

JOHN UPDIKE



THE AFTERLIFE
AND OTHER STORIES

John Updike

THE
AFTERLIFE
and Other Stories



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The Afterlife

The Billingses, so settled in their ways, found in their fifties that their friends were doing sudden, surprising things. Mitch Lothrop, whom Carter and Jane had always rather poked fun at as stuffy, ran off with a young Jamaican physical therapist, and Augustina, who had seemed such a mouse all those years—obsessed with her garden and her children's education—took it rather raucously in stride, buying herself a new wardrobe of broad-shouldered dresses, putting a prodigiously expensive new slate roof on the Weston house, and having as a new companion another woman, a frilly little blue-eyed person who worked in Boston as a psychologist for the Department of Social Services. Ken McEvoy, on the other hand, who one day revealed in the newspapers as an embezzler who over the course of twenty years had stolen between two and five million from his brokerage firm; nobody, including the IRS, knew exactly how much. The investigation had evidently been going on for ages, during which time Ken and Molly had been showing up at cocktail parties and dinner parties and zoning hearings with not a hair out of place, smiling and looking as handsome a couple as ever. Even now, with the indictment in the paper and the plea-bargaining stage under way, they continued to appear at gatherings, Ken quite hilarious and open about it all and basking at the center of attention; he had always seemed rather stiff and shy before. What had he done with all the money? It was true they had two foreign cars, and a place on the Cape, and trips to Europe in the years they didn't go to Florida; but, then, so did everybody, more or less.

And then the Billingses' very dearest friends, Frank and Lucy Eggleston, upped and moved to England. It was something, Frank confided, they had thought about for years; they detested America, the way it was going—the vulgarity, the beggary, the violence. They both, Frank and Lucy, were exceptionally soft-spoken and virtual teetotallers, with health diets and peaceable hobbies; Frank did watercolors, Lucy bird-watched. A juncture came in his career when the corporation asked him to move to Texas. He opted to take early retirement instead, and with his savings and a little inheritance of hers, plus the ridiculous price their house brought—ten times what they had paid for it in the early Sixties—they moved to England, at a time when the pound was low against the dollar. Why defer a dream, they asked the Billingses, until you're too old to enjoy it? They found a suitable house not in one of the pretty counties south of London but up in Norfolk, where, as one of Lucy's early letters put it, "The sky is as big as they say the sky of Texas is."

The letters were less frequent than the Billingses had expected, and on their side they proved slower than they had promised to arrange a visit to their transplanted friends. Three years had gone by before they at last, after some days in London to adjust to the time change and the coinage and the left-right confusion, took a train north, got off at a station beyond Cambridge, and were greeted in the damp and windy spring twilight by a bouncy, bog-hatted

shadow they eventually recognized as Frank Eggleston. He had put on weight, and had acquired that rosy English complexion and an un-American way of clearing his throat several times in rapid succession. As they drove along the A-11, and then navigated twisting country roads, Carter seemed to hear Frank's accent melt, becoming less clipped and twitchy as he talked to the passengers and he talked and warmed the car's interior with their growly, drawling Americanness.

They arrived, after many a turning in the growing dark, at "Flinty Dell"—a name that natives, surely, would have given the slightly gaunt mustard-brick house, with its many gables and odd-sized, scattered windows, behind its high wall and bristlings of privet. Lucy seemed much as ever. A broad-faced strawberry blonde, she had always worn sweaters and plaid pleated skirts and low-heeled shoes for her birding walks, and here this same outfit seemed a shade more chic and less aggressively "sensible" than it had at home. Her pleasant plain looks, rather lost in the old crowd of heavily groomed suburban wives, had bloomed in this climate; her manner, as she showed them the house and their room upstairs, seemed to Carter somehow blushing, bridal. She escorted them through a maze of brightly papered rooms and awkward little hallways, up one set of stairs and down another, and on through the kitchen to a mudroom, where she and Frank outfitted themselves with scarves and Wellingtons and fat leather gloves and canes and riding crops and rakes and shovels for their dealings with the constantly invigorating out-of-doors. A barn went with the place, where they boarded horses. The village church was just across the pasture and through the wood on a path. Some obscure duke's vast estate stretched all about, with miles and miles of wonderful riding. And then there were fens, and a priory ruin, and towns where antiquities could be had for almost nothing. It was all too much to take in, or to talk about, so late at night, Lucy said, especially when the Billingses must be exhausted and still on funny time.

"Oh no," Jane said. "Carter was determined to get on your time and he wouldn't let me take even a nap that first, awful day. We walked all the way in the rain from the National Gallery to the Tate, where they had a huge retrospective of this horrid Kitchen Sink school."

"Such fun you make it sound," Lucy said, tucking her plump freckled calves under her on the tired-looking sofa. The living room was rather small, though high-ceilinged. The furniture, which they must have bought here, clustered like a threadbare, expectant audience about the tiny grated fireplace, as it vivaciously consumed chunks of wood too short to be called logs. "We thought we'd be going down to London every other day but there seems so much to do *here*."

The birding was incredible, and Lucy had become, to her own surprise, quite involved with the local church and with village good works. Frank was painting very seriously, and had joined an artists' association in Norwich, and had displayed a number of watercolors in the biannual shows. Lately he had switched from watercolors to oils. Some of his new works were hung in the living room: wet gray skies and tiny dark houses in the lee of gloomy groves scrubbed in with purple and green. Having poked the fire, and added more chunks (whose smoke smelled narcotically sweet), Frank pressed drinks upon the Billingses though as all agreed, it was already late and tomorrow was a big day. Lucy was going to drive the car to the sea while Frank rode in the local hunt. Scotch, brandy, port, Madeira, and several tins of sherry were produced; Carter remembered the Egglestons as abstemious, but English coziness seemed to have teased that out of them. Carter drank port and Jane cream sherry and

they gave the American news: Mitch Lothrop and the Jamaican bodybuilder live in Bay Village and have had a baby, and Augustina has turned that big Weston place into some sort of commune, with a total of five women living in it now. Ken McEvoy is out, having served less than two years, and has been given a job by one of the big Boston banks, because now he's supposedly an expert on fraudulent bookkeeping. Though he and Molly still drive the old Jaguar and a Volvo station wagon, it's obvious he must have stashed millions away because they're always flying off, even just for weekends, to this place they seem to own in the Bahamas. And so on.

Frank and Lucy had grown smilingly silent under this barrage of imported gossip, and when Carter stood and announced, "We're boring you," neither of them contradicted him. He had lost count of the times Frank had refreshed his port, or poured himself another brandy, and the freckles on Lucy's shins were beginning to swarm; yet he felt he was cutting something short, standing at last. All seemed to feel this—this failure, for all their good will, to remake the old connection—and it was in an atmosphere of reluctance that the guests were, sensibly led up to bed, Lucy showing them the bathroom again and making sure they had towels.

