

WORLDLY WAYS

Yes yes, I see you, woman of the worldly ways, woman with the giant *cunt* that allows not for existence, woman who hits hard in the guise of smiling kindness. Yes yes I see you on the street clutching a newspaper against your tan parka, you who, like legions of others, still wash your face in the *New York Times* and call yourself learned, you who are heavy on New York irony, you who do the scene in all the five boroughs and *in all the outlying counties*. I ask how you are, how your children are, and yes, I ask how your weekend has been going, yes your weekend, as if only you are entitled to a weekend, you who would snuff out my life before it has even begun. The words come light from my tongue, but they have fear on them and are my only protection against your death machine. You are not someone on whom to risk silence, for the sins of my past come out when near you, you are the smacking one, that oldest sister of mine, with her hand held high in one of the finest smacking positions the world has ever known. I hold it against you that you tolerate the ink stains from the *Times* on your *tan parka*. We are far from reasoning together, you and I, and you would not matter in the least if once upon a time I had not said, in the elevator of the building where *we both do live*, "Why don't we get together sometime, huh, huh?" placing myself, through words, in your unforgiving sphere, where anger and domination do reign. The journey to equality is a long one, and the garbage of rhetorical violence must be shed along the roadside. You have been down in Washington, D.C., you say. The nation's capital. I've always wanted to go. See the museums of the Smithsonian. The National Gallery. That sort of thing. Travel. I do a lot of it, being separated from Beloved. Forty-five, I go to Rome, London, Athens.

Alone. On the island of Naxos that first night the terror that I would drink. Dhommata. Dhommata. Women and men holding aloft color photos of rooms to let. August, you know. The hotels crowded with pleasure seekers. Like a little boy I felt. Repelled by these islanders swarming around me. One of the dhommata women threw me in her car and took me to her family's home. That same feeling of numb dread I would have on being shown my room on that first day of camp, the homesickness never really leaving me, always wanting to get back home to Mommy, precious Mommy, to be wrapped in the soft folds of her endless warmth. On the ferry ride from Piraeus I got badly frightened, something I knew not to tell Beloved. I wanted her to have a new image of me, different from the fearful ways that she had come to identify as part of my being. Though the sky was cloudless, the sea became rough far from land and began to bash the listing boat. Waves broke over the bow and the Santorini-bound hedonists shrieked with delight at being made wet by the waters of the Aegean, and for this I did not like them, as reckless laughter always precedes tragedy, white people carrying on too gaily in a New York subway car, heedless of the cap put on their happiness by the aggrieved, spiritually deprived souls of this city, who then have to administer punishment, often fatal, for these expressions of joy. Naxos Town has a cluster of white houses that front the water and bake in the sun, and there had been a misunderstanding with the man at the OTE office. It appeared to be saying I could not use my phone card to call America and so was cut off from Beloved back in the States. It appeared to me he was saying that I was going to die. Returning to my room I tried reading spiritual literature and praying, but my

mind came back to what seemed the salient fact that I wasn't going to make it, that separated from Manhattan and all those support groups I was going to get sucked into a bottle of ouzo and that the unquenchable thirst would be on me again, and in a final way. Of all people, Paul Theroux, American genius of the road, saved me. No longer much of a book buyer, I borrow from the library. The minds between the covers only a slice of the whole, their wisdom and value finite. So my thinking often goes. *The Old Patagonian Express*, picked up at a street sale on Broadway and 90th Street, outside the Food Emporium, where checkout girls wearing door-knocker earrings give you silent attitude. Paul Theroux told me in these pages, and on that night, that travel is hard, that *travel is not supposed to be fun*. He gave it a spiritual dimension, and in so doing gave my pain a purpose. And I fell asleep as if tough but bracing words had been spoken to me by a brilliant older brother. I have never been in this place before, a relationship saved, through the grace of God. The old marriage dead, a new relationship rising out of its ashes. The men who have much of God in them tell me to stay in the day. They tell me it is an unfolding. Miracles of healing taking place daily, but for lack of money they have to do their own laundry and the food of the Chinese people is beyond their means. Are you hearing me, that the end of the journey is my soul burning bright as the Aegean sun? The woman's name was Celwinka Sessions. I met her on a bus headed for one of the island's outer beaches. It seemed days since I had spoken with anyone. "I'll get him to smile," Celwinka said, to her friend, Agnes Rodehouse. Celwinka kneeling, behind the driver. He gave her some Greek lip and she gave him English lip back. Later,

she was to say that she had learned not to take anything from the men on the island. When I smiled at her flame-throwing, she said, "You see? I told her I would get you to smile." Celwinka asked my permission for herself and Agnes to bathe in the nude. "I can live with that," I said, as she removed her sun dress and showed off her golden nakedness. Agnes had the lesser body. Agnes had the lesser mind. Celwinka so much had the features I was looking for. The beaches of Naxos are not so very generous; there are not the big dunes you find out on the Hamptons. They slathered my back with sun block, and I coated theirs with the oils they had brought along. Under the hot sun and lying on a straw mat, I had steamy thoughts, and counted myself blessed to be reconnected to people after days of solitary ways. Since the separation from Beloved I had dreams where people were around me but they did not seem to see me, and the words I spoke from within the invisible plastic shield enfolding me were inaudible and in another tongue. Isolation is frightening; to feel you belong to no one is frightening. I had some feelings of wanting to die while being in the land of the Greeks. I have to tell you of my fear. The men who walk in holiness but who have to do their own laundry and do without the food of the Chinese people would say it's a superstitious dread, along the lines of 'Step on a crack. Break your mother's back.' Fact is, and I don't say it's natural, that I'm afraid of losing her whom I love more than all the world in writing this. I'm afraid that to put her name on paper is to send her away. I think of Henry Miller writing himself out of his obsession with June, loosening her hold on him by placing their thing on paper. Love never dies, say these men who in plainclothes holiness walk, but my

ego sees the finiteness of things, projects death, and puts me in the cold place, in chronic agony over the woman I've lost. In the end, you just go on because the fear of not acting is greater than is the fear of proceeding through the door you see in your mind. You go on because you know the thing you are afraid of is knowledge. You go on because this fear has bullied you your whole life, because you know its primary purpose is to keep you in bondage to Mommy, and when you say it like that, you know to strike up the band, you know to hit it hard, you know to step out into the bright light of day. Until the next time your mind tries to put the Henry Miller/June chains on. "You want to see a bunch of old rocks, that's your business," Celwinka said that day. I had told her of my plan to leave on the night ferry for Piraeus, and then go on to the Peloponnesus. Celwinka was twenty-one, a London nurse here on the island since June to clear her head. By night she waited on tables. By day she sunbathed. I'd been inland to the olive groves, the villages, the promontories. I'd taken public transportation to the other side of the island along roads with no shoulders or guardrails against the deep drops, terrified that the Mercedes bus would blow a tire or that Raffi, who drove with bazooki music loud on the tape deck, would lose control of the wheel or that drowsiness would close his lidded eyes. Raffi, with his tousled salt-and-pepper hair and sweet smile, was like an aging little boy. It thrilled me when, passing a construction crew, he honked the horn and placed the tip of his thumb against his front teeth and drew the mock fire of the workers. Raffi had no Henry Miller /June thing. Raffi just had the road in front of him. I imagined him sleeping in a bower of bliss with no room for conflict. But for now I must leave Greece and speak

directly of your situation, neighbor of mine. You said you were raised in Washington, D.C., that the museums there are free. You made these museums a selling point. I saw you try to prettify yourself without benefit of a makeup kit. I saw you try to wipe the blur from your eyes, because you now cared how I saw you. "Let's have dinner sometime," I said. You thought that was a good idea. I asked for your last name. You gave it to me. Yes, yes, of course I see you down there now on the corner, waiting not so patiently, not so patiently at all. You are in my line of vision, you who saw me in the building with the woman that one time. Her name was Janice Swift. About your age and pretty enough. And she spoke well. You could see she came from good family. And the fact that we were riding down in the elevator, that we had already come from my apartment, and that she had a smile on her face, and that she was in one piece——this inclined you to trust me. Trust is important. Trust is everything between a man and a woman. This is New York City, and a woman has to know who the man is she is considering for her bed.. I passed a big hurdle when you saw me with Janice, that is for sure. I read your mind. Then and there you crossed Norman Bates off your list as a possible friend of mine. I mentioned you to Dr. Randolph, my therapist. I would see you in the elevator or the lobby. We'd say hello and little more. I got the urge to call you and checked with *Dr. Randolph* if it would strike you as intrusive to get your number by reading your last name off the mailbox and looking you up in the white pages. Dr. Randolph suggested that making a contact by this means might cause some concern. I came to Dr. Randolph shortly after my separation. He tells me it is not a crime for a man to approach a

woman, that this is in the nature of male-female relations. Dr. Randolph has me lie on the sofa in his office while he sits behind me in a comfortable leather chair. I felt flattered that he thought I would be an excellent candidate for psychoanalysis. He seemed to be saying I was bright and articulate. For a while the therapy was quite strange. "Do you want to hit me with a stick? Do you want to beat me? Because you can, you know. I'm just a dirty rotten n-----r." No, you're right. I can't spell that word, for they will come and hit me and their blow will be repeated until I am unrecognizable, for they will come on me with their unquenchable anger, and my blood will only make them thirstier. I asked Dr. Randolph if he wanted to touch me. I asked him if he wanted to kill me. I told him that he could if he wanted, that if it was really his heart's desire, what choice could I have but to let him proceed? It was just language, a rhetorical exercise, though feeling did give birth to the words. Perhaps I was simply giving Dr. Randolph something that he wanted, something within the framework of his theory about me. Dr. Randolph struck me as indomitable. There were times--always at night--that I expected him simply to materialize out of the air in my bedroom. He would just be there, unperturbed, unannounced, and methodical as he lay out the tools for my dissection, as if it were in the natural order of things that he should be doing so, as if it were something we had tacitly agreed to long ago, so why not get on with it? What I am trying to say to you is that an inexorable quality, not evil, was the thing you saw in him. He came to me as I was preparing for bed, when I was in my pajamas, but I could go no further with the fantasy. When I was young I had my world shaken several times. A man

tricked me into masturbating him in a Times Square phone booth. He said he would give me a quarter if I did something for him, and then, after closing the door, he had me pull on his thing. I told my friend Nelson that the stuff that squirted out of the man was milk, but Nelson said no, that it was come. Nelson read *Playboy* magazine. His parents gave him a gift subscription. We both attended the same school. Nelson bought little black loose-leafs of the kind that you don't see anymore, and he wrote his homework assignments in them. He did addition and subtraction and long division better than me, and the figures he wrote in his homework pages were more appealing than mine. I ran and bought the same little loose-leafs and tried to write as Nelson did, but my figures and writing looked crappy in comparison with his. What I want to say to you is that my childhood is where I always want to be. The streets and alleyways, the places of my childhood, sing to me. It's not a hard thing for you to believe, I'm sure. I went looking for this man who had caused me so much terror. I would make an excuse and leave the church where my mother spoke in the tongues of the angels and take the subway to Times Square, longing for this or any other man *with a big thing* to take me and do with me as he would. But I could not find him. I simply could not find him. Then the chance was given me, right there on the Fifth Avenue bus one day. The bus had rough horsehair seats. On the backs of them were advertisements for Camels and Chesterfields, cigarettes of the fifties men and women. A man who looked like Dr. Randolph smiled at me in a significant way. It was clear that he would do the things I wanted done to me if I only had the courage to stay the course. As the bus neared St. Patrick's

Cathedral, the man, who wore a black wool overcoat and had a balding head and big dark eyes and *that smile on his face only for me*--a smile that said he was more than willing to do the things I wanted to have done to me—moved to the rear exit. He transfixed me with his smile, but dread, not lustful longing, overcame me at the moment of decision and I had no choice but to flee from him, as from the devil himself. I was on a visit to Dr. Linsley, who represented white America. He had an office in the Atlas Building--the elevator rose so fast it made your stomach drop--with his name on the frosted glass door. I stared at the *National Geographic* in his waiting room while longing for the man I had seen on the bus. I saw him washing me all over in a hotel bathtub, just me and him, his hands soaping my body, washing and handling my *private parts* in an endless exercise of ecstasy. He had taken off his coat and his other attire to have me wash him, too, including *his private parts*. Oh yes he did, Washingtonian woman. Oh yes he did. I'll be frank. You frighten me. I went to great lengths not to show it on the street. If I don't give you exactly what you want, you will attack me. You will hurt me. You will spit at me. You will give me the back of your hand and flay me with your words. I was born in this city. I will live and die here. I am a Manhattan provincial. Where would you have me go? Akron, Ohio? Barcelona? Settle down in Sacramento? Has the world called to me and I have not heard? I am not some total fool. I try to stay where I belong. Do you understand, fine lady of the Smithsonian Museum? I remember when the subways had rattan seats and overhead fans and a ten-cent token got you a ride. I remember when the city had five daily newspapers. I remember when the subway stations had penny

gum machines and there was still an ethos that kept people in check, before the time of *in your face*. I remember when snow still fell and when orange--yes, they were orange--Sanitation Department trucks with chains on their big wheels and plows affixed cleared the streets. I remember the click-clicking noise of the chains and the sweet awareness that big men with powerful equipment were taking care of business. On the same spot where you are standing now, I saw my oldest sister not a week before. She walked with her forearms up and close to her chest and her hands hanging down in the *pre-smacking position*, a position I know well from a childhood spent warding off her formidable presence.. I ducked into a photography shop, where I busied myself pretending to look at cameras and praying that she hadn't seen me. It meant the world to me that I not have to stand face-to-face with her. Do you know why it was that when I left the store, not knowing she was still in the general vicinity, that she did not spot me? It is because, while waiting for the bus--it was not her way to walk far—she was gobbling up the *New York Post*. Yes, it's true. Right out there on Broadway she was in the act of devouring it, a thing that she has been doing for her whole life, since she first learned to read. When she was but a little girl, she threw away the book of fairy tales that had been given her and screamed for the *New York Post*, and could not get to sleep without reading about crimes of violence. This fact is known throughout my family, and Hannah is much respected for her knowledge on this subject. She is a large woman the blackness of whose clothes does not hide her bulk, and at all times she holds a thick rope. Sometimes, many miles away, the other end can be found looped around her Son, and it has been this

way for a long, long time. Son is thirty-five now, ten years younger than me. Hannah raised him in her special way in my parents' apartment. No, Hannah did not leave home, nor did she have a husband to help her with Son. Hannah took me to her before she took Son to her. She showed me her violence, not the violence of the *New York Post*, but her own special kind of violence, for she always had her tongue clamped between her thick lips when she smacked. You must understand that I grew up only a mile north of here, and that proximity to my place of birth was a consideration before I took this place. Somehow I managed to overlook the patrols along Broadway *by these sisters of mine*, when they have been going on my entire life. I was nine. It was a Saturday. I stood in the lobby of my building. I had never been to a movie. They were bad in the eyes of God, my mother said. People who saw them were living in sin. They were idolaters and they would pass through the gates of Hell and burn there in an everlasting way. Nothing but the agony of this eternal flame awaited them, my mother said. Jesus would not go to the Nemo Theater on 110th Street and Broadway under any circumstances to see a movie. Jesus was on fire with indignation at the ways of the world. Jesus had opinions and he expressed them. And God before him had opinions. He spoke out against graven images. He spoke out against false idols. The world called to me on that Saturday, and the resources were there for me to break with my family and to go in the direction of this theater in a beeline way. I was stunned by everything about it--the air conditioning that banished the summer heat, the darkness, the soft chairs, the ushers in their black pants with red piping wielding flashlights. I had stepped off

the street and into another world. A French gangster flick by Jules Dassin called *Rififi*. On the screen a woman was undressing. Her breasts and other private parts were blacked out. I was in the wicked heaven I had been looking for my whole life. A hand came down on my shoulder. I was pulled out of my seat on the aisle. In case I did not know who it was, I got words of triumph from her big fat mouth.. "I've caught you, you little brat. You thought you could sneak in here. You're going to get it now." I was dragged from the air-conditioned scene of wonder onto the street. Hannah—yes, it was her large, fuming self—had the neck of my shirt bunched in one hand, and the other hand she held hanging down in her usual way. This was before the time of Son, when one hand was not occupied with holding the rope that was to become a fixture of her being. A look of determination was on her face. Her bulk flew over the pavement in the rush to bring me to justice, but so far as I recall she did not have her tongue clamped between her thick lips. I'm sure this is so, for her hands were not in the correct smacking position. I say to you, lady of the Smithsonian, that in that moment the Christ Jesus was in her *as she understood the Christ Jesus to be*. She turned me over to my mother with a sense of profound satisfaction, and the words she spoke were these: "Do you know where I found him, the little brat? Do you have any idea? Do you know that he was seeing a *motion picture*?" She said motion picture, not movie, not film. Stay away from motion pictures, for your life depends on it, they were saying. Hannah was doing what she had to do to put herself right with the Lord and also with my mother, to whom she was always answerable, for even before the time of our births our mother lived with the

nimbus of light around her. My mother had a pained look on her face that afternoon in the lobby, because Hannah had come to her in a state of storm, Hannah had knocked her off balance with her anger, which was Hannah's way. Hannah had a relationship with my mother that preceded my relationship with my mother. They had years of talking to each other in their own special way before I was ever born. It was given to Hannah to be angry, and it was given to my mother to negotiate Hannah's anger in whatever way she could. This is the thing I know. So when my mother said to Hannah, there in the lobby, "But Hannah, must you come to me in such a fashion?" in her pained and wounded way, as if any further assault would bring her to tears, as if she herself were just a little girl trembling before the onslaught of adult storm, it merely raised the volume on Hannah's ire, to the point where she did say, "Well, if you want the little brat running wild in the streets and seeing filthy *motion pictures*, just don't say I didn't try. Just don't say I didn't warn you. I found him watching a filthy French motion picture, and this is the thanks I get." And with that Hannah *tore away from the scene*. I say that my mother was standing in the lobby when this happened. She was there to show rooms to prospective tenants. *Prospective* was the word that came to be applied to tenants. I do not know how, for my mother did not use big words. She was a renting agent for the building, but that was just what she did. Her real life was with God and Jesus and the Holy Ghost. They gave her the nimbus of light. After the departure of her eldest daughter, she seemed to regain her balance. She said to me that day, "Have you done something bad, my son? Have you been out into the wickedness of the world? Are you letting Satan take

you away from Jesus? Are you finding yourself in the dark places?" I could not think. I knew only the terror of being wrong. I knew only the terror of omnipresence and omniscience. I did not know how Hannah had found me. I only knew that she was saying that she extended everywhere, that she would nab me wherever I was. In the apartment that night Hannah's robe fell open. She showed her bush to me, as I headed for the bathroom. "Is this what you wanted to see, devious little boy, that you had to go to a motion picture?" And she showed me her breasts as well, big and round as cannonballs. Yes, my blood jumped. Yes yes yes. But understand that excitement was not the entire thing, that that night a man tried to climb in Hannah's window using a stepladder and invade her private parts. In reaching for her he stuck his finger in a light socket and got the shock of his life and tumbled back out the window and his whole body lay smashed in the alleyway from where he had come. Hannah, still in her robe, but with it now pulled close around her, ran down and bashed him some more. This was told me the following morning, Hannah shouted it to me before I got out of bed, the same morning that Hannah and my father met on the plain of battle. "Lay a hand on me and I will call the police," she shouted to him, as he sat over his breakfast things, provoking him to rise up and say, "You would call the police on your father? In Armenia you would be stoned to death for saying such a thing, do you understand, lazy, unfaithful daughter of mine?" "I have always been faithful to you. Just do not come crawling in my window at night," Hannah shouted back, causing my father to be made to get up. My father never got up to do battle. He was made to get up to do battle. This I know, and

can report with total accuracy, for he would often say, "Will I be made to get up by you?" in the most threatening of voices. My father put his hand in the correct smacking position, the position he had taught his oldest daughter well, but he was the smacking master; even she wouldn't have challenged this claim of his, for his hand had a higher elevation and more velocity in delivering the blow so necessary to the insurrectionist flesh that cried out for it. And so she did not linger unduly on this plain of battle, but ran shrieking out the door to save her life, seeing that he had been made to get up. No museum will show the fact of these things, once fair lady of the Smithsonian, halls shiny with burnished astrolabes and compasses and steam engines and shiny rocks from far-off places, halls that sparkle with culture and intelligence and have no use for the subjective life that swirls all around them wishing nothing but to goo up the delineated substance of these precious artifacts. I have not called this oldest sister in some years *and some months*. Not calling is where I was headed for a long, long time, since I was a boy crawling on the apartment floor, the three older sisters (this was before two of them got deceased) eating my father's terrible-smelling cheese behind his back and nudging me in different directions with their feet as if I were a plaything. They do not know it, but I have been speaking badly about them *my whole adult life*. There are 179 people in the borough of Manhattan who have heard what I have to say about them, and the number continues to grow. And so of course it will go hard on me when these sisters find out what I have been up to, even the two of them who have been claimed by death, who have had dirt thrown over them as I still can think that *all of us*

should, though really, Hannah is the one I most fear, Hannah whose hands were most expertly placed in the smacking position. Yes, I tell these people what I have been telling you, that Hannah roared into my room with her hand in the correct smacking position and her tongue clamped between thick lips. I tell them about her moods, the power of her funks to travel through walls, how you could not get away from these low states of hers no matter how many doors you closed against them. I tell them how she hunkered down in a big chair in her black raincoat with her arms wrapped around herself and her head bowed, and how this went on for hours and days, there was no leading her out of this thing into which she had gone, and we all had to tiptoe around her for fear that the pain she was holding inside her would explode and burn us with the hot lava from the volcano we knew her to be. It was not for nothing that we called her Mount Hannah, for she has the proportions of one of nature's wonders. I tell them of the time that she tripped over a store grating and received a concussion and talked of the trip to Greece--the land of dark men--that she would take and the apartment she would move into on her return to Manhattan and the big TV she would buy after she sued the sons of bitch owner of the store responsible for her accident for every cent they were worth. I tell them of the deep wound she suffered that makes her feel that she is owed something, and something very large, for the injury that was done her by *the party who shall go nameless*. I tell them of Hannah's Republican-ness, the this-ness of her Republicanism defined only by the that-ness of the Democrats, that she can only be a Republican by being against Democrats. Yes, yes. I have already told them about Crosse &

Blackwell jam-ness, of my mother's idea of who the Republicans are, the quality goods-ness that the part represents.. They know that my mother sent me out into the streets of America for only brand-name goods, such as the jam that I have just named, and that she wanted her political party to be of the same caliber. My mother said that Abraham Lincoln was the most handsome man that she could ever imagine. Abraham Lincoln with his seriousness--she did not care for men who smiled too much--was Mr. Republican. He was brand-name goods. My mother voted Republican because the country was not secure in the hands of the others but Hannah pulled the Republican lever because she wanted the other defeated, because she wanted a triumph, because she wanted to say "I won and you lost." Yes, I have told them about Mr. Richard Milhous Nixon and Mr. George Allen, men of the 1970s, men that Hannah was in love with because of their *tricky* darkness, men who in her mind were spiritually linked, not merely because they both operated in Washington, D.C.,--yes yes, of course your hometown--the one running the country while the other coached the Washington Redskins football team, but because they both had the same win-at-all-costs philosophy. So when I came to see my mother as a young adult male (hah) in the 1970s--my mother, whom Hannah was slowly taking control of, seeing to it that she made up for all the deprivation that Hannah somehow and in a not altogether known way had suffered--Hannah posed the question, , "So, what do you think of this Watergate stuff?" And from the smile on her face it was clear to me that she thought she was a cat playing with a mouse. To respond truthfully, to say that Tricky Dick Nixon was a highly intelligent dog and that I hoped they threw his ass

out of the Oval Office--to say honestly and with utter sincerity what I felt--would simply have played to her music of mischief, for she was seeking divisiveness, she had no greater desire than to see me in opposition to her, to see me frustrated and upset by wrongdoing in high places and stonewalling and obfuscation about that wrongdoing by the highest elected official in the land. You dare to wonder why I say this? Because she was stonewalling *me*. Because she was withholding from me all the things that she had done in the years when I was powerless over her marauding ways, the years of her tongue clamped between thick lips-edness, her "You just leave this brat with me" (said to my mother)-ness. My mother, who was not a saint--I dare to say it, I take my life in my hands saying it--in spite of the nimbus of light around her, said that Hannah could not take stress, that what Hannah needed was food, large quantities of it, to buck her up and keep her going. My mother shoveled food in Hannah's mouth to revive her eldest daughter (yes, yes, I will be through with this soon so we can talk, just the two of us, in the Smithsonian way you intend us to) and get her going again. My mother did not take well to my saying that Hannah should get the hell out of the apartment, that she was too old to be living at home, that it was horrible to have her around. My mother said I did not understand what it was to have children, that she loved each and every one of us equally and prayed that we would all be together in Heaven one day. And at such times she would adjust the knob on her personal light box so that the nimbus of light grew blindingly bright. Or my mother would put a sustained, powerful chuckle on me, a laugh that infuriated me because it tried to make paltry my own existence, as if she were saying, "You

can never have the love and patience and tolerance and kindness that I show, you can only have soreness reigning supreme in you." Smithsonian neighbor of mine, from my window I see you down there in your full expectancy, and from my window I also see on the nation's highways heavy machinery moving slowly, machinery necessary for the implementation of the rearrangement of the city's face that has not altogether consciously been called for. I imagine you staring at me with a look of incomprehension. I imagine you saying, "Look, friend, I'm from Washington, D.C. What's this have to do with me?" Because you think it's your inalienable right to get angry with me, and I say to you that the Constitution is presently being rewritten. When I was nine Hannah became pregnant. She became big with child. (Oh, Father, punish me not for the judgments I make, punish me not, punish me not.) She found a man to be with her, and though he did not stay with her long, she saw the pregnancy through and a child was born to her whom she called Son. "This *is* my son in whom I am well pleased. No one shall ever deprive my son. No one. He will be my right arm, and he will avenge me." Then she hit me a hard shot and said, "This is what he will administer when my arm has grown tired from the battle that I must wage with you." Joseph had his brothers, and I had my sisters, and Egypt is a state of mind *and* a land of dubious blessings. I have this box of Christmas cards. It is that season, and I send cards as a way of blessing people. In silhouette the three wise men are crossing desert sands to worship the baby Jesus. They are coming to visit him in swaddling clothes there in the manger. They carry gifts of frankincense, incense, and myrrh. I want to send one of these cards to my ex-boss Edna, English-born

Edna who graduated from Cambridge University, where she *read* English after giving a scintillating performance on her *O-levels*. But I am blocked. There is a fear that she will take exception to the religious nature of the card. I have not seen Edna in eight years, since being laid off a month before I was to be vested by the company. "You got screwed," Edna said, not realizing that I did not know enough to care. Edna sent UNESCO cards for the holidays, cards that were correct for all circumstances. It seemed unbearable not to send a card to this woman, and yet, when I looked further, it was her wrath that I was afraid of incurring. And so I sent a card to a woman I do not see, and she sent one to me, and we go on this way year after year. And then it changed, for last month I came from a concert in the rafters of Carnegie Hall, where she is known to spend her evenings. It was late on a weekday when I stepped on the Broadway bus. How to describe what happened. Time seemed to stand still. Our minds collaborated and agreed that we must pretend we had not seen each other after we had seen each other so that I could do a graceful, unconscious retreat back down the steps of the bus, fret my brow, and look yonder in perplexity and with rapt attention for the proper vehicle to come and take me away. I turned slightly my back to her, holding all the while in my mind the picture of her recording the scene with an amused smile on her face, a smile that could have been of gentle understanding, of perplexity, of scorn, of broad-minded tolerance, of pity. She saw me do this odd thing, and she told me through the expression on her plain face that she understood. Washingtonian lady, all you need to know is that she had a tongue that was on fire in those years that I had worked for her. This was

in the winter of 1979. I was small potatoes in the department that she was there to take over. What I am saying is that she inherited me. Everyone who knew her said the same thing, that she had a tongue that burned hot. They mentioned her hot tongue in the same breath with O-levels and Cambridge University. She wore a pea jacket that winter, and had spartan ways. I did not know then that she was to become my mother, a mother who gave no milk but an example of how to live in the world that I could learn from. That was the winter of my entry into the sober life, the winter of my introduction to the men and women involved with spirit. My job title was production editor but my responsibilities were minimal. It seemed impossible to complete the smallest task. At the lunch hour, while Edna took clients to the restaurants of the area, I went off to the nearby McDonald's and ate food without utensils and read the *New York Post*. There was a pro basketball player at this time--he must go *nameless*--and I could not get enough of him in the papers. His life seemed more important than my own. As I saw it, the job was the only thing between me and the street. The panic attacks would come around the lunch hour. I did a great deal of walking. I walked through department stores praying that I wouldn't shatter into a thousand pieces and never be put back together again. God can't be talked about. You can talk about the shit in your life, and people will listen, but they turn away at the God stuff. And yet God is the only thing I want to talk about. This planet is tired. The trucks are on the nation's highways, headed our way. Blood is about to be spilled. I don't have my mother's nimbus of light. I don't have the light box apparatus, and I don't have the God that she was pushing on me on the years of

my childhood and, in truth, into adulthood. She asked me frequently if I knew that we were living in the last days, if I knew that the day of judgment was coming. My mother had a fear of God. She was a Pentecostal. She spoke in tongues. She believed in the fires of hell everlasting. I will tell you something right now. I will go right at it. I will not be diffident. I will be bold and unironic in this assertion. I have a God in my life, and he is more important to me than anyone or anything. I will tell you that conversation, such as it is, filled as it is with aspiration and desire for the good things of life, often strikes me as false, false, false, as if I am throwing a problem out for discussion so you will think I need help when all I am doing is trying to take attention away from the fact that I am fine and complete and whole in this moment and that there is nothing at all from you I need, that your flesh and your attention to your body are somehow all wrong, some part of a past I have left behind. Don't misunderstand. Don't get woefully clumsy and stupid on me. Let it not sound like Edna is more important than she is. She was my boss. That is all. A boss with a hair trigger temper. I was with her when I began my journey from darkness to light. She was a mentor of a kind, a woman as of this world as my mother was out of this world. She had Scottish thrift, an exactitude about money. She understood sales sheets and contracts. I was where I didn't belong. Children's books, at the time at least, was a woman's domain. I was the only male in the department. No, Edna would not have hired me. I didn't have sufficient skills, probably, and two, I was the wrong sex. So we were an odd couple. I was married to my first wife, Julia, at the time. Julia had slipped into darkness. She was on a dozen psychiatric medications.

She put on five pounds a week. She sat in front of the TV eating Frito Lays and Pepperidge Farm cookies. I wanted to leave her but was afraid she would die without me. "I know you're having problems in your marriage," Edna said, after I failed to show up for a staff meeting on the grounds that I was being underutilized. Growing up I saw my mother as a saint. The nimbus of light around her was very strong. But then in my twenties I encountered Freud. I never stopped loving my mother but I was angry with her, too. She had kept me down, I decided. She should have made a place for me in the family business. Not only had she excluded my father, but now she was excluding me, too. There was something only she could give me, and she was keeping it away from me. It became the same with Edna. By keeping responsibility away from me, she was preventing me from being a man. So that her comment full of acid about my marriage had come in the context of my difficulties with her. She could use her tongue to strike me dead, she was saying to me. I have nothing more to say about Edna, not a word, except that I hated every last thing about her and wanted her to die die die except for all the love and *exceeding admiration* I felt for her. All you need to know is that I had departed for Greece on a Thursday. That morning I saw Dr. Randolph. A boring session. I did not do my little boy stuff. I did not tell him to hit me with a stick. I asked him how he coped with air travel and provided my own answer. Prayer. He agreed. Dr. Randolph is gay. Dr. Randolph has a *live-in girlfriend*. Dr. Randolph is married but has no children. Dr. Randolph knows the song "Kodachrome" by Paul Simon, a disgusting, tuneless thing. I had with me two pieces of luggage--a shoulder bag and a High

Sierra carry-on bag. On the corner of Twelfth and University Place I ran into Kath. I had that moment of decision, whether to say hello or not. She hadn't seen me. Her face--she was once a model--was a mask of anger. Every hair was in place. She looked severe, full of judgment, full of the pain of her *personal* situation. She has a husband who drinks. He is prosperous. He has the earning power to set her down behind the white picket fence and the biological power to impregnate her. Their children are beautiful but she had to leave him when he continued to do the wild thing. Kath gave me a book to read some months before, a book on how to deal with a troubled marriage. The author himself had been given the boot by wifey, but he had some idea how to make a marriage work nonetheless. It had to do with imaging, some technique I did not have the curiosity to explore. She called me once in a time of desperation. She had just ordered her husband out of the house and I had fantasies that the two of us could have something together, but now, seeing her on University Place, I felt distant and regretted putting my hand out to touch her shoulder. She turned to me and I saw in her anger and she saw in me fear. "I'm off to Greece," I said, and heard her say, "You're no man. You're a twit. You're a little boy without a dick. Now come here and let me punish you big-time." Instead I flew away, and rebuked myself for having gone toward her field of punishment. My first trip without Beloved had taken place the summer before. Sitting in the back of a rattling Checker cab on the Van Wyck expressway, I had the feeling of being a child, of doing better what I had done with so much pain back in childhood, which was to leave home for camp. The difference was that in this instance I felt loved

and that I was taking Beloved's admiration with me on the flight to Rome. I felt like the held child of a wise and enlightened parent who wanted only good for me. Gone was the turbulence of the child who wept tears of stunned grief to be separated from his mother, who felt he had to get away from the camp of the religious people, get away from the Catskill Mountains, and back to his mother, who was greatly in need of his help, not understanding that it was she who had sent him away in the first place to the camp to be taken care of by the men and women for Christ Jesus, which is the way they often referred to him. I felt pity for the cab driver, for the rough edges I saw in him, a man whose financial needs extended beyond his paycheck. He was a large man with stubble on his face. I saw him making beer runs to the bodega. I saw him paying an inflated rent for some slum apartment in a drug neighborhood where the boys with guns shoot people in the face for the thrill of it. My mother was right to turn off the TV when the gunfights on those westerns got too much. She knew what was coming. She knew the time of boys who wore their pants falling down over their asses, the time of 'disrespecting,' was coming. It is a long journey, Smithsonian lady, to the feeling that you are being held in someone's heart and mind, and that you do not have to travel with the turmoil you knew as a child. I had pity for the man behind the wheel, I shuddered, for some years ago I too had driven a cab. I had peed in the taxi lot out at JFK and carried my cigar box with coins and dollar bills into greasy spoons. It was less than a year of hacking, but I remember the loneliness, and how people more or less saw you as invisible, no matter how much chatter you made with them. This is the way I described Beloved the other

day on a scrap of paper, when I had confidence in the rightness of what I was doing.

"She came from the ruins of Europe and the bounty of America trailing clouds of glory. She was drawn from a gene pool of an elite order. She had systematic cadences to her elegant thought processes. She knew that Koreans were renowned more for their pottery than for their bronzes, or was it the other way around? She knew that death was waiting for me at the end of a sad door unless I walked through it." The world is a sudden storm. It crashes down around us. Know that this is so, Smithsonian lady, that on the anvil of forgetfulness are dead dreams forged, and that I must now return to Naxos, and my afternoon with Celwinka Sunburst and her *equally* English friend. The water was cold, But Germans with giant sausages plunged into it. I followed Celwinka a short way out to a rock that could accommodate one person, , and there I perched, relaxed by the sun and the sea, and told her the circumstances of my separation. I tried to reach her through this tale, this 21-year-old London nurse, and it began to sound like a story I had told others. I opened to her and she to me. She had been raised exclusively by her father after the death of her mother. Social workers said it was not a good idea, but her father would not be parted from her. They had fights. He hit her often. She got competent treatment and was all well now. The waters of the Aegean washed over her breasts, hardening her nipples, and sparkled in her pubic hair. I was no longer with Beloved, *whom I am always with*, but with Celwinka, her teeth so white and her lips so red. "I have been having nothing to do with men sexually since coming to this island,"

Celwinka said. Those white teeth. That red tongue. Her healthy gums showing in her luscious-lipped mouth. The image of a sexual scene in my baking brain, the two of us brought together from different continents for the closest moment we would have. Smithsonian lady, know only this--I was coming on as a caring person, but I was coming on to a woman who didn't want to be come on to beyond a certain point. It was a situation where if I was to *have* her--and let us accept that that is an odious word--it would have to be at some early point, for time was not on my side. There was pain in having been pulled from the sulk of solitude into the bright light of day by this London nurse. There was some need of woman--call it bondage--vying with a contempt for this need and an agenda that put at the top of the list throwing off their yoke from around me. On these trips--I speak as a veteran when I have been alone to only Italy and Greece--I had been developing pity and contempt for the couples I saw wandering around together. I'd stand in a square and start to count, wondering how long it would take for one to start gabbing at the other. I'd spot a woman in a museum, get my hope up that she was alone, only to see her zoomed in on from another room by the man in her life, who had been trailing behind me, waiting for my interest to be aroused, before taking her away from me and asserting the primacy of *their, their* relationship. I'd see couples sitting together over dinner and think, "How unevolved. How pathetic. How clinging. Go on, little Tommy. You can do it. You can leave the room for three and a half minutes without having to race back and see this monstrous woman of your dreams." I addressed them silently in this way, in a spirit of rancor. I know what it is to be a dog seeking nothing more than

to linger between a woman's legs. I know the draw of that. Paul Theroux had given my solitariness meaning, but now Celwinka had destroyed it. I will tell it to you this way. Her lesser companion was calling to me silently. When Celwinka came from the water one last time, with *Agnes Rodehouse* trailing behind her, I whispered that I would stay on the island if she would come alone to the beach with me the next day. I said this against my better judgment, ignoring the voice within me. She got purposely obtuse on me, saying, "What's the matter? Do you not like my dear friend Agnes, who goes back so many years of my short life with me?" even as Agnes was approaching. "No. No. It's not that at all," I said, and rushed to explain that I only wanted to be with her. Agnes was not finished with her sunbathing, and perhaps I could have stayed with her, but while we had gotten on well, I felt that the spirit of harmony had now been broken, and that discord had set in because for the first time I had given expression to desire. The sun went in behind some clouds and the men of Germany--they were numerous--came out of the water to show off their impressive penises. And so Agnes stayed behind on the beach while I, I, feeling like an interloper, went off with Celwinka. We had drinks at a cafe near the bus stop, but the spell had been broken. A reversal is supposed to be underway, a change of primary purpose from lingering between a woman's legs to not needing anything from women, from getting to giving, the Christ Jesus change effected by a change in consciousness. I had been doing fine with the two of them--they were happy in my company--so long as I did not cross that line. And now all good spirit had fled, and we sat together uncomfortably--I wanting to apologize for my presence--

while waiting for the bus. A film of anger had come down over her pretty face. She was bringing things to bear on me. She had her projector out and all the historical reels loaded into it and I was on the screen, and the object of her disgust. I was Daddy with his hand in her panties.

I returned to my room in anguish over my mistake, packed my things, and settled my bill. You know how it ended, Smithsonian lady. I dragged my bag through the narrow maze of streets in old Naxos Town. I had to play the scene out. At an outdoor table I sat and ordered a meal from her. The sight of my bag indicating that I was leaving might be reassuring to her, I thought, and gentle her disposition toward me. I wanted to be on the plane of equality, but the fact that she was serving me made her dislike me even more, I began to fear. She sat with me briefly, but we had trouble making eye contact. I gave her my address and reluctantly she gave me hers, and I left a note full of appreciation for the time we had been together for Agnes Rodehouse. Unconsciousness can be considered a hostile act, Smithsonian lady. One of my dead sisters was named Naomi. She would climb to the top of the city's bridges and recite oral history, not caring that her words were lost in the rush of wind and traffic. *I do not pretend to know what was in her mind.* She was Madame Thorazine of the sluggish ways and the verbal drone. She married a man named Chuck, Chuck of the wine-stained T-shirt, Chuck of the gruff, whiskey-influenced voice, Chuck from the Midwest of our great country, Chuck who had seen action in WW II. "His jeep overturned. That is why he drinks," Naomi said. "You would drink too if your jeep overturned, little flathead." My sister Naomi belonged to the night. She

belonged to the *motion pictures*, which she went to with my third oldest sister Rachel. Naomi and Rachel met on the plain of battle with Hannah with some frequency. Hair was pulled, flesh was raked, faces and bodies were pummeled, blood stained the walls and floors. They stuck each other with pins, seared each other's flesh with hot irons. Naomi and Rachel were trying to topple Mount Hannah; she was trying to obliterate them. They did not work closely with each other. The wind was blowing very strongly against our family. It was hard for them to leave the apartment. Naomi went out long enough to work as a ticket taker at the Nemo Theater, where I saw *Riffifi*. She went out long enough to meet her husband Chuck, who was sitting in the lobby with his bottle. Naomi called to me across the room. She called to me with a smile on her face. The journey to her was a joyous one. This is my older sister calling to me, I thought. She meant excitement. She meant gifts for me. Those were the things I thought. Hard slap with a smile on her face is what she had for me. The slap did not affect her smile one bit. "This is what you get for being such an ugly little flathead," Naomi said, while in the next room my mother was making dinner. But she did not smack with her tongue clamped between thick lips. This was not her style in the least. And she did not show me the private parts of her body, as that was not her style either. "Someday I'm going to turn my husband Chuck loose on you. He will make a man of you after he has given you some of his hand. No one hits harder than my husband Chuck." It does not matter what happened to Naomi. It does not matter what happened to Rachel. They got run over by trucks. They fell down and died. A bridge collapsed on them. Naomi existed only to be the

laughing lady of the smack to me. Naomi existed only to be smiling hostility. She was that for a while, and then she went away and died. She left no will. She had no possessions, only a bottle of deodorant and bars of soap and hairpins and old clothes. These were her meager belongings. They were there in the room she lived in with Chuck, and where he sometimes drank and stained his T-shirts with wine dribble. There was only that. I will be honest with you, Smithsonian lady. I have not seen her down there on Broadway in a long, long time. The fall of my separation from Beloved, I went to the rooms of those involved with spirit and told them of my need. A sublet was arranged for me. I lived in an area of the city where trees were not to be found and the concrete rose high. I lived in the apartment of a man who knew grief because his wife had plunged herself out the window, *for no apparent reason*. I lived amid the bric-a-brac of their marriage and with the frustration of a VCR that did not work, so that I could not watch movies of men doing it to the women who wanted to have it done to them. The lobby had floors and walls of fake marble and doormen of thuggish appearance. Top shelf prostitutes occupied half the building, and every other day one of their number jumped from a high window. The building no longer replaced the awning through which they plunged before crashing to the sidewalk below, for the number of such death leaps rose ever higher. People were alerted to enter and leave the building with their heads up at all times. It was a modern white-brick high rise building, I say to you whom I am now sufficiently intimate with that I can simply call you S.L., there in the nature-eradicated area. At the newstands of the Pakistanis and the Indians I bought shrink-wrapped three-for-the-price-of-one

Swedish Erotica (they do their porn right--their female stars do not look like they come from the land of the prostitutes) only to find that the other two magazines were not *Swedish Erotica* but something inferior. I got to know well the women of these magazines. The one I knew best was excessively thin and with a fearful smile as she held the large penis of a baldheaded man. It was she who made my blood jump, for the reason that she resembled Beloved, with her look of smiling, shy refinement. One evening I tried to see a movie on 59th Street and Third Avenue. A Saturday night. People were telling me to do things for myself. I stood on the line crying, as if to step inside the theater was to leave my pain behind for a while and to betray Beloved. Would it not be better to sit alone in the sublet and suffer? Did I have any right not to be faithful to my pain? The movie I saw that night was about incarceration in a Polish prison, where inmates were routinely abused. A woman living a normal life and then one day in prison, for no crime she had committed. Beloved would not have cared for this film. It would have troubled her too much. Why is it I fear I am trampling on holy ground in telling you this, S.L? Why do I want to call myself names, names that don't all apply, like whore and slut and fool? Go check out Captain Cook's astrolabe, S.L., and the Hopi death masks. Master some facts with your abundant gray matter. This you must know, S.L. The men of spirit who could not afford the food of the Chinese people told me these two things: 1. "You're in the swamp. Learn to love the swamp." 2. "Nothing real can be threatened. Nothing unreal exists. Herein lies the peace of God." To God I said, when I woke in the morning, "Why me?" to which God said, "Why not you?" His response was instant and tough.

He was just that way with me. He was that direct and firm and emphatic in the ways that he was showing. I also have a younger sister, S.L., and her name is Vera and she too patrols Broadway. She is at the other end of the spectrum. She is successful, and wears a giant mortarboard to keep alive in all of us the memory of the doctorate she earned from Columbia University in English literature. Around her neck she wears the framed doctorate itself and her Phi Beta Kappa acceptance. My birthday came the week after the separation from Beloved, and Vera called to say she wanted us to get together to celebrate. It was a call I was not looking forward to, S.L., for it takes effort to talk with my sister. I fear her. She can flay the skin off me with her words. Vera says, "I give resentments. I don't get them." Vera says, "I can be very nasty. I'm a tough bitch." Vera says, "I can shred people with my tongue." Vera is nine feet tall and still growing, while her husband is a midget. She insisted on taking me to dinner and I said I would get back to her. And so I called her from the sublet of the grieving man, for not to do so would incur her displeasure. I had the idea of standing up to her, of saying now was not the time for celebration. But she said to me, "This is terrible. I feel so sad. You were so beautiful together. How are you going to survive the pain? I fear for you being alone at a time like this. Don't you remember how homesick you used to get at camp? Don't you remember how you used to cry and cry for Mommy? I'll be right down to help." I put out a verbal stop sign. I told her that I couldn't be seeing anyone. She tried to run right over my words. "You're just a hanging string without a woman. You'll be blown to the winds. I'll forsake husband and child for you. I've been waiting for this time

to be alone with you for years. We owe it to each other to define our relationship. We owe it to each other to consummate our relationship as adults with the sexual power to do just that. We are not children anymore. We are getting on in years. Let's stop beating around the bush. So I'll be down in a jiff, as soon as I can stash hubby and the kid." Again I put out the stop sign. Again I said not to proceed. "You're making a big mistake. You're pissing me off, Buster. You're causing me to get ready to sling words, underweight, flatheaded dimwit." I did telephone hang up and filled with happiness that she didn't have the number. Vera and I shared a room as children one mile north of here. In a gentler time trolleys ding-a-linged along Broadway. I was not born in time to see them, and that is my misfortune, but they ran right under my window. I slept in the top bunk and Vera occupied the lower one. At night my mother would enter. Her light box would be burning bright, and she would say the "Now I lay me down to sleep" prayer for us. And then she would take her light away and the er-re-ra man would come. His light would circle the ceiling and form in the middle of it and then plop down to the floor as a white blob that could move with incredible speed, and he would chase me through the apartment shouting er-re-ra man, er-re-ra man. Vera slept with her leelah. I never knew the exact spelling of the strip of blanket that she stuffed up against her nose, and without which she could not fall off to sleep. Vera called down fire from above on me. She said, "Daddy, Daddy. He smacked me. He smacked me in *my face*," and my father came running, whether I had touched her or not, and gave me smacks in *my face*, saying, "You have made me to get up. Do you want more? Eh? Eh? Eh?" and

if I did not answer fast enough, and in the proper way, then the smacks continued, for my father was like the tormented Negroes living in the tenement down the block. When their insanity anger got going they could not stop it until your face from their frenzied beating had been rendered unrecognizable. You would hit too, S.L., if hitting was all you knew. Sometimes when he wanted to establish his authority in a supreme way he would kick me with his wing tip shoe in the face, because he had been made to get up. "That's what you get for touching my face," Vera said, after these times. Always I had a picture of Vera glowing with satisfaction at the beating that she had called down on me by my father from the land of blackness and of rats. Sometimes, when my father was not around, she called on the firepower of Hannah, for Hannah had taken her unto her. The great journey is about love, about learning to love, and I did not know how to love my sister Vera in my growing up years. Not that it was the problem it was to become, for I did not fully see her at that time. Then she lived in the shadows, she was a wisp of a girl I could mostly ignore, for I had my mother's affection and was an academic star and she was a mediocre student and I was a boy and she was just a girl. This was the 1950s, S.L., and you should try to understand. There were lonely summers at bible camp, the two of us sent away in early June to be with the old folks at this country place passing the weeks waiting for the other church kids to join us. "Oh, you'll love it. It's the country. you'll have fresh air," my mother said. An atmosphere of depression. The wallpaper, the plates of unpleasant-smelling food ("Eat. you're all skin and bones. your ribs are showing"). The sermons in the aluminum-sided tabernacle

by the camp owner, a Ukrainian immigrant we called Porky Pig behind his back because of his fat little body and pink face. On his head he wore an orange hairpiece that fooled no one. He would send me to my room for throwing rocks and hit me for small acts of vandalism. Vera rejected me after I had been caught stealing candy from the canteen. "I'm not having anything more to do with you. You're a criminal. You're not my brother," Vera said, after the sweet loot of my thievery— Milky Ways and Sugar Daddys and Mars Bars and Goldberg's Peanut Chews—had been found in my underwear drawer. Yes, there was a sense of ostracism, but also pride, that I was not one of the docile sheep of this camp, one of those who streamed to the prayer rail, heeding the pastor's beckoning call to be washed in the blood of the lamb and the shadelashakbeya women, those speaking with *the tongues of angels*, rising from the rough pine benches to shake and shout and weep. I was proud to be beyond his call, beyond the reach of his words, which to me were disappearing words, do you understand, S.L.? I survived thirteen years of Pentecostalism without being dunked in the baptismal font, thirteen years without once going to the prayer rail to do the weepy-weep for Jesus. They did not drench me in the Lamb's blood. They did not anoint my head with oil. My life became small. I want you to know this is so, S.L., you between whose legs I do not linger. I was a man with a small life and a big bottle. The smaller my life grew the bigger the bottle got. I am saying words that sound right to me. Was there a turning point, when I had to see Vera as a person in her own right? Did it come when she was a teenager, and began hanging out with the Columbia boys? Did it come the day she stopped by the office window

at the building and announced to me, with a smile of triumph on her face, that she had just been accepted to the graduate English program at Columbia University? Was that it? While Vera was stepping out into the world I was becoming a thief, stealing money from my mother's pocketbook because I was too fearful and twisted to go out in the world and make my own way. Was the turning point the evening she came by the office and pulled from her bag the duplicate receipt book I had been using to siphon off funds from the building, a receipt book she found at the apartment I had given her after having the money to move to a better place? Was that it? Did she establish supremacy by walking off without a word to leave me with my guilt and shame? Now of course I could say, and to this moment it did not enter my mind, that there was another way of looking at the situation. Which is, that she did not go to my mother about this thing. She did not pull the receipt book from her bag for my mother's eyes. She did not arrange for my ejection from the office. These are things I cannot say that she did. They momentarily change my perception of her from a malign force seeking to drive me down to possibly someone who cares about and even loves me. Let me tell you what transpired, S.L., you whose nails grow long in order to rake me because I will not give you what you want when you want it, you who desire to exact terrible revenge on your departed husband by joining my body to yours, you who choose to live on a warlike plain, opting not to forgive. I met with my sister shortly thereafter. We talked in a coffee shop over cherry cheese danishes and tea. This was in the West Village. She was struggling in this time. She was living in the place that I had vacated. Her roommate was a wild man,

who believed that he was being programmed for evil by the computers at the Columbia University engineering building across the way. This was her pre-Columbia life, when instead of Columbia itself she had to settle for a boyfriend who was a Columbia graduate and now enrolled at Juilliard. A composer with a handlebar mustache, a man of the Jewish faith with brilliance in his genes. This man had gone and rejected her, leaving her in a state of full despair. I found her sitting on her bed in a drab room of a rundown hotel with slash marks on her wrists. Yes, it was a weak attempt to do away with herself, but still, it showed the degree of pain that she could be plunged into when prestige--when Columbia Juilliard Jewish man with brilliance in his genes--was taken away from her. For Vera too had journeyed forth from the prayer altar in the Catskill Mountains. She too had moved beyond the disappearing words of the pastor and his injunctions against life as *significant numbers* of people know life to be--a ham sandwich and a cold beer and the funnies and Yankee baseball on the tube on a hot Sunday afternoon. Vera had progressed to the point of wanting to be somebody, of seeking prestige and recognition. Why else was she to be seen by the old ladies of the building where we grew up sitting in the window of some fraternity up the block? Why was she yearning to be in the eye of the men of Columbia University, the men with giant brains and large pocketbooks who came from all over to have immense quantities of knowledge poured into them? There she was, cast down, down into the depths of despair, by the Columbia/Juilliard man's rejection. Because we had been told that we were nobody, nobody. Because we were told that these people with fine clothes and big jobs and expensive cars

and fine apartments that had much of cleanliness and order in them, these people who watched Yankee baseball on Sunday afternoons instead of being in the house of the Lord--we were told that these people, no matter how fine they appeared in this life, were going to get theirs. Gas burns hot, we were told, and the fires of hell are fueled by an infinite ocean of high-quality petrol. We were told that we would stand on the edge of hell and watch them burn, that Heaven was in fact a front row seat at the spectacle of the flames and the eternal immolation, where it would be our good fortune to drink orange crush and have the cool breezes in our faces. But Vera could not believe in this path anymore. The world was calling to her. We sat together that night after her discovery that I was *on the fiddle* over our cherry cheese danishes--we had ordered cherry cheese danishes in many of the coffee shops of Manhattan. She said that she too wanted to work evenings at the renting office. What she was saying was that she as well wanted to be fed by the building. What she was saying was that life was hard as she was living it, with having to support her way through school and hardly any money for the cherry cheese danishes that she so loved. She was, then, following my lead into the renting office. She was not judging me with the exhibition of the receipt book so much as she was asking for inclusion. When we were young, she will tell you--for she has a way of seeking to embarrass me with memories she reveals to the public at large--that I would approach old ladies from the building on the street and explain that we were orphans in need of money. She will tell you a thing such as this as if to say how preposterous I was. Or she will report to you on the time I tossed a football at the commencement

