreaming,” she said, stroking his forehead. “It seemed like a nice dream.”

“Oh.” He felt heat rise in his face. “Yes.”

“What was it about?”

Adrian laughed weakly. “Don’t know, really. Odd dream. I’ve dreamt it over and over since they brought me here.”

She gave him an expectant look. “And? What happens?”

“Nothing. Too odd. Can’t make sense of it.” His eyes gleamed with mischief. “A bit of voyeurism.”

“I should have known!”

“It’s what we photographers are all about.”

They both grinned and shook their heads. A faint, hollow rumble drummed on the window. The sky looked swollen. Here and there, lightning leaped from wave to wave of bruised air.

“Rain today?” Adrian asked.

“Weatherman says so.”

“No rain, then.”

Theresa’s smile flickered and vanished. Her lower lip trembled and she looked away.

“Hey.” Adrian touched her hand. “Listen. When I’m back on my feet, let’s take a trip. Ever been to San Francisco?”

Theresa shook her head no. “I’ve never been west of the mountains.”

“You’ve never seen the Pacific?”

“Don’t sound so surprised! Hey . . . I’ve been to Santa Fe. I went east one time, to Kansas, for my mother’s burial. After that dad wanted me to stay here with him, and when he died . . . I guess I didn’t have a good reason to leave.”

“You *have* to see the Pacific.”

“I’ve seen your photos.”

Adrian glanced around the room with exaggerated concern, then whispered, “Don’t let anyone know, but pictures never do reality justice.”

Theresa laughed. “Mister Modest.”

“No, I mean it,” Adrian insisted. “Art is selective reality — a lie, in other words.”

“I don’t agree!”

He raised his hand at her like a traffic cop. “A white lie, of course. The contact area between imagination and the world is infinite; the tools of art are finite. So the truth inevitably escapes. Maybe it *isn’t* lying — just failure. Ambitious failure.”

“Descending to philosophy,” she said. “You *must* be feeling better.”

“Okay. No aesthetics. No more theories.” He reached out, grasped her arm and pulled her gently to him. “The following announcement is *not* theoretical. I love you, Terry.”

Tears came before she could stop them. “I love you, Adrian. I do.” She pressed her face into his shoulder, sobbing. “I do.”

“Listen,” he whispered, stroking her hair. “Listen. . . .”

Thunder boomed, nearer now.

“Terry, the doctors tell me . . . they say this thing isn’t serious.”

She pulled back and looked him in the eyes. “It doesn’t feel ‘not serious.’”

“They say it’s psychosomatic.”

“You’re kidding.”

“That’s what Doctor Linck says. He wants me to get my head shrunk.”

“But how —”

“He says, well . . . you know it looked at first like my insides were being damaged. I bled during each attack. Ruined a lot of sheets,” he laughed grimly. “But I haven’t bled since Wednesday. Doctor Linck says my organs seem to be in place. ‘Firm,’ he says. ‘Everything seems to be firm in there.’ *Awful* medicine-breath, that man.”

He pulled her toward him again, but Theresa pushed away. “You’ve know this how long?”

“Hey, now! I found out late this morning. And then, with the sedative —”

Theresa pressed a finger to his lips. “Adrian,” she breathed. “I’m so glad.”

He took her hand and kissed it. “I’m relieved, too.”

“But Adrian,” said Theresa, sitting up straight and wiping the tears from her cheeks, “what’s causing it?”

“Nobody knows! Doctor Linck says it’s ‘not my area.’ All I know is I first felt sick last Saturday at the museum. I was shooting your new acquisitions . . . and suddenly I felt woozy. Nauseous. A blinding migraine. . . .”

“I still can’t feature how sudden it came on.”

“*Very* strange,” Adrian nodded. “And you know what? Being told it’s all up here,” he tapped his temple, “is no comfort at all. It’s even scarier, somehow.”

Theresa took his hand. “You know how in the movies just *knowing* makes it better?”

“*Spellbound*,” Adrian smiled. It was the first movie they’d rented together. “I think Hitchcock simplified things for his audience.”

Theresa frowned. “You’re still having attacks.”

“I am,” he admitted. “But Terry, it’s so odd. The last couple times, I’ve felt absolutely . . . *cut off*. Like it’s not really *my* pain. Christ! I must be crazy.”