In the night, Carter awoke and needed to go to the bathroom. All that port. A wind was blowing outside. Vague black-on-blue tree shapes were thrashing. Not turning on a light, so as not to wake Jane, he found the bedroom door, opened it softly in the dark, and took two firm steps down the hall toward where he remembered the bathroom was. On his second step, there was nothing but air beneath his foot. His sleepy brain was jolted into action; he realized he was falling down the stairs. As he soared through black space, he had time to think what a terrible noise his crashing body would make, and how the Egglestons would be awakened, and how embarrassing and troublesome it would be for them to deal with his broken body. He even had time to reflect how oddly selfless this last thought was. Then something—someone, he felt—hit him a solid blow in the exact center of his chest, right over the sternum, and Carter was standing upright on what seemed to be a landing partway down the stairs. He listened a moment, heard only the wind as it moaned around the strange brick house, and climbed the six or so steps back to the second floor.

He remembered now that the bathroom was reached by turning immediately left out of the bedroom and then right at the bannister that protected the stairwell, and then left again, to the second door. He crept along and pressed this door open. The white toilet and porcelain basin had a glow of their own in the moonless night, so again he did without a light. His legs were trembling and his chest ached slightly but he felt better for having emptied his bladder. However, emerging again into the dark hall, he couldn't find the way back to his bedroom. Walls as in a funhouse surrounded him. A large smooth plane held a shadowy man who actually touched him, with an abrupt oily touch, and he realized it was himself, reflected in a mirror. On the three other sides of him there were opaque surfaces panelled like doors. The one of the doors developed a crack of dim blue light and seemed to slide diagonally away. Carter's eyes were adjusted to the dark enough to register wallpaper—faintly abrasive and warm to his touch—and the shiny straight gleam, as of a railroad track, of the bannister. He reversed his direction. There seemed many doors along the hall, but the one he pushed open did indeed reveal his bedroom. The wind was muttering, fidgeting at the stout English window sash, and as Carter drew closer to the bed he could hear Jane breathe. He crept

beside her and in the same motion fell asleep.

Next morning, as he examined the site of his adventure, he marvelled that he had not been killed. The oval knob of a newel post at the turn in the stairs must have been what struck him on the chest; had he fallen a slightly different way, it would have hit him in the face—smashed in his front teeth, or ripped out an eye—or he could have missed it entirely and broken his neck against the landing wall. He had no memory of grabbing anything, or of righting himself. But how had he regained his feet? Either his memory had a gap or he had been knocked bolt upright. If the latter, it seemed a miracle; but Jane, when he confided the event to her, took the occasion not for marvelling but for showing him, as one would show a stupid child, how to turn on the hall light, with one of those British toggle switches that look like a stumpy rapier with a button on its tip.

Carter felt rebuffed; he had told her of his nocturnal adventure, while they were still in bed, in hushed tones much like hers when, thirty years ago, she would confide a suspicion that she was pregnant. The Egglestons, downstairs at breakfast, responded more appropriately; they expressed amazement and relief that he hadn't been hurt. "You might have been *killed!*" Lucy said, with a rising inflection that in America had never been quite so pert, so boldly birdlike.

"Exactly," Carter said. "And at the time, even as I was in midair, I thought, 'What a nuisance for the poor Egglestons!'"

"Damn white of you," Frank said, lifting his teacup to his face. He was in a hurry to be off to his hunt; he had been up for several hours, doing a painting that needed dawn light, and there were blue and yellow on his fingernails. "Not to pop off on us," he finished.

"It happens," Carter told him. "More and more, you see your contemporaries in the *Globe* obituaries. The Big Guy is getting our range." This outburst of theology was so unexpected that the three others stared at him with a silence in which the chimneys could be heard to moan and the breakfast china to click. Carter felt, however, unembarrassed, and supernaturally serene. The world to which he had awoken, from the English details of the orange-juice-less, marmalade-laden breakfast set before him to the muddy green windswept landscape framed in the thick-sashed and playfully various windows, reminded him of children's books he had read over fifty years ago, and had the charm of the timeless.

He squeezed his feet into Lucy's Wellingtons and walked out with Frank to admire the horses. This Norfolk earth was littered with flint—chalky, sharp-edged pebbles. He picked one up and held it in his hand. It felt warm. A limestone layer, porous like bone, had wrapped itself around a shiny bluish core. He tried to imagine the geological event—some immense vanished ocean—that had precipitated this hail of bonelike fragments. The abundance of flint, the tufty grass so bursting with green, the radiant gray sky, the strong smells of horse and leather and feed and hay all bore in upon Carter's revitalized senses with novel force. There seemed a cosmic joke beneath mundane appearances, and in the air a release of pressure which enabled the trees, the beeches and oaks, to attain the size of thunderheads. The air was raw—rawer than he had expected England in April to be. "Is the wind always like this?" he asked the other man.

"Pretty much. It's been a tardy spring." Frank, in a hunting coat and jodhpurs, had saddled a horse in its stall and was fiddling with the bridle, making the long chestnut head of the animal, with its rubbery gray muzzle and rolling gelatinous eyeball, jerk resentfully. The

physical fact of a horse—the pungent, assaultive hugeness of the animal and the sense of a tiny spark, a gleam of skittish and limited intelligence, within its monstrous long skull—was not a fact that Carter had often confronted in his other life.

“Doesn’t it get on your nerves?”

“Does ’em good,” Frank said with his acquired brisk bluntness. “Scours you out.”

“Yes,” Carter said, “I can feel that.” He felt delicate, alert, excited. The center of his chest was slightly sore. His toes were numb and scrunched inside Lucy’s boots. With a terrible shuffling of hooves and heaving of glossy mass, the horse was led from the barn and suddenly Frank was up on it, transformed, majestic, his pink face crowned by his round black hat, his hands and the horse a single new creature. The two women came out of the mustard-brick house to watch its master ride off, at a stately pace, down the flinty driveway to the path through the wood. The trees, not yet in full leaf, were stippled all over with leaflets and catkins, like a swathe of dotted swiss. Frank, thus veiled, slowly vanished. “A stirring sight,” Carter said. It came upon him that some such entertainment, astonishing yet harmless, would be his steady diet here. He was weightless, as if, in that moment of flight headlong down the stairs, he had put on wings.

Lucy asked them which they would like first, the walk to the river or the drive to the sea. Then she decided the two should be combined, and a supply of boots and overshoes was tossed into the car. Carter got in the back of the little Austin—red, though it had looked black at the station last night—and let the two women sit up front together. Jane occupied what in America would have been the driver’s seat, so that Carter felt startled and imperilled whenever she turned her head aside or gestured with both hands. Lucy seemed quite accustomed to the wrong side of the road, and drove with a heedless dash. “Here is the village, these few houses,” she said. “And the church just beyond—you can’t see it very well because of the huge old chestnut. Incredibly old, they say the tree is. The church isn’t so old.”

On the other side of the road, there were sheep, dusted all over with spots of color and mingled with gamboling lambs. The river was not far off, and Lucy parked by an iron bridge where water poured in steady cold pleats down the slant face of a concrete weir. Embankments had been built by stacking bags of cement and letting natural processes dampen and harden them. Lucy led the way along a muddy path between the riverbank and a field that had been recently plowed; the pale soil, littered to the horizon with bonelike bits of flint, was visibly lifting into the silvery, tumbling sky. The wind was scouring dark trails of soil upward, across the plowed miles.