exercise at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, causing great commotion, or the time I hurled toilet paper from the second-floor bathroom at the Episcopal school at the nuns, causing the headmaster to expel me that very t day in the middle of sixth grade. She will tell you how I took her downtown on shopping expeditions with money stolen from my mother's pocketbook. She will tell you how the urge was in me to play big daddy with money that was not my own. She will tell you how I nudged her off a bench in a photography studio to keep her out of the portrait. She will tell you that I shot a paper clip at her with a rubber band and cut her hand and could have put out her eye. She will tell you that I engaged in rude and gross behavior, such as farting in her face. A smile will come over her face and you will hear amusement in her voice as she relates these incidents. What she is saying is that guilty I was and guilty I must remain, in perpetuity, that this and no other is the purpose of the patrols of her and my other sisters on this avenue of my childhood called Broadway. So that she was at a low point, what with the rejection by Mr. Columbia/Juilliard man, and before the time of her very own Columbia-ness, which followed only a year later, when she showed up at the office window and said, "Guess what news I have to tell you and everyone," and began to sing "Columbia, Gem of the Ocean." Seeing that feigned obtuseness was my only defense, she spelled it out. The pity I had felt for her, sitting on the edge of her bed in a crummy room with nicked wrists, was now gone, and I knew only dread, S.L., as if my feeble ramparts were being overrun, as if my soul had been crushed. And I knew then that I had been dealt a lingering blow, that it would be for me now and perhaps for all time to rearrange my face to conceal the

hurt and envy and the fear I felt in her presence, and that it would be a full-time job, for she did not have to be present to be present. She was living large in my mind, S.L., and I asked myself this on Chinatown streets (yes, by now, I was living in the neighborhood of the Chinese people in lower Manhattan), and elsewhere: How do you get from fear to love? Where do you purchase the materials to build such an elaborate construction, and how am I to know the design for such a thing? It was to be many years before the men who could not afford the food of the Chinese people showed me the way to build that bridge and led me across it. There were some very good years, years in which I ran through the streets of Manhattan without clothes and also hung out in the bars without clothes, for the bars were where the women were to be found and I attacked them and they attacked me and we had drunken sex. As her life got bigger--Columbia Ph.D. tenure track big--and mine got smaller, there were less places to hide, for Vera was a smirking colossus bestriding New York, her feet in the waters of both the city's rivers, and I was drowning in her piss, which had an unflinching way of finding me. There was no way of seeing her without everything in her proclaiming triumph, triumph, triumph, without her saying "I have won and you have lost. I have stolen the identity you wanted to have for yourself. First our older sisters beat you, and now I have beaten you--you have been beaten by women and ignored by men, and so it will ever be." My father died in this time, and I behaved badly, showing no remorse but only exultant triumph at the funeral service and the burial--lifting my finger in the air and shouting, like a solid, solid, American boy, "I'm #1, I'm #1." Vera answered at the reception, saying with a

look of complete and malignant triumph on her face, while staring directly at me, "I feel compelled to carry on Daddy's name." It's all nothing, you want to say, S.L., you who wants to take your clothes off and *get it on*, you who wants to take your clothes off and *party*, you who wants a respite from all this talk, so you can do what, S.L.? You and I both know you have no need to answer that, that truth does not require *oral declarations*. I had a new prescription for glasses--my first set of bifocals--and took them on the trip. On the Naxos pier that night, after my uncomfortable dinner at the restaurant where Celwinka Sunburst wore the hat of waitress, I stood with my bags at my feet unable to make out clearly the faces of people. My vision seemed to lack detail. I took a seat on a bench and felt old and undesirable, like a man severed from the main action of life, like someone who had found a lonelier, less trammled path, a path without female beauties clad only in racy underwear. Now I was with old island men enjoying a cool night-time breeze on the Naxos main drag. My second-class ticket entitled me to a cabin. There were two bunk beds, and I took the top of one. The engine room must have been close by, for I could feel as well as hear the throb of the engines through the night. I slept in my pants and T-shirt, my belt loosened and my money pouch secure around my waist. You will not tell Beloved the things I tell you, will you, woman whom I am coming to fathom, woman whose only point is to bring me to the realization that there is no woman to tell these things to and finally and ultimately to turn me to the face of God? In my previous life I would have wandered the decks, the lounges, the bar, looking for a woman to be with. Year by year, sinking more into yourself, realizing the answers are inside. I was

afraid. I dreaded being on the night ferry. I imagined an explosion, burned passengers afloat in the water, shark frenzies in the Aegean, a messy death. My disease attacks me through my body and my cowardice causes me shame. I am afraid to fly or travel by boat. I can't enter the ocean without the gross fear of a barracuda or a shark or jellyfish. This you must not tell Beloved. Our relationship depends on her not knowing. She must see me as strong, S. L., she must. My life is on the line. . It's a limiting existence when all you can envision for yourself is disaster. The body. Always the body. You want to get beyond it but it is hard. Locks, many of them, on my door here at home, so no one can come and hurt my body, shoot my body, stab my body, drown my body. I call it the org., this place where I work. An org. for women. The heavier ones, after the breakfast they take from the cafeteria and eat in the elevator (even when people are looking they continue to eat, for they cannot restrain themselves), then go to the top-floor conference hall, where they dance throughout the day, shaking the foundations of the building. My boss, Ms. Small, has mighty powers. She is 78 pounds and lives on a teaspoon of peanut butter and one ounce of orange juice a day. She does not go to the cafeteria for *coffee and*. She sits at her desk. She is task-oriented. My boss does the work of ten people and has powers not seen in most others. She can metamorphose into a bee. She can fly through the air. She can do these things. Ms. Small hired me some years ago. I thought the job would be a breeze. I came to the org. from book publishing. In my mind the org. was not the equal of the company I had worked for because it had the 300-pound women who ate their breakfasts in the elevator--corn muffins and steaming plates

of eggs and hash browns--before dancing with such manifest fat-lady style on the top floor. Ms. Small organized an outing to a printing plant in Camden, New Jersey. We took the train to Philadelphia. I saw the bathroom in the Market Square Station where a murder scene was shot in the movie *Witness*. I got scared standing over the urinal that I would meet the same fate as the murdered man in the movie. I returned to the information desk, where Ms. Small and the others were waiting for the printing company representative, stayed a minute, then walked to a phone across the concourse and called Beloved to tell her that I loved her. In a Philadelphia train station I walked away from Ms. Small to call Beloved, feeling with every step the eyes of Ms. Small on my back. I thought this at the time: I am showing Ms. Small that I have someone. I am showing Ms. Small that I have a life. This you should also know, for it is important in some way. Ms. Small continued to work while we ate lunch. I wanted to cry seeing that this was so, for it told me that Ms. Small was afraid of us, that she had only her work to make her feel good. Behind a stack of galley proofs and mechanicals she hid, while we destroyed the lunch served us by the predatory host, who wanted only our business. He was a man with an easy smile and perhaps violent ways, a man who wore *Armani* suits and read the newspapers of his city. He had greased hair, shot his cuffs, and wore expensive shoes. Research reveals that he drank with the boys and boffed the secretary, before going home to his wife and children, among whom he sipped red wine. The similarities between Edna, my previous boss, and Ms. Small were there, of course. They were both single women of roughly the same age. They both had asexual lifestyles (do not ask

me how I know this--simply do not ask). They both liked the rafters of the Metropolitan Opera House and Carnegie Hall, where they sat alone, alone. They both worked very, very hard and had a tough time with delegation. And while Ms. Small did not have O-levels in her background, while she had no Englishness in her, she had the same fire in her tongue that Edna had displayed, for the week after the visit to the printing plant she came shooting this fire at me, saying "If I knew you were going to be so incompetent I would never have hired you." She said this to me with crackle in her voice, in range of the rest of the department. I knew great fear, for I had been a man of the streets, of those same streets I heard calling to me once more. She hurt me so bad that I went scurrying back to Edna for lunch, and sought her reassurance that I hadn't been a terrible employee. She gave me the vote of confidence I was seeking, and in return I told her I had found God, and that God was a good thing, that He had made all the difference to me, no matter how fouled up my daily affairs could seem. I ran right over the elegant ramparts of her English reserve and into this most personal zone with my assertion. You do not understand their genius—full comprehension is lacking, S.L.—until you consider the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights, and then you perceive that their genius is the genius for privacy. I took away Edna's ability to speak. I caused her cheeks to swell in consternation at such presumptuousness. I tore out of the restaurant and over the years felt increasing shame over the injury that I had done to her Englishness by the strong avowal of my faith, and the recommendation of it to her with whatever modifications she might desire. The men who cannot afford the food of the Chinese people laugh

at me over my employment at this org. for women. They tell me it is karma, that I am being given an opportunity to learn something. They tell me that we are here to learn, that there is nothing to get, only to give, that I was given everything I need at the moment of creation. They tell me to think with God, that love is the antonym of fear, and that love never dies. They tell me these things while not having the means to eat the food of the Chinese people. They tell me these things while the flag of the org. flaps in the wind over Third Avenue and with Ronald Reagan presiding over America in his own inimitable way. In addition to Ms. Small, there was Marge Selvey. She was our senior editor, and had much experience editing the books of the org. My fellow editor was a woman named Blanche Enuff. She came from a speck of a town in Kansas but she was cosmopolitan in her ways. She was tall and lanky and excellent at her job, and though her face was attractive and well made up, the rest of her was *sizes too large*. She was not there long before her editorial brilliance began to be recognized. While this was going on, Ms. Small was hammering me in a ferocious way. My lunch breaks were too long. I was on the telephone too much. I should take a production course to improve my skills. At the same time she was campaigning to have Mr. Slick, our art director, fired. This was the same Mr. Slick who arrived late and left on time and who liked his Scotch after work and his double-breasted suits. Ms. Small did not use the word "fired." She said it more strongly. She said she wanted to see him "boil in oil." "Boil in oil" was one of her high-ranking sayings, along with "there is more than one way to skin a cat," which she only said in earshot of me, so far as I know, no one ever reported

her saying it when I was not around. "What do we have here? Fun and games in the old school yard?" This she also said a lot. She had a great need for the utterance of those words on a frequent basis. But this needs stressing, S.L. During her metamorphosis into a bee, she was beyond words. Believe me when I say that at such times she let her buzzing do the talking. In regard to Blanche Enuff, it is startling but not profound to say that she fucked five men a week. That's right, S.L., five a week. The verb is not mine. It is hers. Blanche says regularly on the phone, while sitting in the cubicle next to mine, "I fuck five men a week. That is the most important thing to know about me, right after my genius IQ, and the fact that I escaped a town in Kansas that is hardly a speck on the map." In a voice that was anything but sotto voce she provided me, as well as her friends, with this information. "I just stuff them in my cunt and move them around a little. Then I pop them back out in the street like the used-up junk they are," she also said. Blanche Enuff said these things loud, on the dozing watch of Ronald "I can sleep with my eyes open" Reagan and with the org. flag flapping in the Third Avenue wind. Blanche Enuff had other things to say, of course. She gave daily status reports on her breasts, for example. "They're not as firm as yesterday" or "Never have you seen such a jutting pair of hooters. The nipples of the monsters are seeking to puncture the delicate fabric of my blouse." She had a way, an inimitable way, of unbuttoning her blouse to show off her breasts to me. "How do you like their fabulous silcon-ness today?" she would say, asking me to feel their marvelous heft, asking me to inspect and taste them in places that org. people were known to pass through, places like stairwells and corridors

not exactly off the beaten track. There was no stopping her body awareness. There was no stopping her on-fire-with-desireness for me, and never at any time did it become clear to her that the primary obstacle between us--the moral reservation aside--was my undying belief that sand belongs on beaches, not in people's bodies. In a hushed confidence Blanche Enuff announced to me, over the cubicle wall dividing us, that she was a soul sister to Xaviera Hollander. Blanche Enuff said, "I suck men's cocks. I drain their lizards dry. Give me yours. I command you to. You are in the presence of imperial woman." The truth has simply to be spoken once in a while. There is only insanity without its cleansing action. This you have to know, S.L. I told my wife, not the wife I left because I had no choice but to free myself from her in order to grow (*grow*--there is a word. With hot pliers I would have pulled the teeth of anyone pretentious enough to use that word in the 1970s, the years of my drinking. Drinking on the streets of Manhattan while the president of the United States, RMN, did his drinking in the Oval Office) but the new wife, who in holiness walks, who is part of my soul. I told her essentially that Blanche Enuff was going to hell, that severe punishment was awaiting her for a lifestyle that called on her to snatch men off the street and place them under her skirt and move them around for a while down there before throwing them into the gutter, spent and useless to her. Blanche Enuff was a devourer. Blanche Enuff was acting out. Blanche Enuff would get hers, I asserted. Genius can be a painful thing to deal with, if it is not bowed down to in admiration. It gives rise to the cacophonous sound of desire in others, a song sung in the envy key. This is important to say, S.L. Gradually, it became

apparent that while I was seen as competent, Blanche Enuff was regarded as brilliant. So I heard Ms. Small say about her. So I heard others in the org. say. I began looking at Blanche's books to see how she handled a styling or copyediting problem. And in most if not all cases I deferred to her. When Ms. Small would ask Blanche to be a first reader of my galley proofs, this fear would come over me that Blanche would come to me and say, "Wow, you're really a lousy worker. What are you doing here?" At the same time I would look and look through her books, hoping to find errors and rejoicing when I did, for then she did not, for the time being, have to be an editorial goddess in my eyes. But the satisfaction was not long-lasting. It can never be arrived at through that means. Then one day she wiggled out. She went on one of her manic booms. She called from home to say that she couldn't come in because Ms. Small was the devil and wanted to destroy her life. She said that Ms. Small had totally evil intentions toward her. She said this directly to Ms. Small over the phone, and then asked to speak with me. She said to me, "I am having a doozy of a time." Those were her exact words to me. She asked me if I believed in love on the run, that is, would I like to be under her skirt for a brief while before being discarded as a spent cock on the side of the road. She said these things while Ms. Small stood fretting less than a foot away from the receiver I held. I took a high posture. I comforted her with my voice, for I am good in a crisis, I know how to perform on the drama stage. Ms. Small, despite being called a devil, put on her special cape, had me hold on, and then flew us off out the window and to the home of Blanche Enuff. (Here I have to stop once again, Lady of Nothingness,

Lady of the Cold Realm, Lady of Finiteness, Lady of Pain, Lady of Gripping Fear, Lady of the Place Where Love Is Entirely Unavailable. It is futile to try to go on, for I cannot tell you about the one I love. I cannot tell you that she lived in a fifth-floor walkup loft on Mercer Street in SoHo. I cannot tell you that she is loveliness itself, that she treats animals with the love and affection with which humans should be treated. I cannot tell you that the SoHo gallery owners all, *all*, wanted to claim her for their own, for she is endowed with talent *and* brilliance *and* goodness *and* beauty, and they cannot get enough of her, they want to drink her through a straw. I cannot tell you the details of our living situation, for as you know, such communication could jeopardize my life. I could lose her in the telling. I could end up in the same pitiful, cold place where you now stand. Such communication could undo the holy--yes, I said holy--bond that God--yes, I said God--has been creating between us, doing for us what we could not do for ourselves, taking us from the dream of specialness and revenge to selfless love.

Yes, I claim this to be so, here on the island of Manhattan, in the year 199)
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Blanche Enuff was surrounded by her lovers. They lay on the floor, like stinking husks of corn, and we could not get a word out of them. Blanche herself was holding court. Even the presence of Ms. Small did not inhibit her from the display of her silicon-enhanced assets. Call it semi-modesty, but they were the only private parts she bared. On steel shelves she had bottle after bottle of prescriptions, hundreds and even thousands of multiple prescriptions. Some of the pills were contained in oil drums. As soon as she ran out of one bottle, she ordered twenty more. Because death was synonymous with running out. She

told us all this, the words manic-booming out of her in a stentorian voice. The lying about men were an impediment to her pacing. She noticed this after nearly tripping, and kicked them brutally out of the way. Let me say that it was then and there that Ms. Small resolved to do everything in her power for Blanche Enuff. Whether it was a void in her own life or a Catholic sense of duty or *a combination of both*, studies have not yet determined, but one thing shines clear--she wanted only to help. This resolve came in spite of the epithets that Blanche Enuff was raining down on her: "GREAT SATAN, POISONER OF MILK, TORMENTOR SUPREME." The names came too fast to record or remember. Before our eyes she washed down a beaker of pills with a quart of beer, belched loudly, then got on the phone, and in a baby voice, said, "Oh doctor-woctor? This is poo-poo, little sugar cute cute? You know I don't need nothing but your doctorly expertise to fix me? You know I don't need no stinking God, you know I don't need nothing but your fine, fine pills? Would you call into the pharmacy and increase the order this time? You're an angel? Love you? See you soon, hon hon?" The reduced, spent men tried to speak, but once again she kicked them savagely back into silence and out of her path so she could resume her pacing in an unbroken way. I could not tell myself that I had never witnessed such a scene, for there had been Naomi, my second oldest sister, telling the family history through a bullhorn from the top of one of the city's finest suspension bridges. And before that, I remembered as a schoolboy turning the corner onto my block to find a crowd staring up at the same Naomi, poised on the ledge outside her window in her nightgown, with the very same bullhorn and an early version of the story that she

developed and polished over the years, a story that reached its most evolved, lapidary style there at the top of the fine, fine suspension bridge, the essence of her story being that she was involved with a life that just went on and on in spite of the fact that it had gotten hopelessly away from her. She was performing in her nightgown for the neighborhood, and the neighborhood did acknowledge her. "Jesus, that's that woman from the landlady's family. They're all nuts," they all did they, every last one of the crowd shared in this statement of seeming fact, before going off for *coffee and* with their dates and then the daunting assignment of *cracking* the books. So, yes, I could tell you that it was within my realm of experience to see women in the state of undoneness, though never ever with men reduced to ugly husks shoved against the wall to make way for their uninterrupted pacing. Oh tell the truth for once. Were you not a discarded husk, too, growing up in that family of the marauding women? Dare to say it. So, yes, I have to say it was so, and it was this knowledge that compelled me to kiss these discarded men as if they were my brothers and caused Blanche Enuff to turn her attention my way. She stood with her hands on her hips and her legs spread and said to Ms. Small, "He has been balking me. He won't get under my skirt, no matter what I do. He won't have his turn in the barrel. He won't drop in the old cement mixer. He won't have a point put on his pencil by my sharpener. He won't allow himself to be milked." This was the way Blanche Enuff spoke to Ms. Small, in my presence, on that day. Some time later Blanche came to me and said she was a drinking machine. She said she quaffed the suds without ceasing, and would I take her to the men and women who walked with God but

could not afford the food of the Chinese people. You need only know that her quaffing days were from that time on behind her. She did no more ordering up of the foamy brew by the tub. But the kingdom of God that called to her she could not get to, for the ego had her in its grip, and now, while she no longer knocks back the brew, she chews on the pills of the doctors who are thrilled to give them to her, those who are licensed drug dealers, and rages against God, whom she will have no part of. Let me say this, S. L. Marge Selvey, Ms. Small's second-in-command, had much to answer for in regard to her sycophantic ways and for her excessive facial expressions of concern and rapt attention whenever Ms. Small held forth at our irregular staff meetings, where Ms. Small would hysterically shower us with dire warnings of the things that would befall us if we did not step up the quality of our work. "There is a ton of stuff, an avalanche, headed our way. Holy crud. Are we up to speed? Can we cut the mustard? Do you know what's out there if we don't? The street. Penniless people do not wear warm coats. They do not sleep in warm beds. They do not cool out in air-conditioned apartments. they do not stop off at the Bagel Nosh for *coffee and*. Do you get my drift?" The staff jumped up and said, "Ms. Small, we salute you in your fearful, perfectionistic Catholicness. We most certainly get your drift." All except Marge Selvey, who remained in her chair and wore that disgustingly pained expression on her sad face, a look that said she hung on every word her mentor, her spiritual director, spoke. Full credit Marge Selvey with bringing so much conspicuous feeling for Ms. Small into the room. And there was Dolores Ramos, who had fatness in her face and body, and who said to me the day I was hired,

"You're so tall and thin," and who also said, "What's with you? You eat only salads? You're so healthy. You're like a Boy Scout or something," and who also said, after I had been there a month, "Damn, I don't understand. You seem so positive and health-minded, but I had this dream. You were sitting on the curb outside the org. and you had a big gallon jug of wine in one hand and a Snickers bar in the other and you were wearing an attitude. Yes, that's right, you were wearing an attitude. You were saying, 'Take that job and shove it. I'm not working at that dump anymore.' What can this dream mean, because you look so clean and as I say, you eat so many salads?" Dolores Ramos had a Filipino father and a black mother. Her father was a businessman who traveled all over the world. Her mother was a schoolteacher in the public schools who in recent years had been assaulted more than once by some of the students she was there to educate. Dolores Ramos was sometimes white and sometimes black. When she came from a place of blackness, when she caucused with other blacks and spoke black slang, I would think, Why do they have to huddle? Why do they have to talk this exclusionary black slang? while striving to overcome my discomfort and silent rancor *and get back to the peaceful place*. Dolores Ramos had a friend on the staff named Freddy Fred. Freddy Fred was a woman. Dolores called her Spotty because she had a freckled face to go with her red hair. Freddy was part German, part Irish, part French. She had a tough manner, and who could say if it had anything to do with her different ancestries? Freddy said that she took shit from nobody. She and Dolores would have spats. Dolores would rile Freddy, and Freddy would flare up. Freddy would tell Dolores

off. She would say she wasn't taking any more of Dolores' crap and not speak to her for days. Ms. Small once said that the two of them were horrible, that there would come a time when nobody wanted them around. The two of them together had a name for Ms. Small. They called Ms. Small the Snorkster. It was some kind of onomatopoeic word, for they were saying that she talked in a snorkeling kind of way, something about the sound Ms. Small made with her words. Dolores let it be known that Freddy wasn't too bright. She said the fact was that Freddy was a lousy writer, far inferior to herself. Dolores said of herself that she was a writing industry, that her talents were not restricted to turning out org. pap, but that she was a writer of note in the world of black magazine publishing, that her articles were lusted after--"lusted after" were her words--by her black readership. Every workday Dolores made the announcement that there were no good single men in any of the five boroughs, and then she went on to include Nassau and Suffolk Counties, and Orange, Rockland, and Westchester, too. She made the announcement daily that commitment phobia was plaguing the metropolitan area, that women were more than able to get next to men but that men weren't able to get next to women. Dolores said her singleness had to be seen in the light of this deficiency in the men of the five boroughs and outlying counties. Then she sang, with *a finger to the side of her mouth*, and in the cutest and most babyish of voices, the song "My Heart Belongs to Daddy." Every morning without exception she sang this song, and nine times out of ten she was joined by Ms. Small and Blanche Enuff, who showed no power to resist. I was not too involved with the org. staff in this time. I did not take them home with me, except for Ms.

Small, who had caused a professional identity crisis to take place in me because of her outspoken assessment of my performance. These were the Reagan years, S.L., and I was rich through marriage and living with the woman I loved in a SoHo loft on a cobblestone street, and I was bound for literary success and I could pretend I did not care overly much about my office life. It was a job I did not have to take home with me, as my father-in-law said. He was a member of an exclusive club in the West Forties, and had me meet him there for lunch several times a year. He delighted in pointing out famous figures in the oak-paneled rooms--John Lindsay, Louis Auchincloss, the heads of major corporations, just in general luminaries of the art world and leaders in industry and government. Men with much plastic and little cash on their persons. There was German warmth in my father-in-law. He was not like my father, if you can understand, S.L. He came from an identifiable country--Germany--and an identifiable people--the Jews. He had risen through his own initiative to be the head of a vast enterprise, here in his new country, after fleeing the Nazis. He did not spend his afternoons listening to the disappearing words of the pastor at the tabernacle. He did not raise his hand to the correct smacking position. He did not say, "Will you make me to get up? Are you trying to aggravate me?" Does it sound to you that I am judging my father, S.L., that I am coming down hard on him, that I have no awareness of the pain of his existence, how hard it was for him to live? I must tell you plain that I long ago ceased my resentment against my father, I long ago came to see that he had done the best he could with what he had, I long ago came to see that I had grown up to be just like him in

brittleness of temperament. By this time my father-in-law (how do you put such a word next to your person, how do you do it, knowing he, with his German-Jewishness, is the reality, the substance of that word? How do you dare to put such fineness next to you? I would ask myself in this time, in the time of the walking through the concourse of Grand Central Station to meet with him, knowing that through the gates were the trains that took you past the fevered, raging blacks savage in their desire to get their hands on you for not so ancient wrongs, those trains waiting to take you past them and poisoned project buildings and death on cold, ugly streets to the cultivated lands of Northern Dutchess County, where you had your little white house under the large oak tree, and you could live in a gentler environment, until the day the blight reached you up there as well. How did you come to be next to the man who brought this all into being through his financial ingenuity? I have not told you all of it, S. L., I have not told you of the largeness of my dimensions, how there, in his club, I would handle him, treat him like the little boy he was, be a father to him even as he was fathering me. How, how, did I do this, S. L.? By listening, listening. Yes, he took me into his suaveness, his worldliness, but what he really wanted was someone to listen to his stories--his immigrant experience, arriving in this country during the Depression, a German Jew of the upper class, a Berliner, first in his class at the gymnasium, first in his class at the school of law. A man with a mind and with drive to be somebody. From buyer to head of a department store. What he didn't know he would learn from books. He had instincts that suited him well for a drive to ascendancy. He told me how he had come to rise to the top of his father-in-

law's company, and of the people of culture he had met as a publisher. I had the impression of a man who needed to talk, S. L., a man who had been isolated and lonely, a man who, when he retired, found that his friends were fewer than he thought. I had the impression of a sad, nice man, S. L., and did not know how to put this together with Beloved's first words to me about him, that her father *was not who I thought he was*. The wedding reception was at the Cosmopolitan Club on the East Side, S. L., a place with badly worn rugs. Some years before, when I mentioned to a psychoanalyst I was seeing, a woman also born in Germany, the possibility of marrying Julia, my first wife, I said, "But who would come? There would be no one there." "Profound," the analyst said. It was a moment of truth about the aloneness of my life. She said I was in a prison of my own making, this woman who had in her Hannah Naomi Vera elements that disturbed me. I was young then, and my German doctor did not like my character. "It is your social scheme I object to," she hissed. It was a German hiss, full of indignation. "Moral" was a word she used, as when she said, "I cannot make you more intelligent, but perhaps I can make you more moral," for this was the time in which I was in the building of my mother and father and aunt and all of them, taking what was mine, feeling good amid the growing piles of money, grabbing the loot and stuffing it in my pockets and drinking beer and running after women and visiting the freight trains and experiencing a frenzy of desire for life. Her point was that I was using Julia, that I was after the cushion her money would provide. In fact, Julia and I did not marry for some years but lived together in a Chinatown loft, where I drank the bottles of red wine from the store of Mr. Ying

down the street. A year into this life my neighbors came to me with a movie they had made entitled *We Know Who You Are*. It showed the shadow of a man on a building wall involved in the repetitive action of raising a glass to his lips and then lowering it and whose only other movement was to refill the glass from the bottle on the table. They came and said honesty compelled them to notify me that I was the inspiration for this award-winning film, this Whitney Biennial piece-of-dung film. They said they were trying to make a statement about the purity, the simplicity of my life. I proposed to Julia some years later in Key West, Florida, where we had gone for a winter vacation. Some months before she had left me because of my drinking. I had fired off a gun, a powerful hunting rifle, at her parents' country place--they called it Camp--because I did not have the nerve to tell her that I needed a woman with a *rounder* bottom, and thought I had found such a person at my place of work. Because telling her I wanted to leave was unbearable. Better to die than to leave someone. Better to die than to have her die. Because Mommy needed me. She needed me more than anyone could know. This is something that you must understand. It is a serious thing to leave your mother when her very life depends on your staying right there with her. Can you imagine anything more tragic than the death of your mother because of your selfish, heedless actions? So it was a very necessary thing to express myself with the gun, to make my statement with rounds of ammunition on the front porch before passing out in the bathroom. When I woke the next morning her parents were not talking to me. They treated me with silent contempt, or horror, or something. They no longer wanted me at their place, and told their daughter not

to be intimidated into going back home with me. It seemed safe to say that they were getting histrionic on me, that they were delighted to overreact to the mistake I had made the night before, that they could not resist this gross and cowardly urge. So for the next few weeks I was alone in the Bowery loft. Yes, the Bowery, for by this time we had left Chinatown for reasons having nothing to do with the ethnicity of the region, I can completely assure you. It is hard on my pride to admit this, but at this time women did not want me. I could dance around them. I could wave to them, I could say words that had a smattering of sense, but they did not want me in the way I wanted them. It was eerie. It was as if they knew I was lacking before I did. I came to them in the way I always had, just sidling up to them and saying hello, but after saying hello back, they went on their way, or they said, "You belong on Forty-second street." The drinking life is like no other. Some time ago--*in the recent past*--Beloved and I were en route back from Massachusetts to New York. After a while I noticed that the trees were getting smaller and scruffier. I began to see signs for Cape Cod. It was apparent that we had taken the wrong turn, and so we did the sensible thing--we turned around. It is not like that with drinking. At first I had misgivings about my relationship with alcohol, which I expressed to my German doctor, who put the kabosh on my idea that I might have a problem by saying that I was just worried because of my rumhead older sisters. A year later I sought out a medical doctor, but I could not muster sufficient honesty to tell him the extent of my drinking. He recommended a path to me, the path of those who walk with God (many unable to afford the food of the Chinese people), but he might as well have been

consigning me to death, for a life without the bottle was beyond contemplation. I mention this to you only, only, because by the end of my drinking--when blackouts were a common thing--I did not have a clue. I thought the bottle was the only thing that was saving me. Yes, yes, yes, S. L., many pass through the gates of hell because of this denial they themselves cannot lift. The bottle grows bigger and the life grows smaller. Yes, yes, yes. A man like me, from one point of view, is to be despised, S.L., for he wants only one thing, and that is to be let out to play, as when he was a little boy, roaming the city without a care in the world (this before the weight of the world is on him, before he knows that he must be one of the world's saviors). In my sober life I came to see that this was so, for I interviewed a man named Hank, a bum who took up residence at the Hotel de La Bum, as he called it, on a grate one block from where I lived with Beloved. Yes, he was a bum, S.L., a bum with a fat gut and alcohol-ravaged face, a bum who ate from garbage cans and who caused whole subway cars to empty out when he entered them, the passengers doing the *vaminoso muchacho* holding their noses and retching within a split second of his arrival, so hard and pridefully had he worked on his *smell*. He was the doctor of smells, stinking worse than a field of cadavers. People in faraway buildings couldn't sleep because of his stench. Once a week he was washed down by sanitation workers using high-powered hoses streaming out Lysol and Janitor in the Drum (yes, S.L., Janitor in the Drum) because not even the hardiest man could get next to him. Following one of these cleansings I got within range of him and told him to fess up. Those were my exact words to him, S.L., to fess up that he was playing, as he had played

when he was a child in *the shadow of Ebbets Field* and Brooklyn was still really Brooklyn, before each succeeding decade destroyed us more and more with its evil blight, till today all we have are the vile, uncouth actions of our bodies and the piercing implements that fly from our mouths. I said, "Admit to me you are just little *Hankie*, out romping in the neighborhood, the adorable object of attention of your mother and all the shopkeepers," and this, with tears in his red red eyes that had become a stranger to tears, he admitted to be the very essence of truth. So yes, S. L., in this time away from Julia, my first wife, I came to know a painful reality. While I was free to roam as I had when a child, I came to see that women no longer wanted me, at least the women with full bottoms freshly minted from Vassar and Wellesley at my company showed no sign of wanting of me. There was one in particular I had my eye on. Her name was Claudia. Like myself, she was an editorial assistant. A woman with curly black hair and small breasts and a slender figure and the round bottom I was seeking, I knew she had the goods that would complete me. S.L., this you should know. She jumped rope outside her boss's office, and had a look of smiling evil on her. In this time of separation from Julia I asked if Claudia would like to see a movie, to which I had passes. She promised to meet me there. I waited under the marquee on Broadway at 47th Street on a drizzly afternoon expecting an afternoon alone with her. Instead she showed up with the company hunk. "Don't go away. You can sit with us," she said, but I was the odd person out. They shared popcorn between themselves and drank soda from the same straw. They were each five years younger than me, and I left feeling like a miserable loser

after the state of exhilaration I had known. The next day I set fire to the hunk's suit jacket, which had been draped over a chair, after dousing it with lighter fluid. He came to my desk and confronted me. "You sick piece of Manhattan nothingness," he said. "Just because I have an Ivy League degree, just because I've been slipping it to her, just because in five years I'll earn more than you'll ever make in your sorry Chock Full O' Nuts life, just because I go camping and you don't, you feel the need to unleash vandalism on me." I gave him only silence, S.L., and after a while he went away. The journey home is a long one, S.L., and yet instantaneous, with obstacles of our own making. I was born with a sense of differentness. I was born with a 50-pound last name and into a family intent on doing the wild thing. In this time of the coat burning I was employed by a man named Marg. It was a backdoor kind of thing. I had been driving a cab in my late twenties, thinking there was no place for me in the middle class world. I quit that job and took temp work with the company, typing labels and filing papers. A spot opened up in the adult trade division and I applied. Mr. Marg--his full name was Margovich--asked me to consider shortening my last name. He wanted an American-sounding name, he said. Yes, yes, I did as he asked, for I knew by this time that the street was calling to me unless I got my foot in the door of some org. I was beaten, S.L. I wanted to come home. I wanted to stop this deep alienation. I wanted a life for myself. Mr. Marg had me circulate a memo that henceforth, my name was to be different, that it was to be imbued with Americannness, and that the new name had been worked out by the two of us. People came up to me. They had distress on their faces. They didn't know what

to make of the memo. They were angry, disturbed. They were puzzled. They didn't understand why I wasn't upset. They had their motherfucking names. They had *Blakely* names. They had *Roth* names. They had *Carson* names. They had *Vance* names. They had *Jordan* names. They had names with pleasant scents attached to them. Mommy and Daddy had given them these names and told them to go out and hit people very hard and to take everything they wanted. They had parents who had given them their big teeth and hard-hitting way, that allowed them to claim things for their own. I got drunk one night and called them all and said, "This is Nigger #1 from the land of darkness calling," and hung up. I called *Blakely* and *Roth* and *Carson* and *Vance* and *Jordan* names with this message. The next day they came to my desk en masse--it was not their cowardly way to see me alone--and asked if I had been the caller. I pulled myself up right righteous. I said, "Do I be bothering you? Do I be coming to your desk with my face puffed up with whiteness? Do I be interfering with your attempt to climb this racist ladder of your own devising? Do I be? Tell me now. Be grateful I don't cut your mo'fucking throats. Be grateful I not be coming from the land of attitude." From that day forward, while at work, at selected times of the day I walked with a ditty bop shuffle, my right hand balled into a fist. I let these people know where I was coming from, and they did seem to shun me greatly. During this time that Julia was away from me (I cannot say it another way, I cannot say that I ever leave women), my hunger for the rope-skipping Claudia grew. On a half-gallon of red wine I called her and she said into the phone, "Would you like to come over

and fuck me?" and gave me her address. I whooped with pleasure. After shaving for the first time in three days, I tore out of the house. A cab took me to the West Forties and a rundown building with some windows boarded up and where Claudia could not possibly live. The cerveza men were on the stoop. "Did you come here to get your dick wet in Spanish pussy? Is that what you are wanting?" they said in unison. They dragged me up the steps and banged loudly on the first door in the hallway, a hallway that had the smell of dead rats in the walls. My mother answered the door. It was my mother but her hair was black to the roots and her mouth was crowded with gold teeth and she spoke in a Spanish accent words of lewdness I cannot repeat. I screamed but the men just held me there. "What is the matter, little baby? It is only what you have been looking for," she said, with her Spanish accent. I bolted and ran, but the Hispanic men would not let me be. For some blocks they shouted, over and over, "Your momma. Is she fine, baby? Your momma. Is she fine, baby?" They said these things in the public places, shouted them out loud in the public places, between swigs of their cerveza. What is one to say about the noise, S.L., the constant noise, and of a country whose most favored verb is *to party*? (Dr. Randolph, my therapist, has me talk in detail about my sexuality. He has me tell him about the men with the big things doing it to the women who want to have it done to them. He has me tell him about my porn library, black men with big *members* doing it to willing and more than willing white women. I tell him that since I was a young man, men with large members, numbers of them, have been doing it not singly but in twos and threes to these women. I tell him that these are women thin and eager for the advances of these men. Dr. Randolph is tricky. Sometimes he is my mother. I hear her speaking through him, telling me to move my bowels. At times he

seems sad and pathetic, as if he is full of doubt and fear, just a trembling little girl in an old woman's body. And then it will change. I notice that the patient with the time slot just before me no longer visits Dr. Randolph. At first it occurred to me that Dr. Randolph had dropped him through an oubliette, donned his apron, took out his gleaming stainless steel cutting implements, and set himself to *hacking and snacking*, to pass the time before receiving me. More recently, noticing the absence of the patient, I have come to understand that Dr. Randolph has failed, that this patient and others have left him because he is not competent, because he is not brand-name goods. At such times I fill with concern for Dr. Randolph, and weep over him, as when I was a child I would weep for my sad and burdened mother.) While struggling to meet Beloved's father for that very first lunch date, pain nearly buckled me there on the concourse of Grand Central Station, S.L., and stopped me at the main stairway onto Vanderbilt Avenue, for I was remembering the father of Julia, my first wife, and all the alcoholic atrocities and turmoil I had visited on him, and I thought how he, who had been part of my life for all those drinking years, would now get to see none of my recovery, that all of the good, whatever there is, would be shown to this new man in my life, Beloved's father. Does anyone marry just the spouse? When Beloved and I *tyed the knot*—yes yes, a City Hall wedding—it seemed to me that I was marrying into her whole family. Beloved's father received me deeply. Beloved's father was very German, and so he had to receive me deeply. He had thick lips. He had a gymnasium background. He had lived on one carrot a day after the defeat of his country in WW I. He had survived the separation and divorce of his parents, his father

having left his mother for a younger woman. My father-in-law had to leave the land of his birth. He had deprivation and trauma in his background and yet received me in this deep way at the club of which he was a member. He saw something in me that he could respond to. "I approve of your regime," he said, and while I did not like that word, for it suggested rule of a sort and smelled bad and had the clank of iron chains on it, I liked the words "approve of." But yes, S.L., in the way that it had been given me to do, it was my function in this life to truly express myself. For while I had been a sleepy child, a child dozing as the disappearing words of the fulminating pastor flew all around me, I yet received the message that there was one who had come to raise the dead, to heal the sick, to cause the blind to see and the lame to walk. And while I had not seen him, I had smelled his vigor and sensed his light. For in this tabernacle on a street in the west Thirties ("This is a neighborhood without personality," Beloved remarked), there had been, behind the baptismal font, a mural in the softest pastel colors of the Garden of Gethsemane, where a kneeling Jesus went inward to the God within him while his disciples slumbered and the Roman guards did advance. I had ruined my teeth on the church's hard rock candy, and had my mind saturated with "The Old Rugged Cross," and there I had been introduced to Jesus, who was softer than his Father, more loving than his Father, less tolerant of deceit than his Father (never would he have championed Jacob over Esau), a figure with roots in time as well as the spiritual world of non-time. My father had been in that church with me, blocking my vision of the true God, filling me with embarrassment and shame and dread, for to have a relationship with God was to

have a relationship with my father. Better to run through the streets of Manhattan like a crazy person than to have that, S.L. I came to Beloved's father hungry for the world of civilized men, not those who could not stop the flow of their disappearing words, not those who prayed ceaselessly over meals while the food got cold, the fat congealing on the roast leg of lamb (him, him, the smacking man, my father), not he who made \$69 a week as a cashier at Jack Dempsey's Restaurant, the walking man who could not stop walking the length of Manhattan because he had no place to go but Horn & Hardart's, not him who had to have first one and then the other leg amputated because he had diabetes and did not take care of cuts or have the gangrene that set in tended to soon enough. I did not go to him who held his hand in the correct smacking position but to a man of this world, abler in intellect, abler in personality, not the kind who had to quit his job at the Virginian, the Californian, and other restaurants of that chain in 1950s New York, because his brittle temperament would lead him into strong confrontation with the owners, who took him back because they were touched by his temperamental ways. Let us say, S.L. (you with your phony *Father Knows Best* father a phony creation of your phony mind, don't you laugh at my pop, don't you do it), that the men with the slicked back hair who knew how to use their fists and hit very hard with them *in the downtown places*, were softened by something, perhaps his solitariness, that they saw in him. Jack Dempsey himself, no slouch with his *dukes*, put his arm around my father one day, had him come to a back room to meet the boys, who were playing cards. Jack Dempsey forgave him for acting like a shy little girl in their company, Jack Dempsey, who

washed his face in brine each morning, as his mother had taught him to do, so he could be tough and leathery against the world. (This you must understand, S.L., before you go running to the morality police. The harsh evaluations of my father have been going on for many years. On the island of Manhattan alone I have buttonholed thousands of people and told this tale. Yes, before you start your indignant sprint to the *proper authorities*, understand this. It is simply a shedding. It is all movement toward a forgiveness that has already happened.) No, the man who had received me to him had darkened no church doors for the purposes of worship. He went to them, the Romanesque in particular, for their architecture, guidebook in hand. Beloved's father had serious plastic in his wallet. He sat on the board of directors of many companies. His stock portfolio filled a room. His money flowed to and from all continents on electronic channels. He was savvy about how to get the upper hand on doormen and waiters. Behind the gentility was a man who could break bones. "The others in the company did not rise as fast as me because they were unable to hurt people," he said, dismissive of his rivals, to Beloved *sometime back in the 1970s*. For he had risen very fast once coming onto American soil in the 1930s, with only his valise and a German-English dictionary and a handful of names. Within a week he was speaking flawless English, and within a year he was known to every corporation in this floundering country. For he was a German Jew of gymnasium quality. At the club he was on good terms with the men at every table, men who came in \$2,000 suits. Before ordering I would ask if there was alcohol in the soup or in the sauce. I took this precaution, S.L., my vigilance

soaring. Beloved's father wrote out the menu in a shaky hand--he was afflicted with Parkinson's, about which he did not complain (he once went to work the same morning that he had all his wisdom teeth removed, according to Beloved, so the *legend if not the myth of his Teutonic Jewish strength could be established as a paradigm for the all the struggling men of Manhattan—those who could, in their Gertrude Stein-detected powerlessness, do little more than watch the trains of power roar on by— to bow down to*). He handed the menu to a waiter of color in a starched white jacket who showed only minimal respect, for he knew that power had flowed away from Beloved's father owing to his age and to his retirement. Because the men who were wearing the expensive suits did not stop at his table but only nodded in their subtle way and kept going. Because Beloved's father found out what all men of power find out when the title is gone-- they are not wanted in the same way. Beloved's parents had asked about my family, as a family steeped in its own propriety has no choice but to do, but I was unable to provide them with acceptable information.. The words stuck. I had trouble telling them about Naomi and the bridge, about Rachel and her naked runs down Broadway, about Hannah and her dangerous son. I had trouble telling them that we were not a family living in the light. Because this was a new and sober time I consented to a reception at the Cosmo Club. This was to be in the evening, S.L. That morning Beloved and I were married down at City Hall. Beloved's friend Myrna joined us to serve as a witness. She had just come from an interview with one of the city agencies, a tube of architect's drawings in her hand. "I've got the job if I want it," Myrna beamed. She and Beloved went back

a long time, to a childhood in Riverdale. Myrna was a year younger. She looked up to Beloved, who had always been the leader, and Myrna's family looked up to Beloved's family, who had great wealth and culture and who gave parties attended by *famous people*. By comparison, Myrna's father was a simple dentist. (Do you understand the helplessness I feel, S.L., when I talk of Myrna, a Yale-educated architect, who had a Harvard-educated professor brother? Do you understand the terror I felt, bringing my family into contact with people at the very summit of the world, people with genes that had led them into stardom?) My first meeting with Myrna was in the last year of my drinking. By this time I was married to Julia. We had had our City Hall wedding, for it's where people go who don't have the living rooms of others to go to, S.L. Yes, yes, I was working for the Marg man in book publishing at this time, who would say to me at the end of the day, "Stay sober," which I thought was just his cute way of saying goodnight, for it was my belief that since I did no drinking on the job he could not possibly know that I spent the evening glug glugging cheap Spanish wine. S.L., I thought that if you drank until four in the morning and got a few hours sleep before work the next day, then all the alcohol vanished from your system. I did not know that last night's gallon of wine was coming out of my pores and on my breath, that my breath was truly from the land of smelly. I did not know that I had the eyes and the complexion of a drinker. Marg had psychic powers. It ran in the family, for he had a son doing ESP research at CalTech. Marg read me like one of his manuscripts. "You don't have to get married if you don't want to," he said, when I told him of my plans, the only piece of personal advice he ever offered. In the

winter of 19__ (dates are very important as a framework for the laying on of fact, S.L.) Julia and I had flown down to Miami, and from there took a bus to Key West. She had come back to me after the rifle incident at Camp, her family's country place. I had lacked the courage to say I wasn't sure about our future together. I had covered over my doubts with expressions of my love for her. The process of her return was a slow one. We would talk on the phone and I would try not to pressure her. Once we got together in Little Italy. Afterward she returned to the Bowery loft with me but after some minutes she grew distressed. I did not try to keep her there but let her go. Her associations with the place were still too painful. When, some weeks later, she returned to stay, I proposed that we tie the knot. ("To get out of a hole, some people dig a deeper hole." This Marg said to me on the eve of my marriage.) The bus to Key West made local stops along Route 1. Some of the passengers were rowdy in a white Southern trash way. An empty whiskey bottle rolled along the aisle. One of the rough stuffs fell off the bus backward when the door opened and broke his head against a cement pylon. There were *peals* of laughter from his friends. Ahead the road shimmered in the strong heat. We stayed at a rooming house on Duval Street owned by a Cuban woman with bad legs. There was trauma inlaid in her pudge, a fearful response to this new land in which she was living. She was remarkable in that she had done the backstroke from Cuba to get here. The view from our room was of a used car lot. We watched the plastic pennants snapping in the breeze. I was reading Graham Greene--*The Comedians*, *The Third Man*, *Our Man in Havana*--and trying not to drink. I thought that if I went to bed with the

novels of Mr. Graham Greene I would not have to drink. (Some years before, S.L., I had thought that the novels of Franz Kafka would do the same thing for me.) By the third night I was downing scotch on the rocks in Sloppy Joe's, and by the end of the first week I was drinking bourbon out of a bottle on the street, proud of the money I was saving by staying out of the bar. Under a weeping willow I stood, palmetto bugs underfoot. I slugged the bourbon down, while troopers, their belts heavy with weaponry and gadgets, massed to drive the hippie infestation into the Gulf of Mexico, a New Year's rite, it was later explained to me. Suddenly, there were tear gas canisters at my feet hissing fumes that stung my eyes. S.L., I could think of only one thing--the sheer inconvenience of having my drinking interrupted in such a manner. On returning to New York we married. I took the afternoon off to go down to City Hall, and in my bag carried a manuscript entitled *How to Escape a Terrible Marriage*, by Dr. Carl Wattersly, Ph.D., a book that advised you not to let your spouse hold the atom bomb of suicide over your head as a deterrent, a book that told you to get up and go when the time had come, to not delay one second. Julia was waiting for me in the marble lobby of a building with granite masonry that housed the marriage bureau. Switch of switches, she had alcohol on her breath, she who never drank. Did she feel that she was dying, that she was selling herself out, she who had all those years ago stated frequently her need to live alone, forever and ever, and when, through my relentless insistence, we did begin living together, had me sign a contract committing me to respecting her independence of thought and action. How else to explain the alcohol, except to guess it lessened the pain of self-

betrayal? A man sped by, the heels of his cordovan shoes slapping the tired marble, his dark avaricious eyes merry with his own life's success, a man who wanted nothing more than to be this town's next mayor, and whose name is tiresomely found in the *New York Post* with *Jr.* trailing after it. He zoned in on Julia and Julia zoned in on him. What I'm talking about, S.L., is sex communication at a lightning speed. Yes yes, he had an appointment in officialdom, but it was hold the horses, Harry, when their eyes met. For he was in spirit if not in flesh strong in resemblance to the man who held first place in Julia's heart and mind and love box, a Jewish prince from the city of Boston, where she had gone to school, a man who had almost destroyed her when finally she grew heedless of the danger and let him have his way between her legs, a temporary shiksa haven on his wandering path. S.L., this you must know. Right there in front of us she groped him and he groped her, and they did the writhing thing to completion before he was on his way. My mother arrived alone. A son cannot get married without his mother present. That had been my thought. The nuptial thing was an opportunity to amend an old wrong, for I had been the son who denied his mother on the city streets, who treated her like dirt, as she often said. I was sixteen. I was with a boy from high school, a boy whose parents had academic degrees covering the walls. He was a boy with a lacerating tongue, and when he said, as my mother walked by and gave me a wave, "Is that your mother?" I could only say no, for I was sixteen and she was sixty, old at the time of my birth and getting older and older. "Man, where did she get those shoes, and what are those rubber stockings on her legs?" He laughed, noting the men's

shoes and support stockings she wore for her varicose veins. Though she had left behind Hannah and the rest to attend the wedding, she did have the light box apparatus, and it was turned up very high for Julia's parents to see. It was a civil ceremony, not the kind my mother would have chosen for me, and I looked blankly at the clerk, a man in a cheap suit, when he asked me for the ring. Julia's mother expressed disgust, but then offered the ring off her own finger. The oversight, of course, stayed with me, and in the next few years, now and then, I thought the proper thing to do would be to give her a ring, but could never summon the will to follow through. Julia's parents had been married in a New England church. Her mother had tossed the bouquet. They had been showered with rice. Her parents' parents were all present. There had been a reception. This was in another time, the buttoned-down time that came before the let-it-all-hang-out time in the history of time that I am able to present to you. All you need to know, S.L., is that it was a tough afternoon, that shame was present every minute, that Julia's father's words to me afterward, "Your mother has tremendous character," caused me to weep, for I had been thinking no such thing about her, only that she was an embarrassment to me. It had taken another to confer value in my eyes on my own mother. Don't get your phony righteousness going on me, S.L. God does not see these blemishes. He wants only for me to recognize, in this moment, his endless love for me, and for me to extend this moment of awareness into eternity. There are no flames of hell, there is no endless punishment, there is only the source which my mind, because of its poor discipline, allows me to believe that I have left. Marg had me write copy for him.