They fell into a mutual, bewildered silence. A velvet bell rang once, then again. A voice crackled unintelligibly over the intercom. Then a soft knock came at the open door. “Mister Cornell?” said a nurse carrying a dinner tray. “Time for some delicious hospital cuisine.”

“Just set it down there, Betty. If you would.” He told himself that the faintness he felt was because of the bad food he was about to face, but another part of him knew better. He squeezed Theresa’s hand and said, “You’d better go, Terry. Eating’s my toughest assignment.”

Theresa kissed his hand again, then stood. “I have an assignment myself,” she said. “Enjoy the dinner.”

He smiled thinly. Another attack was on its way. He could feel it the way an epileptic feels a seizure coming over some cloudy horizon. “I will,” he managed. “What’s *your* assignment?”

“Packing boxes, believe it or not. Dinner with Marion Seabury, then packing up the rest of her museum donations.”

“Who?”

“Marion Seabury. You remember — you shot her first batch of donations last week.”

The golden fish flashed in his skull as the first wave of nausea rose inside him. “I remember,” he said.

“I’m already late.”

“Go. Go,” he told her.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Theresa said and walked toward the door.

“Don’t worry,” Adrian said shakily.

She smiled back at him. “I won’t,” she lied.

The door wheezed shut behind her. Close by a clap of thunder shook the air. “Marion,” he breathed. In his bowels the scalding sickness started to churn and his muscles tensed for the shock. Then it was on him.

#### IV

The pain flooding through her subsided gradually, leaving Marion numb and clammy with sweat. It had lasted nearly forty minutes — longer than any of the several attacks she’d had all week. Her body’s anguished, twisted arching had etched a shallow ravine in the old mattress and pillow. But lying in the dark room she soon felt refreshed once more, fairly brimming with pure vigor. When she rose from the bed — still a bit lightheaded, clothes clinging to her body like layers of papier-mâché — she stepped to the window. Down through the willow tree’s branches she could make out the flaking whiteness of the porch. Someone had come during the attack, had knocked several times; she’d heard it as one hears under water. But now there was no one. Rain was thumping on the front walk, on the warped planks of her porch steps, pelting the leathery rose leaves in the garden. Thunder growled. Over the mountains lightning skewed and spider-webbed. A chilly breeze lunged through the window and made the sleeves of her housedress flutter. “I ought to put on some tea,” she muttered and banged the window shut. “Warm me up.”

On her way to the stairs she glanced at the long mirror at the end of the hall and her legs nearly folded under her. Someone’s broken in, she thought, grabbing the banister for support. The woman in the mirror stood erect, shadowy hair spilling over white shoulders, head slightly tilted in something like

puzzlement. Marion opened her mouth, but lightning cracked close by before she could speak, and for a second the dark hall went white. In the mirror, she recognized herself. My God, she thought, looking down at her hands. They were slim and smooth on the banister. The tarnished rings she hadn't been able to remove from her knobby fingers for so many years gleamed as if they were new. She looked back at the mirror, edging closer, and saw that her sagging breasts had grown firm under a crepe bodice. Behind her, the mirrored hall dissolved into a summer evening in a garden. Ruth's garden, she remembered. Guests talked and laughed under leafy branches hung with Chinese lanterns. Ruth had used Truman's atomic defeat of the Japanese as an excuse for a celebration — an event that might draw Marion out of the ennui that had swamped her ever since her husband's suicide. Marion watched herself walking under the trees and felt — for the first time in years — the old emotions. She had sensed William's despair for months, maybe years. But over time there had come to be no contact at all between them; no touch, no talk . . . no healing. Even his various mistresses were no longer able to keep his melancholy caged. She remembered with horror the shotgun blast that rocked the house, the annihilated study window, the wall baptized by darkness. At the party, Marion saw herself smiling bravely, watching the couples dancing on the flagstone patio. And there was Ruth, handing her yet another sweet, gin-heavy drink.

Are you happy? Ruth says.

I'm trying.

I wish you could be.

“Happy,” Marion sneered at the murky glass.

Maybe I ought to find a . . . what did you call it, Ruth?

A distraction, Ruth says.