“It’s been almost a drought,” Lucy said, her voice uplifted, her kerchief flattened against her freckled cheek. Her eyes, squinting, were a pale color between blue and green, and the beryl, beneath this wild sky, had an uncanny brilliance. “Oh, look!” she cried, pointing. “A little marsh tit, doing his acrobatics! Last week, closer to the woods, I saw a pair of waxwings. They generally go back to the continent by this time of year. Am I boring you both? Really, the wind is frightful, but I want you to see my gray heron. His nest *must* be in the woods somewhere, but Frank and I have never been able to spot it. We asked Sedgewick—that’s the duke’s gamekeeper—where to look for it, and he said if we got downwind we would *smell* it. They eat meat, you know—rodents and snakes.”

“Oh dear,” Jane said, for something to say. Carter couldn’t take his eyes from the distant dark lines of lifting earth, the Texas-like dust storm. As the three made their way along the

river, the little black-capped tit capered in the air above them, and as they approached the woods, out flocked starlings, speckled and black and raucous.

“Look—the kingfisher!” Lucy cried. This bird was brilliant, ruddy-breasted and green-headed, with a steel-blue tail. It flicked the tail back and forth, then whirred along the river’s glittering surface. But the gray heron was not showing himself, though they trod the margin of the woods for what seemed half a mile. They could hear tree trunks groaning as the wind twisted their layered crowns; the tallest and leafiest trees seemed not merely to heave but to harbor several small explosions at once, which whitened their tossing branches in patches. Carter’s eyes watered, and Jane held her hands in their fat, borrowed gloves in front of her face.

At last, their hostess halted. She announced, “We better get on with it—what a disappointment,” and led them back to the car.

As they drew close to the glittering, pleated, roaring weir, Carter had the sudden distinct feeling that he should look behind him. And there was the heron, sailing out of the woods toward them, against the wind, held, indeed, motionless within the wind, standing in midair with his six-foot wingspread—an angel.

The wind got worse as they drove toward the sea. On the map, it looked a long way off, but Lucy assured them she had often done it and returned by teatime. As she whipped along the narrow roads, Carter in the back seat could not distinguish between her tugs on the steering wheel and the tugs of the wind as it buffeted the Austin. A measured, prissy voice on the radio spoke of a gale from the Irish Sea and of conditions that were “near-cyclonic,” and Jane and Carter laughed. Lucy merely smiled and said that they often used that expression. In a village especially dear to her, especially historical and picturesque, a group of people were standing on the sidewalk at the crest of a hill, near the wall of a churchyard. The church was Norman, with ornamental arcs and borders of red pebbles worked into the masonry. Lucy drove the car rather slowly past, to see if there had been an accident.

“I think,” Carter offered, “they’re watching the tree.” A tall tree that leaned out from within the churchyard was swaying in the wind.

“Bother,” Lucy said. “I’ve driven too far—what I wanted to show you was back in the middle of the village.” She turned around, and as they drove by again several of the little crowd, recognizing the car, seemed amused. A policeman, wearing a rain cape, was pedalling his bicycle up the hill, very energetically, head down.

What Lucy wanted the Billingses to see in the village was a side street of sixteenth-century houses, all of them half-timbered and no two skewed from plumb at the same angle.

“Who lives in them?” Carter wanted to know.

“Oh, people—though I daresay more and more it’s trendy younger people who open up shops on the ground floor.” Lucy backed around again and this time, coming up the hill, they met a police barricade, and the tall tree fallen flat across the road. Just half of the tree was actually; its crotch had been low to the earth, and the other half, with a splintery white wound in its side, still stood.

The three Americans, sealed into their car, shrieked in excitement, understanding now why the villagers had been amused to see them drive past under the tree again. “You’d think somebody,” Jane said, “might have shouted something, to warn us.”

“Well, I suppose they thought,” said Lucy, “we had eyes to see as well as they. That’s how they are. They don’t give anything away; you have to go to them.” And she described, as the car bounced between thorny hedgerows and dry-stone walls, her church work, her charity work in the area. It was astonishing, how much incest there was, and drunkenness, and hopelessness. “These people just can’t envision any better future for themselves. They would never *dream*, for example, of going to London, even for a day. They’re just totally locked in their little world.”

Jane asked, “What about television?”

“Oh, they watch it, but don’t see that it has anything to do with them. They’re taken care of, you see, and compared with their fathers and grandfathers aren’t so badly off. The *cruelty* of the old system of hired agricultural labor is almost beyond imagining; they worked people absolutely to death. Picking flint, for instance. Every spring they’d all get out there and pick the flint off the fields.”

That didn’t seem, to Carter, so very cruel. He had picked up bits of flint on his own, spontaneously. They were porous, pale, intricate, everlasting. His mind wandered as Lucy went on about the Norfolk villagers and Jane chimed in with her own concerns—her wisdom now that the children were out of the house, to get out herself and to be of some service, not exactly jump into the ghetto with wild-eyed good intentions but do something *useful* with something with *people*....

Carter had been nodding off, and the emphasized words pierced his doze. He felt he had been useful enough, in his life, and had seen enough people. At the office now—he was a lawyer—he was conscious of a curious lag, like the lag built into radio talk shows so that the obscenities wouldn’t get on the air. Just two or three seconds, between challenge and response, between achievement and gratification, but enough to tell him that something was out of sync. He was going through the motions, and all the younger people around him knew it. When he spoke, his voice sounded dubbed, not quite his own. There were, it had recently come to him, vast areas of the world he no longer cared about—Henry James, for example, and professional ice hockey, and nuclear disarmament. He did not doubt that within these areas much excitement could be generated, but not for him, nevermore. The two women in front of him—Lucy’s strawberry-blond braids twitching as she emphasized a point and Jane’s gray-peppered Brunette curls softly bouncing as she nodded in eager empathy—seemed alien creatures, like the horse, or the marsh tit with his little black-capped head. The two wives sounded as stirred up and twittery as if their lives had just begun—as if courtship and husbands and childbearing were a preamble to some triumphant menopausal ministry among the disenfranchised and incestuous. They loved each other, Carter reflected wearily. Women had the passion of conspirators, the energy of any underground, supplied by hope of seizing power. Lucy seemed hardly to notice, while talking and counselling Jane, that she had more than once steered around the wreckage of tree limbs littering the road. Through the car windows Carter watched trees thrash in odd slow motion and overhead wires sway as if the earth itself had lost its moorings.

Then, out of the bruised and scrambled sky, rain pelted down with such fury that the wipers couldn’t keep the windshield clear; it became like frosted glass, and the car rattled and thrummed. Lucy lifted her voice: “There’s a lovely old inn right in the next village. Would this be a good time to stop and have a bite?”

Just in dashing the few yards from the parking lot to the shelter of the inn, the three of them got soaked. Inside, all was idyllic: big old blackened fireplace crackling and hissing and exuding that sweet scent of local woodsmoke, carved beams bowed down almost to Carter's head, buffet of salmon mousse and Scotch eggs and shepherd's pie served by a willing lad and a blushing lass, at whose backs the rain beat like a stage effect on the thick bottle panes. The middle-aged trio ate, and drank beer and tea; over Lucy's protests, Carter paid.

Next door, an antique shop tempted tourists through a communicating archway, and while the storm continued, Lucy and her visitors browsed among the polished surfaces, the silver and mirrors, the framed prints and marquetry tables. Carter was struck by a lustrous large bureau, veneered in a wood that looked like many blurred paw prints left by a party of golden cats. "Elm burl, early eighteenth century," the ticket said, along with a price in the thousands of pounds. He asked Jane if she would like it—as if one more piece of furniture might keep her at home, away from good works.

