YEAR AND A DAY

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Theoretical Introduction

It would oversimplify the process of writing this novel to say I concocted the character and narrative voice of Jim Grady and let it go. And saying I role-played Jim (or *became* Jim in some artistic trance) so that I could record experiences predetermined for him in the moment of my inspiration for the novel overreaches the fact. Little of what has been written about the creation of fiction offers any better understanding of the process than these misstatements. My view of the inception and development of this novel follows a model drawn from a variety of sources. Such a theoretical scheme makes a valuable contribution toward understanding the writing process.

As a matter of record, *Year and a Day* began with some observations of personality traits in a variety of people I knew more or less well, aggregating into a proto-Jim and Pamela and early versions of Phil and Carolyn, coming together as I noticed certain related or interesting interactions of those traits. Phil and Carolyn originally did not interact with Jim and Pamela, or with each other, but became appropriate acquaintances of the characters. In imagining the early, simple Jim and Pamela, I began to develop two sets of materials: constructs of events and characteristic sorts of behavior and a complex of ideas concerning the motives for, the interrelations of, and evaluations of those characteristics and events. So far, these developments were only the beginning.

The second set is the significant and fundamental development of the

process—creating a standpoint allowing me to survey both the state of the story and relevant details from my experience and observation, creating a focal point for transmitting select details to the growing story, and creating the source of fictional but plausible manipulation of probability and fact.[1] Together, the survey, transmission, and manipulation performed by this second set of ideas produce further material of the type of the first set: the story's contents. Working through the agency of this story's complex of principles and attitudes,[2] I applied a variety of standards, aims, and evaluative and critical methods for the writing. The first of the novel's contents I concocted was the narrator, the expressive persona to whom I attribute the writing.[3]

Critical theories offer a variety of identifications of the complex from which an author writes. Trying to find much agreement among several theories because of one corresponding item they discuss is as ridiculously pointless as reducing the stories of John Chapman, Genesis, and New York City to one narrative type because all involve apples. Three theorists I have read provide handy discussions of the artistic complex, distinguishing it from both author and narrator in ways sufficiently alike to assure the correspondence of the three views.

With the concept of the implied author, Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* is most relevant to thinking systematically about the relationships among writer, implied author, narrator, and story. Though a theorist of reading—the narrator and other contents of a novel being the active forces Booth sees doing the implying—Booth describes the form of a novel as a structure emanating from "the core of norms and choices" (74) which is the implied author. Booth categorizes various types of narrative personae, differentiating them by grammatical person but more substantially by such

rhetorical qualities as reliability, irony, and intellectual, emotional, moral, and physical or temporal distances between the narrator and implied author and between the narrator and the characters and events of the story. Indeed, most of his study deals with textually explicit matters; however, the fact that Booth's system branches out from the implied author to several types of narrator and then to the generality of distances (ranges rather than defined categories) supports the fundamental idea of centrality in the term "core," the focal reference point of the structure he gives his attention to analyzing. Though the implied author determines the nature of all elements of a fiction, it is implied, nowhere manifest in the text.

Pointing out that "the writer sets himself [another term for implied author is *second self*] out with a different air depending on the needs of particular works," Booth says these different implied authors are "different ideal combinations of norms" (71). Booth tells readers and critics how to examine narrative qualities in order to abstract the implied author by a process similar to triangulation. But the writer, coming at the fiction from the other end of the exchange, can use the same kind of abstraction, selecting particular norms and choices to make up an implied author, which then creates a narrative persona, setting it in an appropriate position at appropriate distances. The implied author (or writing complex) can present a narrator as a persona very much in accord with the complex's norms, voicing ideas with as much articulate, forceful capability as the complex can muster. Or the narrator may appear suspect—overreacting emotionally to the events it narrates, or judging them poorly—inviting the reader to question the fiction's logic and the relation of narrator to events and come to conclusions based on answers to those questions.

A smooth, easy transition from the theory of Wayne Booth to Michel

Foucault's would be an awful thing, but their ideas on the implied author and the author-function have plenty in common. Though the author-function is as much an abstraction as the implied author, neither the real person who writes nor the narrative persona appearing in the text, the term at least is active rather than passive, something which functions rather than something implied, and this is the contribution Foucault makes—attention to the function, the activity taking place within this complex. Setting out from the Nietzschean idea that "the author has disappeared" (141), Foucault notes, among other standard criteria, that "the author is defined as a certain field of conceptual or theoretical coherence. . . a definite historical figure in which a series of events converge" (144).

Though the starting point carries some dismissal or even a snub to writers in its tone, Foucault explains his interest in this disappearance: "It would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the 'author-function' arises out of their scission—in the division and distance of the two" (144). The location of the author-function is similar to Booth's, though the description locating it is less developed. Foucault's idea seems to factor in the person who writes as one of two concrete grounding points which determine the point of view of the author-function in cross-reference, triangulation again. This existence of the narrator prior to the author-function shows Foucault as another reading theorist whose sequence writers must rearrange for their own purposes.

Despite locating the author-function by measuring "division and distance" between two other figures—both having identifiable positions, it would seem, according to the logic of the metaphor of distance relations—Foucault treats only the narrator as apparent, finding the author-function by its relation to the narrator. Positing the actual author as a determiner of the

author-function is his only sighting of the person, except perhaps the definition he uses with the stipulation that its traditional view was developed before the author was considered invisible: "a definite historical figure" (though "figure" is vague enough to take as a compilation of experiences). Yet even this much ambivalence is surprising considering Foucault's ambition to eliminate not only the writer but the author-function from analytic discussion—and so happen to withdraw it from the writer's employ. Of his four relevant questions regarding literature, only two bear on the author-function:

> "What are the modes of existence of this discourse?"
>
> "Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?"
>
> "What placements are determined for possible subjects?"
>
> "Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?"

And the spirit behind these questions is "What matter who's speaking?" (148).

The grounding of the argument (before it begins to aspire to discourse without any point of origin) leaves some value to the writer. However, the answer to the titular question "What Is an Author?" is the author-function, the intermediary projected between writer and narrator. Though Foucault's tendency is toward eliminating attention to any conscious source of writing, beginning with the writer, his view of the textual circumstances still includes the abstract author-function. Less systematic than Booth in offering plans to answer the question "what position does it occupy[?]" (Foucault 148), Foucault provides some questions in keeping with the writer's efforts to define the nature of the writing complex: "what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse?" (148). Vague as Foucault

is on what kinds of rules and functions the author-function is made up of, the writer must consider what principles such an abstraction would follow, what actions it can take: rules for the selective process (is autobiographical material to be excluded or privileged? are conventional attitudes to be respected or rejected?), rules for plotting (cause and effect, coincidence, absurd association), functions of composition (assembling characters from traits, ordering descriptive passages). Even Foucault's initial definitions drawn from theories concerned with the author as a person—"a certain field of conceptual or theoretical coherence" and a "figure in which a series of events converge" (144)—supply concept, theory, and events or experience (or observation).