He had me edit his authors' manuscripts. He had me look after the trafficking. I had no real office clothes, only cheap Levi's and work shirts, and saw myself as without ambition to rise higher on the grid. I left at five p.m. and headed for the liquor supermarket down on Astor Place. Always there was a debate in my mind, whether to get off the subway at Astor Place or continue on to Bleecker Street, my home stop. The liquor supermarket called me more strongly, and so I always arrived home with my night's supply. I could not do the monogamy thing, S.L. That is just the way it was. The marriage was license for me to see other women. I went drunk down to Brooklyn to see Julia's best friend. I slept with another woman friend of hers. The exclusivity, the permanence, of the marriage bed was too frightening. I needed to find others. On a Saturday night I returned home from a failed attempt to rendezvous with one of Julia's girlfriends and felt trapped in the loft and unable to breathe. I was sure I was dying. We had phones on either end of the loft, and on the wall above one of them I had written Beloved's number, having met her two years before through a mutual friend. At the time I had been driving a cab. The combination of alcohol and drugs had undone me. I was losing my mind, becoming dangerous to Julia and myself, and began seeing a psychotherapist, Dr. Merk, who told me to "feed the face." I hadn't worked in the two years since the family business had collapsed, and the embezzled funds that I had lived on since then were dwindling. Thus the cab job. It was all I could do, S.L. I didn't feel fit to be among people in an office situation. This mutual friend insisted I come to dinner to meet this dazzling couple. I could not take my eyes off Beloved. To this day I remember the green top and the

black skirt she wore. The curly black hair, the sparkling eyes, the sensual mouth, the slender perfect body. She was already an accomplished artist living a life of wealth in a West Village townhouse. Drinks in the garden, dinner at an expensive French restaurant. Peter, her husband, became rude behind his drinking. He suggested that I had pimples on my ass. On the way to the restaurant, he had lifted a squash from a vegetable stand and placed it against his fly. Beloved talked of wanting to kill herself. Peter said he would follow suit should she do it. His words seemed insincere. I didn't understand. After each round of drinks I said I would go. I left feeling devastated by this chance encounter. I was full of desire. I wanted Beloved. I wanted her life. I wanted her gifts. I was in total turmoil. She had left the door open to me to call her for possible reading assignments for a publisher who sent her books, but I was too daunted by the gulf between us--her wealth, my poverty, her success, my failure. And then of course there was her husband. As available as she looked, she wouldn't go outside the marriage. So the number remained on the wall, without a name attached, until the night a couple of years later, the night I came home and couldn't breathe, and called her. "Sure. Would you like to come over now?" she said. It was as easy as that. The townhouse was gone. The building I stood in front of had a peeling facade and a rusted front gate. She was not living in squalor but in disarray, books stacked everywhere, the grand piano strewn with sheet music and unopened mail. And yet there was a quality to that apartment—she gave it that quality. The bars were hard for me to be in now, because I drank too much and too fast, and the women seemed out of reach. And yet, at the

height of need, on a wild chance, a door had swung open. Things like this didn't happen to me. Desperation was never relieved. It just snowballed. And yet here I was and on a Saturday night. I had brought along two things with me: a story and a stick of grass. Both were instruments of seduction, of course, and before she had read half the pages I touched her and we went to bed. I felt this jolt of power. It had something to do with her fear and insecurity. In the sexual arena I was in control, the leader, and she was a willing follower. S.L., it was the best sexual experience I had ever had. Life was not what it seemed from the outside, S.L. The next year I was to work for a man who was legendary in book publishing for his editorial acumen as well as the books that he himself had written. I was told by the personnel director to take several of his books from the library and read them. The biographical copy on the back flap stated that the man lived with his wife and three children and was the author of 25 books. The reality was that he had a room in a seedy Times Square hotel, that his wife was divorcing him, that he had a drinking problem and expensive drug habit and couldn't do his job, and that the blimpy young black man in hot pants who arrived at the office each day with a ghetto blaster on his shoulder was not a messenger but his lover. The reality was that shortly after my employment he was found dead in his hotel room of a heart attack. And the reality of Beloved's life was that her husband Peter was gone--he had left her for a male lover the year before. Peter was living the good life with her money. She was unable to stand up to him, she said. She needed him, she said. The thought of life without him was unbearable, she said. He came to see her once a week, she said, in his

defense. Beloved was the first woman not to reproach me about my drinking, S.L. She didn't quite match me glass for glass, but she made an effort to keep up and offered no protest when I asked for more. (You have to understand the fear that comes over me when I write about these matters--when I touch on the subject of Beloved--the fear that I am being consigned to the cold place, the place of death, reserved for those who abandon in order to die, reserved for those who betray in order to die. There are other things to talk about, other experiences to relate. Why this? What is the door I imagine anyway but some silly contrivance of my mind that pertains to nothing real. Mommy calls me back, those times long ago, on the subway each morning, the urge, as tears filled my eyes, to get off at the next stop and rush home and take care of her, for what would she do without me but die, and what would I do without her but die? And is this what I must do for Beloved, get off this subway which is my writing and rush to her so she doesn't die? Stand alert, S.L., for I am talking to you.) In this time of my affair (hah) with Beloved I wrote my mother, my real mother, that is, letters. Were they influenced by the opening line of Beckett's *Molloy*, the most influential line I had ever read, for it opened up to me the world of impotence, a line that read "I am in my mother's house. It is I who live there now"? I wrote her in this way: "Mother, I am on Dead Man's Hill, just a short walk from the building. I have gone there with my bottle. I waited until the snows were knee-deep, snow drifts approximating the ones in which you were sent out to find your father by your mother. I am lying face down in the snow, for I want nothing more than to be your obedient son and do all the things you would have me do, in the way that

you would have me do them. I hope and pray that I am following your dictate to the letter. I know it is your heart's desire to come for me, as you did in the days of old back in Sweden--to find the bottle and to smash the bottle against the rocks and then to take your father in from the cold so he doesn't die of frostbite. I know you'll be on your best behavior. I know you won't stall me or be deliberately distracted, the way you sometimes could be when I was younger. I have every confidence that you can do this thing." I began to visit Beloved after work. I would go directly from my job with Mr. Marg and the publishing company to her West Fourth Street apartment. She was always willing to have me. I said to her, "I don't go to the bars anymore." She said, "Of course you don't. I'm your bar." I drank her vodka tonics in great quantities and felt a sense of my own power, the power Dr. Randolph says I have to claim for my own. "Stand behind your penis," Dr. Randolph commands. "Stand behind it." In just that way does Dr. Randolph tell me what to do. Beloved showed interest in me. She "loved" our sex life. It was "thrilling." She was amazed that I could hold a job and find time to write as well. She was impressed with the story I had shown her. (Again I say it, S.L. Death will come to me, the cold place. I will lose her for writing this. That is my fear). Sometimes I would stay past midnight. Starving, I'd eat a souvlaki on the run gotten from the Greeks on MacDougal Street and arrive home with a story about calamitous events at work. Marg was in serious, serious trouble, earth-shaking events too traumatic to discuss were taking place back at the office, no, no, please, Julia, I beg of you, if my health means anything to you, don't press me about the matter. Just leave me the hell alone. Julia was not having a good

time. She was eating quantities of shrink pills and had been for some time now. She was not the same person. There had been a breakdown, followed by increasing dysfunction in the world and an inability to move forward with her art career. It is important for me to say that Beloved, to my eyes, was as light as Julia was dark. Beloved was as open to people as Julia was suspicious. Beloved accepted motherhood while Julia scorned pregnant women and loathed babies. Julia grew increasingly worried, for I continued the pattern of arriving home late and shrieking about some new crisis in the life of Marg that kept me out to all hours. I had found someone in Beloved who placed no restrictions on me, someone who lit me up, and I had no choice but to run to her, for life was impossibly drab without her. Beloved was a gifted artist. Still in her twenties, she had had a one-person show at a prestigious SoHo gallery. Adoration societies had formed around her. The mutual friend who had introduced me to Beloved a couple of years before was having a party. Wake up, S.L. We are still where we are in time. She had invited Beloved, not knowing of my involvement with her, and invited Julia and me as well. Beloved and I laughed, savoring the fact that we knew something that this mutual friend did not know, this friend who felt cheated because her family had withheld her inheritance and who wrote poetry to rock and roll music, Rod Stewart being her god. "Maggie" was a particular favorite. She got some good poems out of listening to that one, she said. Beloved saw danger in bringing my wife and her together at this friend's party. The danger excited her. For myself I had no seeming reason for doing this thing other than wanting to be next to Beloved. Before arriving I suggested to Julia

that we stop off at the White Horse Tavern on Hudson Street for a drink. "Just to loosen up. I'll have just one," I said. It was a delicious drink. The bartender was from Ireland. Bull-necked and green-eyed and all in black, he spoke with a brogue. Because of the skill with which he poured, because of his appearance, because of the brogue-drenched words that came from his thin-lipped mouth, it was important to have a second drink. I arrived at the party with four of the specially poured drinks in me just in time to hear "Maggie" and to see our mutual friend in the frenzied act of writing one of her poems. She also played a lot of Fleetwood Mac, and had gotten a lot of good poems out of them, too, she said. Julia wore a denim skirt and a dark top. She would no longer allow herself bright colors, for she was trying to take attention away from her body, which had thickened because of the steady diet of shrink pills and the Pepperidge Farm cookies she so loved to eat while watching Bette Davis movies and *The Rockford Files* on the second-hand TV we had bought after considerable debate, for we had concern about its possible corrupting influence on our lives. Beloved was slender and stylish. She wore a sleeveless black dress and a silver necklace, and stood smiling against a wall. Because I had left the Irish bartender behind I had to pour my own drinks, which I was entitled to since this was a party and you went to parties so you could feel happy, and drinking and happiness went together. Having proved that our secret could be kept, it was now time to introduce Julia and Beloved to each other, and so I brought them together and allowed them to chat between themselves while I went off to refresh my drink and engage socially a third woman, very attractive. After the proper period of small

talk, I made the suggestion that we continue the party up on the roof, just the two of us. The roof was a place where things could happen, I suggested, a place where we could become more familiar with each other, thinking how well I was covering my tracks by engaging this third party while Julia and Beloved continued their little interaction. It was at this point, I have to guess, that my words grew strange and caused the woman's eyes to show fear and led her to back off from me and to look elsewhere for conversation.

I had no choice, because of this abandonment, but to refresh my drink strongly and to make my way back to Beloved and Julia and consolidate what I had, so that I was not in danger of losing that as well. I did not ask either of them to go up to the roof. Instead I suggested that we leave the party altogether and get some air. Out on the street I took them by the hand and we began to run. We ran most gaily. That is the last I remember, S.L., this running most gaily. In the morning I woke in a bed that was not my own. Julia was lying beside me. The bed was Beloved's bed and the room was Beloved's room and across this room of Beloved's was a radiator. I gave the valve of the radiator my full attention but I could not make myself into the valve or any other inanimate object in this room of Beloved's. "Bastard." Julie said, repeating the word before also saying, "You've been here before. You went like a homing pigeon for the bed." S.L., I am here to report that the valve did no buffering whatsoever. I maintained my innocence, but over morning coffee the truth was revealed, when Beloved's daughter Ariadne, now three, spoke my name on seeing me. Julia and I left and sat in Washington Square Park. An old man was feeding the pigeons, and I envied his

harmlessness, particularly when Julia began to cry her bitter tears and to say, through those tears, "You betrayed me. You betrayed me." Where should such monstrosity as mine put itself, except behind a smile, I thought, as I trailed after her on the depressing path toward home, but not before going back to the very old man and saying, not once but twice, "You have the knack for harmlessness, and that places you in the realm of the truly fortunate." Julia was not stable to begin with, and the stuff with Beloved added to her undoing. I would speak Julia's name, and she would say, "You were going to call me by her name, weren't you? Admit that this is true." It frightened me when a woman could see into my mind in this way. It reminded me of my mother and her special abilities in the long ago. "I love you," I said to Julia. "You love shit," Julia said to me. I tried to break off with Beloved after the party debacle. Instead of going directly to see her after work, I would go home and drink, but after a bottle of wine I would be sprinting westward to her place, having shouted to Julia, "Jesus, I need some air. I'll be back shortly." These were my very words to Julia time after time, S.L.

Julia's therapist, the world-famous Dr. Banko, called me to him. He wanted a full and lucid explanation of the situation that was causing Julia so much distress. He asked me point blank if I was seeing another woman. I hesitated, for it seemed like death for me to talk about these things, but finally I nodded yes and Julia exploded in tears. "You don't know how much I loved you," she cried bitterly, and Dr. Banko looked at me with full sternness in his eyes. "I'm sorry," I said. "You don't sound sorry," Dr. Banko said to me. "I am sorry," I said back to him, but he had something more to say to me on the subject of sorry, quite

specifically, "Sorry be damned. You should get down on your hands and knees and beg, beg, beg for forgiveness." Because he had been trying to put her together for all these years. He had bought many things for himself with the money she gave him and it was only human to want good results for her. And he was not getting the good results. He was getting someone who was falling apart, someone who had to stay indoors because the outdoors was not being good to her. But the laughing thing was in me, S.L., and it was laughing loud in spite of my solemnity. It was laughing in the face of Julia's outraged and world-famous therapist. I thought of what it was like when I was a boy and my mother caught me with my hand in her pocketbook, and then and there, with all the earnestness that she could muster, urged me to promise never, ever to do such a thing again, and I could see from the fear in her eyes that she knew it was not in her power to stop me, that not all the fumbling at the controls of her light box to achieve maximum brightness could change my course, for I was showing her that she could not exercise permanent and total control over me, her son. The laughing thing that I showed world-famous and fuming Dr. Banko was the same thing I had shown my mother all those years ago. Do not try to control me, do not try to govern me, I am a nation all to myself, is what I was saying, S.L. There is more to say on this matter, S.L.--there is always more crap to say on these matters, but what you need to know is that I tried. I tried very hard to stay in the barn. I broke off with Beloved for the simple reason that I could not bear the conflict anymore, for the simple reason that it was necessary to do before I got in too deep and couldn't get out, for the simple reason that _____ . I called Beloved

from a phone booth at a gas station on the Bowery and told her of my resolve. Bums were filling their mouths with gasoline from the unattended pumps and cute little boys put matches to the bums' mouths and set them on fire. The stench was terrible and the rain did nothing to put out the flames that burned the bodies from the inside out. I did not allow myself to be distracted from my business with Beloved, who agreed with my decision, and so I returned to the loft relieved that the termination of the affair had come to pass, that my life was in order again, and with no wracking pain to speak of. I lived in a state of relative quietude. It was just me and the bottle, a giant bottle that rose to the ceiling. In order to get a taste, I had to climb in the mouth of it, and it was only my good fortune that it came with a ladder that allowed me to climb out of it, for otherwise I would have drowned. Julia did not talk to me about the space the bottle took up. She had no words for me, except to say that I had killed her, that, appearances notwithstanding, she was dead. One afternoon in this time I went for the food of the Chinese people in Chinatown. A Chinese waiter who favored most of all things in America OTB and Johnny Walker Black Label took my order, standing in front of me in a filthy blue smock that had last year's duck sauce on it. The name of the restaurant was the Happy Palace, and no tears were being shed at any of the tables, for they were occupied entirely by Chinese people who were all laughing in tremendous bursts of gaiety that suited their sunny, industrious personalities. I have always felt decidedly (yes, S.L., decidedly) safe among the Chinese people, whether they are laughing or not. And many many times had Julia and I eaten their food, there at those very same tables, when we were living

in the neighborhood. But now I was there as a resident not of Chinatown but of the Bowery, and it was a Saturday afternoon, and a feeling was coming over me that I had done something with my morning that I could not recall, something barely at the edge of my consciousness. I had the most implausible idea that without any memory of the event, I had been to see Beloved that morning, something that just couldn't be, and to prove that my mind was deceiving and torturing me I called Beloved from a phone not far from the giant woks in the open kitchen of the Chinese people. Her silky voice. My anxious question. Her quick, emphatic response. "Not only were you here, but you were outrageous." I got off the phone and began to cry. I was crying because I wanted to stay away, and I hadn't been able to. Under the power of alcohol I had gone over there once again, and now I would have to start the process of separation from Beloved all over again, and couldn't be sure of success. I knew for that moment my life was out of control. However, within a week I was at a phone booth calling Beloved to tell her I was on my way to see her again. She said, "No, don't do that. I've met someone else. I picked him up and took him home. He's great." I reeled around the streets of lower Manhattan before returning to the loft to climb back in the bottle, stunned by the blow she had given me. She had severed our tie with an ax. It was a clear message to stay away unless I wanted more pain. With the exception of a few calls--each time she said "He's great, he's just great"--I did just that. Not so long afterward I came to the rooms of the men and women who walk the sober path, some of them able to afford the food of the Chinese people, some of them not. I sat among these people in church basements and in other

spaces. Beloved had a life of glitter and I had a life among people trying to reclaim their broken lives. I listened to their stories. I listened and listened and listened, and began to hear my own. Some of the women in these rooms had formed huggy-kissy brigades. They ran to the men and hugged and smooched them and pressed them to their flesh. They could not get enough of this activity. I looked at the men with scorn, as if they had a secondary addiction to the flesh of women. I imagined these women trying to give me the same treatment and saw myself pushing them away. I told myself I was not turning away from love but from dependence, and recognized dimly the domination women had had over me my whole life, starting with my mother. I saw that what I lacked and needed was separateness. I got to live my dream, S.L. That is all you need to know. One day, after being with the men who could not afford the food of the Chinese people but who walked with God, after being with them for two and a half years, Julia and I were released from each other. I was walking home from work. At Twenty-fourth street, near Madison Square Park, the awareness came over me that I could leave my marriage. In this sober time I had been praying on my knees for guidance, not knowing whether to stay or go, but at the same time understanding that the mind is a finite thing, S.L., that I could not think my way out of the marriage, S.L., or into staying in it, S.L. Years before, back in high school, I had had a similar experience in regard to my mother, the realization one day as I was *also walking home* that I could be away from her. That evening I spoke with my mentor, who said we don't leave a marriage on the basis of a sudden revelation. Julia was not working in this time. She had taken early

retirement, retirement from life and the human race. The loft was her world. Her last job had been in the men's shirts department of Gimbels on East Eighty-sixth street, a store that had a high volume of space in it, as anyone who ever patronized it will attest, a store without the specific density of genuine material goods. At this preposterous store she felt increasingly harassed and despised by the female staff, mainly young black women who *cracked their gum* and maintained an exclusionary patter. Her routine was, as I have said, to stay up late watching TV on the little black and white set that rested on the living room carpet while devouring those devastatingly delicious cookies that she bought at the deli on the Bowery where I used to buy my beer, a place patronized by the residents of the men's shelter on East Third Street, with a plexiglass shield separating the cashier from the customer, and where the staff carried guns and machetes, and where the commodities were, in addition to beer, potato chips, and cigarettes and, yes, the unreasonably good cookies so favored by Julia, absolutely the only woman ever to set foot in the place. When I left in the morning she would be asleep. Around noon she would rise, make herself some breakfast, and get to work. Once or twice a week she saw the incredible Dr. Banko. This was her life, S.L., and about it you should know. She had given up painting for doing monoprints. By this time I was in the children's books department of the company, and I set up a review of her portfolio with the art director. They were horrified by the darkness of her work. I didn't know who I hated more, them for their saccharine tastes, or Julia for not being able to meet their needs. Often she would weep bitterly. For a year or so she was obsessed

with her hair. A recurrent nightmare was that she was going bald. She had the dream so often that I too began to dream the same thing. *She was in total distress.* At seventeen she had had beautiful blond curly hair all down her back. S.L., she turned men's heads. Adoration societies were established. At age thirty her hair had thinned. It was straw-like and without luster. She consulted a dermatologist, who could not entirely allay her fears. He gave her pills. Dr. Banko gave her pills, too, pills like Mellaril and Tofranil and Thorazine and Artane and Haldol, pills intended to seal her mind from the waves of psychosis that would otherwise wash over her. She had begun seeing Dr. Banko years before, after her first breakdown. He was a barrel-chested man who believed in the efficacy of therapy. It had freed him from a career as a coroner, a position he had taken because he felt he could not relate to those who were still living. S.L., he had sterling qualities. He had a *Columbia degree*. He had an impressive *Fifth Avenue practice*. He had a *wife and two children* back in *Westchester*. Several times I had called him, demanding that he make Julia better. He was not my friend, S.L., but I was relieved that Julia had him to talk to. It is not everybody who has Columbia-ness, S.L. It is not everybody who has that kind of brand-name goods. I stress to you that *this is how I felt at the time*. Understand it that way only. Please, please. I wanted a new life. Dr. Merk, my own therapist (who had Harvard-ness) said as much. Back in the year of the tall ships (facts always provide the necessary structure, S.L.) I had lost control of my mind, for my thoughts were wacko. For two years I had been taking diet pills and drinking compulsively. One day I woke up with knife fantasies. I saw myself stabbing

Julia to death. The mental images of violence became constant. Through Dr. Banko I began seeing Dr. Merk, who got me off the pills. He would see whether employment would curb my drinking. He said the jury was still out whether or not I was alcoholic. Three years later the jury came back with a verdict. He ordered me into the rooms of the people who walk the sober path, for over the 1978 holiday season I had called, while intoxicated, and threatened to put a bullet in his brain. Those were my words to him. "I'm going to put a bullet in your brain," I shouted into his answering machine. I added that I was an assassin par excellence, that I had killed many fathers in this great land, and more were soon to fall before my wrath. Sober the next day I offered the excuse that I had been distressed, that I had wanted a new typewriter but couldn't afford one. "You don't need a new typewriter. You need a new life." Dr. Merk hissed these words at me, with all the Harvard dryness that was in him.

It was odd. When I first began to drink I had fears about alcohol, but at the end I didn't have a clue that there was a problem. Not so odd, as it turned out, for there were many like me. I tried to be good, that is accurate to say, now that I had the monkey of drinking off my back. Years before, at the onset of active alcoholism, I had been bound for Newark, New Jersey, on a public bus. There was to be an orientation at the law school. By this time I had become an embezzler of money from the family business to fund a lifestyle built around writing, and as the bus emerged from the Holland Tunnel I remember a sense of exhilaration coming over me, a feeling that I could confront the lie my life had become, that I could go on to be a lawyer and a good person to Julia and my

mother. I could be a success as a man and as a son, I probably thought. But I fell into fear and despair and never made it to the orientation. There had been that one moment of sunlight in which I was able to have a new identity before the old one reclaimed me. But now I have that newfound sense of power every day. In some way I seemed to be growing younger since being released from alcohol. Drinking had taken up six, eight, ten hours of each day, and now I had the full day back. Freed from the bottle, I could be out in the city at night. I had an opportunity for the new life that Dr. Merk had mentioned, and I did not know if it included Julia. The separation didn't happen that night. In fact, I forgot about the epiphany on Twenty-fourth Street, though I did not discount it. About a month later we had a fight, precipitated by my rage. I had come home and called her a bum, full of the self-righteous anger that sobriety had not drained me of. It was a stinging word, a horrifying word that penetrated. She recoiled, as if I had struck her with my fist. The word seemed to take her breath away. "What did you say?" she finally gasped. I repeated the word. Suddenly, rage replaced the fear in her. She took a plate from the dish rack and threw it at me. Then she took another, and another. When these were used up, she went to the glasses and the cups. I was pinned in a corner. Some of them struck me. Most of them missed. When her supply was depleted, she took a carving knife from the drawer. "Where do you want it, skinny dickless fag? Up your ass? Between your ribs? Across your jugular? In your back?" Slowly she pulled back from the edge. That night I slept on the carpet and she in the bed. It was our last night under the same roof after ten years of living together. Though I had not seen Beloved in those first sober

years she had been an invisible presence with Julia and me. I had betrayed Julia before, most woundingly, by sleeping with her youngest sister, her biggest rival, but no one had threatened her as much as Beloved. When she saw Beloved at that party and then back at Beloved's apartment she was face-to-face with someone she had to consider her equal, or more than her equal--someone poised, beautiful, and talented, for some of Beloved's paintings were there to be seen. She didn't know that Beloved had taken another lover. All she knew was that I had been with her. I never mentioned Beloved's name, but Julia would. "Why don't you go live with her?" she would scream at me. Or, "I know you're going to leave me for her," she would say, words to which I would not respond, while taking secret pleasure in them, for she was acknowledging my success, my ability to have in my life a beautiful, talented woman. I can't explain it, S.L., but Beloved remained in my mind as a kind of sunlight. I thought of her and felt happy, and she remained the object in my masturbatory fantasies. When the men in the plaid shirts called me to them (yes, soon I will stop, and talk of them in a normal way, with all the respect due them), I could no longer go to Beloved. A few times I called her; the man she had taken up with was no longer in her life. He had been a drunken oaf, and she was relieved that he was gone. In fact, she had thrown away her diaphragm. I tried to go to her—after all, she lived just a few blocks from my loft—but once out on the street my feet would take me to a meeting of the men in the plaid shirts. Some force field was keeping me away from her, so it seemed, the fear that re-involvement with her might cost me my sobriety. To be honest, I saw her once in this time. I had gone down to Canal

Street to buy a chair--I was constantly fussing, obsessing over my typewriter and desk and other writing accessories, trying to get things right in my environment so I could settle down, and on the way home called on her. She was at her new address by now; on Mercer Street in SoHo, in a fifth floor walkup loft, white and spacious. I had enough of myself to see her in this time, but nothing happened. I did not touch her and she did not touch me. That night I went trembling to a meeting. "Do you want your marriage?" the man who was to be my mentor asked. "Yes," I said. "Then give it 110 percent." Five minutes later I said, "I don't really know if I want my marriage." "Just continue to give yourself to God, and the things that are meant to be in your life will be in your life, and the things that aren't will fall away," the man said. I didn't speak with Beloved again until some months later, when I was in the hospital with a back injury, that I had willed to happen, S.L., for I was tired of my life and the weight that was on it. There was a transit strike that spring, and I began riding my 10-speed bike to work. I began to ride like the powerless brothers in need of expressing themselves on the wide fashionable avenues of this city, brothers who rode naked with their penises painted striking day glo colors, some of them hurtling over buses, some of them sliding naked under those same buses, some of them simply running naked with their bicycles over their heads, packages strapped to their backs. I began to ride too in this intentionally expressive way, seeking the attention of America's finest women while competing with the buses and trucks and rampaging taxis of this city, and after a while found myself lost in drama, lost in the fantasy of an accident that laid me low. For some months I rode without incident, and then one

night I was struck by a car on in the West Village. Though I'd been hugging the curb the driver crunched me from behind. The bike lay on its side, the back wheel crumpled and the front wheel turning slowly. I was on all fours, unable to get up. The driver, a black man, stayed behind the wheel of his large car. His family was with him. Julia accused him of purposely running me down. His face was a mask of sullen impassivity. I had this idea that were it not for his family he would have kept going. Julia burst into tears in the ambulance. Perhaps she felt guilty. Perhaps it was just fear. I could not say. A few months before she had also begun to cry, over our usual pasta dinner. "I don't deserve this," she cried. Did she mean my being sober? Did she mean being treated better? Beloved had a good quality press, and I had determined after getting sober that Julia should have the same piece of equipment, and so had bought a press for her on the layaway plan. She didn't tell me why she was crying, I only saw that she was, at that oak gateleg table where I had done my drinking for many years. And now, in the ambulance, she was in tears again. Though I had been imagining this accident, I now feared paralysis. Still, there was relief in being taken care of by the EMS people. There was relief in being given a hospital bed. There was relief in not having to write jacket copy for a company that was paying me \$12,000 a year, a salary no one can live on easily. All I mean to tell you, S.L., is that in this time I did reach out to Beloved and told her as a way of recommending myself to her thoughts that I had broken my back, a piece of information that she did record in the course of getting on with her life. It is in this

time that I did an accounting of my life, though my disease did storm, and this is what I wrote, for the ears of God and one other:

--That I resented God for telling me to stand on the sidelines of life wearing a hair shirt and for instructing me to jeer at those on the road of material success and to promise them an everlasting life in hell for the sinfulness of their ways.

--That I resented my father for being from the land of hard smacks.

--That I resented my sister Hannah for also being from the land of hard smacks.

--That I resented my sisters Naomi and Rachel for scorching me with their fiery tongues and also being from the land of hard smacks.

--That I resented my youngest sister Vera for siccing my father on me and for beating me in the game of life.

--That I had hidden Vera's schoolbooks back in high school so that she wouldn't surpass me.

--That I had gone to the men with the big things when I was quite young so that they would do the things I wanted to have done to me.

--That I had slept with the younger sister of Julia and tried to sleep with her older sister.

--That I was afraid to be on my own.

--That I had been rejected by the U.S. Army on physical and mental grounds.

--That I feared if I gave myself up to God I would have to give up my ambition.

So that when I went back to Beloved as a sober person a couple of years later, the past was not in me as it had been. I could look back on the person I had

been with some compassion and understanding and self-forgiveness. And I could go to her in a no longer attacking way. While her daughter slept we made love in the chaotic apartment. S.L. I want to say to you that I went to her with sunlight in my heart as I skipped over the dark SoHo streets, for after years of bondage I was free. I was not sprinting to her West Fourth Street apartment tanked up, S.L. I was not three sheets to the wind, S.L. I was not sozzled, S.L. I was sober. On these dark streets the men of power were cruising in stretch limos seeking garter-belted anorexic artist women to fill the holes in their souls. This I know for a fact, S.L., for I interviewed them, each and every one, on any given night, before continuing my journey up, up, up that mountain of stairs to the top floor, where she stood waiting, she of the most beautiful kind, she who was top echelon, she who was 99th percentile, she who was the product of German Jewish and American Jewish genius genes For the galleries of SoHo had come to claim her, as the galleries of Madison Avenue at 57th Street had claimed her, for they had only to see her to know they had to have her. I was the luckiest man alive, S.L., for I had been freed, freed, from my penance with Julia to linger between the legs of an artist goddess-do-with-me-what-you-will woman, a woman who gave me the sense of power that had been denied me in a hamstrung life. A woman who did say in the nighttime hours, "Oh, but you'll go back to her, just like that last time. This is only temporary," saying this with not a look of sadness but a smile on her face, I not knowing that she had been set up from childhood to believe she would be used and discarded. Julia was in the dark place. I had fears for her ability to survive, remembering her dead younger sister

Lenore, *with whom I had fooled around*, and worrying that she too had the suicide gene. Images of blood-splattered walls assailed me. But I had made a decision. I wouldn't stay with a woman just because I was afraid that leaving would be the death of her. Besides, besides, she had left me as much as I had left her. She was now in Brooklyn seeing a man with a ponytail, a man who lived for his art. A female friend of Julia's whom I had tried to sleep with had introduced her to this man, who wore a curator's hat as well as his art hat, a man who jumped up and down—yes, he literally jumped up and down, as much as his forty-five-year-old body would permit—over her work. "You do good art. You do good art." Many, many times he said this, till she did not know what the matter with him was, and *feared for his sanity*, but he calmed down sufficient to declare that he wanted to put her in his show, that he was strong for her art, and so I knew that in accepting her art he was accepting her, that they were accepting each other, and it came to pass in this way, for he had at her in the most intense way, but now it was coming to an end, the thing was burning itself out. Now she was in Phase 2, the despair. She had gone to her parents' country estate, loaded up on sleeping pills, jumped in the family jeep, and came close to committing vehicular mayhem on the road, for she passed out and crashed through the front of a store, demolishing the wall and scattering two-*two*--large families on a shop-till-you-drop outing. For which she was placed in an institution in a nearby town. Her mother, who hated me as the whole family hated me for the things I had done--for drinking their whiskey and sleeping with or trying to sleep with the other three daughters, for abusing them verbally, for borrowing

their money without paying it back and *showing no gratitude*--called me in a state of distress. She saw the poorhouse looming, for this institution was charging three thousand dollars a day--*a day*--and where on earth were they to get that kind of money? Could I, was there any way, that my insurance might cover this whopping bill their daughter was running up? And here she began to cry, because of the threat her daughter's institutionalization posed to their way of life and because her world might be coming undone, the world of privilege, of charge accounts and trips to Europe and checks that covered everything and second homes and endless leisure. She was afraid all that was going down the drain because of the world of money-guzzling therapists and the money-guzzling institutions they were in cahoots with. I got repellent with this woman, who once had tried to pimp Julia off on a Frenchman in Paris so her daughter could experience French love the way that she, her mother, had experienced French love. I got repellent by saying "We'll see. We'll just have to see about this little request of yours," and then sucking on my eyeteeth, something to this point I had never ever inflicted on anyone but was now doing with quite noisy success, enough to elicit *ire* from her along the lines of "You skinny alcoholic failure. Your life will never amount to anything. *Anything*. Do you hear me, you insane drunk?" S.L., I felt ashamed, ashamed at the poverty of my life, that they, Julia's parents, had to come to me about this matter because I, even though separated from Julia who had left me for another man, a man who did art and wore his remaining hair in a ponytail, did not have the necessities to understand, before her mother came to me with this entreaty, that maybe, just maybe, it was within

the realm of my responsibility, husband or not, for I came into this world to save the world, to give it light, that was the meaning of the endless sermons, the endless disappearing words of the pastor at the downtown church where my family worshiped. As a matter of fact, S.L., my insurance did cover the hospitalization. Julia's mother called me in ecstasy to say that the insurance people were picking up the whole tab. Her gratitude was boundless. She said she would never call me a bad name again. At this time I was walking the sober path and working for this woman Edna, who prided herself on her ability to do figures. No one did figures better than she. No one had her *figures* more at hand. She knew what it was like to have *read* literature at Oxford. She knew what it was like to have given a scintillating performance on her *O-levels*. I was fuming in this time, because of the injurious effect of Edna's controlling ways on my self-respect. Because she had her figures at hand, because she had her calculations (also at hand), because she had read at Oxford, because of these things she was controlling me to death, she was doling work out to me in a parsimonious way and dealing severe blows to my image as a man. Item #1-- when her secretary, a full-chested young woman in the prime of her beauty, announced to Edna that she was leaving, Edna wept. Edna was bereft, for Edna had been in love with this woman, secretly and profoundly; she had been responding to this woman's strength and beauty. Edna had been seeing for herself a life with a lover, with something more than her cat, someone to go to the opera with her. For a day it was touch and go--I thought Edna thoroughly hated me because why had her love left and broken her heart and I, whom she did not

care for, was still around? S.L., you must understand what it was like to grow up in a house of marauding older sisters, to be pummeled because you have a dingus between your legs. Of this I ask your complete understanding. Item #2-- She once gave me a manuscript without giving it to me, that is, she thought she gave it to me but she really hadn't. I had to go to her and say, "Where is the manuscript?" whereupon she sheepishly pulled it from her drawer—sheepishly is the only word for the expression on her face, S.L.--and turned the slight thing over to me. S.L., her desk was buried beneath manuscripts, while mine was bare, bare, but could she let go gracefully? No, no. That very *sheepishness* was all over her face. Proof, where no more was even needed, that she was not happy to have me around, that I was an object of fear and loathing to her, that I made her skin crawl, that she had withdrawn to the world of children's books with her great *reading skills* and there sitting plop in the safety zone that she had retreated to was a 6'4" skinny alcoholic with an attitude problem, a crazy man who under the influence of alcohol went to the prostitutes of St. Mark's Place, those who had needle marks on their arms and who wore filthy, filthy hot pants. She had me to deal with when her heart's desire was some young thing with luscious breasts and I tried, I tried to accommodate myself to her by simply tiptoeing around. Know this, S.L., for three whole days after the secretary's departure I kept completely out of sight of Edna, or if she should lay eyes on me, what she saw was an entirely penitent, entirely neutered, entirely contrite man, a man who made it his business to keep his voice low, to be smaller than he was. I simply presented myself as being from the land of the innocuous. That is all.

That is all. Do not ever, ever, underestimate the legacy of marauding women on the young, S.L. Simply forbid yourself to do this. Item #3. When I came to her office, when I brought myself there, she tried to speak but nothing came out. She started choking, her eyes brimming with tears, though she was not in the act of eating. There was no food whatsoever to be seen on her cluttered desk, clutter that she was proud of, for it signified the esteem the organization had for her ability to get demanding tasks done with dispatch. As I say, no words came out of her mouth, and though she was starting to gag, though her eyes were brimming with tears, she continued to go through the motions, as if her words were only seconds away. I sought guidance from within for an action, S.L., and came up with this stunning awareness. Of course there was no food on her desk, for she had already eaten it. She had torn into this food ravenously, and now was choking on it. S.L., I yanked her out of her Naughehyde chair, spun her around, began to execute the proper Heimlich maneuver, when, with amazing agility, and the ferocious antagonism of a riled cat, she raked my face with her nails and spit at me. Soundless rage is what she expressed to me, S.L. When it happened a second time that she was struck speechless on my entering her office, I came up with the proper solution. Now that it was obvious that she lost her voice because of my proximity to her, I would talk to her from the threshold of her doorway, and if there was anything to physically transmit, I would simply leave it there at her door. Or if I actually entered her office, I would then begin to step back in tiny, tiny increments even as I spoke, in this way reassuring her that though I was present, I was also in the process of leaving. This technique was a

tremendous success, S.L., for her voice would return and by the time I was backed up to the door she was her old self again, with her figures and calculations and slashing assessments and all the rest. Variations on this technique evolved, S.L. Sometimes I would step back after her every second word, sometimes after whole clusters of words, but the important point to stress is that I was instilling in her absolute security about the backwardness of my motion. S.L., in all these ways, I tried to fade away, to be as unobtrusive as possible. But I was angry, for she was a woman with her foot on my neck. She was purposely keeping me down. She did not want good things for me. She did not want me to be a man. She told me each day that it was my job to saw my penis off, that penises grew back fast so that you had to saw them off every single day, and that if I wasn't up to the job, she would do it for me. I tried to comply, but things would happen, like the time I stood at the door to her office and she lifted her eyes from her figures to see me in the act of rolling up the left sleeve of my shirt. S.L., she looked at my bare forearm with total disgust, as if to say, "You big, stupid, sweaty man, do not ever with your primitive ways enter my office again," she who had read literature and had her figures and her calculations. In this specialized world I found myself, without even knowing who Eeyore was--I had to leave conversations when the name Eeyore came up, for fear my fellow workers would discover this piece of ignorance and jump up and down and shout "A man who works in children's books and doesn't know who Eeyore is. What kind of man is this?" For I had read only comic books as a child and had no memory of children's books except for two, the first of which makes

me weep with the memory, for I sank, sank, into its pages. I was in the living room of my family's apartment--no, the TV was not on, the fifties men were not on the screen punching each other in the mouth and falling to the ground and then getting up and punching the one who had punched them in the mouth--and reading a book with color illustrations, though I remember only one, that of an old Italian man, an organ grinder, and the pet monkey who accompanied him, and the tricorne hat the organ grinder wore, and his grizzled face, and the red-brick wall and the elm tree rising above it, those two place elements so heartbreakingly evocative of the delicate balance between nature and man, between nature and artifact, a balance that is no longer in play. I can read, I can read, I like to read, I like to read, I remember thinking. For once, S.L., I could forget the messy environment as I sank into the book. Edna, knowing I had no feel for picture books, assigned me to the nonfiction list. I did books like *The Story of Your Liver* and *The Story of the Planets*, books that had been signed up before Edna's regime and which did not fully engage her. S.L., the adult books people came strong to the sales conferences. They came with their romance novels. They came with blockbuster thriller novels. They came with main selection of the Book of the Month Club properties. The sales force was present and sober, for they had been locked in their rooms the day before and guards had been stationed at the doors to ensure that they did not slip out and get blotto. The president of the company, *who spoke a second language and had spent much time in France*, was present, and led the convention in his suave way, managing to speak with one hand in his pocket. Edna presented her books and I presented mine. After

the previous sales conference I had made a large stink, for Edna had introduced the whole list by herself, an action that led me to feel like a minion. I had felt humiliated, S.L. In every other department, junior editors presented their own books. It was just more evidence of Edna's controlling ways. Edna had had total hegemony over the books, S.L., but this one thing did not escape my attention. It was a fact that while Edna could do figures and calculations and burn the skin off you with her scalding tongue, she was a tense, tense, public speaker. So that, when at the next conference she gave me a couple of books to do--yes, *The Story of Your Blood*, yes *The Fishes of the Ocean Deep* (text by Oleon Frink, line drawings by Edwina Kolnik)--I did swagger. S.L., I wore a white linen suit and white shoes and red socks and matching suspenders. I showed up with a new do, my hair parted in the middle. S.L., I perorated on *The Story of Your Blood* and *The Fishes of the Ocean Deep*. I held forth, as had the president of the company, with one hand in my pocket. I went on for twice Edna's length of time with eight fewer books. Afterward she smiled, but I smelled resentment rolling off her. At the next conference it was the same thing. I was at ease, and she was ill-at-ease, and again I spoke longer than she did. This time she was not smiling and said not a word to me for the rest of the day. So that at this, the third conference, she brought all her legendary powers of control to bear on me. S.L., she had me delivered to this last conference bound hand and foot. First, she had me write out my presentations. Then she edited them, cutting the copy in half. Then she had me take a pledge that I would not depart from the copy. "Do you promise to comply?" she asked. And so I shook my head. "That is not enough,"

Edna said. "I must have a clear oral agreement to abide by this copy I have approved." "I agree," I said. "You agree to what?" she said. She had the look of English craftiness, for which she was renowned, on her face by this time, S.L. Understand too that this was all going on from door to desk, that is, I at the door and she at her desk, for the reason that I went into at length earlier. "To what you just said," I said. "Do not be a snake, mister. I have killed some snakes in my time," Edna said. I stared at her. She stared at me. "So?" she said. "So I will be there and execute my copy faithfully." "You speak a very peculiar English," Edna said to me. "What did you read at university?" "I read Carlos Castenada and *Ramparts* magazine and the collected works of Huey Newton," I said, causing her, in reply to hold her nose. At the conference I cranked it up. I orated, like a lesser Pericles, like an unhinged Fidel Castro, like a filibustering fool. I took up thirty minutes on a slight book about cats (*Cats: Our Furry Friends*, text by Alice Withers, halftone illustrations by Cathy Quintle) with no hope of trade sales. I was in liberation heaven. Once in a while I would glance at Edna, there in the gallery. She was the one with smoke coming from her ears. Her Englishness was on fire. Her eyes were slits and she had her long knife drawn. S.L., she was shouting, but no words came from her mouth. There was this phenomenon I have described involving my entering her office, a phenomenon that to this point only I had witnessed. Now here it was, S.L., for everyone to see, only you could not say that the words not emerging from her mouth had anything to do with her office or my entering it or any of that. What we were seeing was that this unwanted silence could strike her anywhere, and under diverse circumstances.

As a final touch I rolled up not one sleeve but both sleeves and winked at her, and here it was that she bolted from her chair to have at me with the hideously long knife she brandished, and only the quickness of the president and his excellent staff saved me from being carved before the temporarily sober sales force. "You gave me your word. You gave me your solemn word," she spluttered, some days later. "Solemn is a big word. I gave you my word. Let us leave it at that," I said. "So now you have proven yourself a liar," she said. "Not at all." "You broke your word. That makes you a liar," she said. "I hardly broke my word," I said, maintaining my calm even as she moved into overwroughtness. "How do you presume to offer me such a barefaced lie?" she shot back. "Quite simple, my dear Edna. I was faithful to the *spirit* of the text. Nothing more seemed *required* of me." "I will have you out of here. I will see to your dismissal," Edna said, but it was too late for her to do so, for the gates of love had opened and overwhelmed her, and she recognized me as part of her humanizing path. S.L., I had touched her English fierceness in some gentling way. So no, she was not the one to savage me. The president himself made the decision to let me go, only three months prior to being vested. He cited my oddness, and even resorted to the French language. By this time I was living with Beloved, S.L., and this you need to know, that as in times of old, I came armed with the power of the broom to restore order where there had been no order. I came as the sweeping and the cleaning man, doing the job that I had once done in my family's home, cleaning up after the dogs that dragged the refuse from the garbage can over the floor, cleaning up after the Hannahs and

Naomis and Rachels and all of them. My father was himself a sweeping man, so is it not the most natural thing that a man *such as I*, when he enters the family way, picks up a broom, carrying on the tradition of the man who mattered the most in his very own family, for it made a deep impression on me, the sight of my fastidious father in his old, old robe, his calves painfully thin, his hands hideously hairy, his nose threateningly long, through the action of the broom seeking to impose the order on the household that the women of the family would not or could not themselves impose, he muttering but not exploding, his strongest statement on the chaos around him being "such a mess, such a mess," those words repeated twice, never said once, in his mysteriously Armenian way. All I will say for now is that there was much untidiness, that my new environment was a challenge to be met, and that my drive to impose order had the full backing and displayed gratitude of Beloved. You could say that the first crisis in this new life happened one night as Beloved was luxuriating in a bubble bath. Simultaneous with raising one beautiful thin leg from the bath and running the sponge along it she said these words, as I may have mentioned to you previously. S.L., please, please maintain maximum alertness, *for lives depend on it*. "Maurice wants me to come over tomorrow night to see how he has displayed my sculpture in his loft." Let's break it down, S.L. Maurice was a wealthy collector, and had purchased the piece from Yugoff, the owner of a prestigious gallery that exhibited Beloved's work, Yugoff being a man who had shown an abiding lust for Beloved and who himself owned an enormous stretch limo rivaling the very biggest in Manhattan, a limo famous for clogging the streets of SoHo. The leg disappeared

beneath the soapy water. What can I say, S.L.? I came undone. Inwardly I began to tremble, and crossed a line I had told myself I mustn't. Driven by a fear of her seduction, I asked her not to go. Because any man who wanted her could have her. I had wanted her and she had accepted me. She had appeared available to me while still with her husband. The invitation from Maurice seemed to be going in the same direction. Whether it was my direct pleas or for other reasons, she did not enter the domain of Yugoff, but the matter was to come up later, when all her past was to come up, when all that she had not said or allowed herself to feel or had pushed down the memory of having felt was to come up, when the line "My father is not who you think he is" was to be amplified on so the process of liberation could take place, the liberation that eventually required her to give herself to God, to ask his help in giving back the self that had been taken by the night bandit parent with the complete access to her. I did not understand my fear; I only knew it as the fear that she would have it done to her by the men who wanted to do it to her. This you must understand, S.L. She lived in a fifth-floor tower, a walkup loft tower, and suitors of the most debased and wealthy and ardent kind, suitors with a global reach, were parked and double-parked and idling on the sidewalks in their stretch limos waiting for their *window of opportunity* with her. This you must also understand, S.L. She had the nicked rough hands of an artist but a body and a persona of ultra-feminine beauty and a voice that made you melt. If nothing else is remembered, this is a point that must be preserved for posterity, or else time (as it is) is merely a thinly piped out tune on a seaward wind. So yes, I got to meet her parents, whom I had vowed never

to meet, for they were on the highest rung of the ladder of success, the father a German Jew able businessman billionaire, the mother a brilliant writer whose face and biographical sketch were on the back flap of 163 books, all of them best sellers, a woman whose sentences were luminously elegant (do not try to stop me, do not try to impede me, S.L., do not be obstructionist in any way with me) but who, as it turned out, was not in the least Germanophilic but rather, expressed abhorrence for the guttural harshness of the language and who further said that *lieder* (and the minutest portion, at that) was the only thing of value in the entire German experience. "If he's got a mind to match his looks, then you're in business." These were the very first words I heard from Beloved's mother, spoken to Beloved at the door of her parents' penthouse apartment overlooking Riverside Drive. Beloved's father wore a cardigan, a fact of no significance whatsoever but only by way of noting that it was one of Beloved's favorite pieces of casual wear apparel. He whisked me out onto the terrace, from which we had a view of the Hudson River. I regaled him with stories of my childhood, how my friend Stinky and I would roam the park along the river lighting fires of dried leaves and twigs and throwing rocks at the freight trains that ran underground through the park. "Stinky? That is a name?" he asked, and I assured him that it was. In turn he said the following, that the standard poodle that had followed us out onto the terrace was an extraordinary and remorseless killer of cats, that she would just snatch them up and shake them till their necks were broken, and that he himself had risen to the top of his industry over his rival for the same position because he had the one thing his rival did not have, he could hurt people and his

rival could not. This toughness, he assured me, was essential for an ascent to corporate heights, as he was to tell me more times than I can count at the club for the rich and famous, where we were to *do lunch*. The cat-killing dog, his ability to hurt people--I took these two things back inside, to the den, where we ate Nova Scotia salmon and black olives from Zabar's. Shelves covered the walls to the ceiling and were stocked with books, all of them in order, for Beloved's mother could not sleep at night if a single title was out of place or missing. Order had to be preserved at all costs. I explained to her that I was cut from the same cloth, that I had grown up with such filth--people dropping things all over the place--that my only recourse was to take up the broom and sweep, that in my estimation the moral regeneration of America might start with that very act, every citizen with a broom in his or her hand for five hours a year set aside for the cleaning up of public spaces, that this was an idea whose time was coming, that soon we would see it written into the platforms of the national political parties, the resolve to clean up the filthy median strips along our nation's highways, the resolve to spruce up the rubble-strewn railroad tracks, etc. Sweeping made you feel good. It was a way of putting coherence in your life. I explained further that there were people on the loose in the city who would kill without a second's hesitation, that say a man needs a Snickers bar, say he needs a new shirt, say he needs a CD so he can listen to new sounds, he follows you down the block and pops you in the back with his *motherfucking piece*, he pops you in the head, he blows out your eyes and your teeth, he empties all the blood from your body, he simply checks you out, so he can have this tasty candy bar or these new

sounds, or whatever he needs in that moment. Murder was a kind of negative sweeping; it swept you away into death. Beloved parents mustn't think that gentility reigned, I said. They should double the doormen, for if a criminal entered their apartment it was certain that he would shoot them dead without hesitation, the bullet would travel through all the thousands of books straight to Beloved's mother's heart, the bullet would pierce the Nova Scotia salmon that Beloved's father might use as a shield to defend himself. I told them that at that very moment specially designed trucks were being built to go out onto the nation's highways, for the decision had been made that death was the only way that *segments of the population* would get control over their own impulses, that once you had fired a gun and used it as an extension of your will, you could not return to where you had been beforehand, you would always go back to the gun, that *piece*, as in "I'm going to get my piece and blow your motherfucking ass away," was destined to become the premier word in the English language, that furthermore it remained to be seen what the trucks setting out on the nation's highways would ultimately do about the situation, whether there was a definite and conclusive plan behind it all, and whether, with all the loveless momentum they had gathered, *anything could be done to stop them*. Beloved's father stood over me with his biceps flexed and his legs spread. Six feet of plastic unfurled from his wallet and the words "Heh heh heh" came from his thick lips. He took a handful of my hair and said "You have curls just like a girl, just like my daughter. I can do with you what I will, for I am short and compact and able in the extreme." They asked me about my family. Shame flooded me, S.L. I guess I thought by

this time in my life I would be able to do better with a question about my family, but I couldn't. I mumbled something about a younger sister who lived nearby and was a university professor. "So you have only your sister?" they asked, speaking in unison. Well, no, I said, and tried to explain about the sister who had been on the bridge with the bullhorn and the other sister who ran down Broadway naked for the president of the United States and the oldest sister who lived with her violent son in my mother's house, but my words got tangled up, and I talked to myself through the night to block out memories of the seeming debacle that this first meeting with Beloved's parents had turned into. It was another year before we married, before I stepped over what I thought of then as the finish line, the line of unending material security and prosperity. Why did I have the feeling that if we had waited another day, she would have changed her mind, that the whole process was moving her in the other direction, that I got her *just in the nick to time*? As I have told you, we went down to City Hall, my favorite marriage site, for we both agreed that was the way to go, *we did not care to stand on ceremony*. I was better prepared than the first time, when I had no wedding ring for Julia. Beloved and I both came with wedding bands purchased at Tiffany's (later she was to say that she had chosen the thickest band, for slavery to her mind was sexy then, before beginning the process of disengaging from that hated thing, the slavery thing, that Tiffany's had been an unwitting party to). Beloved's friend Myrna was there, as we have discussed. She was wearing white stockings and pumps and had a red ribbon in her frizzy brown hair. She was Beloved's lifelong friend. Solid in her shyness, S.L., she was determined not

to be an appendage to the furious dimensions of time but to be a player on the gritty stage of New York life. They had grown up together in the Bronx. Wrong. They had grown up in Riverdale, which is supposed to be part of the Bronx, and where 1950s families no longer live, because the shoot-em boy run run crowd now roam, those who will cap you for a Snickers bar whether you are reading *Better Homes and Gardens* or Thomas Merton or the poems of the great Robert Browning, whether you are underway with a 12-course dinner or just finishing up an intricate needlepoint. They will burst through your plant-filled window and cap you and sodomize you and cook your private parts in an oven turned to "Broil" for no better reason than that they are hungry for a Snickers bar, their religion being the aggressive street language that they speak. Beloved and Myrna were from that part of the city, but now Myrna's parents lived farther north to escape the widening trouble zone and Beloved's parents had the penthouse apartment on Riverside Drive. So yes, the great Myrna arrived with her tube of architectural drawings, triumphant in her *professional capacity* in having been offered a big job that day. Understandably was she beaming over her success, and had this to say to Beloved: "You don't have to do this. He's not at your intellectual level. He has an unpronounceable last name. He's an alcoholic. He has no successes to his credit. A background check reveals that he has not been to Harvard or Yale, that no Ivy League school whatsoever could ever want him. A study of his record shows that he barely got into Queens College. A further study of his record shows that he was rejected for military service on both psychological and physical grounds and that he makes \$19,000 a year. That's less than some

secretaries, and the prospect of significant earnings is not great. He doesn't even own a credit card, and lists on his resume prayer and meditation as his greatest achievement." While she was monologing into Beloved's ear, Myrna had her eyes trained on me, and what those eyes showed was unrelenting hatred, S.L. I cannot say it any other way. Beloved stepped away from Myrna and began to sing an aria from what she later said was *Rigoletto*, and many in the morning crowd were moved to stop and listen, forming an immediate and swelling adoration circle around her. Then this further thing happened, S.L., for which I can offer no explanation. My mother came out of me--don't ask me how--adjusted her light box so that it eclipsed even the morning sun, and said to Myrna, "Do you take Jesus as your personal savior? Do you know that he is the way, the truth, and the light? Do you know that this world has nothing to offer?" Myrna recoiled but sprang back hissing and brandishing her American Express Gold Card to drive my mother off. "I have researched you, too, you Holy Roller. You are the origins of his failure, you crumb bum God freak," Myrna said. My mother came back with words of her own. As I recall them, S.L., this is what she said: "Look at my hands, little Jewish girl. Just look at them. They are the hands of a peasant woman, a woman not afraid of a little dirt. You think you know what trouble is, you spoiled thing with your scented muff? You think you know what trouble is, you who never had to swim to America on your own? I could tell you something about trouble. Go on and have your fun. Go on and spread your legs for these wealthy Jewish men, but I will tell you this, your day is coming, it is coming if you do not accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal

savior." S.L., this is what happened next. Myrna bopped my mother *on the head* not once but twice with her tube of drawings, and then turned her bile on me.

"Goy trash. Stupid goy trash," she said. In this turmoiled condition, spitting and fuming, did Myrna bear witness to the civil ceremony in the sparely furnished room where Beloved and I were in matrimony joined. As I have told you, the reception was held that evening at the Cosmopolitan Club. The Van Guydings were there, and the Esterbrooks, and the Claytons from Palm Springs, and the Del Ewings from Quogue, and Claybrook Finch from Sneadon's Landing, and the Comstocks and the Grier-Beldings (originally from Schlesweig-Holstein), and the Ford-Deliquescences from Monaco. Their converse among themselves was a marvel of seamless chatter. Not one word, not one syllable, fell to the parquet floor. My sister Hannah was in escort of my mother--aged, hooked, befuddled by a world she had renounced at age thirty-two, when the Christ Jesus so firmly entered her life. Hannah said it all when Beloved's father approached her with *cultivation and suaveness*. Hannah got Hannah-esque on him. How else can I say it, S.L.? She reared up. She belched. She snorted. She was the Hannah of old, the princess of some smoldering darkness. "I don't have to tell you a damn thing about my life, mister, and don't think you can make me, either." Then she went on to tell him that the most important thing was that no one should ever think of trying to deprive her son. She said her son was the most strapping young man on the island of Manhattan, and that in retaliation for the fact of God's generosity to him--"you people have a lot of nerve thinking you're the chosen people--some bitch goes and drops a dime on him. It was only this, Mr. Big Shot,

if you must know," Hannah said. "My son was taking a dance class, that's all. He was just exploring his creativity. He goes up to this woman in black tights and says he would like to get next to her. He says he would like to take her to dinner. Nice. Just a nice young couple getting next to each other. He's left his bag behind at her place, and they go back together to her apartment so he can retrieve it. She's taken over by his handsomeness. She does all the things a woman should do for a man with his handsomeness. They have hours and hours of whorish pleasure. They just get *next* to each other really well. Then she just decides to get strange. My son falls asleep after satisfying the woman immensely, more than she has any right to be satisfied, and how does she repay him but by running out the door in the middle of the night with only a shirt around her screaming for the police, stops off at a pay phone to drop her damn dime, and then runs straight into the precinct, having messed herself up good, having socked herself in both eyes and banged up her body black and blue so that the police will come and arrest my son for the crime of rape? What do you think of that, Mr. Big Shot businessman? Think you can top that? What are you going to do, tell me about the six million? Shout 'Never Again'?" "Hannah, please," my mother pleaded. "This is a social gathering. This is not normal. It does not look right." "Don't tell me what looks right. Did it look right that Daddy had me all to himself when I was a child for all those years while you were out working? Did that look right? Anger is my inheritance. Anger is food to me. It is my sustenance. I am entitled to it, and I throw gobs of it on each and every one of these clowns." I had been informed of her son's arrest right there at the

reception. Hannah said I shouldn't feel that her son was disrespecting me; it was true that he had her dictate to kill me, she said, but, no, he was not disrespecting me. I shouldn't take his failure to attend personally, given the fact that he was in jail. At the same time she said I should ask myself some hard questions, like why it was that I had never ever tried to help him with the circumstances of his life. And why I had never, for that matter, tried to help her with the circumstances of her life. Did I not understand that sisters were for marrying, that it had been my obligation to marry her, that was the whole reason for my birth, so that she could have a husband when my father passed on? The news about the son's arrest (the definite article is required in speaking of him, S.L., don't ask me why) was less surprising than confirming, and I beg of you for a moment's time in which to speak to you of this, S.L., for only the week before, at my sister Vera's apartment, she who is a tenured professor and sometimes violent of tongue, Son (his pared down, final name, S.L.) had followed Beloved from room to room and talked to no one else. It seemed as if I were there inside his mind, that he was my lower self, that I was witnessing this man stalk my fiancée with singleness of purpose. The horror was that Beloved seemed to be acquiescing smilingly. She was doing nothing to deter him. It was as if she had left open a door for him--for anyone who wanted to--to walk through. My look of contempt had no effect on him. Hannah too seemed to see what was going on. In fact, S.L., she came over to me and said, "So what if he takes her from you? So what if you don't get to cross your finish line into imagined safety? Suppose you have to stay one of us by not marrying her? You thought that someday you

would be free of me, but now you have my son to contend with, my son, who is part of my power. I have ordered him to shatter your world, to pluck your flower. You know these things, and yet your only weapon is a sort of bogus detachment. You think that nothing is happening but something is happening. He has drawn a bead on your woman. We come from a dark place. You have always been right about that. Evil is no big deal. It's just a part of life. Of course he wants to rape her before your eyes, and then to dismember her limb by limb before your very eyes. I have been programming him for violence since he was a babe. I won't be here forever, and I have a legacy to pass on." These are all things she said to me at Vera's apartment, S.L., and even if it did not come to pass, Hannah had done the job of confirming my worst fears about her and Son. "It will go bad for you when he gets out of jail. Just remember that you owe us," Hannah said to me the next week, at the reception where she was making her big stink.