"Darling, it's lovely," she said, "but so expensive, and so big."

Elm burl: perhaps that was the charm, the touch of attractive fantasy. In America, the elm trees were dead, as dead as the anonymous workman who had laid on this still-glamorous veneer.

"They ship," he responded, after a few seconds' lag. "And if it doesn't fit anywhere we can sell it on Charles Street for a profit." His voice didn't sound quite like his own, but only because he seemed to notice. The women's conversation in the car had obligated him to make a show of power, male power.

Lucy, intensifying her hint of a British accent, courteously haggled with the manager—a straggly fat woman with a runny red nose and a gypsyish shawl she held tight around her throat—and got four hundred pounds knocked off the price. Carter's plunge into this purchase frightened him, momentarily, as he realized how big the mark-up must be, to absorb such a discount so casually.

There were forms to sign, and credit cards to authenticate over the telephone; as these transactions were pursued, the storm on the roof abated. The three buyers stepped out into a stunning sunlit lapse in the weather. Raindrops glistened everywhere like a coating of ice and the sidewalk slates echoed the violet of the near-cyclonic sky.

"Darling, that was so debonair and dashing and untypical of you," Jane said.

"Ever so larky," Lucy agreed.

"Kind of a game," he admitted. "What are the odds we'll ever see that chest again?"

Lucy took mild offense, as if her adopted fellow-countrymen were being impugned. "Of course they're very honest and reputable. Frank and I have dealt with these people a few times on our own."

A miraculous lacquer lay upon everything, beading each roadside twig, each reed of thatch on the cottage roofs, each tiny daisy trembling in the grass by the lichen-stained field wall. Then clouds swept in again, and the landscape was dipped in shadow. Many trees were felled or split. Little clusters of workmen, in raincoats that were pumpkin-colored instead of, as they would have been in America, yellow or Day-Glo orange, buzzed with saws and pulled with ropes at limbs that intruded into the road. Waiting to be signalled past such work parties took time, while the little Austin gently rocked in the wind, as if being nudged by a giant hand. Carter caressed the sensitive center of his chest, under his necktie: his secret, the se-

of his nocturnal pact, his passport to this day like no other. It had felt, in the dark, like father's rough impatient saving blow. "How much farther to the sea?" he asked.

"Well might you ask," Lucy said. "On a day of smooth sailing, we'd be there by now." The cars ahead of them slowed and then stopped entirely. A policeman with a young round face explained that lines were down across the road.

"That does rather tear it," Lucy allowed. The detour would add fifteen miles at least to their journey. The landscape looked dyed, now, in an ink that rolled across the pale speckled fields in waves of varying intensity. Along a far ridge, skeletal power-line towers marched in a procession, their latticework etched with a ghostly delicacy against the black sky. A band of angels.

Jane consoled Lucy: "Really, dear, if I saw too many more charming villages I might burst."

"And we see the sea all the time when we're on the Cape," Carter added.

"But not *our* sea," Lucy said. "The *North* Sea."

"Isn't it just ugly and cold and full of oil?" asked Jane.

"Not for much longer, they tell us. Full of oil, I mean. Well, if you two don't really mind, I suppose there's nothing to do but go back. Frank *does* like an early supper after he's been on a hunt."

It was growing dark by the time they reached Flinty Dell. Exposed to view a small, draughty Victorian church, the ancient chestnut had blown down—a giant shaggy corpse with a tree stump torn like a shriek, pointing at the heavens. The tree had fallen across a churchyard wall and crushed it, the outer courses of sturdy-seeming brick spilling a formless interior of rubble and sand.

Frank came out into the driveway to meet them; in the dusk, his face looked white, and his voice was not amused. "My God, where have you people *been*? I couldn't believe you'd be out driving around in this! The hunt was called off, the radio's been cancelling everything and telling people for Christ's sake to *stay off the roads!*" He rested a trembling hand on the sill of the rolled-down car window; his little fingernail still bore an azure fleck of today's dawn.

"In this bit of a breeze?" Lucy cooed.

Jane said, "Why, Frank darling, how nice of you to be worried."

And Carter, too, was surprised and amused that Frank didn't know they were beyond that now.

Wildlife

The town was sexy, or so it had always seemed to Ferris. He had lived there for years, and his former wife still lived there. It was a town by the sea, with marshes and a broad beach. Summer had been a fête of sunburn and short skirts and cookouts and insect bites. Not only mosquitoes and midges and gnats but a curious plenitude of ticks and green-headed bloodthirsty flies bred in the marshes and the winding saltwater channels. An air of siege persisted through the other seasons—fall pinching in with an ever-earlier darkness, winter when on the crooked slick roads cars slid into one another with a dreamlike slow motion, spring with its raw east wind and bouts of flu and considerable human irritability.

The town was not for everybody; it had no country club, its politics were unedifying, its schools were only fair, its tax base needed broadening. Up-and-coming young commuters from Boston, or hi-tech engineers employed along Route 128, moved elsewhere, to more prosperous towns—one with a pretty blue harbor lined in granite and adorned with the yacht club, another with a domed gazebo, another equipped with horses and stables and a weekly fox hunt, a third boasting a precious historic district of early-Federal homes, a fourth full of grand estates waiting to be subdivided. All of these towns were more suitable and sounder investments for the aspiring than the ragged, raffish settlement where Ferris had lived in his physical prime.

Its natural beauty had verged on wildness and could overflow into violence. Maritime scandals would suddenly rip through the school board or the Methodist choir. Early-morning murder-suicides would bestow a blasted aura upon a pale-green house hitherto innocuous in its row. Weather would hit oddly hard, so that power would be lost for the week after a nor'easter that had hardly touched the rest of the coast, or a drought would dry up the private wells and expose the gravel bottom of the town reservoir. Fires were common in the old town built almost entirely of wood. In the years after Ferris left, first one white Congregational church burned down—an irreplaceable example of carpenter Gothic—then another, a noble Greek Revival edifice erected in a parish schism in 1842. The movie house, with its quaint Arabian Nights décor from the 1930s, vanished in yet another holocaust, along with the adjacent paint store, its cans of turpentine and Williamsburg colors exploding like rapid artillery. Ferris's growing children reported these disasters to him, along with their own. He had remarried and lived in Boston.

Returning to the town, to take a child to dinner or to consult his dentist, who was aging along with him, he never failed to be uplifted by the local ambience into a sexier, more buoyant self. His very step became more youthful, and the rub of his shirt against his skin took on a suggestive nervous tension. Almost no one, after ten years, knew Ferris—even the corner drugstores, once operated by rival selectmen, had changed hands—but he was greeted by the familiar proportions of the buildings, the erratic layout of the streets, and unexpected souvenirs of his past: an antique store still offered, it appeared, the same sun-baked furniture

in the window, a gray-haired postman was still doing his rounds, a graceful great elm hadn't died yet, a straggling stretch of dirt sidewalk hadn't yet been paved. The town was patchy and informal, with seams where the true stuff of life—dirt, sex, saltwater, death—kept leaking through. Even the town's children and dogs, as Ferris saw them, were scruffier and cannier than those of better-organized, more antiseptic communities.