Booth, more useful in setting the position of the implied author, offers less approach to considering that complex's productive capabilities—though specific operations like irony indicate particular functional relations between implied author and narrator. As a term from a theory for reading, *implied author* describes an effect of the text, static in its relative position. The *author-function*, "a complex [adjective] and variable function of discourse" (148), describes a dependency of discourse (a view appropriate to reading theory) and an activity which is the source of discourse. A writer may disregard much of Foucault as inapplicable to the pursuits of writing (if not antagonistic to the idea of the *writer* writing), because Foucault is concerned with working back toward conditions of discourse from a text at hand—the writer with proceeding toward one. But decisions about functions (actions, applications, fundamental techniques), rules generated for the current fiction, conceptualizations of material, theories about material, and sources of material are relevant.

Whereas Booth most clearly presents a system for arranging the

relationship between an implied author and its narrator and text, whereas Foucault analyzes the author-function itself and gives a number of its attributes, Terry Eagleton categorizes the sources—which we may take as both the material making up the complex and the elements drawn from to make the work. Though Eagleton is very thorough in classifying the determinants of the authorial complex, he uses no particular designation for it. For convenience's sake and to keep ideas about definition straight, I refer to Eagleton's theoretical predecessor, Louis Althusser: "Every ideology [including a fictional text] must be regarded as a real whole internally unified by its own *problematic*, so that it is impossible to extract one element without altering its meaning" (62). The translator's glossary notes on the term problematic (reviewed and in large approved by Althusser) explain, "PROBLEMATIC. . . . A word or concept cannot be considered in isolation; it only exists in the theoretical or ideological framework in which it is used: its problematic" (253) and "the problematic, the unconscious of the text" (254). The term problematic, admittedly, has little explicit sense of being the agency of writing, but as "the unconscious of the text" (the text, not the author) it is not manifest in the work; this framework is described as a precondition of the written work—one point more in line with the writer's interests than Booth's or Foucault's comments, which register the reader's process of starting out with the text.[4] And, concluding his discussion of analytic principles beginning with the statement that the problematic is a construct unifying the work, Althusser says, "the developmental motor principle of a particular ideology cannot be found within ideology itself but outside it in what *underlies* (*l'en-deça de*) the particular ideology: its author as a concrete individual and the actual history reflected in this individual development according to the complex ties between the individual and this history" (63).

Althusser directs this argument to reading theorists, chasing significance out of the text into its source's context.

Eagleton, less forthright about a term, is somewhat clearer in locating and describing his idea of the problematic (to supply the term):

> There is no question here of "centring" the literary text on the individual who produces it; but neither is it a matter of liquidating that subject into "general" aesthetic and ideological forms. It is a question of specifying the ideological determinations of the text. (59-60)

It is a question of identifying the set of idea systems determining the makeup of the fiction.

As I have said, Eagleton is most useful to a writer in classifying the sources of the problematic. He says, "The literary text is a product of a specific overdetermined conjuncture of the elements or formations set out schematically" (63): the elements from this scheme which are relevant to the writer's decision-making process are the literary mode of production,[5] general ideology, artistic ideology, and authorial ideology. Being aware of distinctions among personal ideas, literary convention, and cultural beliefs or popular opinion helps a writer weigh, evaluate, handle, choose, and balance the construction of the writing complex and its product. Further, being aware of their ideological nature allows for questioning of those ideas, whether the aim is to strive for the objectivity traditionally prized by novelists or some fresh subjectivity.

Having surveyed three incompatible theories for their corresponding identifications of an abstract force which serves as a source for the writing and having compiled a nomenclature of terms with a bearing on that force, I

defend this cannibalized system as an answer to the writer's need to understand what happens in writing. It helps not only to know what tools and materials are available—point of view, plot, character, and so on—but how they come about, operate, and interact. And it is a great help to have names to put to those processes. The writer's complex gathers more or less discrete elements,[6] considers their relations and how best to express them, then formulates an expressive medium.

Simply put, I have presented an approach to locating an implied author and establishing the position and relation of the text's narrator and ideas projected by it; a description of the operations of an author-function; and a classification of a problematic's constituents: where it is, how it works, and what goes into it.

Some of the apparent difficulty in reconciling the elements of this view of the writing complex depend on my sources in readers' theories. I defend these choices as more useful than most writing guides. The books on writing I have encountered provide no way of thinking about writing, no understanding markedly deeper than mottoes like "The art of writing is the art of applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair," or "Writing is easy; all you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead." Instead these guides describe what the product—the fiction in its final state—contains, or what should be written about, or what list of how-to instructions to follow, or what the writer's life must be like. Such observations may suggest handy shortcuts or useful formulas, offer cheerful or ascetic attitudes toward the art, and even set good examples to follow, but they can lead nowhere beyond the concrete instances of the writing practices they propose. They open no method for creatively thinking

about how writing happens.

A brief review of a few writers' guides will illustrate my point. Natalie Goldberg has a popular book, one interesting to read—*Writing Down the Bones*, subtitled *Freeing the Writer Within*, which gives the encouraging impression that writing is an inherent, monolithic faculty. Most of Goldberg's advice is superficial observation of the work—appropriate to workshop exercises and good practice, not to a theoretical approach. The brevity of the chapters reflects the immediacy of her guidance: "Rereading and Rewriting" (about objectivity in writing—one of the strong chapters) and "Writing in Restaurants" (not as weak as "Blue Lipstick and a Cigarette Hanging Out Your Mouth," which, however, recognizes writing roles separate from the writer) are the longest chapters at five pages each; "Trouble with the Editor" (Goldberg's editor is not a revising persona, but a self-doubting voice) is 219 words.[7] Goldberg's intended audience includes beginning writers; introducing people to the art with practical advice useful at many levels, she does not deal with matters that might put off that part of her audience.

In *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, John Gardner, more discursive than Goldberg, strikes on ideas about a "mode of thought" (x) and, more promising, "The fictional process [which] is the writer's way of thinking, a special case of the symbolic process by means of which we do all our thinking" (51). But from talk of mode and process, Gardner turns to instinct, intuition, and feeling. At his most analytic, he discusses what a writer produces—claiming the recognition that narrative plots have certain limitations as a "step in the fictional process" (53), then sliding into kinds and formations of plots with some comments on metaphor, character, setting, and theme. As for the writer's activity of putting these elements together, Gardner says:

> He writes by feel, intuitively, imagining the scene vividly and copying down its most significant details, keeping the fictional dream alive, sometimes writing in a thoughtless white heat of "inspiration," drawing on his unconscious, trusting his instincts. . . . But at some point. . . . He begins to brood over what he's written. . . letting his mind wander. . . . he discovers odd tics his unconscious has sent up to him. (69)

The assumption that not all writing begins in conscious thought is safe, but that, therefore, most writing cannot be explained is untenable, and is no help. Gardner's veiling of the activity of writing lets him speak in general, expanding the writing faculty to fill the entire person. Thus the writer is encouraged to become an educated (9), obsessed (34) person, to be a writer by the grace of inspired imagination and directionless musing. All Gardner directly discusses in detail is a set of techniques for polishing the elements of the final product.

Janet Burroway openly structures *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* as a textbook, with chapters explaining theme, narrator, characterization, and setting, complete with exercises. The guide "is the result of a course in 'Narrative Techniques'" outlining "the task of devising lectures and assignments" (v). Her theory stops at analysis of the final product because if there are certain "elements for which a reader looks" a writer ought to know what to put in (vii). The assumption is that recognizing a product enables the writer to duplicate it or create a modified version. In effect, most writers can, either by haphazardly cobbling the elements together or by happening to create and employ some set of artistic principles to help them make decisions about necessary elements. Burroway's lesson, to anticipate a reader's expectations, would lead more directly to the former

method.

Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life* offers instruction only in passing. Instead, this book on writing seems to be creative nonfiction, a kind of meditation directed to an audience rather than focused intently upon its subject. Scattered with potentially very intriguing ideas which go no further than being somewhat interesting, the book is written according to the principle it does repeat if not develop: a book determines its own direction. One result of the idea coming out as it will, rather than being pursued and being held to answer for itself, is a strong ambiguity in the expression of that idea. Ultimately, the image of the writer following the "path" of a text is equivocal. At times, writing is desperate work and the writer is making the path which must be followed. The key figures for this view are "a miner's pick, a woodcarver's gouge, a surgeon's probe" (3). The vein of ore, the pattern, the organ are already there to be discovered—are not plans the writer made to follow: "The line of words is a fiber optic. . . ; it illuminates the path just before its fragile tip. You probe with it" (7). The most active trailblazing Dillard allows is "any careful word may suggest a route" (15). The other strong figure representing writing is much more pleasant—indeed, pastoral—than picking, gouging, or probing, but also takes the last bit of control from the writer, remarking only upon persistence as the necessary quality:

> To find a honey tree first catch a bee. Catch a bee when its legs are heavy with pollen; then it is ready for home. It is simple enough to catch a bee on a flower: hold a cup or glass above the bee, and when it flies up, cap the cup with a piece of cardboard. Carry the bee to a nearby open spot—best an elevated one—release it, and watch where it goes. Keep your

> eyes on it as long as you can see it, and hie you to that last known place. Wait there until you see another bee; catch it, release it, and watch. Bee after bee will lead toward the honey tree, until you see the final bee enter the tree. Thoreau describes this process in his journals. So a book leads its writer. (12)

The interesting thing about this idea of the book dictating itself to the writer is its appearance in Eagleton[8]—that or a very similar idea: "The literary text. . . . is not, however, a merely passive product. The text is so constituted by this conjuncture [of deciding factors] as to actively determine its own determinants—an activity which is most apparent in its relations to ideology" (63). In part, Eagleton is noting the power of a literary work to become an ideological source influencing future patterns of thinking and writing. But primarily he claims that a text acts upon itself, as if it is one of many bees. I must insist the ability of a text to take action is every bit as metaphorical as Dillard's bee or pick, just not obviously so, presumably making a different statement.

In deciding on new elements, the writer considers those elements already in place to judge the plausibility, thematic consistency, structural fit, and narrative valuation of the new elements according to the logic of the writing complex. Rather than following some prescient or Platonically pre-existing text, the writer recursively uses the work-in-progress like other available literary ideologies, measuring its success and possibly revising the writing complex and its expectations. Part of the writing complex's function is editorial. If making decisions is editing, most of it is editorial.

I have said much of the activity contributing toward a written work is

unconscious. A writer need not constantly evoke the principles and attitudes of the writing complex for them to operate, supplying the string of words going on paper. And some unconscious motives may go into the constitution of the complex, though the writer should try to have an awareness of the whole. With such an acknowledgement, my scheme of a complex defined by its material sources, its functions, and its arrangement might seem to lack a psychoanalyst to group with Eagleton, Foucault, and Booth. I exclude Freudian views from my survey of the writing complex[9] for two reasons.

First, I discount the attempts of critics to psychoanalyze writers solely by reading a text. The text has undergone too much conscious effort, too much secondary revision, too much deliberate manipulation and distortion and ordering to allow for an accurate trace of any element back to a very complete picture of the unconscious source. Psychoanalytic "reading" works with distortions but reads a more complete set of expressions. And turning the process around, for the writer to depend on self-analysis as a basis of the writing process leads either to blind use of random ideas or a studied self-fascination just as incompatible with the art. Second, paralleling the unconscious with the implied author, author-function, and problematic gives it authority, privileging it over the rest of the mind as the real personality, which is an oversimplification of psychology. Such a valuation of the unconscious is related to the inspiration of Gardner and the writer within of Goldberg. The Freudian model of the whole mind does not apply to the specific writing complex.

In formulating Jim Grady's inquiry, including the self-examination involved, I included Freudian methods in the action, but no more than I did other principles. Jim, thinking of his audience, deliberately modifies his recollections about as much as he is influenced by tendentious tricks of

memory, putting rhetoric on a par with psychology. But I did not refer to Aristotelean or contemporary rhetoric in setting up this novel's writing complex.

In fact, no single principle dominated the construction of *Year and a Day*. Besides my comments on the Freudian principles coming in to influence Jim's actions and narration, some other examples from the object at hand may sketch an instance of a writing complex. The asterisked, inset notes are, in form, a species of the "Dear Reader" addresses associated with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels—passages of direct address dropped into the narrative. However, as these are notes to the fictitious audience, their nature reflects the epistolary quality of the novel. The epistle/journal/ inquiry line of action traces a progression of Jim's understanding, from half-formed, optimistic conceptions of himself and his place in his familiar circle initially to an attitude nearer the mildly cynical view I chose as a constituent of the writing complex. And so the existence of this plot line arises not so much from examples in epistolary or diary fictions as from the possibilities opened up by the view of the writing complex as existing at certain distances from its narrating persona.

I have not set out to follow models of the Southern novel. Some character eccentricities and thematic concerns with the family may be influenced by my reading of Bobbie Ann Mason, Robert Penn Warren (both Kentuckians), Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and William Faulkner, though that sort of range makes for an unsettled sourcebook. Rather, my claim to Southernism rests in Kentucky's peripheral relation to the South—politico-historically and geographically as well as culturally—and on south-central Kentucky's proximity to the print and broadcast media center of Nashville. This novel's Southern qualities come more from my experience

and observations of small city life and from stories I heard there than from "the literary South" that Marc K. Stengal of the Nashville Scene calls "an easily packageable genre" (8), though the unsettled sourcebook is a part of my experience.

More than once in discussing nonliterary sources, I have paired direct observation with oral stories. This distinction from literature is valid in its way—as a formal classification. Obviously literature shares the narrator's role of medium with the oral tale. Though the distances of narrator to storytelling complex to person are generally small, the principles of the complex are the same. Certain values and opinions will influence the nature of the narrative. My great-uncle's story of dynamiting railroad tunnels during the Depression could change focus depending on his interest in daring occupations, in desperate economic conditions, or in historical information. Fundamentally the process of remembering certain details and forgetting others of my own experience is a narrative-making process. But that process is too close to the rough-and-ready system of everyday observation and too far from my topic.