Beloved's father tried to introduce me to some of the family friends, but shame got the better of me. Beyond the introductions I could say little. They saw I didn't think much of myself. Seeing this insecurity made them turn away and reenter their world of seamless converse. As for my mother, she came with religious pamphlets for Beloved's parents. When I looked over, she was showing one such piece of literature to Beloved's mother. Her light box shone at maximum brightness and she was urging them to give themselves to Jesus before it was too late. So we began our new life, taking away with us from the reception a wedding gift of a VCR. Shame. Distress. Emotional turmoil. A sense of complete and humiliating overexposure. For days and months I replayed the

scene--I should have said this, I shouldn't have said that. Love is a meditative thing, S.L. Love is the thing I felt for Beloved in the moment of expressing it on her bed one day the year before as I touched her back. "I love you," I said, and in that moment I had an image of Mrs. Kindelberger, a woman from my childhood, an ancient with a weathered, lined face whom my mother would send me to with pancakes and lingonberries. Mrs. Kindelberger in room 3B3 standing before her easel in a smock touching up a watercolor, several of which hung in the lobby of our building. For my mother had been taken in by America, and now it was for her to take in others, to receive them and to nourish them, and this she was happy to do for old Mrs. Kindelberger, to whom she told me to run with her pancakes topped with lingonberries. "Yes, yes, run, run, you with your long legs," my mother said, handing me the steaming plate of pancakes with lingonberries for old Mrs. Kindelberger, whose room smelled of paints and turpentine and looked out on Broadway, to which the children of the savage night had not yet come with their large white teeth and big guns to shoot off the faces of the old people they accused, through artful verbal construction, of littering the landscape, as if they themselves with nihilistic fury were intent on some mad form of purification. I sank into Beloved, and knew this was the woman I would want so much to grow old with, a feeling I had never had with Julia, whom I could not picture being with through the years. Good old Mrs. Kindelberger, who would be standing at her easel and painting as I brought the pancakes and lingonberries to her. There was a feeling of sweet and spreading joy in that moment with Beloved, though I did wonder if I was manufacturing the sentiment. There had

been the unsettling experience of testing the waters with other females and being rebuffed. Not entirely, but enough to cause insecurity, for women I had believed would see me said no, or not that week. Their unavailability challenged my assumptions about myself, and caused fear of a permanent isolation from them. But Beloved was there. She had not stiff-armed me. Before we moved in together she came to visit me at the Bowery loft, S.L. Julia's artwork, some of it, was still on the walls. Beloved was edgy. She came full of fierce competitiveness, as if her life was on the line. She was fearful of discovering that Julia was the better artist. Her fear relaxed me, gave me a sense of control. I made hamburgers and a salad for us. Cooking seemed a necessary test. I had something to prove, that I could be normal, that I could take care of myself in fundamental ways. The truth was that I was barely scraping by. The rent was a problem. I wanted to sell the loft and get our fixtures money back. But if I didn't continue to meet the rent, I would lose the place and not be able to recover the investment. Once, in the A & P, I felt old and discarded, as if I had no future, as if all my assumptions about myself and my desirability had been false. This came at a time when I was between *safety nets*--Julia had gone, and Beloved was not yet securely in my life. I was past thirty, no longer young. What would life be like if women no longer wanted me? Six months living alone, and it was getting bad, the line that we cross over without knowing it has been crossed, Beloved was now my mind's full object, my heart handed to her angrily, fearfully, on a platter. She wore black with flashes of red, the red of her toenails and fingernails a kind of beckoning sex light. The short black hair. The sexy smile. The slender,

beautiful body and full mouth. Women flocked to her. One had her to a party. Beloved called me from it to say a man--"a real jerk"---was following her around and wouldn't leave her alone. Most nights I felt like a man aware of and fighting his dependency. It was like those times before I began going to the meetings to stop drinking. I'd go a week or two without a drink, but every second of every minute of every hour of every day my mind focused on the fact that I hadn't had a drink. It was that way with Beloved. No matter what I tried to do, she was there in front, it was her I saw and not the thing I had set myself to do. The man at the party had discovered my treasure, and was in the process of stealing it. I took no reassurance from her words. All I could see was her desirability, and the adoration councils that had been established. I called her loft that night, and each time that I got no answer, my fear increased. She had had a change of mind. The man wasn't so bad after all. They were together for the night. So my thoughts went. When finally she picked up the receiver I yelled at her for scaring me. She reacted with astonishment that I could believe she would call me about such a creep and then go off with him. She had only wanted to say how much she was thinking of me. I recognized my mistake quickly but could not undo it. I had crossed another line with her, and lived in dread, S.L., that she was slowly seeing who I was. An ad I placed in the *Village Voice* generated a flurry of calls about the loft.. A couple came to see the place, he an actor, she a dancer. Unmarried. Where had I seen this before? It was like I was interviewing Julia and myself when we came to the same loft years before. They were desperate to take the place, left a cash deposit, and paid the rest the next morning. Later

Beloved would say to me, "What was the meaning of Julia leaving the loft? Why wasn't it you who left?" But that was later, a long time later, for in this time I could do no wrong, and she said, "Great! Unbelievable. How did you manage to do such a thing?" regarding the sale, giving me only her admiration, which was lifting me higher and higher. I gave Julia and her parents half the money from the sale. I knew my relationship to the past, S.L. I knew there were actions I needed to take to get free of it, to be in the glorious present that was emerging, that is always emerging when we are aware that God is in us and we are in him. I knew I could not move forward unless I was willing to look back. These things I knew, S.L. Julia's mother was gracious, but Julia's father had this to say: "If I ever see you again I will pummel your face and flog your hind parts, and this is spoken by a man who has never struck anyone. You should fork over millions--you should be talking about war reparations--for our having suffered your presence all those hideous years. You drove our daughter batty." Yes, S.L., he spoke in this fashion, as *the man who has not God will of necessity speak*. Years later, as you know, she, Beloved, would say, "You moved into my house with a laundry bag full of dirty clothes and no credit card." Those were her words to me, spoken in anger, when the banner of liberation had been unfurled, and she had begun the foray into the past to vanquish foes who all her life had been vanquishing her. But that was later, S.L., when the bond of marriage had given her the security to explore, and anger was something she could begin to own and not simply experience from others, from *my father's not who you think he is*, yes, from him, S.L., the German-Jewish heh heh heh man. The day I moved in with Beloved I

thought, I'll never have to worry about rent again. I'll never have to worry about living on the street again. The place needed a lot of work. There was an unused loft bed space where Beloved had dumped things, including a rug full of moths. I tossed out the half-eaten thing. I made the place my project, and established pockets of manageability, and Beloved set up a cheering section. She didn't have the cleaning knack. "In ten minutes he can make the place presentable. I don't know how he does it," she told many different people. She had a second home, in Rhinebeck, New York. Her husband Peter wanted it as part of any divorce settlement, but she held out, believing the property was something I would enjoy. She wanted to hold onto it for me, and the next year we drove up in her blue Ford Futura. Beloved could afford any car she chose to have, but believed in buying American, and had purchased a demo two-door model. The Saw Mill. The Taconic. The turnoff at Bull's Head Road. Route 199 to Milan Hollow Road, which ran into Round Lake Road. A clapboard house on a small hill. Subdivided farmland. Forsythia, mock orange, lilac bushes, hawthorne, a shad tree blooming white in early spring, a towering oak fronting the house. A woodshed with a roof in need of repair. An apartment over a garage that would make a perfect studio. The year before I could barely meet my rent, and now I had a second home. We joined the beach club. Membership entitled us to use the dock and the lake across the road. Once or twice a year there was a meeting with a potluck dinner. An elderly woman named Beatrice, the widow of a man who had been in the diplomatic service, was the host. Her lawn was green, her flower beds were fertile, her house sparkled. Beloved admired her, as she did

many older women. Beloved had been a member of the club while married to Peter, so the members knew me to be her new husband. S.L., I never said much; I tried to get by with a smile. One of the men, Mr. Pilsudski, was a retired plumbing contractor. He and his wife--they had been married forty-five years and had seven children and nine grandchildren (Jesus, what a blessing grandchildren must be, I get all teary just thinking about them, S.L., how in the natural order of things it is to be a parent and then a grandparent)--spent their winters at their second home in Florida. Mr. Pilsudski was a brawny man of few words, and everything he said came out right. His wife wore loose, sacklike dresses to accommodate her big body. Mr. Pilsudski and I never spoke, except in greeting. I would look his way at meetings reflexively, not sure what I was hoping to find, but I never caught him looking back my way. It was as if he had seen enough and needed no more information for his files. That first season it was decided that the dock, which was noticeably sagging and about to collapse into the lily pads, should have new supports. A work crew of three, including Mr. Pilsudski, was formed, and the door was left open for volunteers. I remembered vaguely a line from Proust, something about how men in their thirties seek to come in from their isolation, but that they remain conspicuous as loners by virtue of their solitary, oddball ways. I was seized with a desire to be a part of this group, but I had not written down the date, so I called Mr. Pilsudski and described myself to him so he would know who I was. "I know who you are. We already did the job," Mr. Pilsudski said, and hung up without another word. S.L., the whole point of volunteering was to be next to Mr. Pilsudski, to have his manliness rub off on me.

I felt roughed up. I felt like I had run straight into a wall. I began to use the living room in the country house for my writing. I was writing a book about Julia, putting my experience with her on paper. Beloved was an avid reader. Later, I would move to the apartment over the garage, which I kept warm in the fall with a kerosene heater. I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I. Julia had said I was a klutz with my hands. She had not been making a judgment; it was more in the way of an observation. She thought it interesting that anyone could be so incompetent with tools. I thought of Julia's assessment, S.L., because the property was in a state of mild disrepair. In addition to requiring new roofing, the woodshed had rotting boards and broken windows in need of replacement. Local vandals had spray-painted a room at the back of the shed, a room that had been ceded to the hornets and which had a rusting bed and ancient mattress and a cracked cement floor. We were weekend people, S.L. I tried to stem my anxiety about losing control by sweeping the floors and raking the leaves in the spring and fall, another form of sweeping. Our first weekend we had a visitor, a local man named Knut, a builder from a family of builders. His older brother had done the renovation on the house, and Knut had gotten to know Peter, Beloved's ex-husband. They had been drinking buddies, and perhaps more. He was possibly from the land of gayness, S.L., and the night he came over, just minutes after we had arrived, he grabbed a half-eaten bologna sandwich out of my stepdaughter Ariadne's hand, demolished it, and said these words, S.L. "Who's the ugly man?" he asked, first of Beloved and then of Ariadne. Because he had a powerful build and maniacal ways, he was someone to be afraid of. He had once

threatened to kill Peter and Peter's gay friends in a drunken explosion of venom, and had recently been bashed in the skull by a state trooper when he began to fight with him after shouting threats outside a woman's home at three in the morning. He was a true Scandanavian, S.L., known to jump into the frozen lake and roll naked in the snow for hours. "Refresh my drink, Ugly, before I cleave your skull. I know you're nothing under that shirt and that you have nothing inside your pants." I told him we had only coffee and tea and soda, or would he care for some celery juice? He ate his glass in front of our eyes, and said this. "I'll be back, Ugly, to put a well-deserved hole in your head." But he did not come back, at least in the way that he had arrived that first time. He did not come back as a bologna sandwich-eating man. And he never stayed long, for he knew that we could not refresh the drink that he had brought along with him. We bought white plastic furniture and set it out on the lawn, under the tall oak tree. In the mornings and evenings the property was especially beautiful, the sun being softer and not in overhead excess like a bare and unrelenting light bulb. In those years we were not there in the winter, when the trees were bare of leaves, except for the lovely cedars banking the road. We did not see the proximity of houses to our own through the denuded trees, and the curving two-lane blacktop road was not visible to our eyes. In late spring we would bring lilacs for our parents. My mother was particularly appreciative--lilacs had been part of her life back on the farm in Sweden. Beloved placed them carefully, intelligently, in wet newspaper, which she then wrapped in foil, and lay the bouquets in the trunk of the car. Beloved was driven by curiosity to know the names of things, the wildflowers and

the birds that arrived for meals at the feeder outside the kitchen window--cedar waxwings and robins and finches and birds I had no name for. I watched Beloved with Ariadne and with her friends. She showed no anger toward people. She seemed to have a sunlight of the spirit that had been lacking in Julia. Now in this time, S.L., Ronald Reagan had come out from behind the desk on *Death Valley Days* to preside over the country. And while he did a lot of smiling and *nodding of his head*, it was understood that he was a man of steel, that he had not the marshmallow fluff insides of the liberal Democrats he opposed to the core of his being, and that he had a mandate from the people to take back the country and return it into the hands of those to whom it truly belonged, those for whom the flag came first and who had fought at Iwo Jima and Guadalcanal and who were truly American, in the way that Jimmy Stewart and John (Marion) Wayne were truly American. The policy of the government, as it was laid out, was to stiff-arm the poor, to hit them hard in their faces and their bodies when they came near with their wheedling, supplicating ways, so that they would finally and emphatically get the message to go away from the door of the mansion and die as they were supposed to do, for it was all their fault, and so that Ronald Reagan could eat his pot roast and eat his Mallomars and watch old movies in the peace that he deserved. Beloved was concerned about the growing division between the rich and the poor, and the tax breaks that were being given to the wealthy. She wondered if the country wouldn't have to pay for this policy in the future— what I am saying, S.L., is that though she was an artist through and through, a woman who worked and created with her hands, she had an analytic ability and a

social conscience. She saw through to the moral issue. (Bear with me, S.L., for your dinky dimensions must be stretched so that you can tolerate the mention of greatness). Most impressive was that the statement did not come out bold and angry but as a *reflective concern*, and thus spoke volumes about the beauty of her sensibility, that issues of this kind could grab her, that she was not of the I've got mine/you've got to get your own ilk. S.L., I took secret pleasure all the same in getting richer, for I saw it as important to not go back to the other side of the finish line that I had crossed when we had married, and if our financial well-being was eroded, there was no finish line for either of us or for Ariadne. To never know wealth was one thing, but to lose wealth was another, a devastating matter. Beloved's ex-husband Peter had moved away to New Haven, Connecticut. He had a buying mania, particularly for old things. Around the house were antique lamps and old tables and an oriental rug that was worn through in the middle. The good stuff he had removed, down to the doors on the closets, which he valued for their unusual knobs. He also seemed to have a mania for nails. Here and there four-inch nails had been banged into the walls as temporary supports for objects that had since been removed. For a long time it was possible to say I was in favor simply for not being Peter, who was seen as greedy and unscrupulous and horrible. Beloved had had no boyfriends back in high school (except for her father, except for her father, except for her father--let me say that loud, and at this particular time, about the heh heh heh man). A senior had asked her out when she was only in the ninth grade. He had taken her to the Princeton-Yale football game. And there had been a boy named Will from her

class who had gone on to Harvard and then Yale Medical School, and who stayed in touch with her through the years, a young man with whom she exchanged love letters in a relationship that never became physical but stayed in the realm of the ethereal. After Peter had left her, Will came to visit. Perhaps he had idealized her. This I cannot say with any assurance. Note, please, however, that he left confused and distressed, his image of her shaken. Was it the circumstances of her life, the sadness and loneliness that was reigning?

Inquiries may need to be made. Know only that he did not leave so much as flee, from what he saw as the pain of her life. Know only that the relationship and its history grabbed me in these ways: 1. That Will was Will and I was I. That is, that Will was Harvard and I was City College. 2. That Will had loved her with a chaste and pure love, seeing the mirror of his chasteness and purity in her. 3.

That I could not know Beloved when she was sixteen and the precious brilliant flower of the Riverdale Country School for Girls. When she was nineteen a man named Howard entered her life. He was a librarian at the public library near the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, where she had elected to go over the pleas of her teacher and guidance counselor, who urged her to attend Radcliffe or Smith or any of the other schools that would have welcomed and yes coveted her excellence. Let us talk plain, S.L. Let us acknowledge that she did not want anything to do with these colleges, or their prestige, which she had no need of, for prestige was not what she was seeking but the ordinariness of life. No teak tables, no Volvos, no fancy colleges. Let us understand where that yearning for plainness came from. Let us understand why she said listlessly she

would consider NYU, eliciting cries of protest from all concerned and condemnation from one, her father, who directed her to RISDE, having decided years before that she was to be an artist and her older sister Sharon a scientist. Let us take a little time to absorb the phenomenon of one born to wealth and power and talent spurning the offerings of that echelon. Let us see it for what it was, a profound sadness and disgust with that world of privilege. There is a photo of her on her twentieth birthday, her black hair cut short a la Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby*, a sad, pensive look on her beautiful face, saying not enough of where she had been, not enough of where she needed to go, but offering clues nonetheless. So she went to the library of this man Howard and took out some books and he fell in love with her in a way that compelled him to say she must marry him or he would die. He was an extroverted, very Jewish man, S.L. The very first words his mother spoke to Beloved were, "You have luscious lips." No words preceded this. Howard's mother got right to the point. Five days after meeting her, Howard flew off to Israel. No explanation was offered. First he was there in Providence with her. The next thing he was in Tel Aviv. Important to know is that she did not miss him in the least, but was in fact relieved by his absence. When he had returned from his journey to Israel, she was through with Providence and through with RISDE, her contempt for which she showed by reading the *New York Times* during classes, not secretly but openly and defiantly, a symptom of the historicity of the resentment she could only feel toward all forms of authority, as they all had their emanation in heh heh heh. There were many men who wanted her at this college, among them a professor from

Germany. He was an older man. He had European genes. She said she was not a virgin at the time of this event, though it was her first experience of sex. There was another man, a RISDE student, whom she consented to go to bed with after he complained incessantly of something called "blue balls." She took pity on his "blue balls" condition. She told me this by way of saying that she was ministering to his needs, as she later ministered to the needs of Howard by marrying him at age twenty so he would not take his life. Howard, who came from *lowly origins*, and who reappeared from Israel without explanation as he had disappeared without explanation to Israel, tracked Beloved down in New York City, to which she had returned to study at the Art Students' League and to be away from the phoniness of RISDE, which an extraordinary intelligence, European as well as American and in truth beyond the both of them, was allowing her to see. Hands were reaching out for her everywhere, to touch her inner and outer beauty, and she showed up in the world in a state of smiling fear and tremblingness. The Art Students' League was not an institution, S.L., not in the way that RISDE was, and she was relishing her relative freedom. Howard found her living in a York Avenue apartment and immediately fell down on the floor and said he would die without her and that they must marry. Israel had convinced him of this necessity, but he would not expand on the matter. So they tied the knot, and at the wedding people remarked that her husband looked so much like her father, they had the same shortness and compactness, they had the same thick lips, they had things in common physically. Howard liked to have a good time. He liked having people around them. When he and Beloved were

in company with others and she would leave the room, Howard's first words were always, "She's an heiress." These words he spoke with a smile and an intense whisper and with great joy on his face, which had stared out at Israel only months before. What he meant was that she was the granddaughter of a powerful publishing magnate, that money from complicated highest echelon sources poured down on her, that she was the crowning achievement of mammoth intelligence and enterprise. Howard knew that she lived on a high aesthetic and moral plane, that in her house were many mansions. But his only way of saying it was to say, when she was out of the room, "She's an heiress," these words from the mouth below the eyes that had stared out at Israel. Howard smoked a pipe. He wore monogrammed custom-made silk shirts. He read only hardcover books. His ambition was to be an antiquarian book dealer. Beloved noted that he was more of a collector than a reader. She put this in her file. She also put in her file that Howard was like a sloppy dog in happiness heaven. Howard went with other women. In his happiness he sought them out. He touched them on the street. He pressed up against them in the hallways of buildings. He undressed with them in bedrooms. Howard could make a mattress sing. Some of these women were in the circle that gathered with him and Beloved. Howard's mother was heard from. She said, "Howard is big and strong. It is not for nothing that he has those big lips and thick penis. They have been given him to use. It is my will that he use them." Howard brought his remorse over these sexual infidelities to Beloved. He sought absolution. Beloved socked him in the eye. Though she was very thin, she had a strong punch. He came back,

thinking she had misunderstood, and repeated his feelings of guilt over these adventures, whereupon she socked him in the other eye. Howard was kneeling on the floor now, hands to both his bruised eyes, and cried, thinking she was punishing him. He was right and he was wrong. Beloved set him straight. She said he wasn't to come to her with his funny business, that what he did with his time was his problem to deal with. She didn't want him burdening her with his stuff. She told him plainly that she would cut him, and cut him bad, if he ever came to her with the weepy-weep again. A marriage was two people doing their own thing, she said. Beloved had her own involvements, with older men who adored her. They wanted her, and so she went with them. She had no ability to say no. While the act was going on she whistled. She did this with the older men. She did this with Howard. Sometimes this caused befuddlement in her partners. (It is hard for me to talk about her sex life, S.L. It causes me a stabbing pain. It dishonors her. It debases her. For she was not partaking in sex, she was partaking in molestation. A little girl was showing up for these events, do you understand, museum-loitering woman with your hankering for the powerful?) She rented a studio for her artistic needs. She did not involve herself with the world of office work, for men were there, manning their positions. They would come and put their hands on her, she would have no power to stop them, she knew. The men she went to were really just one man, an old man from the *continent of Europe*, whom she met in the Chock Full O' Nuts restaurant down the block from the Art Student's League (everyone from the Art Students' League went to the Chock Full O' Nuts restaurant, and those who didn't went to the Horn

and Hardart's Automat). She was soon to have shows. The Madison Avenue galleries claimed her for their own. First a group show, then her own show. She was written up in the *New York Times*. One gallery owner said to her, "If you ever want to grow and advance as an artist, you'll have to get rid of that husband of yours." Howard was out of the room when the gallery owner, who had a tanned face and an *expensive beard*, said these words to her. So that what developed was these two sets of friends. To the first set Howard would say, when Beloved was out of the room, "She's an heiress, you know," passing the whispered words through the thick lips below the eyes that had stared out at Israel. The second set would say to Beloved, as soon as Howard had left the room, "If you ever want to be an artist, you'll have to get rid of him." Not everyone in this second set had a tanned face or an expensive beard, or even owned a gallery. Sometimes the sets shifted around and it got confusing to keep track of. Beloved in this time began to see a therapist. He did have a tanned face. He did have an expensive beard. He had a wall covered with certificates and degrees and awards. His shirts and teeth were the whitest in Manhattan. He wore ties splashed with tasteful color. A Rolex watch was strapped to his *dark* wrist. With not an approximation but a full measure of the earnestness at her command, Beloved said to him one day, about a subject she could approach with only the greatest fear, that her husband Howard was disconcerted because she would whistle while he was trying to make love to her. She told this doctor, who was proud of his wrists, that she never felt present during the sex act, but as if she had *vacated the premises*. The therapist was on vitamin supplements. He

was battling a lifelong problem of underweightness, S.L., that the whiteness of his shirts and the tannedness of his skin could not fully hide. He sat with one leg pressed against the other so that the forward calf would look bigger than it was. S.L., he even wore white socks to create the illusion of bodily substance. Beloved, lovely with her Mia Farrow hair, her luscious lips, her beautiful figure, her vulnerable ways, sat trembling in her chair. The therapist stood. Aroused, he could believe that he had award-winning parts. He rolled up his sleeves so Beloved could better appreciate his wrists, and said, through sliver lips framed by the expensive beard, not "You heavenly angel of God, I see you enfolded in his goodness and entrusted to his care. We begin the process now of healing the wound." Rather did he say, "Would you like me to come over and touch you? Would you like the lovemaking of an expert who has journeyed to the different continents?" Beloved pressed into her chair, as if she wished to be absorbed by it. Her hands came to her face, obscuring him from view. Repelled for that one time the therapist withdrew to his chair. Beloved could not say with total accuracy how long he continued to apply this therapeutic technique, but the number five stayed in her mind. What she could recall was that the therapist, on succeeding visits, would vary his approach, that sometimes he crawled, that sometimes he sashayed, that once he drew near in full ectomorphic strut, and another time arrived before her stripped naked. Each sally forth ended in rebuff, for Beloved could muster nothing more than a terrified smile in response to his smoking ardor. Back in his chair, the therapist switched to an oral technique. Word pellets were exhaled with *hissed* fury: frigid, lesbian, bitch. He had to pat

his expensive beard to calm down, and when he had leveled off to cold fury, he said these words: "My father and mother said I could have anything I wanted. Anything. They lied. I want you out of my office, and this minute. Go now, before I lose my temper." Beloved had her hands full with Howard by this time, for he could not stop the flow of infidelity confessions from his big lips. He had bruises on bruises from the places she had pummeled his body with her enraged fists. She had no explanation for the fury that was summoned by these clumsy, guilt-ridden tales. She only knew that it felt like she was being suffocated, and that desperate measures were needed to stop Howard's oppressive revelations. She told him they would have to separate. He flooded the room with tears. Adding to the sense of futility she had about him was his unwelcome promise to never see another woman again. For two months they lived apart, and then moved back in together. For Beloved the resumption was unbearable, and she ran off with their neighbor, a man with a mustache and artistic flair who had installed listening devices in their apartment, so he could gauge the propitious time to advance his offer of the two of them escaping together. This the eavesdropping neighbor did the morning following a night of record socks dealt by Beloved to Howard for his regression into confessional ways. You know enough by now to know who this man was, S.L., that Peter was to become her second husband, and said, on the first day of this adventure he had initiated, "I am the man you need. I am the man who can establish you in the world of art. I am the man who can help you along your life's path." Howard tracked them to Martha's Vineyard, where they had rented a house, and had his final painful

scene with Beloved. He stood anguished and weeping in the driveway, pleading with her to come back and keep his dream alive, but she was firm. When I questioned Beloved about the matter, she said that he had gone on with his life, that he had become a university librarian and remarried. About the dissolution of her first marriage, she had no lingering feelings--it was just something she had to do. I was the one stuck in Howard's pain, for it seemed a horrible event to have happen to someone. Let me say this, S.L. Peter was not evil; he was merely Catholic. Or I could say, Peter was not unscrupulous; he was merely Catholic. Or I could say, Peter lacked scruples, and by the way, he was Catholic. The point is that he had a three-point agenda for Beloved. One, they must get pregnant, for relationships were holy and procreatively driven. Those were his words to her, *procreatively driven*. Two, a quick divorce from Howard was imperative so that three, they themselves could tie the knot. He outlined his agenda for her in the form of a dazzling, enumerated painting in the most contemporary style he could muster. Alarm bells rang loud in her being, S.L., but they were drowned by the clamor of his loud, incessant desire. Peter was a man with the aggressive face of a wild boar, though his teeth were decidedly soft and irregular. His demons had afflicted him with insatiable hunger, a hunger that could not be checked, and Beloved felt no need to check him, for she recognized that it was a hunger not for her, as was the case with Howard, but for the things that Peter thought made her who she was. His snout was to the earth, S.L., for it had whiffed the truffles. He began to snort up the bills around her, but mostly left her alone, a situation that had appeal for her, for although she had designed her

body to be without handles, there were men who thought those handles still existed with which to carry her away. The volume of Peter's life was on loud, and the dial was turned to frantic. He was a rusher-arounder. He was a dervish without a compelling dance. He ran through the streets and into the bars, grabbing as much of life as he could. Sometimes he would lose his grasp of some of his possessions, and they would fall to the street and break. He had been born into a French family, the oldest of six boys, in a small town in the Midwest. His parents were petit bourgeois out of *Madame Bovary*, S.L., who said to their oldest son that life was a matter of vision, the things that one must not lose sight of were pocketbooks and purses and wallets, one must at all times notice them and be willing to say, "Someday I shall be able to claim their contents for my own." They sat young Peter down many times and sought to inject this idea into him. Individually they would press their foreheads against his for the transmittal of their powerful idea. Peter was known to be a leaper. He would leap high in the air many times during the day. This he would do from sheer joy. One day Peter's father came to the store and saw that not one piece of merchandise remained on the shelves. The place was bare. Even the locks on the door were gone. Later that day he went to the bank and was informed that his account had been closed because of the total withdrawal of funds that morning. Within a short time he found that his house and car had been sold. From inside the bank he saw his ten-year-old son Peter stroll by. He was barely recognizable, for he was wearing designer sunglasses and an Armani suit, the kind never seen on the dusty streets of that *midwestern* town. In his mouth was

a fat cigar. Peter had been in that morning to withdraw the funds. He had come with a signed check from his father, according to the bank officer. Peter's father went out in the street to throttle his son, but Peter held up a portrait of his father so viciously accurate in regard to his French defects of character that the older man was stopped in his tracks, and it was with the painting as a shield and a bag full of loot that Peter left the town never to return. Peter said in later life that being an artist gave one license to ice skate on people's heads. He said it just that way, that he had been granted the freedom to ice skate on people's heads. He had left that midwestern town armed with the knowledge that he was ranked in the highest percentile in terms of intelligence and creativity. He was to live in awareness of these great gifts in many different cities before coming to New York, and developed early on the habit of driving large nails into walls as a temporary expedient. He wanted always to be swimming in the joyful God current, and resolved to have happiness proximate with his intelligence and creativity. In each of these different cities he announced himself as an artist of great distinction. But he did not announce himself as homosexual, and could not ever say it was a settled fact for him in his being, for he was small-town born, and the curse against the sodomite rang loud in his ears. The transfer of Beloved from Howard to Peter was a great joy for him. He did not whisper the words "She's an heiress" to company when she left the room, but the fact of her wealth lived large in his mind. He developed a mania for buying. Their apartment would fill with antiques, but then the preferred style would change and he would simply throw out the old. Georgian, Colonial, Bauhaus, Chippendale--each month saw a

new preference. He was gone for weeks at a time on his shopping binges, and showed himself to be a souse, for sozzled was his preferred and frequent state. Peter did not have the fat lips of Howard. Words that were not kind came from his thin-lipped mouth, and were shaped in the hell of his burning soul, the kinds of words that Howard had not spoken (in his rage Howard had broken some of Beloved's sculptures, driven to this destruction by the pain of her abandonment). Peter called her "Jew," as in "Give me your money, Jew," "I'm going to turn on this oven and bake you, Jew," "Jew equals evil and you're a Jew." So yes, she gave him her money so he would not bake her, and he ran to the stores for antiques and to the bars to maintain his sozzlement. Beloved loved Peter, for he had immersed her in the world of art the way antiquarian book dealer Howard could not. She loved him when others--her parents in particular--rained down verbal fire on him for what they called his "parasitic" ways. She loved him when he went the openly homosexual route and moved out to live with his male lover. She loved him because he did not try to take her from herself. She loved him for running away from her so she did not have to run away from him. She said, "I wish I could die," and he said, "If you die, I'll die with you." She did not hear the affected falseness in these words of reply to her pain-engendered suicidal longing. Because his connection to her was not Howard's connection to her, he did not need her to complete him but to finance him. There was no yearning of his soul for her. There was merely this appetite for her money, and sometimes, when the hunger pangs got extreme, she would put large bills out on a plate and let him chow down on them until satiety had been temporarily reached. Her

father landed on her hard with his German-Jewishness about the marital rupture with Howard and then the subsequent elopement with Peter. "You make a hash of everything," he said, for he had critical ways toward his younger daughter, a vision full of flame not meant to be seen by others, a vision that compelled her to say, to each of the men who entered her life, at the very point of entry, "My father--you must understand that he is not who you think he is," words that could not be elaborated on, for after them there was only the space into which she floated, even as people were responding to her. Her father was 5'6", her height. Her father was compact. Her father combed his now gray hair *straight back*. Her father knew how to crunch people good. So that at the point when I came to her, when I had paid off my debt to Julia, who had left to be with the man with the ponytail, Peter was less and less available to Beloved, had less and less to say to her, rarely came by to be fed the bills he had been so ravenous for, since now he had access to her money through other means. He would see her once a week with his lover, an auto mechanic who spoke fifty languages and loved her for her ability to accept him as he was, loved her for her plenitude of intelligence and high spiritedness, loved her for being the crowning achievement of a brilliant family with brilliant German Jewish genes in her, loved her because in the family he came from, a family that left the bathroom door open when they shat, you did not go abroad to Vienna for a year of study at age 15. You did not travel to the French Alps with your family, where, as she told each of her husbands, her father plunged into a crevasse and she was not threatened by the possibility of his demise but rather, merely stared down into the hole that had swallowed him with

detachment if not pleasure, with only the faint words "yoo hoo, daddykins," to aim down at the vast blackness that was holding him, a response that she could not explain to any of these men. So, yes, S.L., Jake, the boyfriend of Peter, loved her, and this should be said, that Jake was known throughout the area as a gaseous, odoriferous man, that he suffered from legendary flatulence which, at its most extreme, was cause for building evacuations. And Peter loved her too, though he could not be with her. And Peter, because he had been raised a Catholic, had this to say to her when finally he learned that she was seeing me: "I'm sorry that I have led you into sin," the last a word that has caused the Western world grief untold, a word that should have been translated *mistake*, *mistake*, just as express instructions should have gone out forbidding those who insist on the robes to never, ever use the pronoun *you* but instead say *I, I, I, I*, or better yet *we, we, we, we* when tending to their flocks within the granite walls, *lead us not into guilt but along the fructifying path of holy innocence that yields us up patience and love and kindness and tolerance*, a response from Peter that had negligible impact on her so far as morality was concerned, the overriding reaction being one of relief and even great joy that he had not killed her for betraying him, an emotional configuration exasperating only if you did not know the status of her mother when Beloved was young, did not know her mother had an illness that spanned all the years of Beloved's childhood and adolescence, an illness that caused Beloved's father to say, "You must do nothing, nothing, to disturb your mother. If you make a hash of this instruction, you will pay for it," for her mother had the fragility of an egg, and though it was a mystery why this was

so, it was only known that this *was* so, that for years on end she went through the day in a drugged stupor, unable to dress, unable to be with Beloved or with her older sister, unavailable to everything but her own suffering. We could speculate on this, S.L., the collapse of a brilliant, vibrant young woman who in her single life had been a summa cum laude graduate of Radcliffe and researcher and brilliant author, we could speculate on the swoon that coincided with her experience of the marriage bed, we could wonder at the poison he injected into her being that left her defenseless of her children, left him to maraud the house at will, to do his heh heh heh in Beloved's bedroom at any hour of the night he pleased, we could wonder at the compensation he expected from his offspring now that his mate was laid low, we could do the speculating thing and still come back to the fact that *was was*. So yes, Beloved greeted Peter's Catholic-ness with relief and even joy. Peter in fact said something very generous to her. He said, "Give your relationship with him your best." I was touched and even astonished at the wisdom of what he said, for I had judged him severely. I could feel surer of myself as a man with Beloved because my predecessor had 1. left her for a *man* and 2. did not earn a *living*. There was an incident when, *while I was with her and he was not*, he called on the phone and because I was feeling strong and behind the alcohol in me able to declare myself, I said, "Who's calling?" and he said "Peter," and I said, "What do you want, Buster?" and he said "I'll come over and Buster you." And then I went away from Beloved to join the sober men, and I was not with her and he was not with her *but I was with her* in the light that I experienced when I thought of her. So Beloved and I settled in on Greene Street

in SoHo. She had been a painter but after her one-person show she did no more paintings, to the consternation of her dealer, the gallery owner Yugoff, who, seeing sculptures of horses and animals unidentifiable, said that he had expected to find more of the small, worked paintings with exquisite, delicate line that had sold so well. "You've gone and pulled a Brancusi on me," Yugoff said. She was not of one mind about this man. She felt that he wanted things from her that she could not give him. Once he had come to the loft, before my time with her, and said, placing his hand on her shoulder, "What is it you want?" It was a question that had meaning but she could not answer him with anything more than a smile. Beloved felt controlled by Yugoff. He was from California. He wore light suits. *He had killed a man in a road accident in Turkey.* He was a happening thing but put restricting hands on her. When she came to him with thoughts of intellectual endeavors, he could only say, "Don't get esoteric on me, baby." The fine word wrapped in slang made her laugh with delight, but language aside, he had wounded her by stepping on a spiritual longing, for the project involved paintings of Biblical themes. Yugoff had trouble with me. He said to Beloved, "You are not among your own kind with him. He has no glitter dust on him, but only a sadness I associate with Eastern Europe. Plus, he has a fifty-pound last name that can only be a yoke around your neck. Let me put it this way. He is neither the beach at Malibu nor Harvard Yard. He is not the Whitney Museum or Southhampton. He is neither an Armani suit nor nails painted red. He lacks the luster and percentile of success." I have not told you, S.L., of the self I began to show her in this time, the self that would taunt her with words extrapolated from

her own speech, words like *Schopenhauer*, for in her openness to learning she had been reading the works of this philosopher, seeking instruction from the German greats in deference to her father's ancestry, seeking from them what she had not gotten from him, some ray of hope, but she spoke this word from the beauty of her mouth and maybe around this time there had been mention of a man's name, and even in the offhand way the name was spoken jealousy took hold, insecurity took hold, and I had to attack her with her very own Schopenhauer word, mocking her with it as she looked on with a confused smile and no defense. A word spoken in anger was like taking a drink, S.L. More followed, and the ugliness would grow. There is never the need for pride to get in the way of facts, S.L., never the need for that. Her success was hard for me to be happy about. If Yugoff came and took away some of her things, or informed her of a sale, I could be sullen for days, comparing my life with hers. Her success got soreness going in me that would not stop. The way she ate, her habit of wetting her lips with her tongue--these things were aimed at depriving me of my peace of mind, and so I had to attack her hard for the things that she was doing to me. You will probably want, S.L., there in the throes of your bogus-ness, to convene a federal grand jury for these crimes against her, but let me also add that in those instances in which Yugoff rejected her work, I felt depressed and shaken and desperate, for it was important for me to think of Beloved as only the highest quality, as she was hope itself to me. I have not told you that she drank in this time, that she liked her vodka tonics, that they lifted her spirits and gave her a glow. But within a few months the last of the alcohol was removed from the

house. The remaining bottle of vodka had begun to glow in the dark. That is the way I described it to Beloved, and she seemed to understand. My routine was as follows: home from the org. every weekday, a nap and early dinner, and then to work. My sense of failure was like being badly dressed. I sat in my room at a typewriter--later a word processor--hoping someday I would have the clothes I needed. I did not feel fit to be around without this writing time. Later, Beloved would say I had used her. Later she would say I had been dictatorial. Later she would remark on the eruptive anger I displayed if food was late being placed on the table. Later, she would give me a picture of myself that resembled my father. I had lived in the sins of Hannah, Hannah whose sour moods traveled through walls and controlled the environment and who, you feared, would attack anyone you brought into the apartment. And now I had become this sister whom I reviled. Beloved was like a singing bird, and I had quieted her song. Later she would accuse me of never wanting to have people over. I had fear of her friends, like Myrna, the architect, and Janice, the physician. I did not want these intelligent women coming into our home and seeing the way we lived, for the loft was never quite in order. Though I did not walk with my hands in correct smacking position, though I did not have my oldest sister's avoirdupois, Beloved turned me into Hannah with this charge. She had labeled me a repressive thing. Ronald Reagan was the President and George Bush was his Vice President. Patrick Buchanan was director of communications and Dan Rostenkowski headed the House Ways and Means Committee. The country had direction of a certain kind, and I was in love with Mikhail Gorbachev. "This man has steel teeth," none other

than Andrei Gromyko said of him. I even liked his birthmark. I had this idea that someday I would meet Gorbachev. My father-in-law said the Soviet government officials were trained within one inch of their lives. That filled me with fear, for we Americans seemed poorly prepared in comparison. I checked the *New York Times* every day to see how we were doing versus the Communists, whether our personal safety was being ensured, because Warsaw Pact forces were simply stronger than NATO forces, *because a Czech or a Bulgarian or a Rumanian could beat up a freedom-loving Frenchman any day of the week.* I would see my mother on Friday afternoons, S.L., during summer, when the office would close at noon. And I also had regular phone contact with her. "I love you, Mother," I would say to her often, and send her money. When I was newly sober I told her I was an alcoholic, that I had had a drinking problem, and that I was seeking to make restitution to the people I had harmed. She told me once more that at age thirty-two she had renounced the world, that the world had nothing that she wanted. I fell into the trap of trying to explain more about my new life. I call it a trap only because I was seeking something in the form of approval from her, and it wasn't forthcoming in the way that I wanted to hear it. She had the God of the Old Testament, and I had a different, less frightening God. She adjusted the knob on her light box and glowed brightly in the time that I was with her, but even this light could not take away the look of fear that I saw in her eyes, for I had not come to God in the way that she would have expected, the only way she knew. But she did not from that day on ask me the questions that had been so frequent and so infuriating in all the time that had passed since I was born--"Are you a

Christian? Have you been washed in the Blood of the Lamb? Do you know that we are living in the last days? Do you know that Jesus will come as a thief in the night?" These were not questions that she threw out to me anymore, S.L. The fear I saw in her told me that she was taking my measure, that she must not go that way with me anymore, that she could not control me in that area. I was coming to her strong, with sources of my own, S.L. Maybe just maybe I had my own damn light box, S.L. To my sister Hannah, who yes, after all these years still walked with her hands in correct smacking position I wrote a letter saying that I hoped for good relations between us in the future. Sober I saw her still in terms of black, but through the aid of prayer the black was losing its blackness and becoming gray. If I owed her an amend, and I did, it was for having hated her through the years. She did not respond to the letter, S.L. About her part in things she did not speak. She did not get into stuff like that. The past was forbidden territory for her, not a place for investigation. There had been a fire fight with my younger sister Vera my first sober Christmas. She had come to the Bowery loft unannounced about 11 p.m. one Saturday night. I had been talking with Julia and went downstairs and saw Vera with a woman who looked very much like Rachel, one of my older sisters, not the other older sister Naomi, who had narrated family history from the top of the city's bridges but the one who had run down Broadway naked and drunk for the president of the United States. The woman was wearing a wool cap that covered her hair. She was jumping up and down and saying she was so excited to see me. "I heard you're antisocial. I heard you're antisocial," she said. These words did not interfere with her jumping

at all. Vera's husband was also present, but in the background. He walked to the curb to distance himself. The woman frightened me. I closed the door on them, after telling Vera that I would be at the Christmas dinner at my mother's place. You know the story, S.L. Don't get willfully obtuse on me. Vera exploded at me at that Christmas dinner because I said to her husband, "Please don't surprise me with a visit again. It's better if you call first before coming over." I had known not to go near Vera with words of protest, for she would have said to me, "Boy, do you have problems." As it was she raised up on her husband at the Christmas dinner for not sticking up for her. "He was smacking me with words. With words he was smacking me, and you did not rush to my aid, as my father would have done. I had only to call on Daddy's air power and he would annihilate this bug," Vera said, and I had to acknowledge the truth of that, an ancient wrong that stood between us, for often she would call in my father's striking power when I had done nothing and he would smack and smack hard without a question asked and, my face throbbing from his blow, I would have to witness the smile of satisfaction that she showed me. After raising up on her husband, who ran to a corner in terror, she raised up on me, saying "Rip-off artist. Thief. Low-salaried bum. Creep. Man of the evil agenda. Mother, kick him out. Kick him out or I'm leaving." It was that sort of atmosphere, S.L. The apartment was on fire. Julia was with me that night, my first sober Christmas. She was overweight; her face and body had pill bloat on them. She had been a star once, but now she wasn't a star, and I had been a star once, but now I wasn't a star either. Vera was reigning supreme. She wore her framed Ph.D.

around her neck and sometimes took it off and cut people with its sharp edges. "Get out of here, bum, and take your ugly wife with you. You're both losers." She railed in this fashion and was at this point daughter of Hannah in the towering nature of her fulminating incandescence. She shooed Hannah and Hannah's son out of the room. "Let's all get away from him and his evil stink," Vera said, manifesting full control of them. Julia and I went out into the night. We saw *Apocalypse Now* at an East Side movie theater, the Baronet, near where I had first laid eyes on Julia *lo those many years ago* with the thought that she was out of my league. We watched war set to rock and roll music and knew it by its name of decadent folly. I too was being scorched by the orange flame of napalm, the canisters dropped on me not by fighter bombers but courtesy of Vera. I had shrapnel from her hideous bombs embedded in my skin. A dim light went on in my mind. I would have to see my part in the difficulty with Vera. The how and why is not important, S.L., but a month later I met with her. I acknowledged the harm I had caused by not showing up for her wedding or for her graduation. I admitted that I had once hidden her books back in high school, driven to this action by fear that she would outstrip me academically. I expressed to her a desire to put our relationship on a new basis. The meeting occurred in an Indian restaurant on east 28th Street. Years before, S.L., when I was nineteen, she had come to the rooming house where I was living, and under the influence of speed, which I had given her at her request, told me of the interest of a beautiful girl in me, told me, as she put it, only because she was feeling happy on the speed I had given her. That girl turned out to be Julia, S.L., and Vera's reluctant

admission seemed to me in that time to be a close call, a really close call, that if she had not been feeling as good as she was I would never have been sprung from the trap of family into my new life with Julia and her family, would never have left behind the world of failure for that of success, that Vera would have kept me behind bars and under her control. So yes, I went to the Indian restaurant to meet with her, I a low-paid editor who had trouble meeting the rent and she a tenured professor with an Ivy League doctorate, and told her of my wrongdoing. "I should call Daddy back from the grave to administer some more smacks to you, but I'll let you slide for now, you hopeless sinner, you." Let it be noted, S.L., that she made no apologies for the things she had done. Let it be noted that her arms were crossed and that on her face she wore a smile of satisfaction, and that these two things together delivered the message that *contrition on the part of men was her due*, that that was the message of all the marauding sisters of mine, that men had done them wrong, and even if I wasn't in the image of a real man, I would do just fine, thank you. Let it be noted that in this time Julia was involved in her own fierce fire fights with her family. From being the favorite, she was now the outsider, in her view. Her oldest sister had taken her place as the apple of her parents' eye, from the perspective that came to Julia in the time in which she was possessed by notions of injustice not only reigning supreme but seeking her death in isolation. It was as if life had gone on and Julia and I had not adapted to the changes. Now I was trying to get out of the corner into which I had painted myself. It was the whole purpose behind seeing Vera, she of the satisfied smile, so I could dissolve the force field that had been directing me. S.L., information

has to be passed on, and this you should know. The memories started a few years before the separation. Beloved was seeing a therapist, a Frenchwoman, not the therapist who thought he would help her with his lovemaking prowess some years before. Beloved complained that the woman was inattentive, that she actually fell asleep in her chair at times, or confided personal problems to Beloved, such as that her husband was irascible because of a long illness. I myself didn't have the most positive attitude toward therapy. I had left Dr. Merk about a year and a half into recovery. He who had meant everything to me had become dispensable. I would go to him on a Thursday and tell him that I had had a problem on Monday but after a couple of meetings in the rooms of the people who got together to find spirit the problem had vanished. It had begun to seem that I was paying him money to tell him how well recovery was working. My mentor--he who walked with God but could not afford the food of the Chinese people--never pushed the matter, but it was my impression he had no high opinion of psychotherapy. Dr. Merk--yes, S.L., that was his name--said it would be dangerous to leave, and said of my mentor, "Who is this character?" when I kept bringing up his name, and so I had no choice but to declare who he was, that he was of spirit more and more each day and liked the food of the Chinese people but often had to go without it, notwithstanding which he lived to good and exceedingly high purpose. Then one night I had a dream. Dr. Merk was preparing to go on a talk show. He was wearing a *three-piece suit* and fussing with his hair. In the next room, through an open door I could see the bright lights and the camera and the talk show host and hear the buzz of anticipation from the

audience. It struck me with force that Dr. Merk was not interested in me, that I wasn't the center of his world. He had left me. He had chosen his three-piece suit and the talk show over me. At the next session Dr. Merk had no comment on the dream. S.L. he held his silence on the moment of defining truth I was offering him. Once more I told him I wanted to leave, but he replied that termination would be unwise. That afternoon I wrote him a note, thanking him for his services and saying I would not be coming back. For the next week I was in the land of shaky. It seemed similar to the withdrawal from alcohol. I wanted to leave him, and knew I must, but was afraid I couldn't. I knew that alcohol had the power to kill me, but Dr. Merk (yes, Dr. Merk, S.L.) had been instrumental in getting me to the rooms of the sober people. Why then was I comparing him to alcohol and seeing him as potentially harmful, a habit that had to be let go of? I did not have the courage to tell him that I was leaving him to find God, for my fear was to say this would start the laughing thing going in him, the laughing thing that fed on the murder of six million Jews (yes he was of the Jewish faith, S.L., yes yes yes) and the shoot 'em boy run run mentality on the streets on New York City, on the cancer wards and the stillborn babies and all the molested, raped, defenestrated, and mutilated people of New York City and the world, laughter laced with Harvard irony, for no one can laugh in a crueller, more devastating way than a Harvardian, a laughter so dry and cold and sharp as to destroy you on the spot. So my time with Dr. Merk was over. One day at a time I did not see Dr. Merk, I detoxified from Dr. Merk, I sweated in an agony of withdrawal from Dr. Merk. I had come to him in a state of psychosis some years before and now I was leaving him for