In the ten years since he had left, a further plague had been visited upon the town—plague of deer. Even while he had been a resident, housewives along the beach road would complain that in the night deer had consumed all their tulips and that their newly planted dogwoods and crabapples had been fatally girdled by deer nibbling the bark. But the marauders were furtive and shy, and it was considered a treat for the children, better than a trip to the zoo, when an October walk on the beach yielded a glimpse of deer, their white tails flicking, bounding away into the dunes.

Ferris still remembered a moment, freighted with guilt and rapture, early in his separation from his wife, when the property where he had lived still called forth his husbandry. He had come out from Boston and he and his son, Jamie, then in his mid-teens, were up on the tennis court, readying it for winter by placing two-by-fours on the tapes and weighting them with rocks. Otherwise, the freezing and thawing of the clay lifted the aluminum nails during the winter. Ferris happened to glance up. At the far edge of the shaggy field a family of deer had emerged from the woods. It was an unseasonably warm day in November, misty, and in the mist the forms of the three deer—the stag, the doe, and the smallest, no longer a fawn—hesitated as if posed in a soft old photograph, elegant gray-brown creatures from the dignified prehuman world.

“Look!” Ferris told his son quietly, but even this whispered utterance sent the ghostly forms racing, bounding across the wet unmowed field to the patch of woods in the opposite corner of the property, where the tidal creek turned. Ferris had not felt entitled, that haggard guilty day on the edge of winter, to so magical a sight, and had pressed it upon his son as if in compensation for his coming years of absence.

Now his son, in his mid-twenties and called James or Jim, had grown accustomed to his absence, and the deer had become a famous civic problem, which Ferris read about in the Boston newspapers. They multiplied while the undeveloped land around them diminished; starving, they robbed the dunes of vegetation and ravished the landscaping of the expensive seaview homes being built above the marshes. A Christmas tree tossed out into the snow was stripped of needles by the frantic animals, even in daylight; at night, high-school couples parking on the beach lot found themselves surrounded by a crowd of deer standing mute and mendicant around the car. The deer in their delicate heraldic beauty had become as pestilential as rats, and the town, with its curious flair for scandal, where another town might have found a quiet solution, debated the issue into a storm of publicity. Nature-lovers from the other end of the commonwealth came to protest the selectmen's proposal to import hired Army sharpshooters to reduce the herds.irate women threatened to mingle, dressed in deerskin, with the animals on the scheduled day, thus sacrificing their own lives to the ideal of unpolluted natural process. Several veterinarians came to testify that starvation was relatively painless and weeds out the weak; others counter-testified that it is agony and selectively destroys the young. There were meetings, picketing, interviews on television. Meanwhile, throughout large regions of the town—and these the most fashionable areas

expensive—garbage cans were kicked open, azalea bushes eaten leafless, and dead deer bodies found frozen out by the bird feeders.

Then, worse yet, it developed that the deer population was crawling with the tiny tick *Ixodes dammini*, which in turn harbored the spirochetes of Lyme disease, named after the town in Connecticut where it first was recognized. Round red lesions, malaise and fatigue, chills and fever and stiff neck: these are its symptoms. Its final results can be heart damage and lifelong arthritis. We live in plague times. As our species covers the earth like a scum, the bacteria and viruses and parasites inventively thrive. When Ferris lived in the town, no thought was given, for example, to venereal disease. Herpes and AIDS and chlamydia were unheard of; sexual affairs involved a spiritual and economic peril only. Men and women tasted one another as if at a smorgasbord of uncontaminated dishes, a tumble of treats, some steaming, some chilled, some nutritious, some not, but all clean.

The deer-lovers were overruled, and on appointed days the sharpshooters descended on the dunes. But cases of Lyme disease continued to trickle into the local hospital from all along the beach road, where property values, always high, had been soaring, and now dipped.

Ferris's old property was not on the beach road, but on a road off of it, that led nowhere. The road went over a small arched bridge that spanned a tidal creek, passed a few more houses, and then became a turnaround of packed dirt amid the encroaching marsh grass, with its bleached litter of beer cans and horseshoe-crab shells. The road was paved as far as the bridge, and Ferris knew every turn, sway, and jolt in the ride; it, too, seemed sexy, and brought back younger days. It had been a woman's town, dominated by female energy. To find oneself, of a weekday afternoon, in bed with another man's wife was to have achieved certain membership—an accreditation in primordial coin, a basic value within an Amazonian tribe. At parties, there were four kinds of people: women who had known a number of the men, men who had known a number of the women, and men and women who were innocents. Sometimes the latter were married to the uninnocent, and that produced sadness and divorce. Ferris was returning to visit Jamie, who was house-sitting while the former Mrs. Ferris was off for a week in Nova Scotia with the latest of the series of lovers and attendants that for ten years had failed to yield another husband. Ferris for all his failings had proved to be irreplaceable.

The boy greeted his father with complaints, and looked exhausted. He stooped, and had not shaved for a day or two, so that black whiskers of an alarming virility stood out on his jaw and chin. "I've been trying to impose some order on the bushes," he explained. "Mom just lets everything grow. She has this philosophy that every plant has a right to live."

Yes, Ferris recalled, that had been the local philosophy; while the women of surrounding proper towns tended their gardens and joined Garden Clubs, the housewives here went off to the beach to deepen their already savage-looking tans. Personal cultivation had been the style, and horticultural neglect a token of liberation. Once Ferris had tried to prune a giant wisteria vine that was prying clapboards off the house, and his wife had accused him of being a butcher, a killer. All he had craved had been a little order. She had thought dandelions and burdock rather pretty and allowed the forsythia bush to swallow the yew hedge. The lawn had been mown primarily for croquet games and had emitted a different aroma in each month of summer—that of a spicy fresh salad in June, of a well's deep walls in July, and of

dry hay in August, with scuffed patches of earth around the improvised soccer goals, and on the stains where the children had worked on their bicycles.

August was Ferris's favorite month. It was August now. "Jimmy, just don't get into the poison ivy," he warned his son, who as a boy had had a fearful case of it, his eyes swollen and shut above scarlet, oozing cheeks. "Shiny leaves, always in sets of three. Not serrated and feathery, like Virginia creeper. Shiny, with a pinkish stem."

"That reminds me, Dad. I have something to show you."

"What?" Ferris's heart skipped a beat.

"I'll show you inside."

Ferris took this as an invitation to survey the outdoors first. He and this boy who had replaced him as the man of the place walked up through the remnants of a onetime orchard to the neglected tennis court. The wire fencing that had once been virgin and rust-free was stapled to bolt-upright posts fragrant with creosote, now sagged under the burden of entwined honeysuckle. Rotten old sails had been spread along the edges, to suppress the weeds that invaded from the field. Ferris looked up toward the place in the field where he had once seen the deer, but saw only forest, taller and coming closer. Old photographs of the region showed clean curves of land, stripped for firewood and cropped by sheep, and a view clear across low drumlins to the sea. Now shaggy groves covered the high ground, and the saltwater of the channel merely glistened through, with the noise of motorboats and teenagers gleefully shouting.

"A big job," he sighed to his son. In August, there came a scratching in the air, an unlocatable buzzing undercurrent that people called crickets or cicadas but that Ferris associated with the sound that a bedside electric clock makes beside an insomniac's head in the night.