My decisions about the specialized principles and attitudes of the writing complex for this novel arise from my experience of literature, probably far more so than from living in the upper South and having people there tell me stories or fragments of stories. I know of the epistolary from, among others, Richardson's *Pamela* (my character's name came before the novel's form, no allusion intended), which also includes a section of journal entries. But *Pamela* was no more a special model than the journal making up part of Shelley's *Frankenstein,* though both helped to inform me about the possibilities of fiction with the premise of an audience and fiction premised as a private journal. Nor did I choose to follow the single example of a first

person narrator reflecting on recent events set by *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Catcher in the Rye, Lolita,* or *David Copperfield.* But I have read these diverse narratives and been influenced by them, as much as by a number of other first person, as well as third person, narrators. In each of these particular novels, the narrator feels an urge to review or confess to uneasy circumstances in his life, hoping to explain or expiate them. The general ideas of explanation and reconciliation take form here as Jim's specific intention to find answers.

I suspect my written models for structure are more basic and general than just the group Southern literature or any limited gathering of titles. Joseph Campbell's mythic quest occurred to me as a convenient, very general description of narrative form some time after the basic plot and settings were in place. The relation of quest to inquiry may have unconsciously influenced me earlier—in the formation of the ambiguously wise old man Norris, who either helps or impedes the hero, for instance, though I think of Norris as derived from well-to-do, reclusive but amiable old men I know or have heard of (not one of Stengal's stereotyped "old coots" [8]). But once aware of mythic forms, I decided to have Jim confront Alexander (formulated as a regular kind of money-conscious person, not evil, but an antagonist and parallel to the monster in terms of mythic action) in his own lair; the novel's title certainly refers to the quest motif. A variety of other such bits and pieces, perhaps less well defined, went into the novel according to their compatibility with each other and my aims for the whole.

One criterion for compatibility was the mild cynicism mentioned above as the world view Jim approaches. As a normative standard contained in the writing complex, a sense of the way of the world as a rough, diffuse progress influenced decisions to put Phil out of business, cripple Carolyn's romantic

life, and make a variety of characters into instinctive money-grubbers.

No writing complex is an easy thing to fully analyze and catalogue. I would not try to do so. What I have done is discuss a model for the system a writer uses to accomplish the writing, using the novel at hand for examples. This model accounts for my understanding of how this novel came to be, and it depicts a scheme for understanding fiction writing processes—a scheme which is typical but not too simplistic, vague, theoretically partial, or inflexible to be useful.

Notes

[1]By bending probability, I mean it would be most likely that, once living in three cities, the Gradys, the Thompsons, and Carolyn would not end up back in the same place. But it is perfectly acceptable that Carolyn would recommend a capable woodworker for a job she administers and perfectly acceptable that Phil ask for help from a buddy he thinks can help him avoid failure. The lack of artistic order in life nevertheless leaves enough chance patterns that art can sneak by with its forms masquerading as coincidence and luck, conveniently credible views.

[2]I choose these terms deliberately: complex for its senses of interacting parts, of complexity, and of relevance to industry as well as psychology; principle for its sense of primary rule or standard; attitude for its senses of opinion and position (both relevant to point of view).

[3]The coincidence of the narrator with one of the characters demonstrates clearly that his apparent narration is as fictitious as any other action in the novel. I must make clear that the narrative persona is not part of the writing complex, but of the fiction. The point of view of the writing complex is entirely distinct from narrative point of view, just as the value system of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has a viewpoint different from Huck's when he feels he is doing the morally wrong thing by freeing Jim.

[4]One other difficulty the term itself presents for the writer is its implication that the framework of ideologies will be in conflict—will be problematic. Georg Lukács, a related theorist, notes the conflict but dismisses the equation of "having a problematic with being problematic" (73), valuing the conflict as a symptom of tension between reality and ideals or what we try to make real (78). A writer should not use the term problematic

as license to ignore inconsistencies, but an awareness of the relation between the distinct factors reality and ideal can further the writer's understanding of story and character.

[5]The mode of production is distinct from the other elements I list but is an important determiner of means. Faulkner could not convince his publisher to use different colors of ink in *The Sound and the Fury* and had to resort to different type faces. Few 1,000 page novels are published; less rare (yet still rare) are the opportunities for short-short stories.

[6]Some stories come in a piece from the writer's experience; most are assembled from simple events and character traits.

[7]Though her advice largely addresses poets ("We Are Not the Poem"), she takes all creative writing as her subject. It is not that her inclination to lyric poetry cuts out the writing complex and makes things simpler. I would say the convention of the autobiographical impulse in lyrics only shortens the distance between writer and complex.

[8]Finding Gardner's note that the fiction sometimes forcibly controls the writer is less surprising (67).

[9]The Jungian influence (among others) on my choice of the term complex for a mental construct which plays a certain role should be obvious, however, though I bring little other baggage over from Jung's approach.

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Prologue

When I was eight, my mom and dad got jobs in Peru, and left me in Nashville with my Aunt Adelle and Uncle Charles. Leaving me probably had effects, but it was over twenty years ago, and they were back by my teens. I can't make out a connection to what I've lost this year, in my marriage, my career.

Mom and Dad are engineers—structural and mining respectively—met in the Blue Ridge. They're in Nevada now, digging copper, and thinking about retiring out there in a few years. When they moved there, I stayed behind for college and then my job. We're in touch all the time, by phone, on visits. They're not my problem

Aunt Adelle and Uncle Charles died not long after I graduated, Aunt Adelle of cancer and Uncle Charles less than a year later—of old age, basically. Mom (they were her aunt and uncle) figured it this way—sometimes the survivor of an old country marriage like theirs just gets too lonely to make it. I suppose that's possible, though they lived in the city since before I moved in with them. I mourned. I still think of them. But accepting their deaths hasn't been a problem for years.

However, having lived with them is important, I think, because they give me something in common with Pamela; at 16, she moved in with her grandmother after her parents drowned. Similar.

I feel like going on all about my childhood. All kinds of things occur to

me and they all seem vaguely important.

Other than living with my aunt and uncle till I was 14, I had a normal childhood—TV, school, the usual. I rode my bike, hung around groceries drinking cokes, mowed yards for money. My best friend and I spent one summer trying to figure out how to sneak onto the rides at Opryland. Harris was his name, Harry. We made it onto two or three. I remember the river raft slide. I really liked Harris. He was a year older than me, and smart.

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But I know this isn't covering what I need to cover— not getting me anywhere, not like knowing Pamela and I have something in common that kept us together. The problems are hard to pin down into a neat package. So I'm going to try something else I think will work. Let's try starting right when the pace of my marriage and my job picked up and began to turn complicated, right before some of the changes —the one leading to the other, or coming out of nowhere, or going nowhere. Before I fell behind, couldn't keep up, lost track. I'm not sure what I missed.

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.

Dickens, *David Copperfield*

Part I

Chapter 1

Dinner

Carolyn Rumsey was the first sign of change. Phil was out of the office doing shop work more and more, and he decided the extra expense of hiring Carolyn was worth keeping the business running smoothly. This was a smart move.

> **Phil, Carolyn: You'll be reading this, and I'm not just saying that to be complimentary—I want to run this inquiry by you because I think well of your opinions. I'll want to talk to you about it when you're done reading and see if you can help.*

Business had been staying the course, not bad considering Nashville wasn't a big growth city, and Phil wanted to take in more jobs. He argued it would take two kids in the back to do the woodworking he could handle himself and only one to replace him for front office administration and selling work. I estimated salary and unemployment and benefits costs and agreed with him. "Besides," he said, "I still get all the fun—woodwork by day and design at night." Cabinets and home finishing and other high craft products were his preferred projects, his favorites.