You mean a *lover*, Marion says loudly. Don't you?

Hush! Ruth says and grabs Marion's wrist. Then she whispers harshly, He's standing right over there with Edward, for God's sake. Come here!

Ruth pulls her toward the garden pond with a desperation that almost makes Marion laugh.

It's not funny, Ruth says.

Marion doesn't answer, but stands peering into the pond's shallow water. Where are the fish? she says.

The cat next door, Ruth says. Marion, you mustn't let anyone find out!

Oh, all right. I won't jeopardize your *bliss*.

They stand quietly for a long time. The consort Ruth hired is playing something classical, something slow and poignant. Somewhere off in the willows a solitary bird coos.

I thought turtledoves only sing in the morning, Marion says.

Ruth touches Marion's shoulder. What I meant before, Marion . . . about being happy. . . .

We've covered this ground.

We have, yes. But Marion . . . you *can* remarry. There's still time.

Marion bristles. Time, she says. Time and . . . well, why not say it? Time and a working womb. I could have a child for the *two* of us!

She turned from the mirror, sickened by the vicious shouting that now erupted between the two fond sisters. What had she said, exactly? What had either of them said? Not that any of it had been about words, but what was then and what would always remain unspoken. When Marion looked back she had already fled the party, ran into her sister's house and sought refuge in the upstairs bath. She watched the scene play out in the mirror's dim theater.

The woman in the bathroom makes gestures of grief and anger. She sobs, gripping her knuckles white at the sink. Then she suddenly lifts her head. Her eyes are glazed with a sly, drunken resolution and she tremblingly backhands the tears from her cheeks. She examines her profile in the vanity mirror, then slowly removes the brooch William had bought her in Venice — a simple, hand-tooled, golden piccolini with an emerald eye that she'd used to keep her bodice properly closed — and re-pins it lower down to more fully expose her breasts.

Marion eyed her youthful figure and murmured, “Not bad for a woman your age.”

Her younger self inspects her reflection in the vanity and says, Forty-four? Not bad at all.

A moment later she turns and throws open the door. The boy is there in the hall, as if he were waiting for her. He flashes a nervous, awkwardly teenaged smile. She's seen him before but can't place him.

Well! she says, fingering the golden fish-pin. And what are we up to tonight?

The boy's ears redden, but he won't look away. Are you all right? he asks.

I'm fine, she says, though she knows she could use another drink.

I just thought —

Yes? she asks and steps closer.

“You must be crazy,” Marion said into the mirror.

Nothing, the boy says.

She extends her hand and grasps the boy's belt at the buckle, shaking him playfully. Yes, she says.

He reaches out a tentative hand and brushes the brooch. She touches the back of his hand with one finger, running the tip along the largest vein. He looks her in the eyes, then slowly slips his hand inside her bodice.

Marion, the boy whispers.

She takes his hand and gently pulls it free. Then she bends, grasps the hem of her gown, and lifts the yards of silk until he can reach inside her underwear's lacy waistband.

"My God," Marion breathed, watching the boy probe clumsily, feeling him draw wetness . . . find the rhythm.

That's right, she whispers and unzips his trousers, smiling down at his flushed face. You're a natural.

Now the hall exploded in light and thunder shook the house. Then darkness flooded the hall once more, filling it with an aroma of burnt ozone mixed with the odor of dusty furniture and long-closed rooms. Like boiling water, pain hissed up Marion's twisted spine. She dropped to her knees before the mirror and saw that she was old again, old still . . . old forever. She heard a frantic rapping of knuckles at the front door. But already black rivulets of blood were pouring out of her, snaking down her stringy thighs, threading their way into the roots of the ancient carpet.

## V

Adrian could feel the cold bars of the bed-frame through the thin hospital pillow and pushed back into them, as if he needed to feel their hardness. He stared down at his hands, which lay in his lap, palms upward. They had the look of moribund crabs. "I'd forgotten," he said.

Theresa stood at the window. The low gray sky had almost finished dissolving into the faint, pearly pre-dawn light washing up from the eastern plains. She could make out a few watery stars and the moon showing through like a translucent shell.

“She didn’t answer my knock,” Theresa said. “So I called her sister.”

“Ruth. I remember.”