"And the dumb pear trees," his son went on, in that affronted voice children use, "keep producing all these pears to drop into the grass to gum up the mower." His tone was a child's but his timbre adult, an aggrieved baritone that went with the black whiskers, the thick powerful legs, the big-boned wrists and hands. Ferris had trouble understanding the sex lives of his adult children. He had met some of this son's girlfriends; they were presentable young women with well-conditioned figures, oily bleached ringlets, bright eyes, relaxed and sympathetic manners, and mouths curved in expectation of being amused. Yet, no sooner had Ferris mastered the name of one, and the rudiments of her geographical and educational background, than she was gone. None of them lasted, none of them apparently excited the romantic wish so common to men of Ferris's generation, the wish to marry—to claim in the sight of church and state this female body, to enter into formalized intimacy as if into territory to be conquered, tamed, sown, and harvested. The wife at the kitchen sink, the wife at the cocktail party or the entr'acte buffet, the wife showering to go out or coming back from shopping with sore feet, the wife docile on one's arm or excitingly quarrelsome in the back of a taxi: the romance that, for Ferris, had attached to these images and made him want to marry not once but repeatedly had quite vanished from American culture—a casualty, perhaps, of co-ed dormitories or the impossible prices of starter housing. His deep-voiced son, for example, lived here for months at a time, with his lonely mother and her overgrown peony beds.

Dogs bounded around the two men as they crossed the lank brown lawn to the kitchen

door. Inside, the animals clattered and slid about on the linoleum in hope of being fed. There were three dogs, disparate mongrels acquired by Ferris's former family at various impulsive moments and now collected here, along with a neighbor's dog that had attached itself to the pack. Their hair was everywhere, on rugs and sofas and in little balls collected along the baseboards like tumbleweed along a barbed-wire fence. The furniture, much of it once joint property, seemed to float in temporary arrangement, not rooted in place but at rest—Fifties modern grown old and worn. The teak arms of the Danish chairs were cracked; the glass tabletops looked permanently smeared. His ex-wife had scattered garish throw pillows and squares of Indian cloth about as if to distract the eye, and these many festive patches intensified the air of dishevelment, of carefree improvisation, an air that made the shirt on Ferris's chest and the very trousers on his legs caress his skin with an excited slither.

His son at his side fetched a weary sigh. "I was going to paint the woodwork for a project but just keeping it halfways tidy in here and the kitchen seems to take all my time."

Ferris asked, "What did you want to show me?"

"Oh yeah. I, er, have to lower my britches."

"Really? Well, do, I guess. Don't be shy. I used to change your diapers." Ferris's blood raced with the mystery of it.

Beneath his khaki pants his son wore boxer shorts, such as Ferris associated with old men. His father had worn such baggy underpants. Ferris wore Jockeys, the snugger the better. "Come to the back of my right thigh, Dad. Up high. See it?"

"A big round red spot. How long have you had it?"

"A while. I remember, about two weeks ago, this little critter bit me. A tiny tick—smaller than a dog tick. I didn't think much about it but now this terrible itching and this *hot* feeling are there, where I can't quite see it even with the mirror."

Ferris asked, though he knew the answer, "You've been working in the bushes?"

"I *had* to," the child whined. "They were coming into the yard. There was hardly any yard left. I've been feeling exhausted lately, too."

"Chills and fever?"

"Chills once in a while. I don't know about fever. The thermometer's broken."

"Is your neck stiff?"

"Only in the mornings, a little sometimes."

"Jamie, you poor guy. We must get you to a doctor." As Ferris bent lower to re-examine the symptom, he tried to suppress the happy thought that he had got out just in time.

Brother Grasshopper

Fred Emmet—swarthy and thick-set, with humorless straight eyebrows almost meeting above his nose—had been an only child. If he ever fantasized a sibling for himself, it was a sister, not a brother. His father had had a brother, an older brother, who, he let it be known, had dominated him cruelly. Yet into even his more resentful reminiscences crept a warmth that Fred envied, as he tried to imagine the games of catch, decades ago, on the vacant lots of his city that no longer had vacant lots, and the shared paper route in snow that was deeper and more dramatic than any snow today is, with a different scent—the scent of wet leather and damp wool knickers. Though his father's brother had deliberately thrown the ball too hard and finished delivering papers to his side of the street first and never came back to help but instead waited inside the warm candy store, a brother was something his father had *had*, augmenting his existence, giving it an additional dimension available to him all his life. "My brother down in Deerfield Beach," he would drop into a conversation, or "If you were to express that view to my brother, he'd tell you flat out you're crazy." And, though the brothers lived over a thousand miles apart, one in Florida and the other in New Jersey, and saw each other less than once a year, they died within a few months of each other, Fred's father following his older brother as if into one more vacant lot, to shag flies for him.

But this was years later, when Fred's own children were grown, or nearly. He had married early, right after Harvard, supplying himself with another roommate, as it were, rather than launching into life alone. He envied siblings their imagined power of consultation, and conspiring against parents who otherwise would be too powerful. Not the least of the charms his future wife held for him was her sister—a younger sister also at Radcliffe, with her own circle of friends. Germaine was more animated, more gregarious, and more obviously pretentious than Fred's sensible Betsy. Among her numerous suitors the most conspicuous was Carlyle Slaughterfield, a tall bony New Englander with a careless, potent manner.

Fred had been sickly and much-protected as a child, and even his late growth spurt had left him well under six feet tall. He found Carlyle, who was two years older than he and a student at the Business School across the river, exotic and intimidating—a grown man with his own car, a green Studebaker convertible, and confident access to the skills and equipment of expensive sports like sailing, skiing, climbing, and hunting. Carlyle and his B-School friends would load up his snappy green convertible with skis and boots and beer and sleeping bags and head north into snow country with the top down. Details of their mountain adventures made Fred shudder—sheer ice, blinding fog, tainted venison that left them all vomiting, ski trails bearing terrible names like Devil's Head and Suicide Ravine. Climbing in the White Mountains one summer, Carlyle had seen a friend fall, turning in the air a few feet away. Carlyle pressed into the cliff and gripped the pitons.

"What was the expression on his face?" Fred asked.

Carlyle's somewhat protuberant eyes appeared to moisten, as he visualized the fat moment. "Impassive," he said.

His voice, husky and hard to hear, as if strained through something like baleen, was the one weak thing about him; but even this impressed Fred. Back in New Jersey, the big men, gangsters and police chiefs and Knights of Columbus, spoke softly, forcing others to listen.

As their courtship of the Terwilliger sisters proceeded in parallel, Fred and Carlyle spent an accumulating number of hours together. In the spring, waiting for the girls to come out of their dorms, they played catch in the Quad with a squash ball; Carlyle's throws made Fred's hands sting and revived his childhood fear of being hit in the face and having an eye or tooth knocked out. The strength stored in the other man's long arms and wide, sloping shoulders was amazing—a whippy, excessive strength almost burdensome, Fred imagined, to carry. Carlyle had been a jock at prep school, but in college had disdained organized sports; a tendency to veer away from the expected was perhaps another weakness of his. Behind the Business School, across from Harvard Stadium, a soccer field existed where the future financiers played touch football. Carlyle passed for immense distances, sometimes into Fred's eagerly reaching hands, and protectively saw to it that his timorous and undersized brother's courtship usually played on his team.