He had me take care of placing the ad—said, "Money work, that's yours," he told me—and most of the interviewing—"You're going to have to do the W-2s and scheduling anyway, Jimmy." He said Administrative Assistant

sounded good for the ad. I narrowed the applicants down to two besides Carolyn, and he made the final cut. Carolyn had been in sales with one of the big computer stores downtown, and Phil must have figured that kind of hot-ticket selling experience would make for good customer relations.

We were out on the north edge of the city, in a cinderblock building on Campbell Road along with a few minute markets, fastfood joints, and then a shopping center about a mile past us, not a busy stretch. There were enough residential areas nearby to give Phil and the boys in the back something going most of the time. Quite a few people came in to ask about cabinets or den conversions or shelving, though most called and Phil made appointments with them to go discuss the possibilities and give estimates. Carolyn ended up handling most of that paperwork outside of the design end. So there'd probably never been any question whether Phil was going to stay out front full time or head back into the shop. Most of the time, when the phone rang in his office, I had to go looking for him in the back, weaving through the wide passages between workbenches, straining to see through the darkness and sprays of sawdust. He loved wading into a mass of pine and coming out with a windowseat.

Everybody who ever met Phil said: friendly guy, genial, busybody. He wouldn't ever let anyone alone. Every time he came out of his office or out of the shop, it was "I'm going for a cold drink; want one?" or "We need newspapers," and he buzzed out the door. He'd come back, dive into a conversation, and get me to follow him into the shop to keep talking while he worked—long stories about his youth or ideal projects for houses of people he knew, sometimes houses he'd driven past, imagining the inside to suit him. No matter when or where, if Pamela was with me he had to grab us around the elbows and ask why we hadn't made babies—surely we were going

through the motions? Then he'd slam us together like making one big lump of clay out of two small ones, laughing.

Carolyn was doomed. He had it in for her because she was too quiet—smiled, kept up her side of conversation, but that wasn't enough. He'd have settled for just a little outgoing and left her alone, but since she wasn't nearly cheery enough, he set his goals high. Frankly, Carolyn had too far to go to make uproarious. She was fairly young, on the thin side but not really skinny. She never missed a day of work, even though she had this persistent, dry cough right from the first. Like I said, quiet, very reserved. She put up with Phil's big barbeque plans graciously, but she wasn't going to be chief merrymaker.

"You're going to love this," he told her. "You get to relax. I'm a fine cook, and this man," he reached over toward me, "James is a chef. You get a *fine* meal under the trees with a cool breeze and the flowers growing."

Carolyn nodded. "Thanks. Sounds good."

"I don't even want to think about work this weekend. No housecalls. Jim, did we set up the Laines' kitchen for Saturday?"

I checked my calendar. "Yeah."

"That's out. Carly, call them and see if Monday is okay. And then make sure we're not double scheduling." He shrugged. "They won't object. We're on time with them anyway, so we don't need to make this one a weekender, right?"

And for most of the afternoon, he kept coming out of the shop with more ideas to write down—going to be a big day, fiesta.

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I got home, waited for Pamela, told her about the big Thompson WoodWorks family picnic. She liked the barbeque idea. She thought the

break would be good for Carolyn. Maybe this had something to do with being a pharmacist—health consciousness, Type B personality promotion, living right. And her being such good friends with Carolyn was a large part of her interest in Phil's feast. They met one day when Pamela dropped by the office not long after Carolyn started, and they hit it off within a week. Once they realized Carolyn lived less than a mile from us, we were carpooling to work. They probably had lunch together as often as Pamela and I did. So one of Phil's impeccably orchestrated celebrations of life, the kind of activity she liked anyway, was now one person to talk to better.

Pamela always got along with Phil tremendously well, too. She thought his loveable old uncle bit was funny, advice and all, a running joke too funny to take as prying. We threw him and his wife birthday parties and vice versa. He was one of those three or four people you know who can drop in any time unannounced for a cup of coffee or half a pitcher of iced tea and be welcome—or be turned away because we already had a commitment going and he'd not think twice and neither would we. So we were looking forward to Saturday.

Phil loved Warner Park. It was close to Belle Meade—lots of old houses, architecture, style and design. And it was a big, rolling park with well-shaded picnic tables and grass that wasn't rubbed so thin it was all red clay showing through. He told us all three o'clock in the afternoon—"There'll be time for the kids to play frisbee and me to drink beer, you guys too if you're so inclined, and to get the fires started so we can eat before six-thirty." But he came rolling in about a quarter to four. He got out of the car and lugged a cooler out of the back. Winnie carried a couple of grocery sacks. "Sorry, sorry," he yelled. "Some of the rich folks are moving out and had an open house. I acted like I had enough money to throw away and took a look

around—couldn't pass it up. God, what mantlepieces! Cherrywood, huge."

Pamela and I, Carolyn, and the boys in the back—two with families and one without—were already staked out in a bend of the park not far from the gardens. There was a wide roll of grassy area next to our picnic area under the trees, then a low brick wall beyond the open space, and the flower beds were the other side of the wall, mostly yellows and whites near us. It was a quiet place to eat, good view, a little air moving but not so much that smoke blew into our faces—wide open spaces and comfortable.

When we'd arrived, Pamela started setting out our dishes while she talked to Carolyn and one of the boys from the back. I figured I'd get the fires going, and by a quarter after three, I had two mounds of charcoal going like roaring furnaces. That's when Phil showed up. With a head count, we numbered somewhere around a dozen—enough that we needed the third grill in our picnic area too. With the arrival and start-up activity out of the way, we had a good wait to take till the coals were ashy and hot. People split up. Some sat and caught up on old times, most of the children went off to run wild, Carolyn walked over to see the flowers. Pamela and I spent our time sitting in the sun. She thought about things to do for the rest of the weekend, suggested we see a movie later.

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The picnic was good, but not good as picnics go—good as dinners go. A picnic really structures itself around the entertainment. Whenever Pamela and I went—say to Bell State Park, this side of Dumont and Crofton, or up to Old Hickory Lake by Bledsoe Creek—we eat so-so food off paper plates, then take walks and make love on a blanket.

**Pamela: Do you think that's too personal? We can cut out that example before Phil and Carolyn or anyone else reads this,*

if you want. When we go on picnics with other people, sightseeing and music and sports are the main attractions. Picnic food rates a poor second—hotdogs, maybe hamburgers, sandwiches, or a bucket of chicken, tops. Now, I like picnics fine. They're their own sort of gathering—the smaller the better. Yes, picnics have their own advantages.

But this picnic was a food and conversation event, a lot more like a dinner. There were frisbees and flower-picking trips (illegal in Warner Park, but no one really saw who was bringing up these bouquets), but those were just to keep the untalented non-cookers happy. When the food hit the tables, there was no doubt what we'd come for. It started to turn out the way Phil planned. It was enough to make you sing.

At one point, there were about five coolers and bags getting opened at once, and the smells were enough to start some serious salivation. I think I'll call this the dinner chapter, because that was the high point of the weekend. Admittedly, since our kitchen happened to be an open air set-up, the meat courses were primarily hamburgers and cheap steaks. But Phil had a thermos jug full of white beans with ham and peppers and what he insisted were secret ingredients—onions and pepper relish. Carolyn made a pasta salad. Pamela and I brought dessert—whipped cream, peaches, strawberries, and blackberries. And a couple of the boys from the back chipped in together and brought a barbeque sauce they'd concocted to grill marinated chicken breasts for their families.