God. That would mean nothing in itself, would qualify not even as a fact-ette, but it is simply that if I was hard on Beloved about her continuing with the woman therapist, if I referred to her with shocking disrespect as "that French fatty," if I expressed smug superiority, it is that my mind was not right to the degree that it needed to be right. I have been led to the other side, S.L. I am shocked at the offensiveness of my words and manner—this is a true statement of contrition, for that zone was journeyed into and passed through, and a recalled and stated accounting of what exactly happened is not to suggest that I am still there but have passed beyond, you who would so quickly indict, Ms. S.L. of the proportions so monstrous that I cannot even see. So yes, in this time, Beloved had given herself to this woman, whom I shall call for purposes of anonymity M.K.M., and in this time the song that Beloved was singing was a song of love and admiration for her mother, a piece of suspiciousness to my mind if not to hers, for the facts of her upbringing did not go with the feelings she was expressing. Her father was the one who drew her word bursts of tame ire. She said of him that he was from the land of pomposity and that cruel words passed his German lips with regularity. Of her mother she would say, "The poor woman. She was sick. That's different from actively hurting me." (I want you to know, S.L., ahead of the fact, that we were not Feebleness, Inc. but parties gathering to heal an ancient wound, to delve into the past so freedom could reign in the ever-expanding moment). For yes, her mother had been sick, bedridden for many years, a case of German-ness overpowering American-ness, for the sickness came shortly after the marriage of this most beautiful, cerebral, and gifted of New World

women, the glorious heiress of a publishing magnate. Beloved's older sister Sharon, raising up in peeve, had this to say: "What's wrong with the man? Why did he stay with her? She's awful. She's totally selfish," for Sharon's heart was with her father, and anguish filled her thinking of the mother who would never hold her, never take her to her, never teach her grooming and all the rest, the mother who would not have her as an adult to her house overnight, who made her stay in a hotel when she came to visit. The first time I saw Sharon was on a visit to Wellesley, where she was living with her husband and son. She was a year older than Beloved and had a heavier build and was stuck in time past and her hair was very black and very straight and she had the knack of flipping it back off her forehead with a toss of her head, *a gesture powerful and moving and designed to cause instant love in adoring American teenage boys* and on her wide face was a look of peeve that fixed her at some point in adolescence, as if she could not get beyond the wound an unavailable mother had seemingly inflicted on her (I say these things not giving full credence to the idea of permanent injury, in mild assertion that all events are there for me to transcend, their hardness designed only to send me wailing into the God realm, there to clarify all distortion in order to come back with jubilant new vision. Let nothing stop us, S.L., nothing , nothing , nothing). So there was a split, with Sharon not championing her father but choosing to prefer him over her mother, and Beloved continuing her steadfast smiling exoneration of her mother, who seemed to me to have given Beloved no more than she had given her sister, as if Beloved and Sharon existed only to satisfy the needs of those who had brought them into the

world. The point is only that M.K.M., who had come to this country from France and spoke English with a Frenchified accent, was everything to Beloved, who went to her in a state of trembling, and for minutes at a time could not speak. M.K.M. discussed household appliances. She spoke about motherhood. She asked after Myrna, who had once been her patient, never failing to be amazed that she had gone to Yale. M.K.M spoke just that way. She said, "And did you know that Myrna went to Yale?" M.K.M. was not lacking in passion. She developed feelings of attachment to some patients, young women like Myrna who had gone to Yale but others too. A woman now living on the streets came to see her once a week, sometimes while Beloved was in session with M.K.M. She arrived with a giant Hefty bag full of her worldly possessions, and without the trace of a smile on her face and without a word would drop her bag on the office floor and proceed to the bathroom. She wanted nothing more from M.K.M. than this, the use of her bathroom for five minutes once a week. No, she did not use the shower, and it is questionable whether she so much as used the toilet or the sink or even touched the towels. This was a matter M.K.M. could not comment on. She simply did not have the answer to that question nor did she wish to speculate. She just gave the woman access to the bathroom, for their relationship went back a long, long time. Beloved was astonished not alone by the fact of the ritual but more by M.K.M.'s attitude, which was one of stoic acceptance. When Beloved asked her about the woman, M.K.M. would merely say, "She is from France. Need I say more?" words that baffled Beloved but at the same time increased her admiration for M.K.M., for Beloved's most precious

gift, exceeding even that of her art, was her ability to love and admire and make you feel good about yourself. Beloved went to her a trembling child, fearing the minefield of memory, the shrapnel of personal holocaust. She went to her with hands clenched tight and raised to her face, in a posture of prayer and at the same time self-defense, not knowing whether the tirade of self-aggrandizement or the balm of love was to come her way from M.K.M., who talked to the grownup in Beloved, she was very European in that way about the matter, she had great respect for Beloved's father, for he had come from Germany and had done so much. The abiding question for Beloved was whether M.K.M. liked her. Did M.K.M. think she was stupid? What did M.K.M. think? To be away from M.K.M. was a complete agony, for at such times Beloved missed her in her very soul. These times came often, for M.K.M., in the company of her husband, was a frequent traveler. Travel, like clothes, expressed her. It was her way of saying that her life was rich, that she was being rewarded by this country she had immigrated to for listening to many of its people so well. These are the places that M.K.M. went to in one year alone: the Cayman Islands, Boca Raton, Morocco, New Zealand, and Kuala Lumpur. On these trips she took her ancient husband, for whom a full day's work was folding his umbrella, who with advancing years was emptying out and whose one seeming desire was to stand on the shoreline, wherever it was to be found. To Beloved M.K.M. expressed upset about her husband, who had been in years past a respected physician, and who now, along with the woman from France with the Hefty bag, would enter her living room while M.K.M. was in session with a patient, and simply stand in

their midst with his umbrella open, forcing from M.K.M. the bitter conclusion "He simply does not respect my professional life in the least." It was an anguished assessment to have to make, and Beloved, seeking to prop up M.K.M. in this time of her therapist's personal torment, offered her the solace of another interpretation, saying "Don't you suppose he's just old and lost his bearings?" to which M.K.M. retorted, with legendary French vehemence, "The man has been old ever since I met him on the Champs Elysee, rue the day. Seventeen days of the month, each and every month, he does this low French umbrella trick." And then, addressing herself directly to her husband, she spoke these words: "Chien, chien, sale chien de la parapluie." Though Beloved had not charted his appearances, there could be no disputing their startling regularity, and so she returned to a cautious silence in the face of the fulminations of her therapist whom, yes, I was guilty of disrespecting in that time, in my gross and unattractive way affirming the superiority of my path over that of my wife, a wrong requiring an amend that is ongoing, *a full honoring of my wife's path*, S.L. The nature of the resentment was not that M.K.M. permitted her husband to show off his umbrellas during sessions, or that, as part of her technique large chunks of time were given to dozing in her chair, it was not these things, S.L., but that she had never suggested to Beloved that she stop drinking or proposed a way to stop. M.K.M. said as much to Beloved. "You would never have stopped drinking without him," M.K.M. said, she said this matter-of-factly, according to Beloved, with no sign that she was coming from chagrin city, and what I heard her to mean was that she would have been content to go on receiving a fee from Beloved whether Beloved

continued to drink or not, that in fact she assumed Beloved would go on with her drinking if I had not shown up, and that this drinking in and of itself was a matter of indifference to M.K.M., an astonishing fact when you consider that Beloved's recovery could not begin until the symptom was relieved. This negligence could only be explained by the European-ness of M.K.M.—her dismissal of self-help groups as so much nonsense next to the profundity of a psychoanalysis that features as one of its cathartic elements the appearance of a doddering old man driven to display the splendor of his parapluie to the music of M.K.M.'s ineffable sounds of dozing. What you need to know, S.L., you with your phony American roots, is that happiness is an American word, freedom is an American word, that our dictate is to transcend the chains that bind us from within as well as without, for we are spiritual in nature and being driven out of the distractions and the hiding places of sin and, carcinogens notwithstanding, into bliss. We do not stand on ceremony, S.L., we simply get the job done. Know this too, S.L., that at some point during the night Beloved would wake me. When I would ask her if something was wrong, her response was to say that she was going to die. She would be trembling, and for seemingly hours we would lie together, her head on my shoulder. At such times I felt a strong tenderness for Beloved, for she seemed helpless as a child, a beautiful child, and while the source of her agony was inexplicable to me, I only knew that it was real and must have something to do with the past. Beloved was not from the land of the histrionic--she did not wear things on her sleeve. I offer as proof, where none is needed, the time she cut her thumb with a carving tool while working in her studio. She had a dinner

engagement that night with the gay men of SoHo, who loved her winning ways, and kept her bandaged thumb under the table and ate using one hand, maintaining the charade of normalcy and conversing with extreme grace until she fainted, bandage and hand and skirt covered with her own blood. Surgery was required for a severed tendon, and her thumb has never been the same. (The thing, of course, that is needed is a path. A man starts his journey. At one end is the bottle. Always the bottle is emptying. And at the other end, of course, is God, the bright shining light of God. The path has exit ramps, shortcuts with dead-end destinations. There is no misfortune so long as you are on the path. All events, no matter how seemingly harsh or cruel or unfair, move you forward toward the light. Despair has no meaning. You may have the illusion of regression--like a man running backward through a fast-moving train--but progress is the reality.) Let this distinction be made, S.L. We kept the car in a lot on Canal Street and paid out what was a small rent for this privilege. The fee would go up two or three times a year. We talked of changing to the municipal parking lot over by the Hudson Rivre, but never acted on this-- it seemed too far to walk. M.K.M., on the other hand, parked on the street. Sometimes Beloved would arrive for an appointment and M.K.M. would still be sitting downstairs in her car, waiting for the hour to be reached so she could be free of the threat of the relentless brown-uniformed meter maids, itching to write out a parking violation just a minute before you had the space legitimately. M.K.M. would have nothing to do with parking lots or garages, and never once in all her years of street parking had received a summons. She made this claim with rightful pride,

and we could only conclude that her parking mania was a European thing. S.L., let me only say that we would drive upstate on Friday nights. The Saw Mill just past Hawthorne and then onto the Taconic. Once over the 205th Street Bridge and into Riverdale I would begin to relax, sensing that the danger of random violence had eased. By 10 p.m. we would be there. For the rest of the weekend I would not be seen much during the day. I enjoyed Saturday and Sunday mornings, for I was free to meditate longer than on workdays. I meditated the way I had been taught, in a straight-back chair. My back was bad; the lotus position was uncomfortable. I focused on my breath and went to God for strength and comfort, and He kept turning me back toward people. Myrna would come up. She would arrive with an expensive trade paperback book. She was good with food, and liked to involve herself with the preparation of dinner. Some large part of Myrna was back in childhood with Beloved. Myrna had been the follower, Beloved the fearless leader. I felt self-conscious around Myrna, afraid to say something unintelligent, afraid to be myself. It was painful to have her as a guest for the weekend, for I could never get her presence out of my mind. One weekend she drove up in the car with us. We kissed on the cheek in greeting. "Mmm," she said. It was a false sound. I felt that I had glimpsed a secret, that something about her had been confirmed to me. Myrna talked about wanting a man, and in just that way. "I want a man," Myrna said, but the way she said "man" was exaggerated so you could only think--putting it together with the false "Mmm"--that a man was not what she wanted. Not that she was without. Men were always approaching her. She had boyfriends, many of them, but they never

stayed, or she never stayed. On this one weekend she removed her tennis whites at the lake and stood at the edge of the dock ready to dive, raising her arms and bringing them together over her head, her body slim and tan and firm in a pale green one-piece bathing suit. My caution about the water's shallowness at the edge of the dock brought her motion to a stop, for I was fearful of a broken neck, fearful of paralysis, I had checked her action because I had read *performance* in the way she approached the edge, as if she had to be perfect in body and form and bold in action for the two of us, Beloved and me, and so yes, S.L., I stepped in, aborting tragedy, knowing somehow that image must often be implicated in the unfolding of that event, as if my function now in life was to put the brakes on after a lifetime of driving with no brakes at all. Over my strong protest Beloved put Myrna in the front seat for our drive down from the country. Myrna kept a proper and self-conscious distance from me. Her hands stayed on the dashboard to brace herself should a crash occur. Fortunately there were no traffic tie-ups, for I had heard from Beloved, who had been so informed by Myrna in a moment of *full candor*, of Myrna's tendency to legendary snits when obstacles stood between her and her designated destination. Beloved heard how Myrna had demolished tiling on a platform wall because the subway got malicious and was stalling her, just stalling her, by not arriving but hanging back just out of sight in the hideous tunnel, how she gnashed her teeth and whacked repeatedly the bulletproof window of the token booth with her shoulder bag without once shaking the relentless passivity of the clerk assigned to that booth, whose only response was finally, finally to circle the side of his head with his

index finger and mouth the word "Cuckoo" not once but three times. So no, this we did not have to contend with, S.L., the unraveling of Myrna, there were only the mildest signs of disturbance, some gnashing of teeth, a few whacks of the dashboard, when a traffic snarl threatened to develop. Back in New York Myrna brought over a man for our inspection, a man who was soon to have a show of his watercolors at the National Arts Club, an effete man who played the piano passably, a man who prompted an embarrassed smile on Myrna's face at the mention of his name. Know this, S.L. When Myrna called the house Beloved would only speak to her standing up, and with one foot on a chair. Beloved's telephone voice was loud and even booming. My mother had an even louder, a fully unmodulated telephone voice, such that you had to hold the receiver away from your ear. And though she never ever put her leg up on the chair while speaking, there is enough here to say one thing runs into another, S.L. It is simply life's way. Beloved was not entirely uncritical of her friend. Myrna would spend weekends with us because she had no other place to go. Myrna was a social climber. Beloved had these things to say. They were not damning comments but rather, observations, assessments, of a sober, clear-eyed kind, with the understanding that these aspects of Myrna were OK, that they were just facets of her personality. Myrna was still making the scene. She had a glittering lifestyle that included dinner parties and recitals at her loft and a fancy social circuit. It was a world that Beloved had let go of and that I had never belonged to. Myrna was so strong, so accomplished, and I could get swept up in admiration of her, though not when she said "Mmm" as she gave a kiss of

greeting or talked of "wanting a man" or when she began to gnash her teeth and whack the dashboard in fear of a traffic snarl. Let me say it this way, S.L. Hannah exists in many women. There is not just one Hannah, but many of them, *in varying degrees*, requiring aversion to have its place. The country house had once been a motel unit. Somehow it was lifted off its foundation and onto a flatbed truck and moved to its present site. Gangsters may have bedded down with their molls in it. Bootleggers may have done their distilling thing in it. The adulterers of America may have trysted their nights away in it. The house had the smell of American history 1930 ff. in its frame. S.L., it was positioned lovingly, the screen door of the kitchen looking straight out at the massive oak and beyond the green lawn and the shad tree blooming white first thing in spring and beyond that, heart heart heartbreakingly, the old woodshed, the sun kissing everything, the birds serenading. A feeling of perfect relationship with the things around me, a wife who had given me the world. But we have to go back, S.L., to the time of my seeing Beloved while still married to and living with Julia. We have to discuss the fact of Beloved's pregnancy by me, much as I would like to run away from it in horror at the pain it can cause. Yes, there was a period of indecision whether to have the child--all on her part--even as she moved toward the abortion clinic on lower Fifth Avenue, a place with Muzak and plastic chairs. Don't ask the feelings of a man-child about having a child because there were none, such imaginings were in the realm of the inconceivable for such as me, who knew pain and anguish nonetheless that beauty had the chance of issuing from her. Don't even ask me to talk about it, I don't know how to get near a description of what

they did to her, I'm shit with things of the body, the rain pelting down and bouncing off the pavement like giant sinkers, she in pain after a rough procedure. I escorted her home wanting to siphon the pain from her beautiful face. I felt concern for her physical well-being in my bones, and soon thereafter would also feel the horror of the life snuffed amid the Muzak. There is no place to go but to the bottle or to God when you have made a mess of your life, S.L., when the sight of a man with his young child makes you want to die, knowing that you didn't have the courage to break the mold, knowing you weren't responsible enough to even conceive of taking responsibility for the life that was forming. This was not the first aborting. Back in 1976 Julia had become pregnant and Dr. Banko, her therapist, ordered her to have an abortion. It was all right. I seemed accepting, except after the fact, when Dr. Merk, *my then therapist*, expressed astonishment that Dr. Banko, *her therapist*, could order an abortion without suggesting an exploration of my feelings. To that point I had only been concerned for the well-being of Julia. I made a contrast in my mind between Julia and Beloved. Julia with her hateful attitudes toward motherhood and her loathing for pregnant women--"bloated bitches," she called them, mimicking their form by holding her arms out with her hands joined and shuffling along chewing as if a cow working a cud to suggest some doltish soul carrying a great weight. There are mysteries to relationships, including how we do not murder each other more often. Beloved, on the other hand, had a child, a beautiful child, proof positive of her affirmation of life. After the marriage we tried to get pregnant. When Beloved was late getting her period I was terrified. I saw my writing life,

my freedom, vanishing in diapers and bitterness. Happiness was the arrival of her period. There was another reason for concern. Beloved was in her mid-thirties. She had been raising a daughter, and alone, all these years. Was it really fair to ask her to have a second? Wasn't there the potential for resentment? Wouldn't she inevitably cast blame on me if, well into her forties, she was still mothering? Wouldn't a second child lead to terrible rage? Beloved said she had no anger. From that first evening with her, S.L., when I was still with Julia, I had been showing her manuscripts. "This is wonderful, great," she would say, returning a story to me. Sometimes I would look up the words she used in the dictionary, though they were of course simple words, words like "brilliant" and "riveting." I needed to savor those words, S.L., to prolong the high. When I was a child my mother would call me to a private meeting with her to discuss my report card and for hours and days I would glow with the approval I had received from her for my good grades. Perhaps it was this way with Beloved, too, S.L. Perhaps it felt like I had found the complete mother. This you must know, that when the blows of failure landed on my being, when the manuscript of a novel was returned to me by a publisher or agent with a brief, firm letter of rejection, a depression that was like falling down a deep hole would follow. So it was this one time shortly after Julia and I had split up and I was still living alone at the *Bowery loft*. People seemed far away and unreachable. It was Beloved who beamed me out of this hole, with her "wonderful" and "great" and "brilliant" words. My manuscripts continued to be rejected in spite of her sunshine words, and when she had a small success, I would erupt, implying that the art world

approved of her because she was moneyed, because she was from a cultured family, that there might be a tacit conspiracy to raise her up and keep me down. And as with Julia, I had a right to my anger, I had a right to attack. The bastards didn't want me because I wrote the truth. The bastards didn't want me because I wasn't cute, because I didn't wink slyly at the audience while pretending to be a failure, wasn't one of those who couldn't have failed if they had wanted to, so middle class, so connected were they, people with pretty American last names. "I'm just a motherfucking nigger." I said it loud, I proclaimed my identity to her. One afternoon, coming home to a rejected manuscript, I exploded, "Well, you could at least give us a goddamn baby." My anger, my soreness, my deprivation. Beloved met a woman named Brenda, a woman with the loud, amplifying voice of an actress. Beloved proposed that we wait a while before resuming our attempt at pregnancy. Brenda was sure I wouldn't mind, Beloved said. It offended me that Brenda had intruded herself into our marital problems. It frightened me. I had an eerie sense of some shift, that Beloved was pulling away from me, that though she was standing right in front of me, she had left, that cooperation had been replaced with control. I waited some days before bringing the matter up. When I did, she said, "You see. You can't do it. You just can't do it. You just have to have your own way." I told her I didn't want my own way, that I just wanted to be free to discuss the matter, that I had feelings about it. She continued to see me as trying to impose my will, a fear of hers that anguished me, for I was ambivalent about pregnancy, I was capable of thinking about her welfare. The pain came not from not having a baby, but from the break in communication. "We could have had a baby. I wanted to, but you pushed and

pushed. You pushed too much, trying to be Big Daddy, trying to run the show, with your fat stomach hanging out. You could have had anything you wanted, but you grabbed too hard. Now I've won and you've lost, Buster." Small things happened. We rented a house on Block Island. Ariadne brought along her friend Wilma and smart-mouthed me in front of her. She said, "Shut up, jerk," after I had sharply criticized her for going off to play near the water without telling Beloved and me. Wilma gasped. Wilma was from Holland. She did not talk to her father in that way back home. The house was on the water. Lightning without the accompaniment of thunder stabbed the ocean repeatedly our first night. I had never seen lightning so close to the ground. The storm needed close monitoring, or else it would punish us with a strike for our cockiness. This I knew for sure, S.L., and so I stayed up with an eye peeled on its silent, stabbing malevolence until dawn. I had brought baggage with me on the trip. There had been a verbal warning from Ms. Small, my boss, for some oversight involving a set of blueprints for one of our publications. "This constitutes a verbal warning." These were her words to me, S.L., and thereafter I was afraid to talk on the telephone. I had this idea that Ms. Small was noting my personal phone time as part of building a case for my dismissal. As you'll remember, I'm sure, S.L., sometime before she had rebuked me for making too many personal calls. You're not a man. Can anything be clearer? Your wife doesn't want a baby by you, your stepdaughter humiliates you, and your boss (your female boss) is out to can you. This was the message that I heard. What is a man to do when the forces of femaleness have aligned themselves in such a way against his being but to affirm his power? I subjected

them to silent rage for the next week for Ariadne's *smart-mouthing* of me. When that wasn't tormenting me the pregnancy issue rose in my mind. I imagined myself opening a window and dropping the hellish thing out of it that had been contaminating the house. Five minutes of peace followed, before the anger returned. At the foot of the bluffs was a narrow strip of rocky beach. As I was coming out of the water, Beloved rushed past me in the opposite direction. She was smiling in a way that made me uneasy. The water was choppy, and a couple of small fishing boats bobbed in the distance. Beyond the swells I lost her in her outbound journey, and in this time the meaning of her smile grew clearer to me. The revelation defines me for all time as a coward, has to, has to, S.L., but rather than swim toward her, wherever she might be--I was without my glasses and being nearsighted could not see well--I remained rooted to the spot, not willing yet to scream for help for fear of, dare I say it, embarrassing myself. Or was it that I was afraid of making the whole thing real? I stumbled to the beach and put on my glasses. Beads of water dripped onto the lenses and interfered with my vision. At least a minute seemed to have passed and there was no sight of her. Like me she was no better than an average swimmer. I began to think of Ariadne exploring the island on bicycle with her friend. I would have to go to her and say, "Ariadne, I have something to tell you. Something has happened. Your mother has had an accident. She was taken out to sea by the rip tide and was found drowned." I would have to say this to Ariadne, and Ariadne, at age twelve, would have to process it in her child's mind, that the one who had been her lifeline through all the years, the one who had never left her, as her father had left her,

the one who gave her strength and love and security and protection, was gone. The time would be fixed in her mind for all time, where she was, what she was wearing, my big, ugly face as I spoke the words that would deliver her into a new world, birth her in this ugly fashion into a world that had acceptance as its destination but which screamed with pain. I would survive more easily than Ariadne, for I had the laughing thing in me, the thing that saw all tragedy as sly histrionics at best, people weeping and agonizing over loss, when the point was always, always, to transfer dependencies from the human onto God. I was fortified with the stuff of the rodent world, could subsist on offal and remain strong. And of course I would come into wealth, being the beneficiary of Beloved's will, and there would be women, many women, women younger than Beloved, women who would take me in their mouths while I tooted down the highway in my BMW, thin women who wore garter belts and crotchless underwear and let themselves be taken by seven men in one night, women unafraid of anal intercourse, women who signed affidavits stating "I love it" when men with 13-inch John Holmes cocks stuck these cocks up their firm asses, women with luscious mouths who loved for these men to come in their mouths, who savored the come of these endowed men. Yes, these women would be in my life, and there would be a different one every week, and life would be fun, fun, fun, a lot of fucking and a lot of fun and never ever again dominated by women, for now I would have huge financial assets to make me indomitable. Yes, it would be that way, S.L., for lust was in my heart, I saw the women with the painted toenails and the twitching bottoms. I followed them into elevators and onto

subway cars, I tried to look down their blouses or glimpse their panties under their short skirts, I wanted to stick my tongue in their luscious mouths. These were the things that awaited me after the death of Beloved. So that yes, when I was on the verge of screaming, of declaring that I needed help, I saw a blessed sight, a sight that filled me with relief and joy, I saw Beloved, some one hundred yards down the beach, staggering exhausted from the water, the strap of her black bathing suit pulled down over her shoulder. When I saw that she was all right, that she was just struggling for her breath, I shouted furiously, demanding to know what had happened, and supplied my own answer. "You were trying to scare me. You were trying to punish me. You were trying to die at me, weren't you?" "Leave me alone. I could have drowned out there, and all you want to do is get mad at me," she gasped. Yes, she had wanted to die, she said later, but once swept along, she realized how much she wanted to live, only the tide was strong, and she had trouble getting back in. *Another minute and she would have given up*, she said. What I like, S.L., is for people to admit what they are about. Have you ever watched people closely? Take this woman the other day. She's no exception but a familiar sight in every city, you know, the one who crosses the street looking for traffic *in the wrong direction*. Is this not slyness? Is this not phoniness to set out for a bashing while pretending that you aren't? And what choice is there but to stand over her battered body and let it be stated that she got just what she was asking for? How many times have you done this very thing, S.L.? Oh do not hide where your phoniness lies. The clubs that would ban you for such a confession are not where you truly want to be anyway. I called my

mentor that day, as if he were my lifeline, screaming Daddy, Daddy, across the continent. He had nothing to say when I told him about the near-drowning, nor of my image of throwing the pregnancy issue out of the window as a way of giving the matter visually into God's hands. I hung up feeling uncertain. Was his silence a form of judgment? Was he saying, "You poor deluded man, who can't even incline a woman to want to have a baby by you?" for he had children by five different women in five different states. Was he saying he was more of a man than me? Has certainty taken its ugly shape, S.L.? Lightning stabbed the sea. Clothes flapped on old clotheslines. People ran shrieking into the one movie theater on the island to escape from their lives. Beloved and Ariadne and Ariadne's friend Wilma cowered together while my sickness ran its course. And yet great things were happening. I was sober. It's not a picture in the round to reveal only these things, S.L., for Ariadne was given to saying, "You two are so nice to each other. It's disgusting." A year after Block Island Beloved announced that she no longer wanted to spend weekends in the country, that she had never liked the property and that I had taken it over. The house had been her ex-husband Peter's idea. She had never wanted it at all, she said. What was the point of such a place, anyway? When I was in the house, all I did was crowd her. She needed space and I wasn't leaving her alone. All these things she said. It was hard to get through weekends without her, but I told myself she would like me more because of my absence. S.L., it was strange. Sometimes, when we were physically together, it felt as if she had disappeared on me. Our sex life, however, was better than ever. In this time I read William Kennedy's *Ironweed*.

I'm not here to talk about the book, just a passage that states a woman's preference for a large penis. The passage had a disturbing effect on me, S.L., for I got to thinking that Beloved too desired a large penis, and since I wasn't so endowed, that I could easily lose her for this reason. The things of the body came between me and the grace of God, S.L. My ego brought obsession to bear on my mind, banishing that grace of God. I bought an artificial penis. Beloved let me use it. I bought racy underwear, which I encouraged her to wear. I bought a hand whip which I used on her bottom, while her hands and feet were tied. I got scared and pulled back, afraid of the zone we were entering. For the next few days I felt overpowered by sexual fantasies. I saw us bringing Myrna and other attractive women into our circle. I saw orgies and other forms of sexual wantonness. I passed women on the street and wanted to stick my tongue down their throats and my hand up their dresses. I called my mentor. "There's a child abuser in each of us," he said. I made a decision not to use these items anymore. Some part of me wanted to complete the journey, but I was afraid where it would lead. I had this idea that death was the final stop. And yet it was like giving up on pleasure after the first delicious taste. It was like putting down a glass of wine after one sip. I was terrified that he would take away from me the fake penis and the racy underwear, but his focus was on the s-m gear only. He said my fear was that Beloved would leave me if I didn't use those things. In this time, S.L., all of New Jersey flooded SoHo on the weekends, and in this time, I am frightened to say--for they will come and beat me beat me beat me until my face is *unrecognizable*--I asked myself silently why it was that some blacks

couldn't behave themselves (this was in the time of wilding), and was grateful for the second home in the country as an imagined place of refuge when the riots started and those who were called on to suppress them went out onto the nation's highways in their large trucks. We had taken several trips together, S.L. Our first was a drive up to Quebec, where we seldom saw the flag with the maple leaf. Ariadne was at camp that summer for the first time. She wrote every day pleading to come home. Beloved was on the rack. She felt assaulted, but held out against Ariadne's pleas. It was a tortured time for her. Add to Ariadne's campaign the fact that M.K.M., Beloved's therapist, was away for much of July and August, and know that she had pain, for M.K.M. was the mother she had never had. So it was Beloved missing M.K.M. and Ariadne missing Beloved. The heat was stifling that summer, with day after day of 90 degree temperatures. Not until we were deep in the Adirondacks on the Northway did it loosen its oppressive grip. I thought of my mother, who was now eighty-three. An air conditioner was an appliance she didn't want, she said. In its place I bought a fan and stood it on a chair in her living room and fled. My mother was sitting in a sweltering apartment in Manhattan and I was zipping toward Montreal on the Northway. S.L., I took her on the trip with me. That is only the truth. At a restaurant near Quebec City, a heavysset woman with a peasant manner served us in a plain dining room. She wore her hair in a braid and had a meek expression on her bewildered face, the expression that my mother, *who was not afraid of a little dirt* and once worked as a maid for the Park Avenue wealthy (do not be afraid of words, do not be afraid of them, do not let your fear bottle you up)

wore on her face. In that dining room I had the eerie sense that I was seeing my mother at some younger age, leading the life of a beast of burden under the supervision of the hardhearted men men constituting throwbacks to another time before the womens did their rising up. It disturbed me that I had come to Canada and there she was. Some days later, I drove into a Canadian sunset after dinner, having left Beloved in the hotel. The sky was purple and as I headed into the vanishing sun the songs of my childhood came to me and I started to weep, for as the congregation sang "I Walk in the Garden" my mother was right up close to me and I knew she was dying, I knew that the heat of New York City was killing her, and I had left her with nothing but a cheap fan to ward it off. I reached a phone booth and called. Yes, I was right to think she had been suffering, there had been some bad days and nights, but now the worst was over, she said. "How interesting that you knew," she said. I wanted to get the laughing thing going in me, the thing that said I had a bogus relationship with my mother, that I didn't love her, that I didn't honor her, that I just expiated my guilt by seeing her a couple of times a month and sending her money. *You little nothing mamma's boy.* I heard this voice, but came on strong and sent it on its way. S.L., it began with a small matter, a piece of lettuce. Beloved put it in her mouth and I saw the entree sitting there uneaten and the rest of the salad uneaten and I said to her, "Your food is getting cold," and she said to me, "I'm so full. I've eaten a ton," and I said, "You haven't eaten a fraction of your salad even. How can you be full?" But she said she was stuffed to bursting. She said this in a restaurant near a river bordered by a retaining wall, on which, the next day, she sat provocatively,

leaning backward so that it was only a matter of time before she plunged fifty feet to her death. She sat on this wall with a smile on her face, ignoring the danger, ignoring my discomfort. I had knowledge by this time that things could be over in a second. They could be over with one strong Block Island current. They could be over with a tilt backward, the head smashed, the body smashed, blood of the beloved flowing into the Canadian waters, the disappearance into death preceded by the same strange dissociated smile that she had flashed while racing past me into the waters of Block Island Sound the year before. So in my anger, in my desperation, I hurled words at her. "You sit there on the edge of oblivion looking like a concentration camp lady. That is what you look like, do you know it? You look like you're starving yourself to death. Now get down from that wall. I can't stand it," but she only turned up her smile and said, "What's the matter with you? I'm just sitting here. I'm not going to fall," and as quickly as that raised herself up and began to dance on the wall, doing so en pointe on the wall's edge, saying these words, "Sleep should come to us all, don't you think, sweet beddy-bye sleep?" I grabbed hold and pulled her to the ground, and want to say to you here, S.L., you who loiter in the halls of government--the Senate and the House, the Supreme Court and the Oval Office, unresistant to all of them who hold the power--that something was happening on this trip, some seeming bifurcation of the road. She was changing before my eyes. That leaf of lettuce, that statement of her fullness. Later I was to learn that at 5'6" she had gone down to 82 pounds on that trip. I didn't know. I didn't know. What? What? That it was the only control she had, that the past was obliterating the present. In a

park in Quebec City she had this to say: "Why don't you go back to the hotel if you're tired? I want to see more." It was the way she said it that made me feel as if I had been shot. At Perce a visit to an island bird sanctuary. A drunken, lewd man attached himself to me on the boat ride, as if he knew secrets from my past that gave him access. Any closer and I would have smashed his face in fury. Her father and mother were ardent travelers. Was Beloved trying to follow their example? There seemed to be a blight on the woodlands, large patches of ruined trees, like ringworm on a scalp. Had there been fires? Was it acid rain? No one would tell us. The whole country silent about the source of spreading evil. What is one to say? The next year we were in the French Alps. La Grave, a small town. The motel a fire trap. No smoke detectors. No fire extinguishers. Just a wood structure for cooking the lodgers. We had driven a tiny Ford compact from Geneva, where our plane arrived. To Beloved I had said, "Please do not book us on a DC-10, for they are notorious for the hideous modern ailment of metal fatigue, a twentieth century malady if ever there was one." I did not plead with her or come on strong, but rather, expressed myself in the understated manner that I have become rightly known for, S.L. So that when we arrived in Geneva, I collapsed in exhaustion, because for eight hours I had been fully responsible through relentless vigilance for the plane remaining aloft, a plane with a plate next to the boarding door that clearly, clearly stated, "DC-10, DC-10, fret your ass off baby," leaving me no choice but to interrogate the flight crew as to their competence. "We are Swiss, we are not you American shitheads who can neither maintain nor operate your craft because you lack a

work ethic and have a society going to the dogs. You whose workers go about their tasks with Walkman headsets covering their ears and a Hostess Twinkie or a Wing Ding in one hand and a tool in the other. We are a precise people, with nonpareil scientific and mechanical aptitudes." Such filthy boasting, and then to buzz repeatedly every air tower at the airport on their bizarre flight path before heading off on a straighter course to their native land. Beloved's parents had given us express instructions to spend no more than a day in Geneva, to get out quickly, that nothing worthwhile was ever to be found in such a ludicrously dull city, that the lake would lull you to sleep. But that night I found myself crying, *crying*, on a cobblestone street, for at 10 p.m. I no fear that men for whom remorse was not even a word would come and snuff my life for money to buy themselves some Hostess Twinkies, I had no fear of that at all—sooner or later the trucks setting out on the nation's highways—and could feel the terror and stress leaving me, though the next morning, as we were preparing to set out, a crone appeared on those very same cobblestone streets. Her every step was cautious, her glances were unremittingly guarded, suspicious, and harsh, and suddenly I saw the whole of Switzerland in this withered woman. "The Old World sucks the big one. U.S. number one. U.S. number one," I chanted in her befuddled face, telling her all this whiteness made me uncomfortable. This you must know, S.L. We opted off the main road to a secondary road over the mountains. A narrow road with no shoulder, no guardrails, and horrendous drops. In the valleys cars on fire, occupants in their death wails. The continual shifting of gears in the tinny car. The dread of stalling out and having to slip into

first while the car was rolling backward before it edged off the path and plummeted down the drop. The mountains had been stripped bald, denuded of trees and grass; like old gray elephant skin they looked, S.L. My knee was sore the first few days, but Beloved showed no patience on our daily hikes. Above me on the trails she would turn and breathe fire, saying I was a drag on her every which way. I did not understand where her energy came from, for she seldom ate, it seemed, but her thin beautiful legs carried her far ahead of Ariadne and me. Things began happening. That first week she disappeared beyond the edelweiss over a ridge of stones. The plan had been to meet at the rest stop near the mountain's summit, but hour after hour passed without her appearance. "Don't worry," I said to Ariadne, but it was I who was worried, and I could feel the girl's scorn for me, the foolish, incompetent adult who was falling to pieces and trying to infect her with his fear because her mother had been gone for a short while. When finally she returned she was out of breath and exhausted. She had gone farther up the mountain, in search of the crevasse her father had plummeted into many years ago. No, she couldn't be sure she had found the one, but there were others, and all she would say was that there was a sense of peace she experienced looking down into their blackness. She had just wanted to go off and have a good time, she said. What was all the fuss about? S.L., She made me sound like a clutching man rather than someone with a reasonable anxiety about his wife. We set off for the town, with her in the lead. I had come to the Alps weighed down with a large suitcase, whereas Beloved traveled light, with nothing more than an overnight bag. She was downstairs having breakfast

before Ariadne and I were out of bed. She grew impatient. She accused me of being dawdleacious, for I had morning rituals that needed tending to--prayer and meditation primarily--before I was in fit condition for Alpine exertions. For the first four days on the paths I brought up the rear and accepted her scoldings, knowing that her trail of fume was owing to an excessive sense of responsibility, which she daddy loathed daddy to high hell daddy loathed, yes S.L., life was just like that sentence for her, full of the impediments of him and no fun to traverse, a blow to the stomach, an ad nauseum cross-block, things of that nature. And then I got untracked. Don't ask me how. The magic ointment of a Swiss-head hiker who saw me hobbling along, I suppose. The pain vanished and I slipped from first into third gear, and then into fourth and fifth. I began flying. Soon Beloved and Ariadne were staring at my back. We climbed to the snow line of one huge mountain, and then chose to go back down an alternate, more exciting route, full of rock crops and steep grades and narrow treacherous trails. I began running over acres of rocks, did back flips and somersaults over mountain passes, and zipped to the edges of promontories and hung from them. I tumbled down steep hills, bathing in silt, and in ecstasy rammed my head against stone, covering my face with blood. "Idiot. Do you know that people can die up here?" Beloved shouted. For hours we saw no one. Lead-colored clouds covered the sky. At some point down below we spotted a column of people going along a trail. We had only to slide down the graveled side of the mountain to join up. But the time for sissification had not come, and so I exhorted us around a perilous path banding the mountain instead. We lost sight of those people and again we were

on our own. Soon we were free of the endless stretches of rock and onto a dirt trail overhung with trees and shrubs. At one point we saw the pylons and steel cables of the ski lift, and even passed a cable car station, heralding civilization, but it was late now, and the station had just closed, the last car sliding away teasingly on the overhead. It was not lost on me that the sun was dipping toward the horizon. But I was not heartbroken, S.L., I was not yearning with all my soul to be on that car headed for safety and comfort, though less than a half hour later I was frantic. Ariadne had sore feet, the sun had disappeared over the mountain, the coolness of night was coming, and we had nothing, nothing, no flashlight to guide us, no food to eat, no blankets for warmth, no guns to protect against the bears that would implacably mosey our way and eat us, eat us with leisurely, excruciating slowness, a hand here, a toe there, have you sampled his calf and her abdomen, Louie? I have told Dr. Randolph of this incident, S.L., do not treat it as a late-breaking news development. I have told him how I suddenly took it upon myself to fly, to just fly, for all I was worth, down the trail and to the town so I could return with help and lights, because we weren't going to make it in time, because darkness was going to fall and the bears were coming, the bears were coming, they were moseying from all directions, to do their devouring thing, their snouts wet and their tongues hanging from their filthy, filthy mouths. I have told Dr. Randolph how I ran, that I slid frantically down slopes, tore my flesh racing through brambles, shouting to myself that I was a coward, a coward, abandoning my wife and stepdaughter, not saving them but saving myself and doing this simply because I did not want to be cold and hungry and terrified waiting for the

filthy mouths of the bears. I told him how I cursed the evilness of the trail for extending itself so maliciously and how all studies have shown that it was willfully and purposely thwarting me. I told him how I roared into the gendarmes' quarters and willed a perfect communication with them with my high school French, simply shouted the slothful ones awake and led them forcefully to the wall map of the area to zero in on the site of the impending tragedy, and then summoned them to gather their gear and move out without the slightest attempt to stall. In a jiff I shooed them into their car for the drive to the foot of the trail, and then directed them, again with flawless high school French, to stop off at the hotel, for it would be a good idea, no, an excellent idea, as I explained to them, to leave word in no uncertain terms with the obtuse desk clerk just what it was I was engaged in with these gendarmes, on the chance, on the off-chance I should say, on the remotest chance imaginable Beloved and Ariadne should get down and themselves start along the agonizing path of doubt as to where I--I who have no name, no name whatsoever, who could be found dead in a bed in a foreign country and left to rot in an open field with no one to identify me--was to be found, engaged in heroic, no cowardly, cowardly activity brought on by the hysteria of the truly skittish, no the truly insane, a marvel of fuss-budgeting neurosis, and who, who was out there once I had crammed these sluggard Frenchie gendarmes into their hideous vehicle, who walked up and showed their faces to us but yes, yes, yes, Beloved and Ariadne, Beloved and Ariadne, you've got it, by God, that's who it was all right, Beloved and Ariadne, Beloved and Ariadne, and fortified by my complete love and relief at their arrival I could turn my attention to the gendarmes and yes,

let them shame me with the looks that came from the eyes in their rugged and good faces, all but one, yes, all but one had those rugged good looks, and he it was who looked like a stork, bringing shame to the whole French nation with his irregular face and body. They hid themselves away, that is the only way to put it, they hid themselves away with looks of complete and at the same time subtle--for they were nothing if not French--disgust, saying with their faces what was left unsaid by their *tongues*, that this would remain forever a day of personal infamy for me, and it did not end there, for suddenly the entire French nation rose up and broke its silence. "Sale chien. Sale, sale chien," they said, their legendary gendarmes joining in the barking of their poisonous French words at me. (Yes, S.L., Dr. Randolph was to be involved. Yes, Dr. Randolph did not offer comfort. Yes he said, "There are incidents in our lives that tell us who we are. It is something you have to live with," in other words telling me that I was a coward. I howled and gnashed my teeth at his judgment, but he merely clapped his hands in approval at my emotive powers.) Alpine events had led me to an astonishing level of dizziness, a dizziness that allowed vicious room at the same time, S.L., for plunges into *complete despair*. I slept outside on the balcony of the Frenchie firetrap, went without food, and would talk to no one. Even Ariadne, who generally did her best to studiously ignore me, noticed my funk. "Has he gone crazy?" she whispered. "He lives in a state of full disturbance," Beloved whispered back. I had removed all my clothes save my shorts, in which I sat on the wood floor. Though summer, S.L., these were the mountains and the wind picked up at night and the temperature plummeted and conditions for outdoor

virtual nudity were, in full honesty, not optimal. Beloved came out. "Are you nuts? What are you doing?" she asked, not once, but on three separate occasions. It was not in me to tell her that I was expiating guilt over the crime I had committed, and at the same time I was silently lashing Beloved for not seeing the cause and effect relationship between mountain hysteria and balcony isolation. "Leave him alone. He just wants you to feel sorry for him," Ariadne said, calling my number with that uncanny child's accuracy and doing the equivalent of rushing out and pouring battery acid on me. "Do you think so?" Beloved asked, having to rely on her daughter to explain me. Into the morning hours I meditated, my lips turning blue, my flesh goose bumpy, and Ariadne's words burning in me like a shaming fire in spite of the chill in the air. I returned to my childhood room, to which I would retreat when my mother would not give me what I wanted on demand. I waited for her to enter with food, and turned her away. A second and third visit followed, and each met rejection from me. On her fifth trip she began to cry. A mother's tears. They will do great things for a son. They will give him a sense of power. They will reveal who the true man of the family, who the true husband of this woman, is. I slept briefly with my arms wrapped about myself, and by morning was ill, and took to bed for the entire day, imagining as I would when I was a child a small space that I could crawl into and where no one would find me, a spot all my own. But first I went to the dining room of the lodge in only those same shorts for cafe au lait and croissants. I could only eat these things so dressed. Later, I would cry, cry, for mercy, but Beloved hit me several remorseless shots, rang my bell severely for coming to

her in this state. "I have taken care of you my whole life, but the end is coming," she hissed, and knocked my head against the wall. A DC-10 took us home. I kept it in the air and got it through the head winds all across the Atlantic but coming in over JFK my attention wavered for just a second and the craft skimmed an air traffic control tower, then had a go at another tower, reverting to its incorrigible behavior on the first flight. When a stewardess got a stricken look on her previously unflappable face, I saw death coming, and told myself that holding onto life was the ultimate form of control, and that I needed to let go. Beloved slept and Ariadne listened to Boy George on her Walkman in this period of my renewed and heightened vigilance, S.L. We returned home to giant men occupying our loft with hammers and spirit levels and other paraphernalia of their trade in hand, for we had contracted with them to renovate our kitchen and bathroom. S.L., they were supposed to have gotten the job done while we were away; but alas, not only had they not gotten the job done but the job wasn't close to being done. The loft was in chaos and filthy, with plaster dust covering all our possessions. The words of a wise (there is no other word that will do) friend came back to me. "You pay them twice what you agree on, and it takes twice as long as they say--if you're lucky." I staggered to a bench by the playground at Spring and Thompson and watched court heroics, black men taking off from one foul line and doing triple somersaults in the air en route to slam dunking in the basket on the other side of the court. Another leaped over an eight-story building en route to the hoop. The topper for the day was the warrior who skied over a high-flying plane and threw the ball down from two miles up. All lived to tell their

stories. All cooled down their fine selves with sudsy brew afterward. This kind of shit you don't see among the Swiss-heads or the parlez-vous crowd, S.L. Know only this. SoHo was holy to me in this time. I saw the ex-junkie Basquiat outside the Spring Street Market. I saw ghostly white Andy Warhol, the most placid man in the Western world, on Mercer Street. And everywhere I went the cobblestone streets evoked a melting love, for I lived in memories of childhood in this section of town, a trip by cab to a small business gone without a trace to pick up bathroom tiles for my mother. Plaster dust vanishes, S.L. You think it will never go away but it does. You think the men with their *spirit levels* will never go away, but they do. Life is like that, appearances and then vanishings. This you need to know, S.L., that in this time I told Beloved of an awareness that had come over me. I told her that I realized I no longer had to remain at my place of employment, that I had paid some sort of dues in my thirties for the riotous living of my twenties, that I had made amends to society by having this office job, and that now it was OK to go to a new phase of life and maybe stay home and write. What I am saying, S.L., is that I raised the possibility of leaving my job sometime in the future. Several days later, when I brought the subject up again, she roared, "You're not going to be home with me. It's just not going to happen. You're not going to take advantage of me the way my ex-husband did." Her words stung. They were like hard slaps. No question about it. I returned her rude and harsh fire with the fire of my own fury. To only mention the possibility of leaving my job and to have the door slammed with such ferocity. It was similar to the pregnancy issue ("I won and you lost. I won and you lost. How do you like

that?"). Weeks would go by with no mention of the subject, and then the resentment would surface all over again, and Operation ROAR would ensue. "Be reasonable," I would say. "Reasonable? You want to take over my whole life, and you tell me to be reasonable?" It was eerie to know that we were talking two different languages. She had done things for her ex-husband Peter. She had given him a baby. She had underwritten his artist life. She had bought him a country home. But for me, who had taken the bottle from her, who had been with her and wanted good things for her, she could do nothing. She could not give me a baby, etc. I am merely telling you the thinking that creates a sizzle state of mind, S.L. Some weeks passed. Then one night in the country, this being in the time that she was still going to the country, if only irregularly, she said, as we lay in bed, "I wish I didn't have any money. I'd like to give it all away." She said these words with a smile on her face, S.L. I went into the next room. I prayed to God. I stopped praying to God. Then I went into the room from which I had come and did battle with her. The house shook with the fury of my words and the laying on of it with bare hands. Ariadne clamped her hands over her ears. I was on fire with grievance. Beloved wanted to give away all her money but she couldn't *see fit* to even consider my staying home. It was an injustice of the first order. I had her dead to rights. I was being done dirty. *I was taking stuff no one should have to take.* A lightning storm commenced, and why should it not, S.L.? It was clear that *my fury was signified to be sound and endorsed by the supporting fury of the heavens.* I gave indignation a new name in the venting of my spleen. I gave better than I got. I belched fire. I stood up for myself as any

man *would*. I was exceeding wroth. I took no guff, and at the same time took severe exception. I removed myself from the house and to the apartment over the garage just next door. There I spent my first night away from Beloved, something I said we must never do, for that would be the beginning of a separation leading to death. The demon of fear came to me that night, S.L. He put me in the cold place. Beloved did not want me, he whispered. I was going to die, he whispered. I had smashed our precious marriage to smithereens, he said, and there was no repairing it. Do you know it, S.L., the cold place that can only project death and hides from us the oneness of love? I have made a lifetime of visits to that place, but am beginning to see its lie. Let praise be shouted for that fact, I say in jubilant gratitude that leaves no room for the sheathing of these words with worldly and anemic irony. Outside I heard nothing, not the opening and closing of the screen door of the house, a sound that would have heralded her footsteps and surrender. The black night. A car along the road and its light in the trees. A bat splattering onto the window screen. Five hundred and fifty-two anxiety-driven trips to the chamber pot. As many prayers and still unquenchable anger. Yes, the impasse continued. Weeks of silence and then an explosion about the job, as there used to be explosions about pregnancy. Beloved took another tack. She called her parents with her distress and told them that her oafish husband wanted to come home and sit on her. "Yes, I called them. I didn't have any choice. You kept grabbing at me, wanting more and more. You wanted to suck the life's blood out of me." She did not volunteer this info. Rather, we spent an evening with her parents, and afterward, I asked her, out of simple

curiosity, and expecting an answer in the negative, if she confided personal matters about us to them. It was only then that she came forward with her disclosure of *betrayal and perfidy*, the dinkified perspective that then beset me in regard to her revelations to them. I am not prompted to use the word *flabbergasted* easily--it is not part of my everyday vocabulary. It is a word with jowls on it, and the scent of an old lady's perfume, and yet a word that circumstances reduced me to, for yes, I was speechless and knew not where to go with my pain. Was I to run howling through the streets and beat my fists on the idling stretches in which sat the men of power (every single one of them wearing an ascot, S.L.) waiting for Beloved? Let us review, you denizen of all that is dead to life. First, she takes a simple statement that someday it might be nice if I could leave my job to mean that I presently wanted to leave my job. Then she insists on her interpretation of what she has heard, allowing no room for the *light of reason*. She knew what she knew when she knew it, and locked it up for safekeeping. I felt humiliated, that the public was bearing witness to my life, and that her father was inspecting it with German disdain, saying, Yes, we have found you out at last. We know now that you are in the grand tradition of Peter, that you come from the land of the freeloaders, that you are exploitative and abusive of women, that you are not even an approximation of a real man. A blot on your so-called goodness has revealed itself, and this blot will only spread. So yes, it was a wound that she would go to her parents, particularly her father, the very man on whom by this time she was laying steady denuncements, a man who she wanted me to know in the most serious way imaginable was not

the person I and the world, *for that matter*, might think he was, that yes, he was from the gymnasium, that yes he was Mr. Able Businessman, but that yes he had his dark and cruel side (an assertion I do not even honor with a *too*, so painful are its consequences), that in the house she grew up in, a Scarsdale house with maids and every imaginable convenience, a house in which her mother was sick and laid up in her room for almost fifteen years, he held sway. He woke her in the morning and put her to bed at night, and in between he said "You can't do anything. You make a hash of everything" and criticized her musical aptitude, saying he needed only three notes of each to identify all nine Beethoven symphonies by age four, that by six he knew the poems of Heinrich Heine by heart, having committed them to memory after one--*one*--reading, that he was an example for the whole nation in his star-bright grasp of mathematics. These are the things that he told her—that he was very big and she was very small—in his German-American way, accompanying his words with hearty chuckling, his big belly rising and falling. By day he lashed her with his tongue, and in the darkness of night he did the other things, paid her the other attentions, and to this man she was going now with a large complaint about me. Myrna in this time was giving concerts for the rich and the famous, those on the same plane as her, and she included Beloved in these soirees. An aura of light was around Beloved when Myrna gazed at her, as it had always been. Evenings of art song, with Myrna as the accompanist. I was not wanted. I knew this to be true, for I was covered with dust. Studies had indeed shown that there was no glitter attached to my person. I was happy that Beloved had Myrna for a friend. Evenings I

would answer the phone while at my computer and Myrna would be on the line. When she said her name I would give her right away to Beloved, thinking that this made good sense, that I was showing Myrna that I was only too eager to hook her up with Beloved, that I had no interest in coming between them. This was the same Myrna who kept her legs from mine when Beloved placed us together in the front seat on the ride home from the country, the same Myrna I fantasized about reaching out and touching. This you must know, S.L., that Myrna took Beloved into her glitter, her world of classical musicians and Ivy League socialites, where Beloved was at ease, for social grace and luminous intelligence were with her at all times. And of course I became afraid that this was the night that the man with the anonymous face and the big thing was going to come and take her from me (this was before the time of the awareness of the genesis of this fear, the time before I knew that it had to do with the illusion that as a child I could possess my mother, could keep my father apart from her so that she would be mine, all mine, my very own for all time, I the little husband getting the job done). Beloved had seen this thing in me, S.L., she had seen it the night she laughingly told me as she bathed—yes, I saw her breasts and other private parts; yes, I saw her immerse her head in the water before lathering her hair with shampoo; yes, I saw her beautiful body as she rose from the water to towel herself in her feminine way--that the man who had bought one of her sculptures had called her, and now wanted her to come over and see where he had placed it in his home, that he was in a state of permanent vigil in stretch #3 down on Spring Street, and yes, he said that she would know him from the fine

fine ascots that he wore while dwelling in the hedonistic heaven that is the residence of the nose-candyng sot for whom it is ultimately possession of the artist, not the art). Yes, she had seen it that night, the insecurity that prompted me to beg her so desperately that she not go, for I knew he would be standing there in the living room of his elegant apartment with his huge penis out and plunge it into her. I knew that this was so and that my life would be irrevocably changed if this *were* so ("Stay out of the bedroom, father of mine, stay out of it. She's all mine, all mine, and you mustn't think that you can ever have her," the anxious unconscious childhood melody played without words through the years until you either get to the bottom of things or die), but she only smiled her radiant smile at me, not to laugh at me but to suggest that she could not understand my extreme discomfort. And now she went to see Myrna and to hear the music of Myrna and her fabulous musician friends and to mingle with these people rendered at ease by *accomplishment*, and yes, among them was one who a big penis had, there to sink that penis into Beloved and to join his world with hers and close me out in the unending screams of babyhood/childhood and on and on, "Mommy, where are you? Mommy, don't leave. Mom-my, Mom-my," doomed to the life all must lead who have devoted that life to keeping Mommy and Daddy apart. So yes, S.L., when she left the house at 7:30 p.m. and then it got to be eleven and then twelve midnight, what defense did I have against my worst nightmare? What could I do but be led by the pain to the phone? What could I do against my better judgment but call Myrna, ignoring the voice saying softly, "You don't have to, you don't have to, let her go about her life." So that yes,

Myrna came on the line, and in answer to my weak and apologetic query, said the words, *in her strong socialite way*, "Oh, she just went out the door with Robert. She should be home shortly. He's giving her a *lift*." Robert. Not Larry or Mo but Robert, a name that was common and refined at the same time. So yes, it was coming together in the way that I had thought. His hand on her knee in the car. The loosening of clothes. All the rest. Kring, our dog, heard her before I did. Kring pricked up his ears--he was a coon hound (you are not to say that word, even in relation to a dog, unless you wish to be beaten senseless and unrecognizable. My father is always around. Sometimes he is black. Sometimes he is white, but know only this, he is always around). Kring was a dog with whom she had a very involved relationship. There is no other way of describing it, this relationship in which solicitousness of Kring reigned supreme, a dog she talked to morning, noon, and night while letting him do as he pleased in the *bathroom department*. We paid a trainer, gave the fraud gobs of cash, this so-called master whose technique involved silent whistles and frequent newspaper bashings of Kring's hind quarters, bashings scientifically synchronized with his unique and idiotic silent whistle. The trainer turned Kring over to us with a smile of tremendously smug satisfaction, and he was no sooner out the door than it seemed that Kring had a hose, not a dick, he was pouring gigantic quantities of his gross urine onto our floors, onto the walls and furniture, and finishing up with monster craps in the middle of our marriage bed. I am a fastidious man, S.L. Yes, I farted in my younger sister's face when we were children and *took delight* in such surprise attacks, took delight too in crapping in

the bathtub that we shared. But that was years ago. To control one's bowels in to control one's life, and Kring was from the land of the terrorists with his remorseless attacks. Beloved's exact words to me on opening the door—not her first words, for they were addressed to Kring, to whom she said, "Oh sweetie, oh precious, yes yes yes," as he slurped her face with his long and greedy tongue-- were "I hope I didn't worry you. I was having so much fun," words that moved me further into the cold and fearful place, words that in all honesty should have been the death of me, for they were words of smiling and pitiless detachment. My response was silence. I went to bed and soon she followed. "Are you awake?" she asked. "Yes," I said, my back turned. I gave her nothing more than yes. "Are you mad at me?" was her next question. Beloved's mother, when she found that Beloved's ex-husband Peter had been emotionally cruel to her, that he had hurt her with his words, said "That is horrible. My daughter needs to be with someone entirely different. I'm so glad she's with you," addressing herself to me, which of course caused great pain, for no one had been as verbally cruel to Beloved as me, *no one*. I claim and protect that position. The famous psychological concept of perfidious escalation, the upping of the anger fever even as something is crying out in you not to go forward with this thing, was having its way with me. I mounted furious silent assaults on her equanimity that night, I had a battle with her like my battles of yore with *Mom*, a battle the gist of which was, *do not ever defy me. Be at my beck and call. Do what I want when I want it, or I will kill the earth with my anger..* Praise the light and let us proceed on the spiritual path, S.L. So that one day I was sitting with Beloved's father at

his club, where he nodded or waved to one or another luminary from the world of politics, art, and business, men of the highest economic and artistic strata who now walked haltingly, who had to make do without their hair or their prostates, who relied on canes and had lost loved ones, men who had once been passionate about baseball but who now knew not a single player, not one single player, in the daily box scores. He waved to them and they waved back in their distinguished way, in the way that only money could teach, little nods of the head, little flicks of their hands, exquisitely refined greetings while I cowered, fearing them and wanting Beloved's father all to myself, for by this time I had grown comfortable in his company, looked forward to our lunch dates, knowing that he was needing me, that he was in some way just a little boy in my presence, that he required attention and someone to listen to him, for he got little of that at home. His wife was a roamer. She had a nervous disposition. She had obsessions. If a book was borrowed it had to be replaced and in the right order, or she could not rest. If they went to a restaurant and it did not have a liquor license, then she had to leave, for it was absolutely necessary to have two drinks--two drinks, exactly--of Scotch and water, with the Scotch measured out just so, for her to have peace, for she had been looking forward to those drinks the whole day and the question of living without them was not to be explored, such an exploration was an unspeakable and subversive thing not to be countenanced. "She is a brilliant woman. She simply has a somewhat nervous disposition," Beloved's father said of her mother that day in which he waved to half of the club and received in turn distinguished greetings of their own. His

wife's condition was simply nothing, he assured me. It was just a matter of hiding the bottles from her at night by removing them for safekeeping to his room. Yes, S.L., they had been sleeping in separate bedrooms for many years, I was given to understand, without his directly saying so. Yes, there had been the difficulties during the two girls' childhood years, those years when she could not leave her room for days. Yes, there had been her reliance on barbiturates. Yes, there had been long stretches of incapacity, but they were over now, over. Everything was tranquil now. They were in the golden years. He reread her books every year and still admired her brilliance. He confided in me, S.L. He told me how it was that he got to this country, how he had nothing but a law degree from the most prestigious university in Berlin. He had a very Jewish face. High forehead. Large nose. Thick lips. Am I permitted to say these things? Not once did he castigate the Nazis. Not once did he say a single word about them, or the ordeal they caused him and his people. He was not forcing himself not to say anything-- he had simply removed these oppressors as a topic for discussion. Let us say that the fact that something happened was to be understood, and that the fact of his silence on the subject was louder and more compelling than any words, that deep philosophical currents and noble strains in his character led him to this silence that led away from victimization and self-pity and blame, for he was a man of cerebral merit. It endeared me to him to hear Beloved talk of his reflexive dread of the IRS, his insistence that the family comply with the IRS in all matters, fair or otherwise. *This could only be traced to his fear of what government, had it a mind to, could do.* This could only be traced to a trauma so deep that it had to

be relegated to the realm of silence. We are talking, S.L., about a man able in the ways of high finance, a man with vast resources at his command, a man scoring exceedingly high in all indicators of intelligence. On this day he said to me, "I have read your book. How it stays in my mind. That poor boy," and here he did something important, he placed his hand on his gargantuan brow in a gesture and with a tone of voice that suggested a man greatly affected by what he had read. For yes, having known Beloved's parents for some time, after having sat like a *bump on a log* for the longest time, after saying, in answer to their questions as to whether I wrote that in fact I did write, and answering all their other questions about writing but showing them nothing, I had now come forward with my novel of childhood and adolescence, plopped it down in front of them and then ran like hell and cowered under my bed for days, literally for days no one was allowed near me, so great was my reaction to this act which flung open the doors of my life to them, which made of it an open book. I chronicled every horrific fart I'd ever laid, every instance of being pederasterized (you know who you are, you dirty filthy old men and men not so old and women short on motherly ways), every feeling of inferiority ever felt, flinging at Beloved's parents my imprisoned, cowering, inadequate young self, saying here I am (but at the same time not saying here I am, for who am I if not the catalyst for great change in people's lives, the man in the state of permanent revolution--we fight four-front wars where I come from, S.L., a lack of ammunition notwithstanding, and never die) here I am, do with the fact of it what you will for I am gone from the place and the person of which I write, and ultimately you must see me not in that light

but in the light of my true reality. "Your book should be published," he said. "In another, less commercial time it would be." But this was not the important topic of discussion. He had something else on the agenda. We came to the point in our discussion where I was expected to give a report on the status of Beloved and Ariadne. And so I said that they were doing very well, and then made the mistake of mentioning the recital at Myrna's that Beloved had attended, the recital that had caused me so much anxiety. And here is what he said. "She needs to be able to go out once in a while." He said this to me in the mildest of ways, while dissecting and then demolishing--there is no other word for it--his bifteck aux pommes, the specialty of this renowned, ancient club, where men, only men, were allowed, angry hordes of distinguished women surging against its gates, hordes causing considerable tie-ups in *midtown traffic*, all of them with gold cards and summa cum laude degrees pinned to the jackets of their corporate attire and blowups of their resumes for the world to see, all of them demanding access. (Let us not lose sight of justice, S.L., in the confines of smallness, but tear down such walls to be relieved of their blocking, obfuscatory function). All this formed the backdrop for my meeting with Beloved's father, in this club where the members had perfected the wordless gesture of greeting, where generations had walked with one hand in a front pocket and the other hand out, as their fathers had taught them. The most disturbing aspect of the lunch I am only coming to now, S.L. Beloved's father's words to me about her need for freedom were hurtful enough, but more harmful was the fact that his eyes narrowed, his face transformed itself into a look of anxious pleasure

knowing he had zinged me, that some aspect of my character that can only be called gross had been revealed to him, and he was revealing that it had been revealed to him. He was triumphing over me, S.L. He was saying that he had me *dead to rights*. In that moment, though I could not say it then, I read his fear, and took the accurate measure of his dinkiness, saw that triumph was his aim. Let's go into the look, S.L., so full of retribution and lording-it-over-you-ness. It was an I-want-to-see-you-squirm look, a look he had not shown me before. Not once had he shown it to me, but now, at the opportune moment and because *he had the goods on me*, he was flashing it with an amazing intensity that set his eyes on fire. First, there were the words. He stated them clearly and without qualification. Then there was the expression, and its stunning intensity, the expression of a man *swinging into action* on me. Then there came the next--I can't call it last--phase, in which he returned to words, though technically they weren't words. You don't find "heh" in the dictionary, nor "heh heh heh"--it's a word that can only come in triplicate here in America, I don't know how it is outside the States, but that is clearly what he said to me, "heh heh heh," word approximations meant to seal his triumph. I said an affirmation walking up Fifth Avenue. I said it this way. "I am your perfect child, dear God. You hold me in your everlasting arms." I said it looking up at the thin spires of St. Patrick's Cathedral, where the miter and alb and chasuble garbed cardinal (where have I seen you before, you who lusts for little boys and wills the bombing of Hanoi and would lock up Jesus in your Vatican vault) was holding court with New York's finest. Back at the org. I made a face in the elevator. I opened my mouth and

stuck my tongue out. It was not a gesture of scorn but more of satiety with pain, as if in opening my mouth and sticking out my tongue I was letting out the disturbance that was in me in the anonymity of the space. Everything about my place of work was hideous that afternoon--the moldy carpet, the noise, Ms. Small flying about in her cape, doing stunning aerial maneuvers or metamorphosing into a bee with a giant proboscis to show off her menace. A tall man, I sat in the adjustable chair at my workspace in the *module*--a doorless thing--with no work in front of me, for no work had been given me by Ms. Small for some time.