“You know her?” It wasn’t really a question.

Adrian rubbed his eyes, then his whole face. The dry palms rasped over his stubbled cheeks.

“Not really,” he said at last. “My father did.”

Theresa slumped back into the bedside chair, her gaze clinging unfocused to the wall. “It feels like a dream.”

Adrian nodded. “So then what happened?”

“Ruth told me to wait on the porch while she went in to find a flashlight. The lightning had downed some lines, I guess. But when she screamed I ran on in. I followed her voice and finally found them upstairs, in the hall. She told me to call an ambulance and pointed me into the bedroom. I called and we followed them here. We sat a long time waiting in Emergency. Most of the night. They called us inside about three-thirty.”

“Jesus,” Adrian breathed. “And she was —”

“Yes.” Theresa didn’t want to hear the word. “Doctor Linck said she’d simply lost too much blood. Then he left us alone with her, and Ruth was so . . . *stricken*. But after awhile she said, ‘I think she looks happy. After all these years, I think she’s finally happy.’ I felt so sorry for her. But you know, by the time I drove her home she seemed perfectly calm.”

Adrian's face had changed as Theresa talked, taking on a complicated look: a mixture of sadness and fear and wonder.

"But I just couldn't go home alone, Adrian. I came back here and Doctor Linck agreed to let me see you." She slipped her hand into Adrian's and he squeezed it gently.

"I'm glad," he said.

She watched him smile, then look away, and felt suddenly alarmed. "Adrian . . . what is it?"

After a long silence, Adrian said, "My dad was Ruth's lover once."

"You *father*?"

"Yes. It was after he and mom divorced," he added defensively.

"But what about . . . her husband?"

"He was the reason, I think," Adrian said. "If it hadn't been dad it would have been some other man."

Theresa shook her head slowly. "I can't feature Ruth having an affair."

"You can't picture how young she was," he said. "I tell you, both those sisters were so beautiful. I was fourteen that summer, and dad . . . oh, he tried to be so discreet. But I saw through him."

"It made you mad, I bet."

"No! No . . . I loved my mom, but I idolized my dad and I wanted him to be happy. Hell," he said with a faint laugh, "I wanted to be *like* him."

"Like him *how*?"

Adrian gave her a sheepish look. "I wanted Marion."

"Adrian! Jesus . . . she had to be forty something."

“I *know*. But age never crossed my mind. She was absolutely striking, Terry. And I was horny as hell.”

Theresa shook her head. “Men,” she said. “Wasn’t she married? Not that it would have stopped you from following in your father’s footsteps.”

Adrian felt his face blaze with embarrassment. “I’m trying to be honest here.”

Theresa smiled wryly and let go of his hand. “I appreciate that.”

“Look,” Adrian said, “I could *never* be that reckless. The fact is her husband was dead. But even that,” he went on, hurrying past Theresa’s obvious disgust, “—even that was part of the attraction. He’d committed suicide, and she seemed so *tragic*.” He looked at her pleadingly.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll put off asking what you find tragic about me.”

Adrian almost laughed. “Listen, it was all so romantic and dark. You know, a few years later, in college, we had to read one of his Greek translations — his name was Leggett, I think — and the professor brought in an article about him. It said his last years were ‘spent in debauchery.’ In the end he blew his brains out.”

“And you considered that romantic,” she said.

“I was fourteen, Terry. And the point is, as far as I was concerned Marion was free. Now this was all in my head, you know. I only met her once close up . . . until that garden party.” Adrian blushed again.

Theresa laid her hand lightly on top of Adrian’s. “Go on.”

“It the summer the war ended, and Ruth threw a big celebration one evening. Marion was there. She was sad and feisty at the same time, you know? And on top of that so . . . *ethereal*. I’d started out

planning to talk to her, but gave up the idea because I could see she was under a strain. She was suffering. And seeing her like that my lust pretty well drained out of me. I felt ashamed.”

“So you did what?”