Really, the only thing that kept it from being a full-fledged dinner was the separate menus. Everybody had enough to share for a taste of this and a helping of that, but mostly each family prepared for itself. Plates and bowls

circulated within the bounds of each family's table, and if I said something was seasoned just right and somebody agreed, we probably weren't talking about the same thing.

Eating dragged on longer than just chewing and swallowing accounted for, as a real dinner goes. I think one of the mothers was teaching a baby to eat for himself. That table laughed through most of the meal. Phil and Carolyn talked politics, serious issues mostly— whether there'd be a Soviet Union much longer, Tennessee's economy, garbage fees, but some questions like how long would the sheriff be in prison and who was the mayor sleeping with, too, and that was laughs. People welcomed the opportunity to sit in the shade and talk, held on to the quiet.

After dinner was a nice rounding off of the afternoon. The sun got down lower and lower and cool started settling into the air. Charcoal smoke rose from the ash, becoming thinner and thinner, barely showing against the dark trees. Tree branches moved in a breeze so slight I couldn't feel it or hear it rustle the leaves. A few joggers went by, one with a dog barking and bouncing around like he thought the whole trip through the park was a game for him. Pamela and I and one of the boys from the back and his wife were playing with some of the children, wandering around with jars while they paced back and forth chasing lightning bugs. Phil and Winnie sat at one of the picnic tables, facing outward, leaning back against the tabletop. They just looked out over the gardens toward the east, where it was getting dark enough for the city's glow to show, and every once in a while one or the other would come up with something to say.

I thought Phil was disappointed. It had been a good meal, a good day, but Carolyn sat on a little rise of the grassy area off by herself, away from the grills where the rest of us were sitting or playing. While I walked around

with my beer and jar of bugs, I happened to notice her, and then Phil out of the corner of my eye and remembered how the idea for dinner got started. I started trotting along with one of the more active little girls and eventually saw my chance to herd her in a loop past Carolyn, trying to draw her attention to some of the socializing. Then a minute later, I called, "Come on, Carolyn. They want to let 'em go and see how many we can get back." She just waved and leaned back to watch. In the dusk all I could see was this cross-legged figure lift one hand and let it drop.

Pamela let me run around another minute or so before catching me by the crook of the arm. "Let her rest," she said quietly, dropping her chin to my shoulder. "She can't use her inhalor for nearly another hour, so she needs to be careful and not start coughing." Pamela took the jar and gave it to the little girl, sending her over near Carolyn to open it. I saw the bugs' lights go on, rising into the air, scattering and blinking so that within a few seconds it hardly seemed like they'd ever been grouped together as closely packing as the mayonaisse jar had them. I mumbled something in a tone of acknowledgement and a little apology, put my arm around Pamela, and walked along with her,

Thinking about what makes a good trip to the park and how little of that Carolyn was getting involved in, I didn't stop to put two and two together—that's all. A few months before, Carolyn had been in a fire in her apartment. She wasn't burned, but she suffered a mild case of smoke poisoning. With just the wrong circumstances, a sharp whiff of smoke from the grills or running out of breath from exertion could set her off coughing, maybe bring on some bronchial irritation.

I kept better track of myself and what I said for the last hour we spent in the park.

Part I

Chapter 2

Driving

Of course, I already knew Carolyn had a respiratory injury. I just put it in the back of my mind because I was thinking how much she needed to relax—because, of course, she wasn't well. My reasoning circled around eventually. Pamela and Carolyn had gotten to know each other as close friends, but after all, I worked with the woman and carpooled with her, so of course I knew.

It's about a twenty minute drive to work and that's long enough for greetings and comments about the weather to turn into conversation. The first few days took care of generalities, her questions about the route to work and area groceries and which streets weren't a good idea to walk at night, and the next three or four trips to and from work were fairly quiet. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence—Carolyn's not the type to feel like she has to chatter politely—so I didn't think anything about it. Old Hickory Boulevard is interesting to drive and that area is scenic, as far as urban fringe is concerned—no abandoned buildings or weedy vacant lots.

The beginning of the second week, Carolyn spoke up about halfway home. I don't remember if some remark led up to the subject or if she started talking out of the clear blue sky.

"I enjoy working for Mr. Thompson," she said. She was just getting used to saying, "Phil." "I believe I'll get to like it as much as my old job."

I might have said good, or asked about the old job.

"Computer Center was good, but I couldn't keep up my old work load. I only missed two days out sick. Once I returned to work, it wasn't that I felt weak or tired. I believe it was making all the adjustments that distracted me. I lost all my clothes in the fire, and my home computer. And other things that made it hard—my old desk, my good pen, address book, comfortable shoes. I'd moved in with Anthony, but I kept wanting to start home at the end of the day."

Though she'd never mentioned Anthony before, I didn't ask about him—might be prying, might be a sensitive subject. I was just conversing. I made a sympathetic comment—"Sorry about the fire."

"I got home late one evening and thought something wasn't right at the door, but I didn't actually realize there was a fire until I walked in and smelled smoke. Or else it's just in retrospect I think the door was warm, the light too red. If I'd seen fire right away, maybe I wouldn't have even gone in, but I was right there. I thought I could take my jewelry box, some photos, and my file of disks and get out. I must have panicked or breathed enough smoke to feel faint, I don't really know. But I remember finally seeing the flames as I was grabbing something stupid like record albums or my crystal glasses, and I turned to run out. The next thing was I was sitting against the wall of the next building, coughing, and there were sirens coming. My apartment was a total loss. So was half the building. It was a big fire.

"The firemen said wiring started it, but it's a new complex. The wiring shouldn't have been bad, should it? I don't guess how it started is important, anyway." We were close to her house by this time. She added a few more details, but more scattered—rambling, compared to her usual conversation. She stepped out of the car and waved. I yelled, "See you later."

It seems as though she'd had something on her mind for a good while. It was a lot to say.

When I got home, Pamela and I traded shorthand accounts of our days at work. But then later at dinner, we were talking and she told me about some plans she had with Carolyn, a trip one afternoon looking for auctions or a country bakery or something, and I mentioned the conversation Carolyn and I'd had.

"Really?" Pamela asked. "What'd she say?"

I told her as close as I remembered with elaboration under her promptings. She commented, "Hm!" when I finished and got up to step into the kitchen, getting herself the Worcestershire sauce. She kept on as she came back and shuffled the food on her plate: "She told me about the smoke poisoning, but I hadn't put it together with the new house and job. I didn't know she had the total loss or she spent that long in the fire." She shook her head and made that little three note hum she'd picked up from her grandmother—*fa, mi, re*—meaning imagine that. "Well, she's lucky. But still. . ."

I admit I didn't catch on to Carolyn's problem right away. Pamela was ahead of me there. But I did get the story. Pamela's perceptive. She looks for these things.