"Down time," as the org. referred to these periods. "A feckless man, you are certainly that," I said under my breath, for people were about, I was not isolated in the enclosed space of an elevator at this time. The thing to know is that pain rode out on the words or along with the words or trailing the words or in advance of the words, I don't know which, but say emphatically that God rose up and I was no longer in the land of "heh heh heh" or anything else of that kind. The org. in this time was a happening place. Three hundred pound women ate the muffins they had purchased in the cafeteria on the way back to their desks. *They ate them in the elevator because* they could not wait. I challenged them to wait--"Try to refrain, for God's sakes," I shouted--but incurred only incredible resentment. Once I snatched a muffin off the plate of one of these women just as she was about to devour her snack and took a huge bite of it myself, causing her to grab me by the hair and beat my head against the wall until I was senseless. But nothing interfered with their merriment at the annual Christmas party, where they shook the building with their impossible dancing--rumbas and fox trots and

waltzes supreme. The goal of course is to live a life of no judgment, to be responsible for every little thought trickle that comes into the mind, to be responsible for one's thinking as well as one's behavior, to live in this loving feeling of oneness with God, but yes, I did judge them for this impulsive muffin eating, sought to rouse them to an awareness of this compulsion, because of which the mind is in darkness and unable to heal. They ate these muffins and lost their souls--there is no other way to say it, S.L. There were others who caught my eye. A tall, thin man who gossiped in an intense way, talking with his hand to his mouth so only the party who had his ear would hear him, while his eyes darted here and there around the room, focused in a fearful way on the comings and goings of the people around him. For his own good I stopped responding to his hello's, etc., ignoring his overly friendly gestures, even if we were alone in an elevator together I would disregard him, and so there came the time when his smile dried up on seeing me, his whole being would shake with the effort to suppress the urge to gossip, as if violence were being done to his gabby-holic nature. "All I want to do is say one nasty, cutting thing about someone. Don't you know you are playing with my life to thwart me in this way?" he said to me this one day, but I stopped up his heated mouth with a cork and sent him on his way, for I wanted him to know, for the first time in his life, the healing power of silence. And of course there came the day that I saw him at his *module*, and the top of his module cut off his *face* below his nose, so that I saw his eyes without the lower half of his face and they were the eyes of a murderer, a pederast, a man who lives in the dark places, a man for whom words were assassinating

bullets. There is only this to say, S.L. When I confronted Beloved about these leaks—when I registered my protest that she had gone to her family—she said I had left her no choice, that I was smothering her. She had no ears to hear me on my beef, she had only her fear and her desperation for an ally, and her father stepped forward in the only way that he could. He suggested that she give me what she said and he now believed I wanted, that she do so to keep the peace, and so he proved to her to be of no use whatsoever, for she could not abide the language of compromise, being as it was the language of death. And so I muffled my mouth. For weeks I walked about with tape on it, knowing silence was the only way to safety, knowing words had the power to kill when they went uncomprehended by the one I loved, knowing that words would lead to strife and *wrenching pain*. For weeks I had this tape over my mouth, showing myself to be a marvel of silent consistency, rejoicing at being on the path away from pain, rejoicing in having myself. Three weeks we went with this truce and then once again she sits up in bed in the country and says, "I'm giving away all my money. It's done me no good." And so the tape came off my mouth and once again I roared my outrage, and once again the whole house shook, and once again I went to the apartment adjacent to the house and stayed the night there. The paradise that I was not even seeking was so close at hand, and she would not give it to me. My mentor told me to see a marriage counselor. "I don't need a marriage counselor. I have God," I said. "Then perhaps you can marry him, because you won't be married to your wife if you don't see a counselor," *he said back to me*. Her name was Oiseau. A giant oiseau, she carried a legendary

weight that snapped all but the strongest of the branches of the trees in which she liked to perch. At the time she came into our lives she was sitting on a strong chair in a high-rise apartment, furniture that could take the weight those cracked branches couldn't bear. She had the cold, clear pitiless eyes of a oiseau, and the objectivity of a oiseau. In a tone without self-pity, she told us how her husband had left her for a younger woman, how she reeled from the blow of this abandonment for years, but now had righted herself, was *enjoying a better sex life than ever*, and had no objection to X-rated movies if they created a sexual fire *where none had been*. Those first few months I had at her, pressing my full lips against her thin ones, and boffing her right on the floor in front of a bewildered Beloved. The times that she denied me I would sing only one note, the note of anger and disgust at the crimes that had been committed against me. Yes, I spoke directly to the heart of the matter. I told this pale, tall, WASPy oiseau--she had blond hair and Aryan good looks, S.L., and no, I am not here to help you determine whether you are in her league--of the monster crime of having been pushed away, dispatched, exiled to the country for weekends, of endlessly trying to satisfy Beloved by disappearing for great chunks of time, only to return home to hear her say, the moment I set foot in the door, that I was involved in an oppression of her, that I blocked her from seeing her friends and from having any kind of life of her own. Beloved made these charges anew. She said these things loud, and she said them strong, in the presence of the ever-watchful Oiseau. Beloved said she had not had one happy day in the marriage, and when the Oiseau pressed her, she conceded that there were a few times in the car driving down from the country that might constitute a

measure of happiness in the memory bank. I ran right over the Oiseau. I had no time for her interference or for her attempt at clarification. I had only my anger to vent at the injustice of my life with Beloved, the need to tiptoe around her, to walk on eggshells in her presence for fear that she would say the hated words, that I was oppressing her. By the time of the Oiseau, I was sleeping on a futon on the floor of my room each night. Wide awake I would lie there longing for Beloved, feeling I was in a struggle I couldn't possibly win, because avoiding her was not getting me the desired result. I grew fearful of rats, knowing that my closeness to the floor would embolden them, that they would come and gnaw at my face, eat every last trace of food from my lips and then eat my lips and my mouth and all my vital organs in a nocturnal feeding frenzy, the attack beginning while I slept and continuing past the point that they could be stopped. Exile from my marriage bed had brought me face to face with the rats of my childhood, squealing, tottering rats, rats that could leap tall buildings, rats that could survive three days in water, rats that could gnaw through cinder blocks, rats whose teeth grew eight inches a year if they did not gnaw continuously. The Oiseau said that we could have benefited from counseling sooner, that there was much to build on but that the misunderstandings and resentments were considerable. Beloved said she only saw the Oiseau because she felt sorry for me and because I was having such a hard time. There was no other reason to see this woman, Beloved said. The counselor's office was also her apartment. I went directly to her bathroom to use the toilet before each session. Often I went during the session, and sometimes capped the session off with a third visit to her bathroom. The

counselor asked if I was anxious. It was not necessary to delve under the surface of everything, I replied. Yes, there were intimations, sensations, regarding these bathroom visits, but my mind was not open to discussion on the matter. And yes, there was a feeling of considerable and at the same time subtle shame, for I had read that Marshal Tito--you remember Tito and the Partisans, that hot group sweeping the Balkans in the 1940s--who was nothing if not a man of all men, having stood up to the Soviets and Germans and knocked stubborn ethnic heads together to bury ancient enmities to form a nation, I had read that this man would drink all day and all night and never once get up to relieve himself. I have this information because he bragged on himself, he had the fact of his strong kidneys disseminated throughout the world and wore this fact like a medal on his considerable East European chest. Marshal Tito said he would go to extraordinary lengths not to be the first to get up and urinate, and here I was doing *beeline, beeline* into the Oiseau's Laura Ashley bathroom, trying so hard not to dribble onto the rim of the bowl or leave any trace of me. Because my mother was very keen to know about my bowels, she wanted to be sure that I moved them regularly. Did I urinate frequently? she wanted to know. For my father had diabetes. He passed great quantities of urine throughout the day and night, and the passing of urine was a symptom of his illness and my mother wanted for me never ever to have the diabetes of my father. So that when I came back from the Laura Ashley bathroom of the Oiseau, I came back as my father, with hair all over my hands and face and body. Armenian hair, the coarsest hair imaginable. Sitting with a refined woman, a woman with a high forehead, a woman with a middle name and degrees from some of the most prestigious universities in the

country, a professional who had been voted *Cosmopolitan's* woman of the year three times and who hosted society luncheons. A woman of formidable but at the same time extremely utilitarian intellect, in the American way, that way we all love, blondness wrapped in the red white and blue of the flag. Yes, she was all these things, and as such, rather an anomaly in New York City, which has not seen many of her blond kind for a long while, since significant numbers have been fleeing, *fleeing*, for their lives. Repeatedly I had to push her out of the way so that I could drive home the points I was trying to make most forcefully, and with stunning accuracy and scorn for the ways of Beloved, who was causing me such pain in the face of my mammoth love for her, who was tearing out my heart because she had lost understanding of me. It was trying—trying is the only word that will do—having to endure the Oiseau's inept interference. Yes, I concede the possibility that she was well-meaning. There is no basis for calling such a conclusion farfetched. It did not fly in the face of the seeming evidence. But she stumbled over her words. She said the same thing in different ways. She did not bring closure to her sentences. Her sentences criss-crossed, one with the other. She did not know the art, the necessity, of concision, to dart in, but then to get out of the way of the points that were screaming, that justice required, to be made. The whole problem was that Beloved refused to accept that she was an alcoholic. The whole problem was that Beloved had refused to accept that she was the daughter of an alcoholic, that her mother, who wrote books *when she wasn't lying about for decades at a time in a stupor*, had to have bottles hidden from her by Beloved's father, who had graduated from the *gymnasium* back in

Germany, where he never, not for a single day, was allowed to practice law. If Beloved took these two salient facts and acted on them, got the help necessary from God, then there would not be the terrible difficulties that we had been experiencing. Life would be a far cry from the present strife if she had followed the course I had laid out for her. And yet the Oiseau had to get involved with her little points--this little point and that little point, points that lacked the concision, the elegance, the force, of mine. Pesky points, you would have to characterize them as, but no, none that I would care to recall, or could recall, so nebulous, so full of vapors, were they. Because there are times when you have to take action, when you simply have to push people out of the way and place matters in your own hands. *Swing into action.* Those three words epitomized my guiding philosophy, they summed me up as a take-charge sort of person, as in, "Honey, would you like me to do a S-I-A on that one? You're aware that my troops are mobilized and ready to roll? That my tanks are always advancing into Egypt, *and in great number?*" The key concept of *glide* was introduced into our conversation, as in "Let's do the glide on that one," signifying let us not dwell on the things that would bring us down. "I'm coptering out on that one," I would say, showing the ability to lift off the ground with a powerful upward thrust away from sticky problems of the earth in an instant. I said to her, "Let's bang on this one," "Let's roar out of here," "Let's not taper on to this stuff." Leading by example, letting her know the rarefied reaches it was my privilege to experience, living increasingly free of the infecting clamor that had ruled my heart for so many years, living no longer in the problem but in the answer, but sometimes in the answer in a way

that could be construed as prideful and judgmental, when what I meant was that I had been there, I had hated things to death, I had dwelt in the 1907 syndrome of historical grievance that Beloved now found herself in, with her catalog of my wrongs, starting with the fact of my initial imposition, that of living with her at all. "You had a lot of nerve, arriving at my loft, bringing only a bag of dirty laundry and proceeding to play Mr. Big Shot, bossing me and Ariadne around, as if it was your God-given right to do so." Stinging me. Shaming me. Stunning me with an image that seemed painfully apt, of a man with a bag of filthy clothes slung over his shoulder. "You didn't even have a credit card, mister." There were words for such statements, and others like it. Those words were *revisionist history*. I felt like Adam Ulam at Harvard, or Isaac Deutscher, the great great biographer of Leon Trotsky (published by, of all people, Vintage Books), who, in another phase of my life, I had fallen in love with because he characterized his tendency to get easily lost as "topographical cretinism." Can you resist a man who talks this way, S.L.? Can I say this to you, S.L.? Can I say that I am more a lover of the deliverer of the thing than I am of the thing itself? Ezra Pound, with his granite soul, would hate me. I would be invisible before his U. of Pennsylvania (where he went) eyes, for he was remorselessly adamant that it was the poem, not the poet, he was full of scorn for those who buried themselves in the writer, not the text (where are you now, Mr. Ezra Pound, with your cantos like hardened feces), but the politics of the great great Leon Trotsky meant nothing to me, only the fact that he subsisted for days on end with merely salted bread in the brutal forlornness of Siberia, that the great great Leon Trotsky had a lifelong love affair

with the French novel, for these things made him human and vulnerable and within my reach. Know only this, S.L. I could pose as a learned man, I could wrap myself in Adam Ulam/Isaac Deutscher male cast of mind intellectualism when I used the term *revisionist history*. Yes, it accomplished a lot, S.L., gave the Oiseau newfound respect for the rigorous quality of my mind, for I boffed her twice in one session on the strength of my *intellectual currency*. My male strength was not to be denied. Beloved and I struggled. We fought. These were dark days. We loved each other, but I could not speak civilly to her, without spikes on my every word, for she was pushing me away, she was saying, as she did at the end of that summer, "I don't want you. Get it? It's over. You thought you could be the big shot, the lord and master, rubbing up against me with your big belly, but those days are finished, finished. I won and you lost. Got it, buster?" she said, proclaiming her angry liberation from me. This was five months after our counseling had begun. I had been hoping that we had been making progress. I had the country house to myself that August. I prayed and meditated. I took long walks. I bought an expensive chainsaw--the very best--and cut wood, thinking ahead to the winter in my drive for cost-reducing measures. Generally, I wore goggles. Generally, I wore steel-tipped boots. Generally, I wore gloves. But I would not go so far as to wear chaps. Chaps would have looked absurd on me. The corpses of amateur woodsmen were all over Dutchess County, men who had sawed off their arms and legs and had the tops of their heads taken off when the chainsaw kicked back. Know that I followed safety procedures in the main, and that I was busy *and effective* that

summer. Know that the chainsaw was about financial responsibility through energy efficiency. All that wood lying about on the property. I'd saw off my legs before allowing such conspicuous waste to continue. So I cut wood and painted the apartment over the garage. That was my summer project, and a time when I listened very much to 1010 Wins, for Mr. Saddam Hussein had brazenly invaded Kuwait, provoking a tense international situation, *and the U.S. and its allies were not going to stand for it*. I found the time to buy new furniture for the apartment--two night tables, a kerosene burner converted into a lamp, and an oak cabinet with glass panels. Beloved said she was "thrilled" to have her freedom. "Thrilled" was the word she used, and I saw her on the other end of the line with a smile on her face, a smile of relief to be free of the burden that she thought I was. Her words hit me like the *hardest* of stones. These stones hit me in my belly. They hit me in my face. They hit me hard and caused internal bleeding of a most serious kind. (I say it to you this way, S.L. Let the banner of freedom fly. Let it be leaning on the shoulders of the damned as they parade it through the streets. Let these armies of the trodden down begin their inexorable march to the realm of not guilty, not guilty, the light, the light. Let it begin, I say, dawdling daughter of darkness that you are.) Beloved was showing me the face of smiling rage in this time. She was beside herself with pain. My mentor had me buy a book for her. It was called *Courage to Live*. The book was about incest and how to recover from it. When I gave the book to Beloved, she almost passed out. For weeks she could do no more than look at the cover, and even that was almost too much for her. Seven times she threw it out the window, and seven times ran

weeping down to the street to reclaim it. My mentor knew about these matters because they had had a bearing on his marriage and had contributed to its undoing. He told me these things from across the country, while (and in spite of) being denied the food of the Chinese people. He said not to take her anger personally. Her anger was at her father, he explained. "But I'm not her father," I said. "No, but she thinks of you as an authority figure," he said. By this time she was saying that she could not breathe, that I was crowding her all the time, that she needed space and why couldn't I give it to her? But our lovemaking continued. It continued strong. She was wanting that as much as I did. I would wake her during the night and we would go to it. We discovered new positions. Things were swell in that area. But then she would later wake me and cling desperately, desperately, to my neck, and when I asked her what was wrong she could not say. Much was going on in SoHo in this time. Great art was being made. Parties were being thrown. Shows were opening. People were being seen in all the right poses. Cars one entire block in length were being driven. The people of SoHo were heard to say they had never felt better. Everyone was rising as we were having our own little personal drama, to which art was taking a *second place*. "He is not who you think he is," she said to me again in this time, but would go no further, and no, we did not stop having her parents over, for whom Beloved made the most lavish dinners. For the whole day she would cook in the hope of satisfying them. Know this, S.L., that while she prepared the plenteous dinners she herself experienced debilitating hunger pains. Know as well that the kitchen was always clean. She demanded that it be spotless and

frequently rebuked me for leaving bits of food in the sink. The rest of the house needed massive assistance. Entire regions had gone unexplored before my arrival, but I had swung into action on the problem, bringing manageability where there had been none. I cleaned the loft with *a vengeance*. The floors were white and needed *biweekly* attention. Otherwise grayness settled over them and they became displeasing to the discerning eye. I imposed a *system* on this cleaning. I did the floors one week and the bathroom and the kitchen the next. Beloved marveled at my efficiency, and I basked in the praise I received for bringing order to a heretofore chaotic scene. As I have said, a man with a broom in his hand is a powerful force for change, such a man sets things in motion in himself and in others. It is for that reason that the moral regeneration of America will and must come from the broom in hand of every able-bodied citizen committed to the care of twenty square feet of public, *public space*. Without this there is no hope, none whatsoever. In the interest of objectivity, it is important for me to stress, however, that things did go awry, that rebellion, resistance, rancor, set in against my great works. Beloved complained that I had become intolerable with cleaning aids in hand, that I grew angry and unpleasant and punishing. She felt called upon to remind me that I didn't have to mop the floors, that in fact I had given myself that task, and that if I was to continue, I might try to be more agreeable in the execution of this noble deed. Her parents, on their visits, would stop at each of the landings to catch their breath on the ascent of the five flights, an excruciating experience for me to witness, for I knew there would come a time when Beloved's octogenarian father could no longer make the climb without risking his

life. And he knew this too, for with only the gentlest trace of rebuke in his voice-- you would have had to listen carefully to hear it--he inquired about the feasibility of a monorail lift, such as he had seen advertised in a national publication. It was an inquiry he made each and every time they came to visit. Always the same point was brought up, and it was left to us, to me, to explain that the landlord was fierce, a black man who played his drums all day and slept with women all night, a man who wore a gold necklace stating his "I am king" identity most emphatically and boldly, and that he was not a man, given our reading of his character, partial in any way to contraptions of this description. These things I said to Beloved's parents while shielding them from Beloved's statement that she liked things just as they were, she didn't want them having any easier access to her than they presently had. Our dinners with her parents were humble things, the great conversations that they were used to were not to be had at our place, for they socialized with the literary lions, the brilliant entrepreneurs, the cultured giants of the New York scene, luminaries among whom, as Beloved's father often said, "Ideas were really flying." Ideas flew straight across the rooms of these gatherings. Some took flight with leisurely grace, while others streaked dangerously through the air, till the environment was a cauldron of activity, people airborning lapidary, exquisite ideas that could only be issued by gymnasium-quality people. At one such gathering, the only one to which I was ever invited, I stopped some partygoers cold when they came to me and asked when they might expect to see *a flying idea of my own*. At that event the single idea I could summon was to say, "I am a son of God." "Harry, Gwen, we've got a

comedian here," a couple said, summoning others. A crowd gathered around me, and I was asked to repeat myself. And so, yes, I obliged. I said once more, "I am a son of God. I am his perfect son." "How was it on the cross? A real thrill, I bet," one of them, a prosperous-looking man with *distinguished* white hair, asked in jest. "The crucifixion is a state of mind," I replied with aplomb, giving full seriousness to his question, prompting him to call on Beloved's parents, who had, to this time, been socializing in their award-winning way, in the manner of people accustomed to moving freely and easily and without fear among people. Beloved's parents were led forward to me, and the question was put to them, "Is this your son-in-law in whom you are well pleased?" Yes, there was some discomfort. Yes, they looked at me in an askance way. But yes, also, they shrugged and took the flow of the party back in the direction of those who could interact more on their level, in the realm, that is, of the flying idea. At the loft Beloved's mother took charge of the drinks, as she always did, for she had set ideas of what constituted a proper level of alcohol. Knowing that we did not serve liquor, she had brought along her own bottle. The measuring out of drinks should have been a complete success, given her supremely intelligent eye for the ratio of whiskey to soda water, but the bottle slipped from her hand and crashed to the floor, leaving broken glass in a wet spot of Scotch. No reasonable person could contest the claim that Beloved's mother ran faster and with more desperation than any 75-year-old had to this point done in the pursuit of a replacement bottle. She was seen by many--many--flying down Broome Street with stunning singleness of purpose, leaving witnesses with no choice but to

look on with wonder and admiration. She had put on a similar demonstration of *vitesse* the time we went to an Italian restaurant and the waiter informed us that the place was without a liquor license. Faster than he could hand us menus she was gone and back, bottle in hand. Beloved had this white Formica table. Her parents had been after her to take a teak dining table from the country house, which they had put up for sale. They had also wanted to give her their second car, a Volvo, but she nixed both offers. She preferred the Ford—she made buying American interesting—and our crummy table, which shook when you placed your elbows on it. Beloved served a lavish dinner, and her father made it disappear fast, patiently dividing the beef into quadrants and then devouring the food without appearing to do so. The dinner was a performance that left me exhausted. For days I could not speak. Beloved's father made me less uncomfortable than her mother, though I hardly knew why. Beloved and her mother did most of the talking, streams of words unending flying from their mouths. Trying to enter their conversation was like trying to enter the Autobahn from a resting position, or something. So it is only this, S.L. This is the thing to focus on. When I came back from my vacation in the country that August, the satyr Zefan was just leaving the loft and gave me a victorious smile. He was a lewd old goat, S.L., who took every opportunity to brag about his teenage daughter. We knew the percentile of her IQ, her latest dancing feat, all about her star-ness. He put his satyr's face next to mine, licked his lips, and turned his lewdness back to Beloved before departing with his arms raised up in victory. "Don't worry. He just stopped by to look at my work," Beloved said. *Don't worry.*

It pained me that she could read me like an open book, that my insecurities were no secret to her by this time. The next morning I picked up the phone. It was Zefan calling for Beloved. They conversed for a long time. Beloved had her foot on the seat of a chair as she spoke with him, a posture, S.L., I have told you many times that I hated. It was as if she were some sort of powerful big shot. And no matter how many times I had asked her to modulate her telephone voice, it was still booming. I went to my room and put my hands over my ears. Twenty minutes later she was still on the line. I peeked out through the door to the main part of the loft. Life was funny. The room had been built to give me privacy, to make the loft more suitable for the two of us. I had bought a word processor, thinking that would be a great tool for getting my work out. One thing after another was going to make my life all right, give me the security I wanted, starting with marriage to Beloved, which I had supposed would be like stepping over the finish line. But despite counseling, despite separate vacations, there remained this wall. When she was off the phone I came out and in anger said I hated for Zefan to come over. "Don't worry. He won't hurt you," she said. "That's not good enough. He's after you. I don't like it." She smiled and said, "There's something I've been meaning to tell you. I want a separation." I pretended that her words meant nothing. They had to mean nothing. It was out of the question for me to leave. I had my *rights*. I was not to be *pushed around*. I was not *doormat material*. I told her as much in *plain English*. I held back nothing. I said I would consult with a lawyer before even considering such a move. We took our dispute to the Oiseau, who had broken an incredible number of branches. She

was never more scanning of each and every word. She made us replay events in slow motion. She was after sequence. We had been getting on reasonably well before my vacation. How did it come to be that separation was now being sought? The Oiseau, on her own, could not get from there to here. She needed help. She was counting on us to provide her with this information. But we could not. It needed understanding that Beloved was moving forth on a rising tide of boldness powered by heretofore unexpressed anger. She was in rebellion against Daddy-land and streaking for the border. The Oiseau caught some of my words. She held them in her beak. She shook them. She heard them to contain the information that, under certain conditions, I might be willing to leave. The matter, she heard me say, in so many words, was up for discussion. The door to departure had opened slightly. That weekend I returned to the country. I looked at the lilac bushes and the forsythia, the shad tree and the oaks, the meadow full of bees and ragweed, the half-finished paint job on the apartment. How could I leave all this? It didn't seem possible. I called my mentor and said I couldn't possibly separate. It wasn't necessary. "Give her what she wants. Don't oppose her. You have to think of the well-being of the three of you," he said. I cried, but they were tears of happiness. If I went, she would see that I loved her. It suddenly seemed spiritually correct to leave. My mentor had elevated me to a higher perspective that included the three of us, Beloved and Ariadne and myself. Saddam Hussein was being a bad, bad man in this time. He was personally killing twenty people a day, just to keep his spirits up. President George H. W. Bush wanted to spank him, and to spank him very very hard. He was anxious to

pull down the pants of the Arab dictator and get his hand on his bottom. Another time he said he was going to kill Saddam's filthy, filthy ass, an announcement he made on the White House lawn with his legs spread and his hand raised to the correct smacking position and a look of full sternness and determination on his American face. And he had me behind him, S.L., for it must have been horrible, just horrible, to be alone in a room with the capricious and filthy-assed Saddam. Beloved received my decision with gratitude. "Maybe you don't have to leave since you are so willing," she said, but my mentor did not waver from his position that I must get out, and that I should give myself no more than a few days to do so. I had threatened to move out many times, only to pull back, but this was different, I knew. I reached for a bottle of typewriter correcting fluid and raised it to my nose, then realized what I was doing, that I was trying to get high. The label warned against using it as an inhalant. Typewriter correcting fluid was not my drink of choice but I had reached for it anyway. This is extremely important to know, S.L. On the train ride from the country down to New York I cried and cried. I couldn't remember crying since my mother died, two summers before, tears that may have had an element of the histrionic to them, for there was some of that in me. I offer it, my mother's death, S.L., as a marker on the journey out, for my sister Vera, the same one who had reported my father death to me *all those years ago*, at which time I rebuked her for her tearful histrionics, was now reporting that my mother had had a stroke. Of this development I was notified at my place of work. A decision had to be made, S.L., on that *summer day*, whether to take a subway or a cab. This is only the truth, S.L. A cab meant giving way to

panic, the demon prompting that I rush rush rush to save a mother who was already gone, the story of my life. Trying trying to get back home to Ma to save her save her. A cab was a statement that this was importantly urgent stuff, while a subway was a way of saying *let the body of my mother be gone before I arrive*. I was in another realm now, S.L., as we all are who are being touched by death. It is a realm that insulates us, that makes us feel cozy within ourselves, and gives us respite from the demands of the world--we are consciously or unconsciously grateful for being placed in contemplation of the infinite. The taxi driver took us through Central Park. I had memories of my mother showing up at parents' meetings at the East Side private school I attended, and wondered how it was for her there, amid the East Side mothers with their two-tone hair, women "who did not work with their hands," as she did, women "who were afraid of a little dirt," as she was not, women who were "worldly" and assertive, as she was not. Women who wore high heels, while she wore flat shoes like a man's and heavy rubber support stockings for her varicose veins. That was a kind of love, certainly, showing up for such a meeting with her grade school education. For the rest of the day I felt young, like a child somehow, and suspended in another world. The cab dropped me at the hospital, where the ambulance was to have taken my mother, but the hospital had no record of her being in the emergency room or having been admitted. At least a half hour had passed since I had spoken with Vera. I had little choice but to believe that she was still at the apartment, and that she was dead. A phone call to the apartment confirmed that this was so. It was a slow walk down the long block to the building where she lived and where I had

grown up. A strange thing happened, strange in that there was no record of such an occurrence elsewhere. Dogs had come to ring the building, and maintained a steady barking, as if determined to inject their senseless viewpoint into a grieving scene. The building had its misery tableau. Old ladies lay about in the lobby, unable to get back to their single rooms with their bags of groceries or unable to get out the door to make their purchases. From prone positions they struck out at each other with their canes and made diabolical fun of each other's anatomies. Their bodies were going and their spirits had been fried and cackle filled the air. "She's in the hallway. We put a sheet over her," Hannah said, of my dead mother. Oh do not deny that the rejoicing factor was strong in her, S.L., at the passing of my mother, for death was the only ticket to freedom that Hannah knew from the seething bondage that she had placed on herself. She was standing massive and in black in the living room of the apartment, and feeding on the moment, for death was more interesting than anything happening in her own life. Death. Violence. Daily washing of her face in the more lurid tabloids, which she physically devoured as her last eating act of the night. "There's a policewoman in the dining room," she whispered. "She can't leave until the funeral home people come and remove the body." Vera was also present, sitting teary-eyed and looking stricken in a chair. The policewoman had her squawk box on. It crackled now and then. She had her billed cap on backwards and was eating a lemon ice on a stick, nibbling at it with her teeth but not allowing her lips to touch it. I told her my whole life story, how I used to pride myself as a child on never staying home for a full day, how I used to alley-climb, how as a small kid I would

shin shin shin myself up street lamps and hang from their horizontal extensions by one hand, and how this feat delighted my mother and won her full approval as she looked on from a window in the kitchen, where she would be busying herself making dinner for the whole family. I told her how I had been the apple of my mother's eye, and of the times that I would get furious because she was stalling me, stalling me. I told her of the fires that had been set in the building by lonely women so they could have topics for conversation and of the fires set by men seeking to immolate the women who had spurned them. I told her that the light of God had been passed from my mother to me, that it had been there waiting to express itself all these years, that I had this light and some of my other siblings didn't, that they were seemingly oriented toward the darkness. I told her that my mother had called me Swedish boy, because I was very blond as a child, and how she took me to her. I told her how my sisters tried to get my mother to drink, but that she resisted, and how I hated them for the evil inherent in their insistence, for what they had been saying was that they wanted her to fall, they wanted her to be a drunk so she could not stand above them with her Christian ways any longer. They did not want her standing in the light. They wanted her full of their own uselessness. They wanted her not to be able to cook, to not even be able to boil water, just like themselves. I told her that I was happy my mother had passed on. I used that word with a purpose, S.L., the word "death" had no meaning for me anymore, it had become objectionable, just another manifestation of the ego's dinkiness. I told her that I had said all I needed to say to my mother, that there was nothing more to do but let her go. The

policewoman said, "You talk funny. Now go on into that hallway and see your moms. If you have the nerve, that is." She allowed herself a callous laugh and I took up her challenge with fear, for in spite of my brave words about there being no death, the idea of seeing a corpse horrified me. I opened the door off the kitchen, and saw down the hallway to where she lay, a sheet covering her up to her neck. On her face was a quizzical expression, as if she were seeing something or being told something that fully had her attention but that she didn't quite comprehend. I closed the hallway door behind me and sat with her. It seemed important to pray, and so for a while I did that and then I stopped and just sat with her some more, wanting to believe that there was meaning in being able to view my mother in this state just a few feet from my childhood room. I wanted to believe that she was offering proof that the body was a disposable thing the spirit found a temporary home in before continuing on its eternal journey. I wanted to believe that she had gone elsewhere and seemed to have no choice but so to believe from what I saw before me. That rapt, quizzical expression had been brought on by her doing the face-to-face with the creator. It could mean nothing else. It was the expression of a dutiful little girl awaiting instruction. Death was all right. Death was no big deal. She had finally escaped. No more dinners for Hannah. No more listening to Vera telling her how great she was doing. No more of any of that. It had been so long in coming, and now the day of liberation had arrived. Vera brought in a lesbian for the funeral. It was the lesbian's idea to have the funeral service at the church. Vera decided that the lesbian had come up with a great idea. At first mention of the

lesbian, I knew that Vera was trying to *get my goat*, a phrase my mother used a great deal in the course of her lifetime here in America, S.L. The woman's name was Pia and she lived next door to my mother's building. She and Vera went back a long time. They had *taken showers together* at some swimming pool. So Vera told me. I didn't know anymore than that, that the swimming pool had something to do with Columbia University and that they had taken their showers together at that particular swimming pool. There was no indication that the showers extended beyond the particular site that I have named. Let logic run its course here, S.L., with precision as its instrument, and let the way be cleared for truth, which I say to you plain and direct and without the adornments that lies are packaged in, that Vera brought Pia in to keep my power down. She brought Pia in as a weapon, for she did not want me to get too big and strong. I *hated* Pia. She was a rotten, filthy bitch who had total coldness in her. She had come to my mother's building in rags, in *rags*, S.L., with an infant daughter and an insane and unemployable husband. Now the husband was gone, gone wherever the insane husbands of lesbians go, and her daughter was full grown, and Pia was living in a clean, beautiful apartment and taking showers with my sister at the swimming pool of the great Columbia University. This is what Pia said to me. These were her exact words, S.L. She said that in the last year she had buried her face in the bushes of 1,003 women on the West Side of Manhattan alone, and that she was still doing a computation of the figures from the other boroughs and the outlying areas, especially *Rockland County*, where she reported astonishing success. She said it was her full intention to take away from me all the women of

the world--that she was intent on claiming them for her own, that it was her mission in life to negate my presence and leave me in the cold place. And then she added, she added this, S.L., she said in her filthy inimitable way, Wouldn't I have to say that she was succeeding? This is the frank and threatening manner in which she spoke with me in this time, with Vera's full if tacit approval. I had read a eulogy for my mother, and Pia had been the only other person to speak. I had reasons for writing and reading this eulogy. This was my mother who had passed on. This was not an event to go unremarked upon. I wrote it because I had no choice, but also to show myself as a person who could let go, who could appreciate her but have no need to keep her here, a person, in other words, who was beyond the point of needing her to be in the kitchen *rustling up some grub* for me. I spoke movingly. They had no choice but to admire me. I showed them a self different from the drunken disgraceful self at the funeral of my father *all those years ago*. I showed a new poise and understanding and love, yes love. I made the funeral as much about me as about my mother. Yes, they cried at my words about her, but they were words spoken of me in relation to her. I said her last words to me were about the Buddha. My Christian mother was requesting a biography of the Buddha, the Buddha of all people. But then Pia stood up, and she too said moving things, and she said them extemporaneously. Because they dared not speak themselves, Hannah and Vera chose a lesbian whose primary purpose was to bury her face in women's bushes and to negate the existence of men, and Vera made amply clear that the goal had been achieved because she gave Pia the thumbs up, she made this gesture right before my eyes, and then

did it once again, only this time both her thumbs were vigorously up. Though no shower was immediately available to them, they brought about their showering environment, for in front of my eyes they gave each other monstrous, monstrous kisses. They touched their tongues together and winked at me salaciously in a scene I will never forget. I was at my wit's end. I ran into the park for relief, and only after the passage of many hours did I regain my composure. The journey away from women, away from the chronic sexfever of little Johnny Updike, is a long one, S.L. So we drove out to Jersey and watched as my mother's coffin was lowered into the earth on those canvas straps. Emboldened by her success, Pia touched my wife. She put her filthy hands on Beloved and began kissing her, the two of them kissing, kissing, right there, as dirt was being thrown on my mother's coffin by the indifferent workers, Beloved helpless to stop the advances of the predatory Pia, whose record-breaking pace of conquests had been universally confirmed. And I would be less than candid if I said it ended there, for Vera, lanky Vera, who grew an inch a year into her forties, got into the act also, and when Hannah too began to maul Beloved, I ran the hell out of the burial ground. I ran and ran, all the way home, right through the Holland Tunnel without paying a toll. Then I ran all the way back. They were all still there and kissing. I stared to scream. I was reduced to nothingness. Pia took control. She led Beloved into the back seat of the car and ordered me to take the wheel. Later, Beloved confessed everything to me, and in this way. Anyone could walk in on her life. Anyone. Her life was open to invasion, she said. She apologized for submitting to the filthiness of Pia, and said not to worry, that it wouldn't happen again. I was

much relieved. But that was then, S.L., and this is now, and all you have to know is that she asked me to get out. She had me go into a far, dark country. To the last we did our lovemaking thing. The bedsprings sang their pleasure at our pleasure, her beautiful legs high in the air, every man's dream, the responsive, willing woman, having done to her what she wanted to have done to her, the woman to whom I could do anything, anything, if I chose to, sending me off, saying, "I don't want you anymore. We're through. Can't you get it through your head?" Waving her banner of freedom. Yes, she expelled me, yes she put me in the dark place. As you very much know by now, I was given a sublet on East 55th Street, a white-brick high rise with a thriving brothel on one of the top floors. Every day a prostitute--*a beautiful young thing*--crashed through the awning to her death. No one could predict the time of each leap--they were entirely inconsistent in this matter. The building became notorious for these occurrences. Management seemed powerless to stop the leaping. It did the only thing it could. It removed the awning altogether so it wouldn't have to be continually replaced and posted a sign in English and other languages that said, "Heads up, Fuckos!" Management was just an incredible bunch. Word was that they were part of a *crime family*. None of them wore less than a \$1,000 suit. Their style was to leave the price tag on the garment. A man with an inquiring mind was shot dead in the lobby for asking the fatal question, for saying, "What's with you A-holes? You need a big bucks suit to do the bang bang on someone?" They had no play in them, S.L., and so I kept my mouth shut. Even the doorman moonlighted as a head squasher. The prime tenant of the apartment was in mourning. His wife

had been run over by a flatbed truck, right there on Third Avenue, and *before his very eyes*. Packs of kids had chanted, "Road pizza. Road pizza. Yo fool, your wife is now road pizza. Don't be letting food go to waste. Eat her up." Only six weeks had passed. Beside himself with grief, he had painted the apartment dark brown and fled to Hamburg, Germany, where he occupied a room near a wharf. More than this I did not know about him, S.L. I could live with the walls. They did not bother me in the least. Rather, they described my mood. But he had a hideous VCR, an obsolete thing that would not take standard-size tapes, and for this reason I was deprived of the movies showing men doing it to the women who wanted to have it done to them. I had to content myself, I had to *make do*, with books purchased at the newsstands of the Pakistanis and Indians, immigrants from cultures of dignity who traded in this filth. They manned positions at their newsstands—one of them was right there on 57th Street and Third Avenue, just two blocks from the great, great Bloomingdales and the Baronet and Coronet Theaters, New York institutions, with his foreignness and his filth. In exchange for \$10 he gave me a plastic-wrapped package. *Swedish Erotica*, the all-time champ of porn. Beautiful Swedish women who had the sensual understanding to leave on racy undergarments while having it done to them by the American men with the giant things. But I was denied the movies, I had to content myself with stills in magazines, because of the hideous, obsolete contraption the mourning widower had left me. I became dear friends with some of these magazine women, this skinny blonde in particular, who was lewdness itself, raising her legs so the man could enter her, but I was deprived of the scene before and the scene

after. All I had were stills of moments in time. But I saw the important thing, S.L. I saw the evidence. She took his penis in her mouth and allowed his penis into her. She said to him, in other words, that she liked sex and liked that men did whatever they wanted to do to her. Nothing is more important than establishing that fact, for without it, you are up against female sainthood, and you might as well keep your penis to yourself. My mother was a saint. Need I say more than that? That she had the nimbus of light around her? The prostitutes came to my door, one after another. They arrived in their underwear and supplied with bottles of whiskey and lines of coke and vials of crack. The light was gone from their eyes, and their beings were not imbued with love. In a moment of candor, they told me that they had come not merely to take my semen but also my happiness, and so I sent them away. Meanwhile, the prime tenant would call me. One day he was in Hamburg, the next in Stuttgart. He had a different woman on his arm in each city. He said they were helping him with his grief, that his wife, who had been so mercilessly crushed by the flatbed truck, would have wanted this for him.. He called his dead wife an angel, and tears came to his eyes with the mention of this word. It is safe to say that he was a good, well-meaning man, with a lot of boy in him, S.L. I was grateful for sleep when it came, and would lie in bed with the middle button of my pajama top unbuttoned, as I had come to do in the years with Beloved. Know that it gave me a feeling of comfort being back in the land of childhood, to have the one button on my pajama top undone. Know that the comfort came from having this as my secret. I fell asleep struggling to believe my mentor when he told me not take Beloved's words or actions

personally. Oh, sleep was delicious, to escape the anger, the fear, the blame. There is no point to telling you this, you say, S.L. Everyone suffers, you say. Everyone conspires to bring about his own misery, so he can go running to the United Nations to address the world body and garner attention for his individual plight, you say. People cannot save themselves from this tendency, I hear you saying, in your mercilessness, S.L. But I will tell you anyway. I will give you the details necessary for an accounting of this time. Do not interfere with me anymore. Let the outward flow of heretofore impacted information proceed. Let me say that I walked. I did a lot of pacing to and fro in the apartment of the grieving widower now of Hamburg-Stuttgart. I did a lot of praying. I talked to God as soon as I opened my eyes and consciousness rushed in. "Why me?" I screamed, and He answered by saying "Why not you?" I wanted the phone to ring. I wanted the softness of Beloved. I picked up the receiver many times to be certain there was a dial tone, should she try to reach me, and was reluctant to go out, in the event she called while I was not there, for Hamburg-Stuttgart had no answering machine, all he had were the German women hanging on his arm. I was faithful to Beloved in body if not in mind, S.L., and put that faithfulness on display that first weekend alone by forgoing a movie I stood on line for, knowing that to be distracted for even a minute from my pain by the flickering images on the screen was to leave her, and let me suffer death before abandonment, mother of mine with the nimbus of light, to whose rescue I have been riding forever and ever. Beloved in this time said she had never been so happy in her entire life. Finally, she was liberated from me and my big fat belly always pushing

up against her. She was free to see the gay male friends she said I had derided, the men who would not reach out to grab her and whom she could feel safe with. She was free to see her friend Myrna and to socialize at will. She did not have Big Daddy sitting on her at home anymore. Things went on in this time. Men (and women) went to the pizzeria on Third Avenue and Fifty-fifth Street and got filled up on *slices*, at all times of the day. Cars and trucks and buses drove up Third Avenue, and messengers were out there too on their bikes, expressing themselves to their deaths. People of different descriptions walked their dogs. Men (and women) of goodwill gave money to the men (and women) who shook the paper cups, men (and women) trying to get back to that childhood state. There were deaths in this time, but no staggering totals, and no major events, nothing that would require the words *late-breaking developments*. For the most part the nation had its eyes peeled for any false moves by the evil Arab. Beloved, it must be reported, was trying for a new image in this time. We met in SoHo one Saturday early in the separation. She showed up in the restaurant wearing a tight short skirt and a transparent blouse. She was next to naked. Her outfit alarmed me, I told her. The men in the stretch limos crusing SoHo would claim her for their own. This I didn't tell her. I went home and masturbated, imagining these men doing as they would with her. She had seen the fear on my face. She had read me like a book. We tried again, this time at a Second Avenue restaurant. She showed up in normal dress--a black skirt and black tights. I was frightened by her beauty. Again, other men would claim her. I wanted her and this provoked a fight. I made a puny threat not to see her anymore if we couldn't

have the sexual relationship we had enjoyed. That evening I called her and said I loved her and apologized for my angry words. This is what I ate in this time: oat bran cereal for breakfast (and later, about 10:30 a.m. a bagel, unadorned). For lunch vegetable soup and a hummus sandwich from the health food store across the street from work. For dinner the salads of the Korean people. I bought a scale at the Third Avenue Bazaar and weighed myself frequently. I did not want to fall under 190 pounds. I did not want it said of me that I was skin and bones. I did not want the painful word of childhood, *underweight*, applied to me. I did not want to disappear. I continued taking vitamins: B-50 caps, vitamin E, multimineral caps twice a day, vitamin C (timed release, for super efficiency), Lecithin twice a day, and later, after reading about its health-giving power in *Prevention* magazine, a beta-carotene capsule once a day. I did not take ginseng. It was too close to speed for me. I did not drink chamomile tea. It was too close to a down for me. I wanted to be sober and present in my own life. I don't ask you to relate to that, S.L. Nor do I ask you to get sneeringly rank on me and challenge my manhood by asking whether I had the ability to look after myself by doing my own cooking. I made pasta and heated up tomato sauce from a bottle. I made salads with plenty of greens and learned to cook vegetarian chili and ratatouille. I did not so much feel like a little boy dependent on the Koreans of New York City when I did these things. Also in this time I bought a novel at a Barnes and Noble (at a savings of \$2.63 off the list price), something called *Geek Love*, for nothing seemed more important to me than to stay abreast of contemporary fiction. The novel was highly acclaimed. It was a

trade paperback, so you knew it had to be good. But I couldn't read more than a few pages, and I couldn't understand what was going on. The book had a dark green cover. The color made me very happy, and I kept the book by my bed to remind myself that I had things of worth in my life. (Dark green were the wood fences around Barnard College when I was a child. Dark green meant quality. This you must also know, S.L.). All my mind seemed able to summon were angry charges about what Beloved had done to me in casting me out of the loft, so that I now found myself in the dark apartment of the widower currently residing in Hamburg-Stuttgart with the women on his arm to console him, and to whom I was not always kind when he called. "Go. Run. There is another one you're letting get away just as we speak. Streak to her on your German legs and bury your face in her muff for the solace that you need," I instructed him. After masturbating I would say "Thank you, God," spontaneous words I needed to speak, thanking him for release from the poison. (I did not call it "semen." I did not call it "jism." Nor did I use that adolescent word "come" or get Victorian about the matter by calling it "spending.") I called it poison, and I could be thankful that, at least for then, it was not ruling my system, and that I could see women with detachment and not be their slave through lust. I said none of this to Hamburg-Stuttgart, while experiencing no real compassion for his cunt-sniffing ways. I did not tell him that we get sober by not drinking, that we get sober by not fucking. I did not say anything to him of this kind, for he was very desperate for his German women. We saw the Oiseau once a week. Beloved was getting nothing from her. She only saw her for my sake, she continued to say, for she knew how hard

it was for me to be without her. On appointment days, I had to give myself plenty of time, for the buses and subways could get evil and stall me en route. Taxis were no guarantee either. You had to keep your eye on the driver so he didn't do something slyly dilatory. The Oiseau lived in a doorman building. Nigerian children frolicked in the lobby. A Hispanic man in a uniform with epaulets was at the door. Two teenage models stepped into a stretch limo in the driveway. Men and women went to the mailboxes and inspected their mail with keys in hand on the way to the elevator. A man in shorts appeared in the lobby. He ran out the front door on his hairy legs. When he was gone the doorman called him a dufus to the porter and questioned his manhood. Often these same scenes were enacted. In two ways I was a model of consistency at these sessions, S.L., in that I always voided my bladder in the bathroom of the Oiseau and vented my spleen at Beloved, who blanched in the face of my mighty anger. I pushed the Oiseau out of the way when she dared to interfere with her hideous, overly complicated concept contraptions from the marriage counseling handbook. I said what I had to say, and with passion and scorn. Beloved could hardly speak, she was so much in the trembling state. My anger notwithstanding, she was more afraid of the Oiseau than of me. The Oiseau had the blondness and the strength that made America great. She had written on her the words "The backbone of America." In another life she had been a pioneer traveling West on a conestoga wagon. Sometimes she wore a short, tight skirt. On such occasions she was in the habit of stretching her skirt to its full length, so it reached her knees, suggesting by this action that I was interested in her legs. I say to you now that I

was in no way interested in the legs of the Oiseau, whose apartment had yellow walls, a Lemon Pledged-to-death oak table, paintings hung below the eye level of all but midgets, books on American history, and a photo of her with a very blond, curly-haired young man who could only be her son. Missing was her husband. The Oiseau affirmed her belief in marriage. It was one of her first statements to us. Marriage is hard, and the single life is hard, she said. With tears in my eyes, I absorbed the truth of her situation, that she had been thrown onto the dung heap, abandoned by the side of the road as a wreck in favor a newer model by her lusting-after-young-babes husband. He had left her the apartment and the subscription to the Book of the Month Club. He had left her relying for company on the men she found through the personals ads in *New York Review of Books*, lonely hearts with two-week time limits on their relationships. I treasured her, spent much time in manner and word communicating my esteem for her, for she was offering us the gift of her services, including her sincerity and spiritual quality. You saw in her a genuine high-mindedness and the wounds of an uneven life. I told her that I wanted every little thing to be right for her. I told her that the sadness of her apartment in the afternoon light made me want to cry. I told her that I hoped life in her fifties without somebody to love or be loved by wasn't a horror for her, and that her sufferings might be mitigated by her own digs and by purchases of all manner of doodads and thingamajigs her heart could ever desire. Beloved was mostly a trembling thing in this time. She would arrive for sessions with only a minute or two to spare, and sometimes she was late. This required a tongue-lashing from me regarding responsibility, and an insistence

that she stop her dawdle-dance ways. In the face of my fulminations she could only cower, and in the sessions themselves drew my fire for picking at the skin on her hands and fingers. Even when sitting apart from her and without my eyes on her, I could feel the subtle vibrations from these flesh attacks she made, and had to ask her, in no uncertain terms, to desist. Abashed, she would acquiesce.