“I was fourteen,” he smiled weakly. “I started sneaking drinks. I’d grab a gimlet and skulk around in the willow grove, or along the juniper hedge by the pond, until the glass was dry. Before I knew it I was plowed. It was like the ground turned to ocean. So I took myself inside to sober up. The house was big, but in my condition it felt like a maze. Took me half an hour to find a secluded room — the guest bedroom on the second floor. I rolled into the bed in the dark. Everything was moving. The combo was playing dance music down in the garden, and I think I passed out for awhile. Then I heard Marion’s voice, or thought I did. It was far off and vague. ‘All your sons dead and you criticize *me*?’ She damn near shouted it. Then I heard Ruth trying to calm her down, but Marion seemed hysterical. She kept screaming, ‘It’s William! It’s because of William!’”

“What was because of him?” Theresa asked.

Adrian shook his head. “I don’t know. All I know is someone ran into the house. I heard footsteps on the stairs, then a door slammed. Then I heard more footsteps. The bedroom door wasn’t all the way closed, so I peeked out and saw Ruth standing at the bathroom door. She said, “Marion,” and started to knock — then just shook her head and went back down to the party. After a time I crept down the hall and put my ear to the door. I could hear her crying. My legs felt rubbery because of the liquor, but I had to do something. I didn’t know what. Then the door flew open, and I guess I startled her. She stepped back into the bathroom and I could see what she’d done. There was a lot of blood in the sink. One wrist was slashed. In the other hand she held some kind of pin. A . . . what do you call those?” He tugged at the front of his hospital gown.

“A brooch?”

“A brooch. Yeah. It was a golden brooch. A fish with a green gem for an eye.”

“My God.”

Adrian nodded. “I know.”

“That was —”

“One of the things in her first donation.” He paused, then said, “It didn’t hit me till a few minutes ago, Terry. I was shooting that brooch when I first got sick.”

Theresa stood and moved to the window, her mind racing. The sun was just starting to show above the horizon — a slice of molten gold — and a ruddy brightness bathed the room. “I see,” she told him.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Adrian said.

Theresa nodded, but she felt alive and clear . . . felt something like knowledge flowing through her like a tide. “What happened then?” she asked.

Adrian sighed. “We stood there. She asked what I wanted in a way that made me know she had no memory of ever meeting me. So on top of being scared I felt hurt, invisible . . . powerless. Believe me, I didn’t know what I was about to do. The words just came. I told her I loved her. Then I threw my arms around her. And you know? She didn’t back away or fight me. She just sort of . . . accepted it. I told her to wait there, that I’d go find Ruth. ‘Just don’t hurt yourself again,’ I said. ‘Please.’”

Theresa heard his voice catch, but didn’t turn from the window. The sun was mesmerizing. Besides, the story’s telling was only for Adrian now. “Go on,” she said.

“I let her go,” he said at last. “But she didn’t stay. She ran. I followed her down the stairs, through the dining room . . . into the garden. That’s where I stopped. I mean, what could I do? I couldn’t

go chasing her with all those people around. So I watched. I watched her run across the flagstones, under the Chinese lanterns. Ruth saw her and called after her, but she kept on running. I didn't tell anyone what I'd seen. Not much later Ruth asked us all to leave, and we did. But Terry, I'd seen Marion toss the brooch into the pond as she passed it, so I fished it out as dad and I were leaving." He smiled ruefully. "I was going to use it as an excuse to see her. But after a couple of days I just slipped it into an envelope and dropped it in her mailbox." He glanced up at Theresa, who had moved to his bedside. "She could have died," he said. "She might have gone home and finished the job. I was *such* a coward."

Theresa stroked his brow and shook her head. "No," she said simply. She could feel full sunlight on her back now, warm and healing.

"The worst of it is I'd forgotten all about her," Adrian said. "Until this . . . weird coincidence. It just doesn't make any sense!"

In the distance a turtledove *roo-rooed*, paused, and called again. Then a second bird answered. Their song was round and seamless as the sun. Theresa closed her eyes a moment, listening. Then she said, "It *does* make sense."

Adrian laughed sharply. "Only if it's all a dream."

Theresa didn't argue. Behind her closed eyes she felt herself flying over the mountains so swiftly, so high, that in a heartbeat she could see the broad Pacific, luminous and shifting in the distance, then nearer . . . its white waves racing under the first rays of sun. . . .

"Don't talk that way," she said at last, offering Adrian a most mysterious smile. "You just might forget her again."