In March of the year that Fred and Betsy graduated, the two couples went skiing, and Carlyle was as patient as a professional instructor, teaching Fred the snowplow and stem christie and carefully bringing him down, at the end of the day, through the shadows of the intermediate slope. All these upper-class skills involved danger, Fred noticed. That summer, after he and Betsy had married, Carlyle took them and Germaine sailing on Buzzards Bay and while the two sisters stretched out in their underwear for sunbaths on the bow, commanded in his reedy voice that Fred take the tiller and hold the mainsheet—take all this responsibility into his hands!

"Take it. Push it left to make the prow move to the right. The prow's the thing in front."

"I'd just as soon rather not. I'm happy being a passenger."

"Take it, Freddy."

The huge boat leaned terrifyingly under gusts of invisible pressure, the monstrous sails rippling and the mast impaling the sun and the keel slapping blindly through the treacherous water, nothing firm under them, even the horizon and its islands skidding and shifting. Nevertheless, the boat did not capsize. Fred gradually got a slight feel for it—for the sun and salt air and rocking horizon. Germaine's breasts in their bra were bigger than Betsy's, her pubic bush made a shadowy cushion under her underpants as the sisters lazily, trustfully chattered. Carlyle's face, uplifted to the sun with bulging closed eyelids, had a betrayed look; his colorless fair hair, already thinning, and longer than a businessman's should be, streamed behind him in the wind. *This bastard*, Fred thought, as the boat sickeningly heeled, *trying to make a man of me*.

When, the following summer, Germaine graduated and married Carlyle, the groom chose Fred over all his old skiing and hunting buddies to be his best man, perhaps in courteous symmetry with Betsy, the matron-of-honor. He bought Fred a beige suit to match his own, the coat hung loose on Fred's narrow shoulders, and the sleeves were too long, but he felt flattered nonetheless. Betsy was five months pregnant, so her ceremonial dress, of royal-blue silk, was too tight. Between them, they joked, it came out even. So young, they were already

launched on creating another generation.

A strange incident clouded this wedding, foreshadowing trouble to come. Carlyle and Germaine were married in New Hampshire, at a summer lodge beyond Franconia belonging to Carlyle's family, and with sentimental associations for him. The Terwilliger parents were getting a divorce at the time and were too unorganized to insist on having the event on their territory, in northwestern Connecticut. With the noon hour set for the service drawing close Carlyle disappeared, and it was reported that he was taking a bath down at the dam—an idyllic little pond in the woods, created every summer by damming a mountain trickle. Mrs. Terwilliger, rendered distraught by this apparent additional defection—her own husband was not present, having been forbidden to come if he brought his youthful mistress—appealed to Fred to go down and fetch the groom. Fred supposed that in his role of best man he could not shy from this awkward duty. In his black shoes and floppy new suit—double-breasted, with those wide Fifties lapels, and a white rosebud pinned in one of them—he walked down the dirt road to the dam. His fingers kept testing his right-hand coat pocket, to see if the wedding ring was still there—its adamant little weight, its cool curved edge. The road was really two dusty paths beside a central mane of weeds and grass, shadowed even toward noon by hemlocks and birches. Bears supposedly lived in these woods, which stretched endlessly and gloomily, in every direction, claustrophobic as a cave. Suppose Carlyle had fled! Suppose he had gone crazy, and with his excessive, careless strength would knock his best man unconscious!

Carlyle was coming up the road, in his identical beige suit, his long wet hair combed flat, his ritual bachelor ablutions at last completed. Fred was relieved; he had been afraid of that, among other things, seeing his soon-to-be brother-in-law naked. The road slanted down, toward the creek, so their heads for a moment were on the same level, and in this moment Carlyle gave Fred, or Fred happened to catch, a look, a watery warm-eyed look. What did it mean? *Get me out of this?* Or was the look just a flare, a droplet, of the wordless pagan wisdom that the brothers somehow shared?

"They sent me after you."

"I see that, Freddy."

Carlyle's eyes were an uncanny pale green, with thin pink lids, and prominent, so that his long face gave the impression of being a single smooth tender surface, his nose so small as to be negligible. When he looked intent, as now, his eyes went flat across the top, the upper eyelid swallowing its own lashes.

In the years to come, the brothers-in-law looked each other in the eyes rather rarely. Not that they lacked occasion: though they lived, with their wives and children, in separate towns, and eventually on different coasts of the continent, Carlyle saw to it that they spent at least several weeks of the year as one family. There was the Franconia place at first, and when Carlyle's mother, widowed early by a heart attack that carried off his father—the Saughterfields had fragile hearts—sold it, there were summer houses rented jointly, or two rented side by side, or Christmases spent in one or the other's home, the floor beneath the tree heaped embarrassingly high with the presents for their combined children. There were nine children, in the end: Fred and Betsy's three, Carlyle and Germaine's six. Six! Even in those years before ecology-mindedness, that was a lot, for non-Catholics. Fred and Betsy

speculated that, his own father dying so young and his mother remarrying and moving to Paris (her new husband worked for American Express), Carlyle was afraid of running out on his family; his New Hampshire cousins depressed him and his only sibling was a much older sister whom he never mentioned, and who lived in Hawaii with an alcoholic jerk of a husband.

The Emmets sometimes found the joint vacations heavy going. Their children were outnumbered two to one and everyone was benevolently bullied into expeditions—to the beach, to an amusement park, to some mountain trail—whose ultimate purpose seemed to be to create photo opportunities for Carlyle. He had become a fervent photographer, first with Nikons and then with Leicas, until he discovered that an even more expensive camera could be bought—a Hasselblad. Its chunky shutter sound sucked them up, sealed them in, captured them in sunshine and rain, parkas and bathing suits, the boys in their baseball caps and the girls in their ribbons and braids. One cherished photo, turned into the Slaughterfield Christmas card, showed all nine children squeezed into the Emmets' old workhorse of a Fairlane station wagon, each hot little grinning face smeared by an ice-cream cone. What the photo did not show was the drive away from the ice-cream stand: the cones melted too rapidly in the August heat and had to be thrown out the window when they became, in the mass of flesh, impossibly liquid. "Over the side!" Carlyle called from behind the wheel, and an answering voice would pipe, "Over the side!," and another gob of ice cream would spatter on the receding highway, to gales of childish glee. Conspicuous waste pained Fred, but seemed to exhilarate Carlyle.

As it worked out, Carlyle was often driving Fred's cars, and commandeering Betsy's kitchen for meals he would cook, dirtying every pan. He made the Emmets feel squeezed, not least with his acts of *largesse*—plastic-foam boxes of frozen steaks that would arrive before a visit mail-ordered from Omaha, and heavy parcels of post-visit prints, glossily processed by a film laboratory in West Germany that Carlyle used. All these fond, proprietary gestures, Fred felt, spelled power and entitlement. Even taking the photographs placed Carlyle on a level above them, as an all-seeing appropriator of their fleeting lives.