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When Pamela and I first started going together that was one of the first things I noticed about her, she's perceptive. Probably the first thing I noticed about her was she likes to keep herself occupied. That's something else she picked up from her grandmother, not as a habit she imitated, but as a reaction, as compensation. The woman was in her seventies when she took in a sixteen-year old. Nothing in the house or in her daily schedule was set

up for a teen-ager's interests. Pamela wasn't a wild kid— especially not after losing both parents—but she needed more activity than a woman who thoroughly enjoyed being retired, who hadn't lived with anyone younger than herself in forty years, would offer.

Pamela became very methodical, developed a second nature around doing *something* most of the time. Very gracefully, no fidgeting to her, she kept a book to read or spontaneously came up with plans for an afternoon and evening out. When we first got married, we could be sitting on the couch and she'd have her book and we each had our own little personal space. Gradually she expanded her method to account for me. Between page-turnings her hand moved to my shoulder or my thigh. Then our first winter together she started keeping her toes warm under the crook of my knee. Finally we arrived at one of us leaning back under the other's arm or across a lap, in a corner of the couch or, better yet, in the easy chair.

She enveloped me into most of her habits the same as always having a book to read or catching the good movies when they first hit the theaters. When we cooked together, we worked on the same dish at the same time rather than dividing jobs. I became part of how she kept herself entertained.

I'd have thought she'd prefer driving to riding, but riding is doing something, especially if we go somewhere more than sightseeing. I like driving. She watched me at first, just as part of us getting to know each other, I imagine. She says I drive like an old fish in a slow current, sliding into a lane, easing around other cars, slipping into openings as they open. Basically, when you know a car, peripheral vision covers the rear view mirror and the speedometer. Judging another car's speed is easy, and all you have to do is time yourself. I can figure out how much I can do in a certain distance at a certain speed. Except for rush hour jams, Nashville's a fun city

to drive. I've been in Louisville a few times and it can get busy. Memphis is a breeze.

As a general thing, I've seen people in standard traffic—no tie ups, no congestion—foaming at the mouth, shaking fists, flipping the finger. What's the big deal? Driving's not a bad experience.

I'm sure that's part of the reason I was the carpool driver—I enjoy driving. That and because Carolyn lived between us and work, maybe one block out of my way. It was Pamela who set up the carpool. After she and Carolyn became friends, she came home one evening asking me, "Did you know Carolyn lives a few blocks from here?"

I'd seen her address but only had a rough idea where the street was—no idea where the house number placed her on that street. "No."

"Yeah." She opened a window to get some cool air into the apartment and sat where the breeze ran past her. "Just off of Johnson on Dogwood. " She paused and thought. "What do you say to sharing the ride to work?"

I pictured the route to the office, followed in mentally. "She's on the way."

We called her that night and arranged it. I drove her to and from work all that summer, till Phil went out of business. She bought a tank of gas now and then. She offered to take her car some, but it was easiest for me to drive over to her house and then just continue in my car.

I tended to show up at 7:30 when Carolyn was more or less ready. She let me in the kitchen door and went on with finishing her makeup or putting on earrings or shoes. At first, she asked me about coffee and put a pot of water on the stove, and then later already had the water going and just nodded good morning and went on getting ready. She walked out of the kitchen and came back down the hall two or three minutes later adjusting a

wire through her earlobe, smoothing her sleeve, maybe patting her hair down.

If I didn't get my coffee made and drunk before she was ready to leave, I'd take it with me and give her back the empty mug on the trip home, or we'd wait at the table. Sometimes she had coffee or milk with me. Generally I finished before she did, hearing a news announcer from some other room of the house and looking around the room and out the window.

The house was okay—one of these late '40s four-roomers for veterans, sound, simple and plain, kept up as well as the average landlord feels like. She had her basic furnishings—in the kitchen at least, which is the room I remember, the only one I ever saw—cane-bottomed, steel frame chairs, formica table, a painted highboy for dishes and whatnot. The mugs were tall, plastic bank giveaways. There wasn't a toaster or microwave or, for that matter, a coffee pot—just the saucepan to heat water for instant from a set of Wal-Mart cookware. She must have replaced basics after the fire, maybe adding a colander here and a potato peeler there as time went on. There weren't any doodads yet—no ornaments like potted plants, cow-shaped creamers, or funny magnets holding postcards and clippings to the refrigerator, or any pictures—just a copper basket holding fruit and a couple of ink pens. I noticed all this in bits and pieces over the summer. Like I said, she was always pretty nearly ready when I got there.

On the average, we made it to work a few minutes early, almost never late. And Carolyn got right to work—calls or correspondence to begin with, maybe estimates around noon, then checking schedules and timesheets with me toward the end of the day—that sort of thing. She was very steady about working—polite and responsive whenever Phil passed through and told jokes or sang to us—but consistently businesslike. Her whole efficient attitude

must have been training from her job with the computer consultants—high pressure, fast-paced business, lots to do, corporate.

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*Pamela, everybody: *Now I'm getting somewhere. Now I'm getting a handle on my career.*

*Pamela: *I still don't know what happened with us, but I have to say I'm not sure anything was going wrong yet.*

*Phil, Carolyn: *I knew I owed you an apology and what I'm apologizing for is simply not giving enough attention. I could have worked harder. Or, no, not even worked harder, just spent my time looking for ways to arrange more economical scheduling and purchasing practices. I never thought of it. I feel like I did my work and my work was okay. I know times were tough in Nashville-the demand for home improvement and the other jobs Thompson WoodWorks went after wasn't expanding, or all that stable either. I even wonder if I could have made a difference. Carolyn was a hard worker and a smart woman. Phil knew how to make wood sit up, sing, dance, and balance Buicks on its nose. But the business was on its way to folding by the end of July. Could I have at least helped smooth the way—made for a more pleasant last dance? At least I'd have liked to have been more involved. Carolyn pushed herself for the sake of the business.*

After work one night, not long after the Warner Park dinner, I went out for some air. Pamela was skimming through articles in a pharmaceuticals journal, so I decided to take a drive by the office and pick up

some tennis shoes I'd worn to work and changed out of. I sidetracked to the mall for a cold Coke and a little people-watching. By the time I set out again, it was nearly 10:00. Old Hickory Boulevard was quiet, the day's heat had died down, traffic sparse. Stoplights were off the sensors and running on timers. A beautiful night out, very pleasant. Just passing time.

I pulled into the parking lot about 10:30. Standing at the office door, I realized lights were on, and they shouldn't have been. I turned quiet, unlocking the door, creeping in, leaving lights that were on on and lights off off. The shop equipment was expensive but not very portable. Could we be burgled anyway?

I looked in and Carolyn was at her desk with a pile of paperwork fanned out in front of her. When I stepped out of the dark entry and walked in, she said, "Oh. Jim." And though she didn't raise her voice or speak quickly, she did sit back and catch her breath. I apologized for startling her.

"No, it's all right," she said after a moment. "I just didn't expect you."

"How're you doing?"

"Fine, I'm almost done. How are you?"

"Good. Just out for a ride." I hadn't stopped to talk, just walked to my desk, found my shoes, and started back past her desk. "So what's up?"