Know only this, S.L. I could not abide distraction from my train of thought, which generally expressed itself as an unfairness rant. She then brought her fingers to her lips. Her words had to pass through the filter of these fingers on the way to the Oiseau, who was eager for them. Beloved was adulatory of my powers of articulation while minimizing her own, but despite the scarceness of her words, they came polished and precise to the pricked ears of the Oiseau. Here is what she said, S.L. I had been a barking, biting dog. I was a dog without manners or a sense of others. I was a dog that had to dominate, and had ruled the house with an iron hand. She had much fire to rain down on me. In essence, S.L., she said that I was the Saddam Hussein of personal relationships, that I had no respect for borders. I had come to her with nothing, just a sack of dirty laundry, and moved into *her house*. No money, not even a credit card, and there I was, acting like lord and master, telling her and Ariadne how to live. I said vile things to her continually. She had to live in fear of the lash of my tongue if she displeased me in any way— if, for example, supper were not on the table by six p.m. sharp. She said she felt obliged to marry me, that I would have been disappointed if she hadn't. She said she had chosen the fattest wedding band to signify slavery, saying further that such a state of servitude she considered to be sexy. She

acknowledged that she had played a role in what went on between us, but that didn't mitigate her suffering. There hadn't been five minutes of happiness in our marriage. It had been an *ongoing nightmare*. (Yes, S.L., this *is* the way it must be, you who have never crossed the Rubicon on the journey to personal freedom, who have never unfurled the liberation banner ending patriarchal rule at its most despicable.) I told her this assertion was ridiculous, that she used to say to me over and over how happy she was to be married. Of this she had no memory. With Ariadne I had been a tyrant, refusing to allow the poor child to have cough medicine in the house because it contained a small amount of alcohol. No sooner had I arrived at the loft than I had dropped my laundry bag, called up a designer, and had extensive renovations done without so much as asking Beloved how she felt about the project. Her viewpoint about our years together was full of darkness, S.L. The Oiseau pulled out her rating scale, from 1 to 10, and asked us to choose a number to evaluate our marriage. Mine was 7.5; Beloved came in with a 1. The Oiseau noted the difference and pondered out loud how such a gap could be? In this time I would meet Ariadne for dinner and a movie. I could never be sure she wanted to see me. Beloved was being difficult toward her, pushing her away and screaming that Ariadne was trying to suck the life's blood from her. I told Ariadne not to take her mother's behavior personally, that horrible injuries had been done to her by her father, and that she was now in the process of coming to terms with that horror. I told Ariadne that her mother loved her very much. I felt awkward saying these words, not knowing if I was in some way intruding or being inappropriate. Ariadne made no response

other than to say, "I know." After seeing her I would sometimes talk to myself, trying to block out painful thoughts. My father may have been a factor. I had this idea that Ariadne saw me in the way that I had seen my father, as someone eminently disposable and unattractive, someone not as men should be. One night we saw the movie *Ghost*, with the great Patrick Swayze and the great Demi Moore, and with the great song *Unchained Melody* that I first heard Sarah Vaughan sing in the luncheonette around the corner from my mother's building in the great 1950s. Demi Moore was a potter. She lived in a SoHo loft. The great Patrick Swayze worked on Wall Street. He wore a white shirt and tie and passed along electronic money in the millions and did deals. Demi Moore had the necessary SoHo look. She had short black hair. She had big black eyes. She had androgyny written all over her, the boyish look that drove men wild. Patrick Swayze was killed in a mugging on a SoHo street. He died but he didn't die. He came back as a ghost. He was available to the grief-stricken Demi Moore staring apathetically at her potter's wheel in her SoHo loft if only she did know it. *Unchained Melody* got played a lot in the movie. They had no other way to bring you to tears, so they used the great song from the 1950s that I had first heard in the luncheonette. Yes, I thought of Beloved. How could I not. I had died, too, and would she ever see me again as a person who loved her? I left the movie with Ariadne infected with *Unchained Melody* and took her home to SoHo, , where the stretch limo men laughed at me and said now it was their turn to claim Beloved for their own, which they swore to be their primary mission in life. I kissed Ariadne good night and jumped into a cab. The movie, the neighborhood—I was stuck in the pain of

longing. I was stuck in the past. The farther away from SoHo the cab took me, the more the pain eased, and by the time we were rolling up Park Avenue past the darkened corporate buildings, the structure of love had reasserted itself and I was at increasing peace. From the country I had asked Beloved to bring me only several volumes of spiritual literature I had recently purchased. In this time, S.L., Beloved left the Frenchwoman with the interrupting husband and the sleeping-in-her-chair technique to see Rhoda, a therapist Beloved found by writing the authors of the book on incest for help. Rhoda was giant black eyes in a small face. Rhoda was smiling hostility to the white power structure. Rhoda was luminous intelligence that glowed in the dark. Rhoda was a survivor of the same things Beloved had survived. Rhoda had been there. She hadn't just read about it in some book. My mentor said I too should begin seeing a therapist. It was about time I started looking at my own issues, he said. The Oiseau was also in favor of my seeing someone. I chose Ollie, a MSW (DWM), with an office on the Upper West Side. . On his shelves were the paperback books of Mr. Carlos Castenada and the other great authors. I went to him in a state of high excitement, yearning to take off my clothes so he could do the things I wanted to have done to me. The important thing was that I quickly strip off my clothes and be there on his Bigelow-carpeted floor ready to have this stuff done to me, but once in his presence I was reticent. He didn't look capable of handling me. He was a stick-figure sort of guy, with lots of ear and nose hairs, even if he did have the books of Mr. Carlos Castenada. He had trouble sitting still, and would frequently jump up and circle his chair. He said "Jesus" a lot, as in "Jesus, I'm getting a handle on you already," "Jesus, I just got a great intuitive flash," and "Jesus, the

chemistry is just so right and fantastic." But the chemistry wasn't right. He had inadequacy and thinness of knowledge s

amped all over him. Besides, he was only 13 blocks from where I had grown up, and where Hannah now loved with the Son. I assured him that I would seriously consider entering treatment with him, fearing that if he sensed any rejection of him that he would attack me. "Look, here's my résumé. I've got excellent credentials," he said. I waited until I was in the subway station before throwing it in the garbage, an action that made me sad, but he hadn't won my confidence and I just didn't want him. A week later he called me and said he was willing to negotiate his fee downward. I thanked him but said no. He got agitated on me. He wanted to know if he had in some way offended me, and said I had given off *really god vibes* and that he was sure I could use his healing strength. I said he was pressuring me and hung up. A minute later the phone rang again. He was on the line once more. "One question, and one question only. Who was the filthy, filthy bastard who turned you against me, just when we were establishing our fabulous, fabulous rapport?" He was a nut job handful. What can I say, S.L., other than that the Oiseau referred me to Dr. Randolph, whom I have mentioned, a colleague of hers at a *downtown institute*. I asked her if she had made love to him between one and many times, but she would not answer me and instead pulled on her skirt to add some imaginary length to it. Dr. Randolph had the dimensions of a bear but spoke with the accents of a *dainty* homosexual. He had methodical, murderous ways and wanted me to retain a lawyer. What Beloved was doing was preposterous and very possibly there was some law against the

action she was taking in expelling me without justifiable cause, he said. I told him to shut his filthy, ignorant mouth, that I was not there to become some degenerate therapy addict yip-yapping all over town about the crimes of mommy, daddy, sissy-poo, and wifey-poo. Was that perfectly clear? I asked him. I told him he must learn to listen if he was to help me at all, and that he was free to spit at me and beat me severely with a stick for my freshness, that I truly expected such reprisal, which I considered to be built into our relationship. Dr. Randolph had his share of curiosity, and floated the question "Did someone beat you with a stick?" and I said no, no, no, I was just a white nigger who knew his proper place in American society and pleaded with him to listen at the door to determine if they were massing in a state of unquenchable anger to beat me to the death I deserved for using the epithet, if only in relation to myself (I have been alone. I have walked many streets in the great cities of Europe, S.L. I speak as I speak, and brook no interference in the spirit of contradiction). Dr. Randolph's fee was \$75 per session. He wanted to see me twice a week. Therapy was like a kettle on a stove, he said. The higher the heat, the sooner the water came to a boil. So he was going to evaporate me? I asked. I told him not to get too close to me, not to make any false moves, and wondered if I had made a mistake. Should I return to the great, great Harvardian therapist who had ordered me into sobriety all those years ago? Dr. Randolph was just like my mother. Big and soft and round, even if he had the clinical coldness for dismemberment in him. I made a point of paying Dr. Randolph in advance. I did not want him thinking I was a welsher. He must understand that I was fully trustworthy. It filled me with

happiness to give him this check, to know at least temporarily that I was in the community of nations. The checks were light blue, and Beloved's name, appropriately, was printed above mine, for all financial power resided in her. She was a corporate giant and I was hawking papers on the street. It was a fear of mine in this time that she would demand separate checking accounts, that I would be Mr. Drowning Man far from the shores of paradise. It was not hard to trace the origin of this belief system that women were my lifeline, for growing up in my family we had looked to our mother for our sustenance, not our father, who was an irascible hanging string making \$65 a week at the restaurant of the great Jack Dempsey on 49th Street and Broadway. It was not hard to see that I was as dependent on women as Beloved was dependent on me, for her father had been the great organizer, with his German Jewish gymnasium-quality mind, of the family's staggering assets. He had risen to the position of president of the firm founded by her grandfather, and because of his financial acumen served on the boards of many foundations. So I began to see Dr. Randolph, who said, "All I hear from you is guilt. How can this be?" I opened up to him but did not trust him, for while my mentor was showing me the way to transform my relationship with Beloved, Randolph seemed only of the world. I told Randolph in no uncertain terms that I knew what he was up to, that he wanted nothing more than to pull me away from Beloved and leave me in the cold place for the rest of my life. I told him that he wouldn't get away with it, that my ears were always alert for disturbances in the room, and asked him repeatedly if he wanted to spit at me and rain down blows on me. I told him that he could, that he should feel free,

that no one would ever know. Below Twelfth Street, where he had his office, was the Washington Square Arch. Farther south and towering over it were huge murals around the perimeter of SoHo. Guards stood on watchtowers. Only the select were allowed to enter, those carrying much plastic and with achievement-studded résumés. The limos were lined up on the SoHo streets. The men who had great power were there to take Beloved out on the town. She had the necessities--great beauty, talent, charm, and sexiness. They were there to dine on her and her paintings together. Dr. Randolph lived in Scarsdale, New York. He owned his own home, and saw patients there as well. I hated him very deeply, for he had succeeded and I felt my mediocrity. I told him he would have to concern himself that I might stalk him where he lived, and kill him dead on his front porch. In this time, Rhoda, Beloved's therapist, kissed Beloved from her toes to the top of her head. Rhoda did this to Beloved at every session. Beloved wouldn't admit to this fact, but I knew it to be so, that Rhoda was in process of claiming her for her own. Beloved's parents called to wish me a happy birthday at my place of work. They were both on the line at the same time. They didn't know about the separation. Then that Thanksgiving Beloved had her parents over for dinner. At the counseling session I expressed my hurt that after giving me the boot Beloved would be entertaining abuser #1 while I was living in a sublet. Beloved didn't disagree. She acknowledged lacking the strength to deal with them. I was pleased that she could see the injustice. By this time her parents knew about the separation, and when they arrived for dinner they maintained a *tactful* silence. I hadn't expected the holiday to get to me, but I was

affected *adversely* and slumped to the pavement in front of a Waldbaum's supermarket. Men and women stepped over me with their 25-pound turkeys. One among them took pity and dragged me to her home for dinner, where we were joined by her old mother and people who didn't seem to know each other. A man who had once been prominent in the entertainment industry was present. He had an extremely long nose and clumps of ear hair and a large belly he rested his hands on. "Once I was rich and famous. Now I'm a nobody, just an old fool who can't find a good reason to get up in the morning," he said. There were mounds of food, which we ate in silence. I left cheered up, feeling that I had been someplace and that people cared about me. Vera had invited me for Thanksgiving dinner at her home. Hannah and her son would be present, she said. By this time Vera knew about the separation. She was upset and wanted to get involved. She said, "You can't make it on your own. You're nobody. You're just nothing without her." She said I needed a Jewish intellectual, a gifted woman of Ivy League caliber, to legitimize my own sorry life. She said she would swing into action on the matter, and with my permission call Beloved. I reluctantly agreed. Vera then said, "I don't know who I want more, you or her. It's a tossup." She called me back after speaking with Beloved and said she had decided in favor of her. At this point, S.L., I myself swung into action and called Beloved and begged her not to see vicious and predatory Vera, who I knew wanted to take showers with her as she had done with the hideous Pia. Vera would only claim her for her own, and Hannah and her son would devour her, too, I said. Not wanting to hurt me, Beloved reluctantly agreed. I felt spared from having my

world overrun and destroyed. Vera turned her attention back to me. She did not know that I had given myself full permission not to see her or Hannah or the Son and to divorce myself from sickness, for let's face it, in my life there had been women on the hills with baked beans, women who had run to these hills to savor their baked beans minus the company of men. I did not have to enter their domain and petition them for space in their world anymore. I did not have to go to them and witness the spectacle of them walking with their hands in correct smacking position. S.L., know that my own banner of liberation had been unfurled to fly and snap in the winds of Manhattan the beautiful. Vera was in a state of disturbance about my not wanting to see her. She did not know how to release, to do the glide, to soar, to helicopter up from heated ground, all the things that I had promoted to Beloved as formulae for sane and happy living. She did not know it would mean my death to see her, for to be with her while my relationship with Beloved was off-center would signify that she was claiming me for her own and for the family, which I had struggled so hard to be away from. She started to do *fang*, S.L., the thing she claimed as her inalienable right, to hurt others with her words. She bit me hard, up and down my psyche. Failure. Coward. Once and future bum. These are the words she bit me with, S.L., and you should know only this, that in this time Beloved was walking up and down the avenues of this city in black tights and short skirts. Never had she been more delicately thin, and never had the men in the stretch limos hungered more to lunch on her body and her art. I sought perspectiveperspective, and found temporary comfort in reading somewhere that the body was the domain of the

ego Asleep and in the waking hours holding these words and *thoughts* in my mind. Beloved returned to her homosexual friends, the same ones she said I had prevented her from seeing. She went to them with a sense of large satisfaction, for it was an exercise of the freedom she said I had denied her. Her friend Dag, a stylish man who lived with his lover on West Broadway, was one such friend I had driven Dag from her life with pronouncements about him, Beloved had said to me. Dag had always been so nice to her, she said. But things didn't work out. She was not welcomed into his company in the way she wanted, and saw him turn to dry rot before her eyes. A female friend of Myrna's, with whom Beloved had only a casual acquaintance--a person of the highest caliber, having gone to Smith College and built fabulous restaurants and journeyed solo to India and Nepal and other distant places--came forward now that I was out of the picture and also tried to claim Beloved for her own, and yes, I was concerned that Beloved would be drawn into a life of high style, that the men in the stretch limos would have access to her through this woman, but such a thing did not come to pass. My fear had been that in claiming Beloved for her own, there would be the parties where the ideas were flying attended by the people of glitter who always showed themselves in the finest of clothes. Now in this time Beloved was getting strong though she looked like she was in disarray, and she was in a slow but building stew ball over the fact of her parents' having come down to Thanksgiving dinner to fly their ideas and the added fact that they had heard not a peep from her about her pain. (For background you should know that President George H.W. Bush of the Oval Office, White House, U.S.A.,

was continuing with preparations to spank President Saddam Hussein, of Hell, Iraq, very hard, and that the people of the United States were fully behind the President owing to the evil Arab's unspeakable ways and the actions of the Mukbharat against the Kuwaiti people. The President let it be known that he wanted an end to the bullets for breakfast mentality both at home and abroad and that it wouldn't be stood for anymore.) Beloved took me to a restaurant patronized by college kids, where the din of conversation was debilitating, but only for me, not her. I understood this to be because there was noise in her head to match that in her external environment. It was, for me, a big discovery, and made me see the extent to which things were going on with her, that she could be in the environment of commotion without being disturbed by it any more than she was. There were long periods when we didn't see each other, outside of the sessions with the Oiseau. Too often the phone didn't ring and didn't ring, and the not ringing of the phone, or the ringing of the phone only to hear the voice of some mannish male rather than Beloved's sweet sound brought me to the point of tears. In such a state I showed myself to my boss Ms. Small, saying "What did I do to deserve this?" because I had only the cold and unfeeling voices of the men coming over the wire to me. In a pinch I was using her as a comforter and she came through for me. "Give it time," she said. She did no metamorphosis. She did no flying around the room. She just gave me the straight stuff. In this time the Oiseau said, "In any relationship there is the pursuer and the distancer. You never pursue a distancer, but let the distancer come to you." S.L., she had of course designated me as the pursuer, and said that I would have to establish

my own life independent of Beloved. She said the old relationship was dead. She said a good marriage was different marriages. If we were to have a relationship at all, it would have to be on a new basis. These were the words and thoughts of the Oiseau in this time. A thing happened that shows the workings of time. Some years before a woman had declared that she had a wicked obsession about me, that she thought about me constantly. A vicious woman whose father used to beat her head against the wall and rape her repeatedly, she was married at the time. It was a normal Vermont childhood, she said. When she spoke the word "obsession," she fanned her hand to show the extent of it, as if she were desperately trying to cool herself down. Some months later I heard that she had done bust-out, that she had left her husband of many years. In the first month of my separation from Beloved, I ran into this woman, who had now been living apart from her husband for two years. Her fires of obsession for me had been banked. She demonstrated zero ardor. She said her marriage had been fine as marriages go, but that a part of her had been asleep. Reluctantly, she gave me her number, but did not return my call when I left a message on her machine. I have not seen her since. Nothing, S.L., has meaning outside the life in God, not feelings, not (dinky) perceptions, not (flashy) insight. There is no need for you to run before both houses of Congress with this news. There is no need for histrionics of that kind. So that in this time Beloved produced for me the draft of a letter she was considering sending to her father (and mother), explaining that she was in pain over her whole life and could not see them. She showed me this letter in a Japanese restaurant on Sullivan Street, while outside

young Italian men with long sticks patrolled the block eager to hurt someone and hurt him good. Beloved asked me should she go against her parents with these words, and I said do it, just do it, for I wanted her father to have his heh heh hehs checked by this time, I wanted him to realize that my eviction from the loft was not personal to me, that he was (deeply) implicated. So yes, she dropped the letter in the mailbox, and her parents read the words that had been a lifetime in coming and washed their faces in its dry ink, and while silence, a spreading silence, was the answer from her father, her mother fusilladed Beloved with letters that Beloved was too frightened to read, that she placed under the sofa cushions and hid away in drawers, for the words of her mother had the power to strike her dead, she feared. Letters which, when she was able to read them, were full of reproach and denial. Letters that stated that Beloved was only in a *mid-life crisis*. So it was that her mother came back to her in the state of stonewallism. She showed no motherly softness. She had only hard stones to offer, stones that Beloved would not accept, for they would have sunk her. First, her life had to be destroyed because her mother had to be free to maintain her invalid ways and not be disturbed, and then her father must have his needs met in the night, he must be free to scald her by day with words and impose on her in the other way in darkness, with his heh heh heh and his big belly touching on her, coming to her with his German-Jewish male desire, his body all she could see, till she could see nothing, not even the fact of it in her own mind. So as far as is known he was not doing his heh heh heh after the arrival of the letter. Was Fort Sumter smiling after the first cannonball? Is secession a painless state of mind?

Which does not mean that he was no longer going to the parties of the people with the flying ideas. Not at all. For he was German-Jewish, and of gymnasium quality. "Follow your heart," my mentor, whose face I did not see *year after year*, said to me in this time, in relation to the women I expressed a desire for. His approval of my lust frightened me, for he was in so doing giving me the green light to abandon Beloved, who would die without me as I would die without her. I speculated that he was being hateful toward me and relishing my discomfort. I made a date with a woman named Ro. She was sullen and the ends of her black hair were often in her mouth. She told me that her mother had busted her chops as teenager after finding a diaphragm in her bag. Those were Ro's words. Her mother had busted her chops. Ro said she hadn't had any action in several months, and that generally, life sucked. "I mean, what is it, life? I go home and play with my cat. That's a life? Yeah, all right, give me a call. You have me pegged. I'm a slut in defiance of Catholicism. We'll have ourselves a little action." We arranged to meet at a restaurant near work, but there was the problem of Beloved, who could happen by, see us, and drop dead on the street. Separated for only four months, I realized it was too painful to proceed with the date, and so called Ro and left a respectful message of cancellation on her machine. Yes, S.L., I took secret delight in canceling the date, for I sensed her desire for me. I was grateful not to speak directly to her, for the message she left was full of ire. Soon there was another flame. Her name was Bo, and I fantasized about overpowering her anorexic body with a giant penis. For weeks I could not get her from my mind, though after a month it had all turned to shit, she

was no more attractive to me than the toothless homeless woman from whom I'd bought a copy of *Street News*. I was the approach-avoidance man in this time, making several other dates that I could not go through with. I would dream that I was in a crowd of women but could not reach out to them, for a glass shield enclosed me. A woman ten years older than myself came to me and braced my cheeks with her hands and said these words: "For two years hubby and I lived apart. We each saw other people. There was no chance we would ever get back together. We were just like friends. And then one day we ran into each other on the street and started talking, and the next thing we knew we were living together. It just happened. There are plenty of women out there. They want you. Go get them." She was a sunny woman telling me I was a stick in the mud and to get with the life force. My mentor. I was afraid of him. Only once had I spoken to him in anger, at the time my first wife Julia and I separated. I accused him of engineering the split. "I've been trying to keep you in that damn marriage," he shouted, adding that my anger was understandable under the circumstances. Often I called him with apology in my voice, my fearful tone a plea that he not hit me with a stick for taking his time, that he not call me the wounding names he was keeping in reserve to smite me. He was my one hope, the only one I knew who had a holy relationship, a relationship of the spirit that looked beyond the body. His wife had left him and taken up with someone new, and yet he told me that they had grown closer and closer, that their love for each other was unconditional. Unconditional was a word he used a lot. I piped up and asked why, if their love was so unconditional, they weren't able to live with each other?

My mentor said love wasn't about two people occupying the same physical space necessarily. My mentor said minds join, bodies separate. Others were not talking to me in the way my mentor did. They were telling me to rent cars and visit Chesapeake Bay. They were telling me to drop Beloved, that she had too many problems. Go immediately to Chesapeake Bay with a carful of women, they said. Run to Chesapeake Bay, they said. This was the way in which they spoke to me, S.L., wounding me with their horrendous words. Often my mentor seemed to take Beloved's side. He did so in a sly way, not a way I could pin down and confront him with. He did so when he encouraged me to see other women. "You used to grumble about feeling tied down, so now here's your chance." They were mean words; they had nothing of a friendly spirit to them, S.L. Stand at attention and understand that this is what he was truly saying, S.L.: "Beloved and I have the same condition. Are you going to leave her as my wife left me? Go ahead. Make your move. Put your money where your mouth is." He talked to me in tones of asperity that I had often to overlook so that I did not grab those tones and shape them into a hammer with which to break the relationship apart, something I must not do by going against him with words in any way, intuition told me. For in one instant I could seize the reins, could rise from my submissive pose, and then I would have lost my last father, I would have had to face the world as a full grownup dependent only on my own resources. "This is like a child's superstition. 'Step on a crack. Break my mother's back,'" my mentor said, regarding the reticence I experienced about seeing other women. My anger obscured my love for him in that moment, S.L. I felt he was

not talking to me from the point where he had once been, but from where he now was, not from the point of pain but from the point where he could do his laughing thing. He had gotten to this place he now was, he said, by dying and dying and then dying some more. Dr. Randolph of course had words to say about other women as well. "You are free to date. At some point you will have to learn to trust yourself with women. You are afraid of your impulsiveness. You are afraid that if you see them you will have to go to bed with them." Dr. Randolph said I was an attractive man, that I should have no trouble establishing relations with other women, if that was what I wanted. When I threatened to punch him in the face, he asked me not to do that, as I was also a large man and could hurt him. I confessed to Dr. Randolph that my sexual fantasies involved a woman entering an apartment with a minimum of two and often three men, men who took turns with her, men who lifted her skirt and placed their hands on her stuff even as they spoke with her, men who stuck their tongues down her throat as her husband watched, buried their faces in her muff as her husband watched, entered her different orifices as her husband watched, entirely dominating the willing, willing woman as her husband watched. Or it was couples doing the swap, the husband of one woman doing it to the wife of the other husband while the remaining two paired off. These were scenes of arousal for me, about which Dr. Randolph offered the words "forbidden fruit," suggesting that in the time of my childhood, with so many sisters with hands in correct smacking position roaming the rooms of our crowded apartment, pubescent women by the time I was a toddler owing to the large age gaps, with so much of this going on, he was compelled to

introduce the words *hanky panky* to describe the activity of these women who, because of the size of their feet and the barriers between them and a place in society, may have been inclined to turn their attention to me, the little man of the house, may have inserted parts of my body--my head, my feet, I cannot say--into their large, large, filthy, filthy bodies, these bodies of the women who knew how to hold their hands high in the correct smacking position. I hurled in Dr. Randolph's face that he was a weak nothing, that he was just like my mother with her soft ways, that he was not capable of handling my anger. I hurled in his face that he was jealous of my mentor and wanted to destroy this most precious relationship. I hurled in his face that he could brook no competition, that he was a very jealous God. But it was the middle of winter, and everywhere I saw the cup people with their panhandling ways and the desperate Pakistanis closing in on the fabulous and very great Bloomie's with their newsstand smut, and Dr. Randolph was warm, he had much fat on him, like my mother, and I scraped the ceiling of his office with spiritual rantings that put me inches above the pain. In this time, S.L., I moved from the apartment of Hamburg-Stuttgart to the apartment of a man with fifty pairs of shoes in his closet, a man who had gone to Alaska to clear his head. His apartment was high tech, with an expensive stereo set and a VCR that made it possible for me to watch the women having it done to them. Beloved came over for New Year's Eve. She was confused. She didn't know what it was that I wanted. Only a nice evening, I told her. We had ratatouille by candlelight. She left before midnight. The building was on the East Side. Many yuppies lived there. They were doing party hardy and all that.

Beloved had given me a teddy bear. I fell asleep with my arm around it, having kissed its button eyes and furry face. We fell asleep together with the middle button of my pajama top undone, as was my way, and with the assurance that teddy would get everything his little heart desired. This I said in the apartment of the man with the fifty shoes, on a night when the city was doing its party-down thing and conviviality was king. I can report to you that I had contact with Beloved over Christmas too, S.L., that I had gone down to the loft bearing gifts, the same loft about which I dreamt I was climbing the five flights of steps to Beloved. At the top landing I am able to see through the closed door. The lights are off but even so I see that the walls have been painted a bright yellow. The furniture is new and the air is temperature-controlled and Beloved and Ariadne are sleeping face up, breathing gently. They are in deep, restful sleep, S.L., a holy sleep, as if they are communing with spirit. On the stairwell my father is racing up and down the steps like a wild man with his tongue hanging out but he has no place to call home, for how in his extreme agitation could he make a home for himself? I fear for my life because of the menacing nearness of this man, S.L. He does not cease this frantic running up and down the stairs, requiring me to spend my energy in hiding from him rather than trying to get inside the loft to Beloved. And there the dream ends. My mentor put the laughing thing on me when I mentioned my pain at seeing the loft over Christmas, he rained hardness down on me from the vantage point some difficult years had brought him to, he talked the language of toughness to me, saying, "That's your problem. You have to deal with that," showing no receptivity to my suffering but

dispelling it with gruffness, demonstrating genius of the first order, for the treatment was a skin bracer, a tonic supreme. I had come to them at the top of my game with Yuletide cheer. The gifts were not lavish but they were tasteful--who can remember what is given from one Christmas to the next?--and I brought along a pumpkin pie, for with my eviction/leave-taking from the loft, Beloved had stopped cooking. Beloved, who cooked without recipes, who showed boldness and creativity in the kitchen, had retired the pots and pans. Her preparation of meals had been for me, and she took it hard when several years into our life together I announced my vegetarianism. She was hurt beyond reckoning, and from that time lost interest in feeding me. Let me say, S.L., that in this new life without me she was intent on placing her own stamp on the loft. My rule was over. I weep when I say this, but for her, everything that preceded had been playacting. Do you care to know what I mean? Can you grasp it? She was now a little girl, a fledging country, having ousted the colonial oppressor. She was a little girl who could not brush her hair because her father had brushed it for her, and so she must not go near her hair with a brush ever ever ever. She fashioned things of wood--little shelves with her signature cross-hatchings, lamps that managed to look sexy, and tables with lithe legs. Thin herself, she worked with power tools. She got each job done. Years before the biggest gallery owner in SoHo had claimed her for his own, a gallery owner who had the largest international stable of artists this world has ever known. And he called her every day. Every day Yugoff was on the line to Beloved, and his opening line was always "How is every little thing?" From this opening he never varied. He

wanted Beloved to go out on the town with him and he rolled out the most stretched stretch limo for her. Of her voice he could not get enough. He said it was sexiness itself, his morning cup of coffee and his nightcap too, that it echoed through him in a way that tizzied his blood. The language of Beloved was bold. She flew on a higher plane than others. Things were *thrilling*. Things were *wonderful*. *Oh how great*, Beloved said, causing you to fall into instant love because of the generous attention she bestowed, a woman who had been recognized and received by the world, a woman with star dust on her body and being, giving attention to you, a nobody. These are things you must know, S.L., that I lived my life with a woman with a many-roomed mansion, a woman who was smiling sexuality in all her gestures. I am saying it loud, but I fear I am not saying it right. Know this, and know only this, that Yugoff was not the glamour-puss he thought he was to Beloved. Yes, yes, she boogalooed down Broadway when he gave her a one-person show in 1980, when Ronald Mr. Velvet Voice Reagan was whipping little Jimmy Carter, yes she took up residence on Cloud Nine, yes yes yes to all those things, S.L., she made a gift to him of all her labor, but she was already turning, she was already closing down, for the exquisite small paintings, full of thin lines, were no longer coming, she bought tools and learned about woods and began to carve, astonishing animal figures that compelled Yugoff, when he made this discovery, to burst out, in his Santa Barbara (where he was from) way, "What? What? I didn't know you'd pull a *Brancusi* on me," an expression loaded with surprise, a high degree of anger, a smidgen of admiration, and a trace of awareness that a defiance had taken

place, that the elegant woman with the sexy voice was in a state of smiling rebellion, a rebellion that was at one and the same time perplexing and growthful of his admiration for her. He did not know, standing in his gallery with his hands on his hips, or sitting in his most stretched-in-SoHo limo, that he was in fact standing outside her window and reaching in with hands that would not leave her alone for all that was most precious to her, he did not know that he was reaching with the intention of plumbing her depths, and that she had to deflect the power of him so that he would not take all of her in the way that he was trying to do. He did not know that anywhere she was, he was, and that he was a clutching, grabbing thing. He did not know that he walked in the black black tradition of the German Jew gymnasium great one who was there at the beginning of her time to reach into her with his heh heh heh and big belly pushing against her. He did not know any of this, for how could he, coming as he did from Santa Barbara, Calif. But he knew me, S.L., he knew the smallness of me, trailing behind her clouds of glory. He saw me in that year when Ronald Reagan was getting ready to squash little Jimmy Carter, to punish him severely for daring to go into adult life with such a diminutive. I was drawn out of my daily routines that spring back into her orbit by the announcement of her show. I arrived at the gallery in a state of anxiety, for while time had passed since our involvement, since she had broken it off by taking home the man she met on the street, the man she let do the things I had done to her, she was still the bright light of my life, the vision of whom made me happy when Julia threw her name in my face and accused me of wanting to be with her. Yugoff saw me and I saw him. As I stood in his gallery examining

Beloved's work, he saw the envy behind the smile. He saw that I was competitive with Beloved and that she had left me behind to be claimed by him. He saw a skinny, unattractive man with nothing going for him, and he laughed as I ran from Beloved's awesome power before calling on her again, for she had the world and the world had her and the world did not want me in the way that I thought I wanted the world. I was trying in this time to get enough of God so I could be with her. That is all you need to know, S.L. When I moved from the apartment of Stuttgart-Hamburg to the studio apartment with the fifty pairs of shoes, I did so frightened, frightened, for I was told I'd have to keep the place for five months and I I was still taking things one month at a time and hoping desperately to go back home.

The Yuppies made it a very happy neighborhood, for they were prospering and bullish on America and a can-do kind of people. Thousands of studies had been done on them, and not one scintilla of evidence of a malaise of any kind had ever been found. They were just so solid and forward-marching, and at such a young age, as some of the older people remarked. Every last one of them from my particular block was to be found at the bar of the Mexican restaurant on the corner every weekday night sipping margaritas and talking about the deals they had done and the deals they were going to do. This is simply common knowledge that I am passing on to you, S.L. The walking phase began in this period, twenty-three blocks each weekday morning along Second Avenue to my place of work. The Fifty-ninth Street Bridge, the Roosevelt Island Tramway. To these two New York institutions I said hello each morning, and blessed the

sunlight and the shops and the pavement I walked on, for I found the exercise promoting great happiness in me and *changing my mind*. At work there was a prolonged period of down time, in which I worked on *Salvation Is to Be Found in Her?*, a novel about obsession drawing on my relationship with Julia during the college years. I couldn't say why. My manuscripts had been thrown out in the street so many times, but I continued because I had no choice and because my days had no meaning without this activity, because unless I did this thing I had to call myself names. I wrote on an IBM computer in my office, waiting between paragraphs for the phone to ring and to hear the angel voice of Beloved. When she did not call, it got the anger going in me, how she was hurting me for no reason and all that. Picking up the phone when it rang, hope soaring, and then hearing a hideous, hideous male voice, a voice that had nothing in it but the coldness of life, just another stray and useless cock calling from where it lay on the side of some road. And I had to talk to these men, who shuffled along the street, not one single person in the universe aware of their existence, men who had been shown the door by their women long ago, men for whom now a date meant saying thank-you to the checkout girl at the local supermarket, men who lived on pasta and tomato sauce cooked in one pot, as I did, men who walked the streets chanting there is nothing to get, only to give, men who were being made to understand that women--the extra hair, the breasts, the extra orifice notwithstanding--were people, and that the days of going to them for something were over. Because once you have seen that you reach for them as a drunk reaches for a bottle, you can no longer do so, you can no longer be little Johnny

Updike with chronic cunt fever, you must settle into yourself, you must live there, you must be content with P and M and I (prayer and meditation and inventory, S.L.) and with finding the great reality within, and having found the keys to the kingdom within, you must be willing to extend yourself to the other men who lap Manhattan on solo journeys while ideas fly high at the cocktail parties in the apartments far above the street, the parties attended by the women with the long legs sheathed in black stockings and held up by garter belts and by the men with full access to those women by virtue of their power. In this time, S.L., the Oiseau said it this way--"The old marriage is dead; you have a new relationship now." In this time, my boss was flying around the office a great deal. She had her cape on and flaunted her proboscis, but my personal problems had warmed her toward me. For months I was left alone in my cubicle. She would appear above me now and then on what were perhaps reconnaissance flights. My world was never happier than when I had time to write my own sentences, which I did almost exclusively at the office now it was hopeless to try to stay at home after leaving my job. Every two weeks I would see Ariadne. That January we went to see the Moscow Circus at Radio City Music Hall. Before the show the Soviet and American national anthems were played. Afterward we walked over to Fifth Avenue. Ariadne had never visited this part of the city. I showed her the skating rink at Rockefeller Center and then put her in a cab. Giving her a good-bye kiss was an awkward thing. A kiss on the cheek, a pat on her head, these were the things I did, not knowing if they were welcome or not, but they brought closure to the evening. Ariadne had the capacity to make me feel insecure, more so than

many others, because she didn't tip her hand, she didn't say what was on her mind. It pleased me, S.L., to be out with her on a cold January night, to say good-bye to her in the same Rockefeller Center that was part of my history in a city that was sinking because of the people who dropped their candy wrappers ostentatiously in the public places. (It pleased me but it also suffocated me, the idea that I would pass up a date with a beautiful woman to be with my stepdaughter, knowing that I was giving up a chance to be out there doing the wild thing. Then you find yourself sinking into a situation you thought you could not endure for one more second, like the amateur entomologist in *Woman in the Dunes*. So you go to the Moscow Circus. You go to the great great Radio City Music Hall and you know that though you are with your stepdaughter and not that sexy sexy woman, you are somehow eating solid solid food.) When I got home that night the message light on the answering machine was blinking. If you listened closely at the walls, you could hear the electrical hum, power being fed to the high-tech machinery that kept the Yuppie residents in their happy state. You could see through the walls dials glowing green and amber and red in the night and you saw screens of the clearest blue. You saw men in Armani ties lying next to the machines, while their women powered up on all-in-one exercise equipment. So yes, the building had a happy feeling of genial prosperity, while the streets were full of guns and the practiced, rageful truncation of speech that exploded in your face as "Fuck out of my way." So yes, the light was blinking, a warming sight. By now it was a ritual of my apartment entrances to say a prayer for acceptance before looking at the answering machine. The angel voice of

Beloved was on the tape, saying, "Hi, it's me. Turn on the TV. Our country is at war." Our country. Do you know, S.L., the love she summoned with those words, this beautiful creation of wealth and culture ready to love in an adoring way parent, husband, child, country. "Our country." Was there any more precious way to break the news? I saw her at her finest, a beautiful beautiful American American girl girl. So that finally, finally, the spanking of Saddam Hussein had begun. We were coming at him with military might. Tom Cruise was flying planes in the night while luscious WACs awaited his return spread-eagled on the flight deck of the *Kitty Hawk*, and the boys in the bars were being warmed by the CNN fires. I have to tell you, S.L., it caught me up like a Don Mattingly hit spree. I had become a follower of the spanking of the Evil One, hoping there would not be too many more bullets for breakfast days for him. Radio City Music Hall. Ariadne. The lovely call from Beloved. The spanking of Saddam Hussein. Just a memorable January night. In March of that year I came here, to the building where I met you, and outside of which you now wait for me, S.L. Her name was Marilyn, and I was delivered to her by an earnest broker, a prince of a man who had once traded in millions but now showed apartments for a fee, a man who had lost his fortune but saved his soul, a man who only wanted to deliver the perfect living space to me. The apartment had a worn carpet and tangerine walls, and the bedroom looked like a madam's boudoir with the pillowy bed as the centerpiece and satin fabric on the walls. Marilyn was a Hollywood blond living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. She had stepped out into the night with many men. She had a film of grease on her and was in her early forties and

had a story of tribulation to tell. In the last year alone she had lost both her parents, broken up with her fiancé, seen the failure of her biggest acting project, had three major operations, and was still afflicted with chronic fatigue syndrome. These things she told me in the expressive voice of the Louisianian that she was, while deciding whether to turn over her apartment to me as a sublet for some months. She promised to cook me some jambalaya, and showed herself to be a woman with the mind of a calculator hooking and pulling and bending you toward her. She told her story this way, that her fiancé stopped *meeting her needs*, and so, just for a while, just for the shortest while, she went to someone else to get her needs met, and learning of the event, her fiancé reacted with *full-scale umbrage*, those were her exact words to me. S.L., you know the woman of whom I speak, as you live in the same building and have doubtless seen each other many times. Do not pretend ignorance, do not work anger in me. You know her as a woman who keeps her hair very blond, that she wears the shortest of skirts to proudly display her long tan legs and award-winning thighs, and that the men of the region descend on her en masse. She had tried to go against the current of her life, to make it a way it couldn't be, S.L. Once upon a time she had been a Baton Rouge debutante, and had a proper Southern beau by way of *Vanderbilt* Law School who became her devoted husband, but on the security that derived from marriage and family she had to turn her back, for the voice inside her was calling her to the footlights of New York City. "Call the police, honey. They'll protect you from your feelings," she said to hubby, writhing in pain over the impending abandonment. He did not know what she meant by these

words, but then he did know what she meant, in the deepest part of him, for the rest of his days (which are still going on). Marilyn took voice lessons at Juilliard. She was professionally trained. But she was a love junkie who could not stay with one man because so many of them felt so good. As soon as one got on a plane she was with another. After a while they got afraid to board their flights. So Marilyn explained it to me. You would see them at the airport stalling and in a state of high indecision on the carpeted ramps leading to the plane door. Stewardesses with their American cheer--Marilyn called them "flying waitresses"--began to notice the symptom. "That one has Marilyn disease," they would say of some dawdling hunk. But now Marilyn was up against it. She was out of love and out of work and the West Coast was calling to her. She had some irons she wanted to place in the fire out there. She had her blond hair, and that counted for something in America, she said. There were many influential and powerful men who still wanted to boff her, she said to me, in a moment of total and uninhibited honesty. As I left the apartment with the broker, she called to me that two months' security would be better than one. The broker, who had been on the sidelines to this point, shook his head no, no in the subtlest way, but Marilyn smilingly willed the money out of me. "You gave away too much," he said later, but he was European and sober and I was full of American largesse. Things fell into place. The apartment was given to me as a sublet, and in the course of our negotiations, Marilyn placed her hand on my thigh. Later she placed her hand on the small of my back. She was full of feminine wile. It was not me she wanted. This much I knew. She had smelled money, Beloved's

money. The broker, who wore khakis that had lost their crease and who was a man struggling to find a new perspective on success and failure, had told her I had a credit rating like the Rockefellers. I did not come forward with this information to Marilyn. It was clearly none of her business, though I do remember some concern that she would find out the money wasn't mine and that the image of me that was compelling her to practice her feminine wiles would alter. All I need to tell you is that she was finally gone. Who can know the truth, S.L.? Who can know it? In the morning I would see the living dead tottering about on the street in ragged clothes, the men with unshaven faces after a night of cracking, the dirty women rearranging their clothes. I have an acquaintance in law enforcement, S.L., who tells me there are crack houses all up and down Amsterdam Avenue, and along with the human detritus, for whom the dumpsters being carted by the trucks on the nation's highways are intended, there is also Mr. Clean, Mr. Dominican Republic man with the flowery shirt and pressed jeans and very white sneakers, a shoot em boy run run who answers wrongs with the antiseptic bullet, who blows people's faces off and for whom it takes a lot of rights and only one wrong for him to pull the trigger. But also there is Mr. Lesser Dominican Man in the crack house management chain, and he is feral and hacks the morning air with a machete, and yes, the dumpsters on the backs of those American American trucks on the American nation's highways are for them too, there are those who will go against their faces and their bodies with *strength*, who will right them with wrongness in colossal ways with hands all over their bodies as they en route them *by any means necessary*, bouncing their heads

along the pavement, to the righteous dumpsters to restore the rightness of America, to put an end to this first thing in the morning hacking of the American air (the heart longs to communicate, S.L., you who are neither beautiful nor glamorous and yet insist on roaming the corridors of power in your fat and waddling way). There will come this time when America will put its foot down, when Billy and Danny and little Johnny *Johnson* can roam free once more. To walk among the crack house refuse and the crack house management team, S.L., and fear, yes fear, that the dumpsters now on the nation's highways are for them. And know only this as well, S.L., that I got after them in my mind for their annoying little ways, for their peculiar habit of stopping, turning, and peering into the distance. Some of them did this. They could not go three feet without turning to do this peering thing, a move calculated to disturb the normal pedestrian, who has been trained to use the street to get from one place to another, and who has no need to turn, whose life has developed in such a way as to not require this impeding thing. And then, as you were struggling to cope with that little pattern, they pulled out their hideous coup de grace. They began whistling. They put filthy fingers to filthy mouths that were all teeth and a high, ear-splitting sound emerged out of all proportion to the effort they seemed to be making. And for this they would have to be punished too, for the nation could not tolerate people in the guise of wandering whistling garbage. It was in this time that I continued my walking ways. I took the bus cross-town to 85th Street, and then set off down Fifth Avenue, saying hello to the Metropolitan Museum, with its banners hung, said hello to the Frick farther down, said hello to the bronze statue of the WW I

doughboys, leading the charge with bayoneted rifles. To these things that represent the finest in America I said hello, but had nothing good to say to the Plaza Hotel, a building that had the appearance of blight on it despite all its polished brass. Walking is a wonderful thing, S.L., to come happy, happy to work is a wonderful thing. That summer the Oiseau equipped me with my own set of wings. She took me out on the terrace and had me perch on the ledge and test-flap these wings. She said the air was to be flown through, the ocean to be swam in, and land to be lived on. She said this with the most clear-eyed gaze, with that unstudied lack of visible emotion birds seem to possess. At the session I had spoken of possibly going to Europe, which brought no seeming opposition from Beloved or the Oiseau. In fact, Beloved was only too encouraging. She spoke her high-spirited language to me, using the words "wonderful" and "great." With my mind it was not hard to grasp the freedom she was giving me, that she was seeing me as Daddy, who in going away would be leaving her alone and not invading her bedroom with his heh heh heh, but my own stuff kicked in, S.L., and there on the ledge I watered all of New York with my uncontrollable sobbing, for to leave home for Europe was to break Beloved's heart, and what is more painful than death from a broken heart? My mentor had given me a writing technique to practice for my daily inventory, a dialogue between my adult self and the child within me, and so when I turned to this writing, I found the voice of the child screaming in terror that while away at the camp of the Christian people, his mother was in horrible horrible trouble, and it was extremely necessary for him to ride, and ride hard, to her rescue, lest she who had sent him away in the first

place die because he was not there. I knew I was applying the same old emotion to Beloved, that I was making her my mother as she was making me her father, but the wall of fear was more than I could see beyond, for the time being. At first, S.L., I imagined myself going off to Scandanavia. After arriving in Stockholm, not far from where my mother was born, I would then travel to Denmark and Norway. But the more I considered Stockholm, the more in danger of suffocation I felt, that I would be traveling thousands of miles to arrive in the softness of my mother and smother in her memory when it was my own life finally that I wanted. Where would you most like to go? I asked myself, and the answer was Italy, sunny, sunny Italy. Know this, S.L., that on the way to the airport I had the curious sense that I was starting my life over, that I was an eight-year-old boy leaving home for the first time. But there was a big difference. I felt held in the love of Beloved and the esteem of the Oiseau. I felt that the insides that I didn't have at that chronological age—when I was beset with terror and longing for Mommy-- had been given me now, that this was nothing to dread but instead an adventure. This little light of love was burning in me, and I could love and be loved. My mentor rained down chuckle on me when I told him of my desire for women and my belief that infidelity was incompatible with love. "Stop trying to be perfect," he said, in his laughing way. We arrived at Fiumecino Airport at 6 a.m. Within an hour I was in a large hotel room with high ceilings, a sad room in the drab, mostly vacant place. I had made a mistake. I wasn't capable of going through with this trip. The minutes would seem like hours, the hours day, and the pain would require me to kill myself. I was back in childhood at the Bible camp in the

Catskills missing the sweet softness of Mommy. Know that I went on automatic with the fear engulfing me, that I unpacked my new Samsonite suitcase and put away my clothes, that I showered and shaved, that I flossed my teeth, that I applied deodorant under both arms, that I sat reading spiritual literature and feeling like a child, that I wrote out my fears and then spent time meditating that the God who is where I am might flood my being with his always recognizable presence, then on my knees held the image of Beloved in my mind and prayed for all good things for her, that she be happy and healthy and have companions and success, etc. I prayed that she have the same freedom I wanted for myself, and, though it was touch and go, the lonely spaces of the pensione did not seem so lonely anymore. The clerk's name was Salvatore. He was bearded and skinny, his clothes were dirty, and the stench of alcohol came through his pores. "Anything you need for me to do, you let me know. Right? Right?" He spoke these words to me in his intense way. The only other boarder was a 60-year-old woman from Scarsdale whom I met in the dining room. Over a continental breakfast she told me Salvatore was a menace to human life, that he was a chain-smoking fool who could pass out drunk with a lit cigarette and burn the place down. Then she asked me for a loan of \$300, and said there wasn't anything she wouldn't do for it, but S.L., I turned her down diplomatically yet strongly, equipped as I was with the Oiseau's wings and Randolph's masculine vigor. The Colisseum, some crumbling ruins I could not properly name, Hadrian's Tomb, the hideous, threatening, and prophetically fascist Victor Emmanuel Monument, so oppressively high up all those steps, a stale sandwich at a

trattoria, where I was treated with impatience, a crying spell back in my room, and then the little piece of heaven that we find in coming together in the rooms of the sober people, where warmth and love such as we need are to be had, at the English church not far from the bus depot at the end of the day. An angel of light, a woman with suntanned flaking skin, a woman at least 60 years of age, asked me that night to come speak the next evening at the meeting at Via Napoli. S.L., she was a woman from Norway who knew the condition of Beloved's that I alluded to indirectly at the meeting, and who told me with full assurance that it takes a year or two for this condition to clear up, and who then swept up her miniature poodle and left the meeting. The next morning I woke to the pealing of church bells. The room was sun-splashed, and I heard the message of the bells, encouraging the spirit to rise and shine, and I was so grateful to be in a country where community still counted, where it was not all I've got mines, you've got to gets your owns, Bones. The terror was gone, and that morning I visited the Vatican. Seeing the massive dome of St. Peter's, I thought I understood the world ambition of the church, its catholicity. I was happy, happy, that morning, S.L., seeing the Pieta behind bulletproof glass, and felt that I had stumbled on a spiritual experience as I entered deeper into the cathedral, where a mass was being projected over loudspeakers, a great religion expressing itself in an environment of great art, and was in love with the priest in his vestments, his chasuble and alb and mitre. But I was not one of the fold, S.L. I was not on Peter's rock. At the Vatican Museum, trying to keep up, tired of the guidebook, tired of the great art of Michelangelo all over the Sistine Chapel, I saw myself for

what I was, a silly tourist taking Italy 101. That evening, at Via Napoli, I bought apples at a fruit stand, the first I had seen in Rome, the sadness of the city sinking into me on a Sunday evening. I led the meeting that night, announcing myself as from New York City and speaking of God and afterward a rubber-lipped woman attached herself to me. We went for coffee at a sidewalk cafe, where she ordered in perfect Italian. An artist, she was also from New York City and beginning to have a great success in Italy, she said. I was just what she had needed to hear, she said, a real New York story. This was not my first infatuation. The month before I had met a woman and we had kissed, but I was not able to go farther with her, and so she moved on from me, but now, intoxicated, I was walking back to the apartment of Nadia, this new woman, full-breasted and with a luscious mouth, but we had not been able to break entirely free, for in our company was an Australian woman, thin and angry, from whose mouth sparks of fury flew. Rome sucked. The men of Rome sucked. The phony art world of Rome sucked, she said. How had this woman who lived for bitter lamentation come to be in my fortunate evening? The road was dark, seemingly endless, and circled a park. Negativity began to rim my good feeling. I was not going to get over the finish line after all, the finish line being possession of the body of Nadia. We passed the Spanish Steps, at the top of which the next day I would see this Australian woman baking in the merciless heat, as if she hoped the sun would eviscerate her off the planet. Burned red, she would point to a gallery exhibiting the work of Nadia, the gorgeous one, and say to me, "Did you get her? Did you get a piece of fame from her? Are you now on the top shelf where you

aspire to be, so you do not have to bake on these Spanish Steps with those of us with no loot and no looks and no place to go?" She talked to me in just this way the next morning, S.L., but on the evening that we were the three of us together in the apartment of Nadia, just down the way from the Piazza di Populi, only a short walk from a modest church with a Caravaggio fresco, on that evening the three of us sat until the heat from the other woman was unendurable, and mercifully she left. A man born of woman and dominated by woman, S.L., has to learn that the magic he is seeking in the big breasts or modest breasts of these women, that he is seeking in the voluptuousness of their bodies, is looking for love in all the wrong places. He has to grasp that he has been placed in the position in which he finds himself in order to chart a new direction, that he cannot be cured by the hair of the dog that has just bitten him. He has to see the thread going back to Mommy, to his high school girlfriend, whom he could not let out of his sight, to Julia, whom he could not let out of his sight until he did not want to be in her sight anymore. One has got to see these things if he is not to be in the grip of chronic sexual fever anymore. One has got to lust and regard those breasts as salvation home and feel the deep anger that just as you are approaching the finish line God contrives to keep her out of range of you. You come this close the first night, talking into the early morning with this woman who is fame-bound and infatuated with your New York talk of God, who tells you, a crucial fact, in the middle of the conversation that she has *an older brother who gets all the attention*, there is pique, ancient pique, attached to each of these words that come from her lovely mouth, and when finally you touch her from

behind on the shoulders above those great salvationistic breasts she says no and at three in the morning you leave with only a *brotherly* kiss on the cheek, and practically sleepless because of the torment of longing you call her the next day and yes, she will have dinner with you, and that costs you big lira, and you go upstairs with her but she has a phone call to make to her therapist back in New York City, the only person who understands her and is keeping her alive, and you generously say, because you don't want to give the appearance of crowding her, as you don't want to crowd Beloved, that it's cool, just so very cool, and you sit in her living room while she talks on the phone in the bedroom, and five minutes become ten and ten become twenty and thirty become an hour, and you become slowly incredulous that this mammoth, preposterous call is going on, for now and then you hear her voice, and you still don't want to believe what is happening because heaven is in those breasts, and so you continue to wait, rearranging your face numerous times to be sure it is the face of an understanding, civilized man--you never, ever want to appear in the guise of an oppressor again--and you surge into the land of optimism, saying the transatlantic call has now gone on an hour, she can't duplicate that feat with another sixty minutes of chatter, but soon it is an hour and a half and you are saying, because it is now pushing midnight, that it is understood that you are to stay, that she will make a gift of herself to you for your patience, but then the two-hour mark has come and gone and so you seek her out, you traverse that hallway that has been separating you these hours, and you find her sitting cross-legged on her bed, the phone now part of her ear, and she saying, cupping the receiver, "I'm going to be a while longer.