Once, on Martha's Vineyard, when Fred needed his car to get to a tennis date in Chilmark and Carlyle had taken it up to Oak Bluffs to buy his daughters and nieces elephant-hair bracelets, and then to Vineyard Haven for the matinée of a Jerry Lewis movie, with miniature golf on the way home, Fred let his temper fly. He felt his face flush; he heard his shrill voice flail and crack. Carlyle, who had returned from his long expedition with bags of farmstand vegetables, pounds of unfileted fish, and a case of imported beer, stared at Fred with his uncanny green eyes for some seconds and then cheerfully laughed. It was a laugh of such genuine, unmalicious, good-tempered amusement that Fred had to join in. Through his brother-in-law's eyes he saw himself clearly, as a shrill and defensive pipsqueak. It was, he imagined, this sort of honest illumination—this sort of brusque restoration to one's true measure—that siblings offer one another. As an only child, Fred had never been made to confront his limits.

In bed he asked Betsy, "Why does he need to do it—all this playing Santa Claus?"

"Because," she answered, "he doesn't have enough else to do."

What Carlyle did professionally became vaguer with the years. After business school there had been business—putting on a suit in the morning, working for other men, travelling

airplanes to meet with more men in suits. One company he worked for made fine leather goods—purses, belts, aviator-style jackets as items of high fashion—and another a kind of machinery that stamped gold and silver foil on things, on books and photograph albums and attaché cases and such. Neither job lasted long. Carlyle's weakness, perhaps, was his artist side. His Harvard major had been not economics but fine arts; he took photographs and bought expensive art books so big no shelves could hold them; he could not be in his house or the Emmets', a minute without filling the air with loud music, usually opera. When his mother's sudden death—she was hit by a taxi in Paris, on the Boulevard St.-Germain—brought him some additional money, he became a partner in an avant-garde furniture store on the Back Bay: chairs and tables of molded plastic, sofas in the form of arcs of a circle, waterbeds. The store did well—it was the Sixties, there was plenty of money around, and plenty of questing for new lifestyles—but Carlyle got bored, and became a partner in a Los Angeles firm that manufactured kinetic gadgets of Plexiglas and chemical fluids. This firm went bust, but not before Carlyle fell in fatal love with California—its spaghetti of flowing thruways, its pink and palmy sprawl, its endless sunshine and perilous sense of being on the edge. He moved his growing family there in 1965. As his children grew and his hair thinned, Carlyle himself seemed increasingly on the edge—on the edge of the stock market, on the edge of the movie industry, on the edge of some unspecified breakthrough. His clothes became cheerfully bizarre—bell-bottom pants, jackets of fringed buckskin, a beret. His name appeared as co-producer of a low-budget film about runaway adolescents (seen romantically roving against the night lights of Hollywood and sleeping in colorful shacks up in the canyons) that received favorable reviews back east and even turned up in the Coolidge Corner movie complex not far from where Fred and Betsy lived in Brookline.

Fred, unromantically, worked in real estate. After splitting off from the management company that trained him, he bet his life on the future of drab, run-down inner-city neighborhoods that, by the sheer laws of demographics and transportation, had to come up in the world. His bet was working, but slowly, and in the meantime the Emmet Real Estate Corporation absorbed his days in thankless maintenance and squabbles with tenants and the meticulous game, which Fred rather enjoyed, of maximizing the bank's investment and thereby increasing his own leverage. That is, twenty thousand of his own equity, plus a hundred-thousand-dollar mortgage, meant a profit of two hundred percent if the building's worth climbed by a third. He was, like many only children, naturally meticulous and secretive, and it warmed him to think that his growing personal wealth was cunningly hidden, annually amplified by perfectly legal depreciation write-offs, in these drab holdings—in Dorchester three-deckers and South End brick bowfronts, in asphalt-shingled Somerville duplexes and in Allston apartment buildings so anonymous and plain as to seem ownerless. He was the patient ant, he felt, and Carlyle more and more the foolish grasshopper.

Yet, when, ten years into his marriage, Fred found himself swept up in a reckless romance it was his brother-in-law that he confessed to. The seethe of his predicament—Betsy's innocence, and the children's, and the other woman's; glittering detached details of her, her eyes and mouth, her voice and tears, her breasts and hair—foamed in him like champagne overflowing a glass. It was delicious, terrible; Fred had never felt so alive. One muggy July afternoon he found himself alone with Carlyle in the ramshackle Chatham house that the Saughterfields and the Emmets were jointly renting. The wives and children were at the

beach. Carlyle came into the living room, where Fred was working up some figures, and sat himself stolidly down opposite the desk, on the sandy, briny green foldout sofa that came with the house. Carlyle had put weight on his big bones, and moved now with the deliberation of someone considerably older than his brother-in-law. Tennis and worry had trimmed Fred down, given him an edge—for the first time in his life, he felt handsome. Carlyle was wearing a kind of southern-California safari suit, a loose cotton jacket with matching pants, suggesting pajamas or a doctor's antiseptic outfit when he operates. He sat there benignly, immovably. To relieve the oppressive silence, Fred began to talk.

As Carlyle listened, his eyes went watery with the gravity of the crisis; yet his remarks were gracefully light, even casual. "Well, Freddy—if I could see you with the woman, I might say, 'What the hell, go to it,' " he pronounced at one point in his reedy voice, and at another point he likened the sexual drive to an automobile, volunteering of himself, "I know it's there, in the garage, just raring to be revved up."

Though Carlyle seemed, if anything, to advise that Fred follow his heart ("My doc keeps telling me we only live once"), and with his noncommittal calmness did relieve his brother-in-law's agitation and guilt, Fred was left with the impression that it would be absurd of him to leave the children and Betsy and the share of the Emmet Corporation her lawyers would demand. Would Carlyle, if he ever *did* see him with the other woman, be enough impressed? Was not erotic passion in truth as mechanical as an internal-combustion engine? Perhaps, giving him reason to talk of her to Carlyle, to brag, as it were, to the older, taller, stronger man of his conquest, the other woman had served much of her purpose. Looking back, years later, Fred wondered if the sisters hadn't known more than they seemed to, and hadn't urged Carlyle to come and have this brotherly consultation, there in the empty Chatham house, sticky with salt air.

The marriages, and the families, went on. So many outings, to build up their children's childhood—beaches, mountains, shopping malls, Disney World. So much shared sunshine. Why, then, did Fred's scattered memories of Carlyle tend to be shadowy? One Christmastime in Brookline, Fred, responding to a ruthless battering sound from below, went into his cellar and discovered his brother-in-law, sinisterly half-lit by the fluorescent tubes above the workbench, pounding something glittering gripped in the vise. The other man's eyes, looking up and squinting with the change of focus, had that watery, warm—was it sheepish?—look they had worn that day of his wedding, as he came up the shady road beneath the hemlocks and birches. "Santa's workshop," he explained huskily. He hid with his body what he was doing. He looked demonic, or damned, in the flickering basement light. Fred backed up the stairs, as embarrassed as if he had surprised the other man undressed.

Betsy explained it to him later, in bed. To save money, Carlyle was making some of the Christmas presents this year—silver dollars drilled through and beaten into rings for the boys and strung into necklaces for the girls. It was the sort of thing he used to do as a boy; he had been creative, artistic. It was sweet, Betsy thought.

To Fred, even this exercise in thrift savored of extravagance—silver dollars! "Are they that hard up?" he asked. "What's happened to all Carlyle's money?" He had always resented that Carlyle had simply *had* money, whereas he had had to make it, a crumb at a time.

Well, according to what Betsy had gathered from Germaine, who out of loyalty of course

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