Could you please be sure that the door is locked on your way out? Ciao," and she blows you a kiss from her full, soft lips, and this time your face isn't so rearranged as to fully hide the peeve, and minutes later you are standing in the Piazza de Populi, a few people sitting about, trying to get a cab. Not that your infatuation fever has run its course, for the next day you remember that she said she too might be headed for Florence, your next stop; you remember her suggestion that you travel together. It is a fever that has you now, the little Johnny Updike fever of desire (let us stop it here and ask the question--Why are you picking on John Updike? And you answer that it is because he writes all those books. Because he sleeps with all those women. Because he does all these things and does not go straight to hell but shows America his laughing face on the cover of *Time* magazine instead. Because he went to Harvard. Because he has an American name and an American way) and it must run its course. It takes you to a phone the next morning. You call her but get her machine, a bilingual recording, and so you leave a message saying you would be *more than* happy to ride to Florence with her, and you leave your phone number at the end of the message. Florence is the Duomo, is Via Laura, where your pensione is, is red tile roofs, is the Bargello and Uffizi and Tintoretto and Donatello and something called the Stendhal effect, an excess of fine art that can have debilitating physical consequences, from dizziness to stroke. You are told to take this seriously, and must admit to some lightheadedness, seeing Leonardo's Archangel and the Virgin Mary. Florence is the English-born old woman who runs the pensione telling you that her son-in-law has been a total disappointment,

that he is a man whose brain was put in "turned around" when he was born, that for no reason other than greed he has tried to scheme the pensione away from her. You remember trying not to laugh, for there was a time when you too had your brain "turned around" and locked horns with your mother for control of the building you were raised in and which your family managed. You remember that your room was on the main floor behind the reception desk, and that you started the morning with a 20-minute meditation and did the same in the evening, time with God moving you from pain and anxiety to a state of awareness of the infinite possibilities of life, a phrase your mentor often uses. You remember the evening strolls and the foolish belief that you would find a woman eager for a sexual experience in the square with the imitation *David*. You remember the gelato every evening and the street band playing bad rock and thinking that second-class seats on Italian trains were the equal of first-class seats on American trains. Venice is the vaporetto, the Piazza San Marco. You feel pain seeing the empty tables in the piazza, customers lured away by the street musicians, so that the beautiful waiters can only stand helpless and idle, their Italian charm for use on no one. S.L., I kept rushing to do Italy, making a side trip to Urezzo to see dusty, faded frescoes because I was a guidebook and achievement slave. *Biglietti andare e ritorno*. I spoke these words with pride at the railroad station. The sun never set in all this time, splashing happily on palaces and churches and glittering squares, or if it did, the moon took its place and the canals caught the lights from the streets that bordered them. I was in my aloneness now, thinking I would find her in the Piazza San Marco, in the vaporetto, in the railroad station,

but she was always walking away from me and into the arms of someone else. Then one night at the hotel I saw a woman wearing a black dress with a red sash disappear into her room with a water bottle. I was on fire with longing for her, and had trouble sleeping that night. If not for the fear that she was with someone, I might have knocked at her door. The next morning I gave myself to my routine of p and m (yes, S.L., prayer and meditation), not wanting to be at the mercy of these longings. I had the idea that if sex were to enter my life, I must not chase after it. I looked for calm and self-possession. I had known a life when drinking where the pursuit of sex was like a great hunt. Sober I did not want to have to go out of my way. I wanted to be able to just walk into it, with no spectacular disruption of my day. If I did not sleep with the woman I had kissed back in New York, it was that I did not want to have to wake up with her the next morning. I have a friend, S.L., who is in my mind as I speak these words to you. He is my New York brother, not my mentor, and his name is Lansingworth and he takes from life. He says of a woman that "she smells of good sex," and sometimes I feel small and that I am talking in an uncomprehended way to this man when I mention a bypassed opportunity like this, or that I am being judged as sickly, as a weakling, for his thing is to live well and that includes fucking. He is a fucking machine. He has slept with many of the women of New York City and looks down on my reticence, as in the case of the blond woman I could not spend the night with. For him, though he does not say so, it is as cowardly as being afraid to swim in the ocean. Of women who have an approach-avoidance kind of behavior toward me, he says, succinctly, "They're sick. Leave them

alone." Sometimes I feel that he is judging me to be less than a man, and at such times I have to write my feelings out, which always lead me back to someone from my past who lived his life with his penis outside his pants, and who was the model for me of what a man should be, in that he too devoted his life to the bedding down of the women of New York City, and later, other parts of the country. And when I see where the self-judgment comes from, I can replace this old idea with the new one that a man is someone capable of humbling himself before God, and then I am restored to the peace of the kingdom. My mentor says we are headed for the place where there is no past and there is no future, only the entire, I mean eternal, now but that to do so it is necessary to keep uncovering and letting go of the memories, and for what purpose but that we can love this thing in front of us and that wanting can get in the way of loving. I'm telling you this, S.L., so that you'll understand why it is I try to step out into the day in a calm, non-needy state, and why it was that the woman fever of the night before was behind me *only to return in some degree* when she walked past me out of the hotel's garden restaurant where I was having breakfast that morning, my *Birnbaum's* on the table, she wearing the same black dress and same red sash but with no water bottle. Because she was not in my direct path I let her go, and walked that morning to the Galleria Accademia on the canal, where, because I had let her go, she stood in front of me in one of the rooms, staring at something, Jesus, I want to say I know, but I really don't--a Tinteretto/Bellini/Cellini/Caravaggio something. The point is that because the people who run interference, the people who position themselves in proximity to

the object of your desire so you cannot fully and unselfconsciously express yourself to her, had taken up their thwarting positions, I had no choice but to wait outside, so that, when she emerged, I could have a clear playing field and show myself in my true and uninhibited power. Because I was working under the cloak of anonymity, the impediment to sexual bliss had been removed. At an outdoor cafe she told me her story. A New Yorker and doctoral candidate in art history after unsatisfying years as a lawyer. A Jewish woman whose mother was flying from the great city of Kalamazoo, Michigan, to meet her in Florence in a few days. We hung together for some hours, S.L., taking the vaporetto out to an island and then returning to Piazza San Marco. Here are the things she said to me that morning. She said the Italian men behaved aggressively toward her, that for a man to kiss a woman is the same as to have slept with her, that I was not a nice person but a dangerous person, the last a comment I laughed at at the time, the sun splashing so happily on Piazza San Marco and I so in love with this intellectual Jewish woman whose mother was soon to fly over from amazing Kalamazoo, but a comment that Dr. Randolph was not willing to let go as easily as I had, for back in New York he jumped on it, with his manly vigor, saying "What do you suppose she means making a statement like that?" and taking me back to the start of our therapy, when he said "All I hear from you is guilt." He was saying nix, nix, this is not harmless banter, this is the stuff that continues the reign of guilt over your being. He was saying, "You did nothing to deserve such a remark." And when Dr. Randolph rode to my defense in this way, I could only weep with appreciation, as I could not weep with appreciation for my father, who

had rode with the posse of the outraged women, taking their side and administering their punishment to me with no questions asked. Randolph in saying this was like a strong sun exposing my receptivity to guilt on that afternoon on the Piazza San Marco, watched over by the hapless, idle waiters with their hands at their sides. Yes, we went inside the palace, and at one point I lost her and tried not to panic, as I searched the rooms, thinking all my fine work had gone down the drain and that I had known all along that I would not get over the *finish line* with her, but there she was, in front of a monstrous tapestry, and she had not been trying to dust me, for her words were, "I was wondering where you were," words that lit me up, though by now I was playing a defensive game, playing not to lose, trying to avoid a mistake that would deprive me of her. You tell me, S.L. Was that why I said to her that I had had enough sightseeing for the day, that it was time to go back to my room? Did I say those words because I had truly had enough, because it was time to return to my room and recharge my battery with p and m and i (prayer and meditation and inventory, S.L.), or did I say this because of the defensive game I was playing and my fear of making a mistake? It is a little of both, my S.L. friend, for a requirement of the life in God is that you not add ornaments to your head in the form of jagged glass embedded in your scalp. You do not do things that are outside of the flow of the guide within you. You are supposedly learning to listen, and so I was called back through the tight, winding streets to my room, to do my p and m and i, but not before saying I wanted to see her that evening, to which she said she had to catch the train to Udine, that she hadn't the money to spend another night in Venice, to which I

said, if she didn't catch the train she should come to see me. So that in my room overlooking the courtyard where I had breakfasted, I was going back into myself, S.L., gaining distance on the day that had pulled me into it, coming back from the wild thoughts of her laid out on my bed, seeking to come back to the still point and to put the shape of the evening in the realm of *que sera, sera*, so that I would not have to wear the glass embedded in my scalp. I was sweaty, S.L., and stared at the phone, thinking to call down to the desk, for that morning I had been moved from my original room to a room without a bath in favor of someone with a prior reservation, so now I had to use the public bath to shower. But something got in the way of my calling down to the desk, S.L., a lack of self-worth, a surge of anger, that said Yeah right, go ahead and call down and tell those Italian clerks a woman may stop by, that you're stepping out of your room to take a shower. Because to call down there is to express your desire that she in fact come and to set yourself up for disappointment when she doesn't, and to have these front-desk monkeys laugh at you *in their Italian way* for your delusion. So no, S.L., I did not call down. I stared at the telephone for the longest while and gave the matter my best thinking, and then went off to the shower without having lifted the receiver. Twenty minutes later I was in the lobby, and the two young Italian desk clerks, both in their Italian way, informed me that a woman had been by to see me, that they had rung my room, but that there was no answer, and so they told the woman, also in their Italian way, that I was not there and sent her away, but not before she had left a note, a note, S.L., that said how nice to be with me and sorry she had missed me and that she was on her way to Udine. "You can still

catch her," they said in unison, in yes, a superbly Italian-accented way, malice smearing their faces, and yes, S.L., I did the crazy-man run through the narrow streets of Venice, I knocked over a dinner table in some dusky little piazza, stepping in a man's chicken fra diablo with one foot and a giant bowl of fettucine al fresco with the other. I threw old women and men into the canals, those who were doing their obstructionist dawdle dance in front of me, and never ceased my forward motion toward the train station, all the while cursing God, cursing him extremely, for what could only be called the *unmitigated betrayal of my best interests*. I spit as I ran. I cursed as I ran. I did these things in protest of his brutal treachery. You cannot stay in this state forever, S.L. Always there is a yielding to his will, a happiness that follows the pain, though it was a long time coming. I had to go back and make restitution to these people I had harmed. The police, the victims, the friends of the victims, all gave me Italian punches to the face and rained blows to my body, but the thing I remember most was that in the railway station, as I checked the coach cars of the train bound for Udine on its way to Vienna, one compartment was filled with young, blond Austrian men, tanned and wearing colorful T-shirts, laughing in their Austrian way with feral tendencies informing that laughter, cubs who had learned nothing from the slaughter of their Hun forefathers, laughing as if to say to me, "You, ectomorphic America, are in a state of decline. Drug addicts operate your computers, AIDS infests the Oval Office, and weeds are soon to crack the foundations of the IBM corporate palaces. Your president is impotent to spank this smile of triumph off our faces. We are rising, we are strong, we are getting *down* for another world

war round," they said in unison. Like the wind I had rushed through the streets of Venice in pursuit of the red-sashed woman, but now I walked slowly, dejectedly. Yes, the punches, the savage beating administered by the Italian people slowed me down, but the numbness came from the loss of her, and so for days and months afterward I questioned God, S.L.; I had wanted her smell, her touch, her lips, and all the rest, and instead I had the loneliness of the Venetian streets. "Oh Father, a man is only a man with a huge thing he uses to exact revenge on a woman for all the wrongs done him by some other woman. Is that what you want me to say? Do you want me in the cold, lonely places forever?" I cried, but he did not answer me with words, only the silence he asked me to explore there on those streets and in my room, far from Mother, far from home, *never closer to Mother, never closer to home.*

That it is not through the body

That the body is the drink

That it is not through the body,

That the body is the drink

That intoxicates us.

He was calling me in the Venetian air to him, asking me to find him in his silence while all of Venice was devouring pasta and wine. He was saying, "Have you finally had enough of this pleasure hunt that leads to pain?" S.L., I could tell you of other events, but all you need to know is that, back in Rome, the flame of love-lust burned high once more, that a beautiful young American caught my eye, that we went in the company of others to a cafe just across from Via Napoli, that she

said I had something spiritual she wanted, that she said, when I told her of my early morning flight the next day from Fiumecino, that she would drive me for a fee--said this kiddingly. I did not respond with any words. Ask me why, S.L. Ask me and I will say, because we were in the company of a filthy filthy clean clean American American corporate corporate man man who knew this woman and for whom I had to prove that I was above a sexual desire for her, sensing that he himself had that desire, by not responding to her offer and by, when she walked off alone to her car, going off with filthy filthy clean clean him him down Via fucking Napoli when everything in me was screaming go go go with her her and let the full flower of your desire bloom. To please please him him I did this at the expense of my desire so that I wanted to jump from my hotel room window to kill the pain of longing. A woman whose face I do not even in my mind see clearly, half my age but whose youth I wanted because I too choose to believe I am young and that my life is ahead of me. So that yes an angry jet tore me screaming from her the next morning into a blue sky. Why do I tell you these things, S.L., but to set the record straight, reporting honestly and openly to you who cavorts, who sidles up to those who pass through the corridors of power, you who with your obfuscating ways never choose to reveal your full identity to me, an identity rooted, as you would never have the honesty to say, in the need to harm. Changes had taken place in the interpersonal sphere, not late-breaking developments that required *full network coverage* but the steady changes that come from dying slowly to the old and being born into the new. Beloved and I had stabilized to the extent that we were seeing each other regularly one night a

week, Friday, in addition to our time with the Oiseau. We had stabilized, S.L., but I wanted to touch other women, and the madness pain of the near-miss in Florence continued in New York. Sharing a cab with two others from JFK, I found my leg pressed against the leg of a beautiful young woman whom I found myself in wordless sexual communion with. Now it has finally come, I thought. The aloneness has ended, a woman who could model underwear has her thigh against mine and sexual compatibility has been established. We left the cab at Third Avenue, where she dusted me, explaining in words that were as bold as the tongue she placed in my mouth that her body belonged to the rock star boyfriend waiting for her now in their downtown apartment. May I say that the city was in mounting uproar in this time, that the spanking of Saddam Hussein did nothing to quell the feeding of bullets by some of the citizens to other citizens, that it was not enough to shoot the life out of them but that the perps had to get up close and listen with envy to the final breaths toward extinction? May I say that Beloved was in a state of mounting terror, that she feared in this time that because I had gone away for three weeks we now had to begin living together again? May I tell you that in the presence of the Oiseau I was at pains to explain to Beloved that I was as oppressed by the idea of our living together as she was, that I too had come to see it as a threat to my freedom? Beloved showed her relief that he/I was not coming into the bedroom to rub fat bellies against her. Ariadne was gone by this time. Beloved could not have her at home anymore. Beloved talked in terms of Ariadne sucking her blood, taking every last drop from her, and so Ariadne's departure northward to Peter, who was making a home for

himself in Columbia County in New York State, had to take place. Beloved talked of reestablishing a relationship with Peter, now that I was no longer there to *create trouble* and erect a barrier between him and her with my thunderous judgments. But Peter flashed his legendary rapaciousness, his way of being that she had entirely forgotten about, and it frightened and distressed her. She came back reeling from a day with him with these exact words, S.L. "He can't change. He's not capable of it." These words she said to me. I had the travel fever in this time. I told Dr. Randolph I wanted to go to Paris in October. Dr. Randolph said my choice of cities made it apparent that I was seeking l'amour. Dr. Randolph shamed me, S.L. I heard him to be saying that I was being excessive. So I chose London, a more sedate capital across the channel. By this time I was in such a state of exhilaration that I didn't need an airline reservation. I just flapped the wings that the Oiseau had provided me with and then flew over the Atlantic, now and then looking down at the endless body of water and thinking, *the world is nothing but a giant bathtub*. This thought came to me in mid-flight. In London, because economy was important, I took modest lodgings in Belgrave Road. There were numerous warnings in the stations and on the trains about packages because of the IRA bombing campaign. An ad caught my eye in the Pimlico station. An aging man with a broad, meaty face stared out at you from the poster, on which was printed a large block of text in which he told you of the sexual abuse he had experienced and the guilt he suffered because of what his father had done to him. This was England, the land of Shakespeare and the stiff upper lip. You did not expect such an ad in the London tube, S.L. Slowly a

depressive loneliness settled over me. The proprietor of the hotel wanted to go to bed with me. She looked to have aboriginal ancestry; there was a sad exoticism, but also yellow teeth, and each night I heard her whimper when the man of the house, a red-faced Englishman, came home and beat her. In fact, all over England beatings of a similar kind were going on at this hour, and *studies showed* that the rate of beatings increased as the hours passed. The peak daytime hour for thrashings was 2-3 p.m., which no one could fathom except to speculate that significant portions of the whole labor force were compelled by their cravings to leave their positions to go home and give the wife a good roughing up in preparation for the real evening thing to come. It was explained to me in a sparsely attended lecture that the English insistence on privacy was in recognition of this deep-seated national desire for *the bashing*. I had brought along books on the Buddha and was encouraged, like him, to try to step off the wheel of desire, to surrender all longings for the flesh. I did look for women in the public places, in the museums and squares, but wherever I went the crowds were moving away from me, and for periods of time it was hard to speak at all, and I would have wanted to die if not for the breath I returned to two and three times a day, in the room on Belgrave Road in the hotel of the woman who received the beatings on a daily basis. At first my evenings at the theater were pleasant, but by the end of my stay, sitting alone amid couples had become painful, as if my solitariness were on full display. Where was my life? Where was my wife? But the breath came in handy there, too. You began to find, S.L., that you could get into your breath wherever you were. But yes, I was longing

without knowing it for human contact. A woman pressed up against me in the tube, those moments of public intimacy bringing a rush of painful understanding of all I was missing, S.L. One night after the theater I walked to the red light district. Seductive women in doorways called to me to come in to their clubs. Because I was no longer on the wheel of desire but armed with the Buddha's four noble truths, I was free to wander the district, S.L. Because I was so impervious to the allure of the *scantily clad ones* the first time around, I gave the streets another tour. A slender woman with a pretty figure and wearing only a brassiere and panties and a garter belt hooked me in. She said that for five pounds, just five pounds, I would find more like her downstairs, more than even a powerful *bloke* like me could handle. This she said on an October London night. Downstairs I found the following, S.L.--fat, fat women wearing dirty underwear saying to repressed men from Ireland that they would sit on the faces of the men from Ireland for five pounds a minute, and would negotiate the rates for any exceeding minutes. The women sat on the faces of the repressed Irishmen, they stuck the heads of the repressed Irishmen in their huge holes, and swiveled on them freely. I ran from the scene, *like the wind*, as my mother used to say, down into the tube at Piccadilly Circus, where, years before, in the company of Julia, skinheads had come on us from behind singing "I'm forever blowing bubbles" in their taunting English way, defying me to take the action that their insinuating words called for. Englishmen of a later decade were now in Piccadilly Circus, two of them, brazenly urinating against a wall of the station, vying for the same spot on the wall with their powerful urine streams. Their English eyes registered my

fear and they came after me in their lumbering way, without so much as first zipping their flies, thus keeping their lulus exposed to the English air, and chanted "A candidate for the bashing, a candidate for the bashing," chasing me half across London before their beer belly bloat did them in. What else there is to report, S.L., is that I took walks in St. James' Park and Hyde Park, that a *young lad* with rings through his cheeks and his ears and leather on his pencil frame bashed buses all the livelong day as they circled Trafalgar Square and that I masturbated in my room with the curtains drawn (bright light is less sensuous than shade. A woman stands naked in subdued natural light, her neck kissed by a man with thick lips while another man removes her clothes, she as frail as they are overpowering. A New York as well as a London fantasy, S.L.), that I heated water for tea with an immersion coil, that I visited the Tate Gallery three times in pursuit of women and in disregard of the Buddha's Noble Noble Truths. On the return flight I was not three hundred miles from the English coast when I dropped my bag in the ocean, in order to be unburdened of possessions. There are more lonely people out on the sea than you would imagine, S.L., people who thought they had gone out there to die but who get moved along on the waves for long periods of time, and are only slowly, slowly eaten by the fishes and the gulls. All they hear is the water roaring in their ears. They uniformly say the ocean is a very different thing from lying in your bathtub, but they also report that the overwhelming sense of lostness has its consolations, that they cease to care, that their lives are completely circumscribed by the waves breaking over them. They report that whole cities are buried beneath the ocean, that it is only a matter

of time before the entire earth is covered over with water. They speak in a knowing way, S.L.. Thousands and thousands of them floating on the water, and they are hard to pin down as to why they have cut loose from land. What one can conclude is that cost and effort were significant factors. Studies show that they are people with poor organizational abilities. To a man and woman they showed trouble marshaling the will to see to the arrangements for their own funerals. Another common link was their fear of the earth itself. The earth's soil is polluted, they said, but their chief concern was that rats would feast on their corpses. Unanimously, these wave riders preferred devourment by sharks and other fishes of the deep. Apathy. Depression. These are disturbing phenomena in the modern world, you would surely say, S.L. One can only conclude that this collection of strays were seeking above all else annihilation without having to do any paper work. Their deepest desire was to be dispersed to the elements as shark shit. In one voice they told me this was so. "Yes, our biggest dream is to be shark shit, shark shit," they shouted. How dark one's thoughts can grow in solitary flight over the briny deep. One thing needs saying, S.L. The giant plate movements that will bring cataclysm to the land, the mega-tsunami that will break over the continents and halt the trucks on the nation's highways and drown the devout in their pews--all this is coming. It's a hell of a thing to be born only to die, S.L., making not dying the only sane purpose in this life. But the thing that needs saying, S.L., to you on display in perfumed fineness, is to give you the reason for the trip to London, to tell you that Marilyn, who had been doing the Hollywood scene, was now back in town and that I had made a firm offer for the apartment

on the condition that she remove every last possession, her crotchless underwear included. But when I entered the apartment she was there spread-eagled on the bed, and her first words to me were "Do with me what you want. Dip your thing in my honey pot. I will give you five minutes of pleasure and years of hell. I will suck every last dollar out of you. Now come and do as you are told." I untied her from her self-imposed bondage and dragged her out the door. Even on the landing she was a study in riveting lewdness, S.L., showing much tongue, simulating masturbation, and fondling her giant West Coast breasts. This is the thing that has to be understood, S.L. When I was a child, living with the wild ones of my family, those who roamed the hallways and the rooms of our apartment with clubs and other implements of destruction and hit very hard with both hands, I was aware of a woman on the other side of the wall, a singer whose vocal exercises led my mother to bang on that very wall with her *thick* shoe in a demand for silence, if the hour was late, this being a woman it made me happy to think of, there in her apartment as beautiful as ours was ugly, as uncluttered as ours was junkified. I thought of this woman with some envy, too, S.L., wanting to be on her side of the wall and away from the marauding ones. So now it should come clear to you, S.L., that here, finally, I was to the other side of the wall, after these many years, after the time of Julia but in the time of Beloved, the time of Beloved being a time that stretches over all eternity, because love never dies but *separateness can assert itself*. The staying power of Marilyn was great, S.L., out there on the landing, calling me to her honey pot (yes, she called it thus) and to save her from the pain of her life, but when I did

not come to her, she turned rageful. She stopped showing me tongue and belched fire, and tore off her hairpiece and aged ten years, and these are the words she spoke: "You owe me. All you pricks owe me. I came into this world with you in my debt. Come forward with your payment and come forward now." Beloved and I continued to meet in this time, S.L. We met in the restaurants of New York City and saw the movies shown in the theaters of New York City and talked of *stuff*. For Beloved the past was a giant thing on her back, and sometimes she got tired of its weight and dropped it on my head, causing me to yelp with pain, but as time passed I began to dodge the past thrown down on my head, and it fell clattering between us but this was never a rupturing problem, S.L., it never ever became a permanent barrier to communication. That does not mean that she did not say, "You were horrible. You took total advantage of me. You came to me with your dirty laundry and expected me to make a life for you. You wouldn't let me speak on the phone with my friends. You called me vile names. You got jealous if I wanted to spend any time with Ariadne, my own daughter. You accused me of wanting to sleep with different men. You demanded that supper be on the table by 5:30 p.m., and if it wasn't, you threw a fit. You were a total tyrant." So yes, S.L., this past was dropped on my head less and less. I was at the stage of not being able to imagine a life fully with her or without her. Whereas once it was death for me not to be under the same roof with her and death for her if I was, now it seemed like, if not death, at least the cancellation of our liberties, for us to share the same space. I was a married man who did not wear his wedding band. Beloved on the other hand did wear her

band, to ward off men who might otherwise come on to her, S.L., a term I have not liked from her mouth, for it put me in mind that the only thing staving off my annihilation was her ring, that the men of Manhattan might, were it not for that ring, have an interest in her. And it put me in mind that I was not entirely at the point of not caring if the men of Manhattan had their way with her, ring or no ring, given the extinction that loomed if they claimed her for their own. My mentor sent great peals of laughter eastward from the West Coast. He laughed at me for identifying with the body. I had some angry feelings toward him in this time, S.L. I felt he had cornered the market on suffering. Tension was built into our relationship, because sooner or later I had to come out of my deferential crouch and rear my patricidal head and decapitate him in order to stand at the top of the mountain. A sore point was that he seemed to prefer the calls of the women of the West Coast over my own. I felt disgust at my sycophantic ways, always expressing such gratitude for every crumb he threw me. I had begun to have extreme anger toward him because he was human, and because he was human the burden of my life was falling more and more to me, and it seemed eventually only proper that he should be punished severely for this transfer. In this time, S.L., I went to the women of New York City, and the ones who came to me I ran from. I had dinner with one at a neighborhood restaurant, and my fear was great that Beloved would see us together and that I would have to drop dead and die. The woman looked less attractive than the night I had approached her. She was a psychotherapist and had much anger at her parents, she said. In fact, she was not speaking to them. She was in an angry condition altogether, she said, and

wanted to take up something creative--singing lessons--as an outlet. She was dating because her boyfriend had not measured up. He was a photographer who did no photography and brought in no income. One day she had looked at him flopped on the bed and said, "This man is a bum, and nothing but a bum," and so the romance was over. Because she was looking for a man who made lots of *thou*. This is the way she expressed it, S.L. She said he had to make a minimum of sixty thou. Anything below that was trouble. Because her studies had shown that qualities of personality were in line with personal income. The more thou you had, the more personality you had. Her studies had further shown that the bigger the income, the bigger the penis. I asked her, S.L., about the homeless running naked, some with huge dongs, through the streets of New York City, but she assured me this was a social phenomenon that didn't need our attention. She further warned me never to talk to her in even the mildest spirit of contradiction, that she had already assessed me to be below the mark and that she had firepower that in its very lowest application could blow me right out of the water. I fled from this woman and her stern propensities, S.L., and got weekly messages on my answering machine from her saying, in the most distressed tone, that I was responsible for activating all her abandonment issues. There was another I approached, falsely assuming I could surmount the issue of aging flesh, and backed out when her new teeth in a new face became a barrier, when I saw the black horror of her life beneath the surgical repair and the graveyard where she buried the men who came near her. S.L., I sought out the bulimic-anorexic women of New York, the women whose fathers had touched them in the

wrong places, women for whom, in their recoveries, commenting on their tans was crossing a line and invading their space. I saw armies of them, S.L., women who had closed up shop and were in full retreat to safety even as they said they were coming to meet you for dinner at eight. In this time, S.L., I got a call from Beloved's father, asking if we could have lunch. "It's been a long time since we've been to my club," he said. "We used to have such a good time together," he said. I will not lie to you, S.L. I wanted very much to go and be with him. I wanted to comfort him for the loss of his daughter. I wanted to explain, in an indirect and nonconfrontational way, what had happened to cause the break between him and Beloved. I wanted to lessen the chances that Beloved would be cut out of the will. I conferred with Beloved, who gave tentative approval, only to insist in front of the Oiseau that I not see him. The Oiseau was strong in her defense of Beloved. She asked me to honor her request, to in effect subordinate my need to see her father to Beloved's need to not have me go. This roiled my waters, S.L., and then my mentor and Dr. Randolph roiled those waters further by supporting my desire to see Beloved's father. But the thing is, S.L., that an incident had taken place that gave me my identification with Beloved. I remembered my own gross terror that my sister Vera would claim Beloved for her own. Beloved's dread was quite the opposite; her fear was that her father would use me to get her back and do heh heh heh big belly on her all over again. Her fear was that her father's reach was long and strong, and that the penalty for her revolt was death. So I had to call him back and tell him no, that Beloved preferred to meet with him herself sometime in the future. "How embarrassing,"

he said, but did not push the matter. Not a word more did he say. S.L., I was in pain for the next week. The thing that he had done to Beloved had not fully presented itself to me, and all I could really feel was my loss, that I was being deprived of his German-Jewish gymnasium fatherliness, not that I was passing up the opportunity of breaking bread with the man who had had his way with my wife. The Oiseau was at her toughest in this time. She spread her wings, showing her full plumage, and said to Beloved, "Do you feel betrayed by his desire to see your father?" Beloved said no, it wasn't that, but the word "betrayed" resonated with me, because I had been in the realm of pity for her bereft father, imagining the ache of loneliness he suffered from being abruptly severed from his precious daughter. Beloved read my mind and came to my aid, not there in the presence of the Oiseau but days later, saying, "You don't know my father. Not to be blasphemous, but he has many rooms in his evil mansion. You need not worry for him." Because yes, S.L., in the process of separating our bodies, our minds were joining. By this time, S.L., I had met Rhoda, her therapist, at an art exhibit down in Tribeca, New York, a show around the theme of incest that Beloved had been reluctant to participate in, for it was not her way to be identified with causes or to go public with a private hurt. Rhoda was the organizer of the show and an active participant. Later, she was to become known to me as the woman to whom all power flowed, the woman with the far-ranging power to offer indictments of any and all for crimes of abuse, but in this time I was struggling to keep an open mind, though my lurking fear was that her format was to take Beloved away from me and claim her entirely for her own.

Rhoda was an activist therapist, S.L. I don't know if that's the precise term, but she involved herself with Beloved beyond the sessions. Beloved expressed a desire to attend church, and Rhoda took her to a Sunday evening service at her place of worship, a joyous evangelical Protestant congregation that met on the East Side of New York at a rented space. (This was before she laid the denouncement on the pastor, accusing him of ritual abuse of her patients, an abuse so evil that the victim had no conscious memory of the atrocity performed on her. More than a denouncement, S.L., but a *knowing*, that caused Rhoda, when this knowing was challenged, to say, in these very words, "Do you dare to challenge my knowing?" And then to say, also with these exact words, "It is not through impudence but because you are under the evil pastor's spell that you come to me in this state of doubt.") Beloved was thrilled, for it had been her longing as a child growing up in an intellectual, atheistic household to take part in Christian worship. She did not know where she got this longing. She only knew that Jesus had come to the world to teach us how to love. It was an effort for her to be in this social context with Rhoda, for she had as much fear of what Rhoda could do to her as she had hope of what Rhoda could do for her. I do not know the full extent of Beloved's involvement with church activities, S.L. I know that she sang the hymns, and allowed some of the congregation to pray for her. I know that I had some anxiety that in this new setting the men of Christ would come to her and wish, under the cover of Christian-ness, to lie down with her. I did have this fear, S.L., and an awareness that did not serve to vivify me but rather, to wish to lie down in the street in tiredness over not the word but the

concept of irony, that word that people use to indicate they have a capacity to think. It gave me no joy to stick that word on her activity, to acknowledge in my mind if not to her that she was on the path I had abandoned as a child, the path my mother adhered to, going every Sunday afternoon to hear the disappearing words of the pastor, the words with no stickability in the mind. I did not tell Beloved that to see her involved with Bible study was to see my mother. Life takes strange turns, S.L.--do not deplore the obviousness of that statement, for utterance will have its way. The point about Rhoda was that she organized this art show, and it did not have a SoHo look--SoHo with its towering ramparts of art and the mile-long queue of stretch limos occupied by the men of power seeking the slender, androgynous, short-haired women who made the art—and was in fact in Tribeca, where black men incensed to the point of baleful silence did their capping thing on the heads and chests and backs of white folk, leaving them to die between the parked trucks and cars on the streets that had a long time before lost their supreme manufacturing power. Word got around that Beloved, the one true representative from SoHo, would be present, and so the stretch limo men formed their line, seeking their chance to devour/annihilate her, and she was dressed for the part in a slinky gown and black tights. They took her, two of them, into a back room. Passively she went, and as they started to disrobe her, Rhoda entered the scene, pulled them off, and with one in each hand, collided their heads together with resounding forcefulness, bringing limpness to their fat selves and depositing them on the street in an unconscious heap. The mommas of these fat men came running, and running hard, and challenged with fury the

right of Rhoda to wrong their sons, whom they had programmed to hit very hard and take whatever it was that they wanted in *large and excessive quantities*, but Rhoda had no play in her on this day. She lasered out the eyes of the mommas of these men and the limos split in great panic, sensing now what manner of woman they had in their midst. Rhoda was white teeth and a compact body. She was a smile that could not be called radiant because it was tinged with menace. She was full lips and blackness was the color that you saw, S.L., the blackness of her hair and eyes as remarkable as the whiteness of her teeth. The smile was hard, not welcoming, S.L. It had no receptivity in it, only conquest. It met your words with doubt, and said, "Prove yourself to me if you can. I'm all ears." I tried to tell her that I too had been raised in the religion that she embraced, that in fact a verse of scripture from the gospel of John was painted on the side of my mother's building, not far from where Rhoda lived, but my words had a long distance to travel, and died before they got there. They just fell at her feet, S.L. She regarded them with her *knowing* and turned away without responding. Later, the verdict came in. "Rhoda says you look nice, but that it was also her impression that you need to be taken care of." These were Rhoda's words, S.L., as reported to me by Beloved. It was, of course, a blow. I had come to the event seeking the approval of Rhoda, only to receive smiling hard slap from her. It put me in mind of being called across the room as a child by an older sister (the one who fell off a bridge into one of the city's rivers, S.L., that one) who had the toothy smile of Rhoda, and thinking as I went, This is my older sister I'm going to, only to receive physical hard slap from her. Dr. Randolph said, in this time and in

his rotund way, that betrayal was a theme in my life, that I had been working to bring this about, and that I perceived perfidy to have taken place sometime in childhood. S.L, I didn't fully believe him, but I was willing to go along, for I did not like the pain of feeling that at any moment I could be replaced by the stretch limo men, a pain that went way way back to my first girlfriend in high school, always always waiting for the CLOBBER that women sooner or later administered to men, leaving them destitute along the nation's highways, while they drove off with those men who owned the spiffier cars. I did some writing, S.L., and saw myself as a child trying to keep my father out of the bedroom with my mother, so that he could not take her away from me. I feel the full absurdity of such an awareness even as I report it to you, S.L., but Dr. Randolph leaped from his chair and did a victory dance, chanting "Insight! Insight!" and being generally preposterous, as only therapists can be when they fully reveal themselves. He made the mistake of touching me, and so I had to slap him and throw him back in his chair, but this did not stem the word gush. "Don't you see? Don't you see?" he spluttered. And so he made me see, S.L. He said that the betrayal was that my mother had chosen my father over me, that all my efforts to keep her had failed. And yet, even if his assertion was true, , what good is knowing, since emotions have a life of their own?

This kind of knowledge seemed sad and lacking, like trying to fend off an enraged tiger with a wet noodle. Dr. Randolph is a great bear of a man, S.L. Yes, he is methodically savage, a dissecting machine with a bag of sharp, shiny implements, but he is also a lake called manhood, and has given me a straw

through which to sip his essence. He wants to fill me with his fluids, S.L., on the theory that this will make a man of me. What he offers to his other patients I cannot say. There is Mr. Chipper with the smiling face whose cheery surface hides a grievance profound. There is Mr. Fat Body Red Face, of whom I say to Dr. Randolph, "Stop taking the drunk's money. Give him hard slap into the rooms of recovery. Then try to work with him. Don't be a thief like some of the other unethical and egotistical bums in your field. Because this guy is at the stage where brushing his teeth on the weekend is a major event and a shower is like a trip to Europe." Because some of them are licensed drug peddlers. Let it be known, S.L., that there are therapists with sick egos who would replace God. And let it be entered into the record that Dr. Randolph is not among them, that he is quick to say that his profession is rife with incompetents. A blanket defense of all his *colleagues* is not a move he puts on me. There is Mr. and Mrs. Beautiful, whom he was seeing for couples therapy, but after a while he was seeing only her, having effectively destroyed their marriage and eliminated the husband so he could have her all to himself, and in the very office where once they sat seeking his help was he now boffing her on the carpet. The world is a little like that, S.L., cold and peopled by reptiles. He was seeing another Ms. Beautiful for a while, a solo job, for she had no dangling hubby in tow. Generally I was repelled if I found the sofa in his office to be warm from another patient's as I lay down, disgusted by the heat from some filthy filthy farting farting bozo's body in the fabric, but I had no objections to feeling her warmth on the cushions following her session with Dr. Randolph. For months I told Dr. Randolph of her unusual

beauty, that she was a woman I could be with easily. I would study her intently as she passed through the waiting room at the end of her session, noting her full lips and thin ankles and serious, literary face, her full bosom and narrow waist. All of these things I noted, S.L., until the day came that she lost her luster and the idea of her flesh on mine, her tongue meeting mine, grew abhorrent, her allure giving way not briefly but forever. The grossness of flesh came clear to me, oozy orifices and bits of food decaying between bad teeth. Where in this process the turning had begun that led to the devaluing of sex I could not say. Oh yes, S.L., the look of longing at a thin, long-legged beauty, the desire to be between her legs, that still was there, capable of ignition, but I dwelt more now in another space, hearing the chattering of couples without envy, seeing them hold hands without envy, imagining them doing the fucky-fuck without envy, imagining their harsh unwritten contracts without envy. I had been set free to dwell in the less sensual places, S.L., you who loiter in the corridors of power, you who say that power is fun. There are things I have left out, S.L., and wish, in the rush to close, to omit, but they are things that bear saying, things that relate to my job (Beloved's German aunt, the sister of Beloved's father, pronounces the word "chob" in her German way). In the smallness of my exterior life I was moved to a cubicle next to a woman in the state of perpetual laughter, a woman who had once been a member of our department but who had now been promoted to the level of manager in a rival department, a woman whose laughter had high anger content. I was frightened of her, S.L. She reminded me of my younger sister Vera, who had outstripped me just as this woman Dee Dee was doing now. She

was Vera all over again, gloating and acting as if she had won out over me in the game of life. I was prepared to deal with this circumstance, S.L., to accept the fact that she had staff working under her and a respectable title while I, emotionally, felt that I was working for my mother, that I was an emasculated individual. I was prepared to go into the secret chamber and say it this way: "Dear God, I know that defective relations with people has been the cause of my problems. I know I am in fear of this woman Dee Dee. I fear that she will annihilate me with her power, as my older sisters hurt me with their power. I release this fear, dear God, and pray that she have love and peace and joy and happiness and prosperity and companionship in her life." In this way I prayed about her, frequently, during the day, and at night. One of her staff members was a woman named Ameeta, a woman with a Filipino father and a black mother. Evidently, she identified most strongly with black culture. On a freelance basis she wrote rap lyrics and also contributed to black publications. Dee Dee and Ameeta had the same boss, a white woman named Candace with sharp, tough ways. S.L., their bonding talk was loud and constant, studded with personal matters and spiked with barbs. Let it be said that they became with their loudness and their personal patter ever more frightening to me, as if they were laying down a ground of noise to make it impossible to think of anything but them. I would leave work numb, and walk and walk, S.L. (when you belong to no one, when you do not have the fucky-fuck in your life, you walk; there are many of us in Manhattan, going about our different routes, admiring the architecture of *Sanford White*), seeking to empty myself in God, running to him for comfort from

the wounds of the workplace. I did not say to him, "God, why have you fashioned me in this way, as a man who finds women to work for and with, a man unable as yet to find another identity in the workplace? Why do you place me next to a woman of this kind? Why do you give her a mentor in the organization but not me? Why do you not cloak me in power rather than provide me with the garments of fecklessness?" I did not say these words to God, S.L. I did not go to him in an angry way, but only to be absorbed in him and to be purified of the shrapnel that I had received on that day. At Columbus Circle, I stopped and celebrated a miracle, not far from where the homeless covered the lawns of Central Park each night, so many of them that they sometimes slept one on top of the other. The women of my past came out of the park that day, reminding me how single-minded in my pursuit of them I had been. "You were the remotest man I had ever met. You had only one thing on your agenda," one woman said, and another reminded me of the sharp remark she had made--"You should see yourself"--when under the guise of being a photographer interested in taking her picture I had tried to pick her up. There were others, too numerous to name, who also streamed from the park, but I did not try to engage them in the old way. I was protected from my desire and reminded that I no longer had "Let's put aside everything and search for women" days, that I was in the process of no longer having manhood defined by how many women I had slept with, any more than it was defined by how many drinks I had had, that the way to feel good is not to drink, the way to feel good is not to fuck. Once a month I called a prayer service, those who pray without ceasing, asking for God's involvement in my situation at

work. Dee Dee had undergone a metamorphosis. Never a careful dresser or attentive to her looks, she now wore colorful, sexy clothes and went for makeovers, and exuded a sense of her own *hotness*. Oh, do not ask for the ways she revealed this hotness to me, S.L., do not turn yourself into a documentarian. Let it simply be said that it was small things, like going barefoot in the corridors, or the way she wrapped her arms about herself, or the long conversations she indulged in with Ameeta about her boyfriends and the parties and functions she attended, the dinner hosted not by Spike Lee but by "Spike" and the lecture given not by Toni Morrison but by "Toni." The cubicles were like thick, padded, fold-up screens, and I would sit at my bare desk peeking out through the small spaces where the hinges joined the panels to the aisle and the traffic in and out of her office, as if I were a boy in hiding. Despite prayer, those times I encountered her my face seemed frozen in fear that she had all the power and I had none. I complained in my mind about Kalon, the executive director who had mentored Dee Dee. I hated his whole attitude, which was to knock me down and flirt with the women. In any interaction he had a sharp, cutting tone with me, S.L. There is no blaming him for living in the land of smallness, for not seeing me as a brother, for what was he, a fellow male, doing working for an org. for women if he too didn't have his problems? Finally, after four months of the ceaseless ground of noise and of trying to shine my light on Dee Dee to no avail, I complained to Ms. Small, who agreed that the noise problem was real and even horrendous. Even farther removed from Dee Dee physically than I was, she could hear the nonstop racket. "And that's not work-related conversation," she

added, assuring me that steps would be taken to restore a proper work environment. Frequently I checked myself on the animosity meter regarding Dee Dee, worried that the problem was all mine, but in the brief periods of calm I saw that this was not so, for all the tension eased from my body and I could even see her in a new light, only to have this feeling of good will crushed by the next onslaught of hysterical chatter. I know I have not gotten on top of the problem, S.L., that I am struggling uphill with what you see as a shaky case. I know I am not looking down at the situation with a celestial light, or even from high org. echelon terrain. I know I am coming on as a little white boy pushed around by the org. women of color, that I am not seeing the big demographic picture of the future. But the hatred these two org. women of color hold in their hearts runs deep. That is why they lay out this unrelenting noise, a sound signifying their fury. "It's our turn now, baby," Ameeta said. These were her exact words, S.L., as she urged Dee Dee into a demonstration of the five stages of progressive laughter, laughter riotous and triumphant and indicating no generosity in victory but the knout, laughter conveying all the aggrievement of black people (never Negro, never), the smoldering rage the world overlooks but that I see each day (S.L., they would come on summer days from Harlem pain riding their bikes to the Upper West Side. You thought the last in the convoy had passed but more were behind them, strung out in deliberate fashion, crowding up against you and saying "Man, you pushing me?" and you in your whiteness backing off saying. "No, no," and them aggressing on you, hitting you hard and not stopping, kicking you kicking you kicking you when you were down and not stopping the punches

and the kicks increasing their fury pulling out blades to slash you slash you the punches and kicks and slashing not enough "let me get in there to cut that motherfucking white boy's throat for pushing on me lying on me" until the police come but even then they don't leave because their aggrievement is strong, their addiction to gouged flesh and sliced flesh, to broken bones, is strong. All summer they swarm and beat and swarm, in indignation over the imagined push, the imagined lie. Their anger cannot be slaked, their talk cannot be quieted. Dee Dee and Ameeta are massing armies, they are the powerless now in power and they hit very hard with their laughing voices. Given these conditions the trucks can have no choice but to set out on the nation's highways, for love, unconditional love, has a seeming obstacle to growth amid a ground of ceaseless noise. Do not be quick to ring the bell, S.L., to run before the United Nations and denounce me before the world body and on *Nightline*, to place the nation's crushing burden of shame and guilt and fear on me, do not go to that reductionist extreme, for I say to you, I am less responsible for what comes into my head than for what I do with the thought that has entered, and recognize truly and wholly that there is no choice but to melt down in love and see them as the children of a living God, coming from and going to the same source as all of us, no choice but to see them as America's litmus test for spiritual regeneration. Do not dare to throw that word on me, you who live tight-fisted with words and in poverty of spirit and with vaginal heat your only form of passion, for in the time that Beloved and I had our second home in Rhinebeck, New York, I saw the men with thin blue lips cranked up on soreness, white men aggrieved at loss of power, men who wore

sheets at night pick pick picking on New York City and washing their faces in the newspaper columns of the columnists of the *farthest right*. Do not think that I do not know the fear a black man can have on a country road, to be alone on that country road with the car broken down and in the stillness feel thoroughly unprotected, as if the whole weight of the country's hatred is on you. Or the fear a black man can have crossing the G.W. Bridge away from New York City. Do not think I do not know the fear they have that history can repeat, or what it is to be on the side of the angels in being with them in spirit. Do not tell me that I do not know how it is to feel this way, S.L. Do not tell me this at all, for all you have to know is that I wear the armor of my own defenselessness to work each morning, huddling in fear against the wave of the future, the ever-present ground of fire-filled laughter until the morning that, unable to take anymore, flames from their laughter licking at all corners of the org. premises, I went to the next cubicle where I not only heard but now saw Dee Dee on the phone, saw how she looked while producing the laughter, and said, "Please, could you stop? It's been six months and I can't do my work." She capped the receiver and merely looked at me. There seemed nothing more for me to say. I went away to the cafeteria for a cup of tea feeling different, as if for the first time I had stood up to her, that I had caught her in the act, for she had started the day with a one-hour personal call to a friend outside the org. Shortly after I returned to my cubicle she came to me. "Let me get it straight. You want me not to talk? I have a staff to attend to." I repeated that the noise level was impossible and that I had work to do. I am coming to you from the smallness of my life, S.L., this I understand, as a beggar

comes with cup in hand asking for a drop of understanding. I hear you calling me a pathetic, subjugated man. I hear you asking why can't I be like the Ron Dougs of the world, with their chops of mustache and large teeth, programmed by their mothers and fathers to hit and to hit very hard. I hear you asking why it is I am working for my mother in the land of my tormenting sisters. And I say to you that yes, I was not given the big teeth of Mr. Ron Doug, yes, I was not told to hit and hit very hard a la Ron Doug, that yes my agenda is not to be a human bulldozer but to make my peace with the women of America, to heal the wound and ease the torment of chronic cunt fever. I am here to say to you that Dee Dee is an opportunity, despite her ceaseless laughter, to face my fear and see that nothing real can be threatened, and to make a heaven of this earthly hell, to replace past and future with the eternal present and worldly clamor with the peace of God, and for these things, S.L., you do not need the big teeth of Mr. Ron Doug, the chop of mustache of Mr. Ron Doug, or the parental programming received by Mr. Ron Doug. What you need to know, S.L., is that Dee Dee came to me saying, "You're telling me that I have no work to do?" to which I said "Not at all," to which she said, "Those were your words. You said you had work to do but I had no work to do." The point is that she did not speak to my point about the ground of noise, but rather, accused me in an insistent way of saying that she had no work to do. She turned the tables on me, and lengths of fire came from her mouth, burning my various parts. I did not go back to the cubicle for over an hour; rather, I sat in the stall of the org. men's room, where aspects of my esoterica had also flourished--two slight marks, dots actually, made by my pen on a wall of

the stall, my secret, the thing my eye and my eye only went to when I was on the john, and there fear visited me, I grew confused. Was Dee Dee right? Had I accused her of having no work to do? Was the problem all of my making? The thought tormented me, grew monstrous. Things were upside down. She had acted for all these months as if no one around her deserved consideration, but still, her charge was a dark spot, it soiled my interior landscape, compelling me to go to her, after a while, in the most craven way, S.L., to knock on *her cubicle*, which she conspicuously barred me from entering by standing strong with her arms folded, legs spread, lips pressed together *in grim resolve*, compelling me to air my words of feebleness from the corridor, where I said to her, "You must understand. I wasn't in the least saying or implying that you have no work to do," because I had to remove that tormenting spot, and all I remember is the words pinging off her like BBs off a metal skillet, and then the ground of laughter rising again. (There will come a time, S.L., it will have to be, that the world will turn its attention to this matter of noise, will focus on the varieties of speech, and see them in the main as the ego's riotous spawn, words as toxic in their insidious desire to unsettle and take one from the center of his/*her* being. The world will go the silent route, and follow its breath into the moment when the loving God spreads through our being. There has to come that time of worldwide silence, when hearts are singing that song of love.) S.L., I was white, and I was male, and even if I did not have the pulsing power of the top shelf members of my race, I felt targeted, as if a partial reason for my existence was to draw the anger out of women for them to inspect and dissolve or to fry in. From the org. window I saw

on the street below a vision of Beloved triumphant, leading her father bound in chains to the docket of the world court. I saw her alternately weeping for him and in rage against him. I heard the thunderous cry of the victory chorus, women a million strong lining those same streets. I heard them shout "We believe you. You're not to blame. Yours is no longer to protect the perp. Place the anger where it belongs." These shouts were by design to buck her up when the doubts rolled over her, when she said "Nah, it didn't happen. I'm crazy. I made it all up." These shouts were there to stem the surging tide of denial in her afflicted mind, S.L. The reality was of a slow progression toward one-mindedness about the events that had happened. The reality was trying to let go and be supportive, to approximate the realm of unconditional love as she continued her journey. The violence did not start the next day, but sometime in the following week, with the trashing of Los Angeles. My mentor lived on a block of burning buildings, though the flames did not lick or even heat his walls. I called him with heart in throat, with the images fresh and vivid in my mind from washing my face in the TV coverage, but he was from the land of terse toughness, he had only this to say: "This is all the police chief's fault. He brought this on the city with his abuses." I asked him if he wasn't afraid for his life, that they would come to his door en masse and *do him*. I asked him if he wasn't afraid of their unquenchable anger, that they would hit him and hit him until the blood had all flown from his body, and that then they would hit him again, and that not even death would end the *party* on his body. I asked him these things while watching the violence on TV played and replayed and gorging on the fear that was being fed me. Eating it, drinking

it, washing my face in it. "Afraid?" He spoke the word in low-key amazement, and said he only hoped he could love them if they did come to kill him. The next day, as you know, the blacks were shaking the buildings of New York City. They shook them so that the furniture shifted and the plateware rattled and precious vases fell and smashed. The shaking went on for two days, never varying in its mild intensity (yes, S.L., oxymoronism does have its place, so have the decency to sit down with it). They shook the org. building too, of course, S.L., and by some peculiarity of physics, the shaking was most severe in my cubicle, so that I was locked in the full vibrating state for the whole workday, I stood as a marvel of vibration for Dee Dee and Ameeta and any others who so chose to observe, and what conclusions they drew from my vibrating condition I cannot with full assurance say, I can only tell you that they measured my vibratingness with a meter and "Uh huh. Uh huh" came from their mouths, not a single sound more or less. These uh huhs were delivered with full *knowingness*, S.L. You could not live long enough to hear an uh huh delivered with fuller certainty, of this I am quite sure, for they were saying, in their uncharacteristically terse way, that they had taken my measure and nothing more needed to be learned. So that the buildings shook for these two days, and we thought how at any minute now they would be at the door with their unstoppable anger, but the crisis passed, and in its coming and going I was able to *dialogue with myself* on paper, and what emerged was fear of my father coming to the door, fear of his unquenchable anger, of what would happen after he *had been made to get up*. So that my father was the black man with the unquenchable anger, S.L., as I had been the

son with the unquenchable anger. These things became clear to me after the shaking of the buildings had ceased. Beloved was a great help to me in this time, S.L. We were doing bridge building extraordinaire. We both had barbarians at the door, and so I could go to her about the ground of ceaseless noise, and she understood the demoralization that could occur under that circumstance, for she had experienced the relentless noise of jackhammers splitting the streets of SoHo. She knew what it was like to feel threatened. The thing you need to know, S.L., is that we had begun to help each other along the path of life. Beloved was letting go of the external symbols of her past in *chunks*. She sold the country house, the house in front of which I vowed to sink to my knees and kiss the earth should I ever get back there again, the house in northern Dutchess County that I left when President George H. W. Bush of America was preparing for the spanking of Saddam Hussein (of Iraq, Middle East), the house I left just having bought new furniture, the house at the end of the drive over the 205th Street Bridge, up the Saw Mill past *Hawthorne*, and the Taconic with its 1930s *curves* to Bull's Head Road, a right turn onto Milan Hollow Road and then into Round Round Lake Road--that house, S.L., that was and signified north to me, that mobilized rustic longings and placed me with the forest creatures in a bower of bliss sleeping peacefully as the *sweet* train chugged around the bend. That house that represented stability and order and yes, yes, yes, safety from those with the endless anger, who in a particular time of my life, the time of Mr. Ronald Reagan, I was admonishing in my mind to do more for themselves, to undergo spiritual renewal and to see the beam in their own eyes, thoughts I am not

entirely proud of, S.L., but which were part of my take on the city as a place to flee from, a take that increased my fear, for there was a safety line I had to cross, I had to get beyond 205th Street and onto the Saw Mill, I was not out of harm's way. Now matters are manageable, S.L. We find that joy does not have an external source, that the fountain source is within us, that when we drink from that joy God fountain within us we can never be oriented toward the external again, that we will go inside ourselves to correct the distorted vision, we will ultimately see that there is no loss. I am not fully there in regard to the country, S.L., but the pain does not run deep anymore, either. Beloved sold the loft as well, and bought a house in *Rockland County*. A big house. She put her financial power on display. All of Los Angeles and half the country was calling my mentor in this time, men and women having trouble with their partners besieging him for advice. He tried to move them onto the path of a more unconditional love. He told them to let go. He said to be willing to give up sex, for how can you have pleasure without pain? You could hear their cries of protest throughout the land. My mentor, barely able to afford the food of the Chinese people and in poor health, was one of the country's great resources. All you need to know, S.L., you who have been standing down there so patiently, is that she started coming back to me, that the bridge we built was a high arcing suspension thing, and on that bridge we both walked with child in hand, and the child of one shook the hand of the child of the other, and in the sandbox they did play in peace and harmony. The father with the heh heh heh and big belly and flying ideas, the father who put his foot on the child's center and ground it to nothingness, he came to visit

Beloved's mind but did not stay, the denigrating voice he piped to her ears grew muted, the circle of people who knew her struggle grew wider, the arms that reached out to her multiplied, the light that she had been seeking grew brighter, the voice of angel holiness called to her saying, "Perfect child of mine," kissing away her bruises. I speak these words to you from mid-air, S.L., where I spend much time. On a cloudless day I see you as a speck on the cityscape. I dive, I soar, I am an aerodynamic wonder. For kicks I strap myself to the nose tip of the most air-ripping jet, and when I take to the water you will find me lashed to a plunging prow. Oh Lord, to be *useful* in America and the world. Someday I'm never coming back for you, S.L., I'm never coming back. Someday and every day things will happen when they can.