"I'm keeping my files up to date." I paused and then full stopped to look. She had notes on customers, mostly typed up, and subscription notices for Phil's *Architectural Digest* and *Southern Accents* on her blotter. A two or three inch stack of other manila folders sat on the floor in the shadow cast by her desk. The only good light in the room came from her lamp, picking out her hands and forearms and the papers on her desk. She tilted the lamp shade to see me better. "Paper shuffling," she said. "You know, the easiest kind of thing to do."

We talked a couple of minutes—her leaning back in her chair, rubbing her eyes once or twice—and when I said good night and started to leave, she slipped her papers up into a stack and said she'd call it a night too. We walked out to the parking lot and locked up. Her car was parked around the side of the building, and as I drove off down Campbell, in my mirror I saw her switch on the headlights and start out of the lot. Traffic was even thinner and the lights weren't timed badly for me. Pamela was ready for bed when I got home—it was that late.

Carolyn wasn't getting overtime. She never put in for it. We signed her up on a flat biweekly pay—assumed a standard forty-hour week, no more. The way she talked, what she was doing that night (and how many other nights a week?) didn't count as actual work.

Part I

Chapter 3

Work

This chapter will be an analysis of my career and my attitude toward it. I'm on to something now. I'm on to something and I'm going to follow it out until I pull together all my answers about work. Then, when I finish this chapter, I can concentrate on Pamela and what happened with our marriage.

I enjoyed my job at Thompson WoodWorks. Phil put me on part-time in college and for a couple of years after. Then, when he offered full-time, I quit the accountants and went with him. Phil had a better variety to offer, more responsibility, less monotony. I liked Phil and got to know the boys in the back pretty well. The pay was a little better. A small company has advantages—getting to go to lunch with the boss once or twice a week, parking close to the door.

To be thorough, I will say there were some hassles. Phil couldn't afford a benefits plan, so I had to arrange my own insurance policies and IRA—not a big problem, not for me, but an inconvenience. Because there was no one who could cover for me, time off had to come either when business was slow or when I'd prepared ahead so Phil could spare me. Before Carolyn started, the office got lonesome whenever Phil was out, though I could hear him and the boys in the back, or the saws at least.

In comparison, someplace like the Walgreens where Pamela worked, which she always said she liked fine, was different just because it was a

chain store. She'd be the only pharmacist on duty, so she'd be alone in the pharmacy area. The clerks acted friendly toward her, but were mostly part-timers, high school or college age, young married men or women cranking away on the second job, grandmothers supplementing the household budget—coming on and going off shift at irregular times, kept busy in the aisles restocking the shelves with suntan oil, makeup, candy, inkpens, and plastic crap whenever the checkout lane ran out of customers—God forbid they be paid for doing nothing forty-five seconds straight. The manager or assistant manager generally respected pharmacists, but always stayed busy administrating. Pamela never got very close to anybody down there, never had much conversation to carry on. Whenever I showed up at the drugstore—to go with her to lunch, say—she lit up the second she saw me as if I was the only person she'd seen all day. *Lit up*'s probably too strong a term for it, but she was glad to see me.

One day early in August, I walked in, getting a Coke from the cooler and paying the clerk—a teenager I didn't know but who smiled and seemed to recognize me—on my way back to the pharmacy counter. Pamela waved and called my name when she saw me and opened the gate to let me into her druggist's alcove. She stayed in an area with a floor a foot higher than the rest of the Walgreens, and a slightly lower ceiling, but with the shelves of pale pill bottles and the bright flourescents, it didn't seem too enclosed. She said I was early—we had twenty minutes till her lunch break. I could wait, take her full hour with her, and just go back to T.WW. a little late. It'd all balance out—no break there for a slightly longer lunch here. The reason I was early was I'd spent the morning inventorying lumber and, once that was finished, couldn't get anything started well. I sat out of Pamela's way and passed the time. "Carolyn said the Laines called this morning."

"Is that job going okay?"

"Fine. They want some more work done, more ornate baseboards."

"That's great," she said and started to tell me how things had gone for her that morning, then interrupting herself—"Oh," she said. "Grandma's birthday is next week. She would have been eighty-nine."

I nodded to show her I recognized the day. She'd been fond of her grandmother. "You want to go out to the cemetery?"

She paused. There were some measuring trays left out and she fiddled with them, putting them away. "This year, again, yes."

We talked and she worked till lunch, and then we walked across the parking lot to the Grandy's restaurant. I didn't get to eat lunch with Pamela every day. Some days, I didn't get the hour off the same time she did, even though working for Phil gave me latitude. Phil liked having me or Carolyn stay in the office at all times during the day, so her schedule and mine, as well as Pamela's, kept changing lunch hours. Like I said, Pamela went to lunch with Carolyn almost as often as she did with me.

But lunch with Pamela was always a nice change from the office—conversation, trying new restaurants, sampling each other's food, quick trips home, or out on errands. When I didn't go with her, or Phil, who's fun, telling jokes and drawing cabinet designs all over the napkins, I hardly ever went anywhere special. The best place I ever went by myself that I can remember was this little malt shop downtown—only about a block from Vanderbilt but never too crowded. It had great shakes, great meatloaf, '50s and '60s music on the jukebox, and really ugly decor—loud-colored tile and chrome, vinyl booths squeaking like two balloons rubbed together when you sit down, and paintings of the malt shop itself—like you couldn't look around without seeing the subject of the painting. But the food was good and the customers

and waitresses were relaxed, and that's what's important. I went there for lunch by myself a few times.

Otherwise it was fast food or even minute market microwaveables. For this kind of lunch I'd just go up Campbell Road to one or another of those places or else get on the by-pass and take a promising exit. It seems like every exit had a little oasis at the bottom, surrounded by blocks of serious businesses, tranquilized patterns of neighborhood houses, or, farther from the city, thick trees and hills. For each of these oases, there'd be one or two minute markets with gas pumps, service stations, restaurants, sometimes a mall nearby. Then, if the dining areas were crowded, I'd head back to the interstate to eat and listen to the radio. Actually a meal on wheels like that could be pleasant, relaxing—a little news, a little music, a ripping wind blowing through my hair and over my elbow propped out the window, or else the frosty puff of air conditioning, the hum of the road, the rattle of pot holes, a quick side track to a Dairy Queen for dessert, the sights—some time to forget work.

Not every lunch hour was so good, but when one was especially good I was a new man that afternoon—could do the books like a house afire.

/

Afternoons were never routine. Pamela could always make interesting plans. But the most frequent way I spent time after work started with taking Carolyn home, making and eating dinner with Pamela, watching television while she read, then heading off to bed. Other evenings consisted of going with Pamela when she felt the need for a jog, going to Phil's for beer and Scrabble, or having a night out with Carolyn. For instance, she and Pamela could sit in a theater lobby chewing over a movie for almost as long as its running time, and sometimes end up making more sense of a flick than I'd be

able to pick up sitting through it twice, though parts of what they said about *Regarding Henry* sounded like what they *wanted* to see in it.

But most of the time, Pamela had new ideas, very little routine. One week we used the evenings wallpapering the living room and hall with a design she had Phil help her find. Then there were trips out into the country, to museums, to bars featuring little rock bands, even to some of the less cheesy Music City attractions like Ryman Auditorium, where the Grand Ole Opry used to be.

And not all of her plans developed spontaneously. Some things were traditional with Pamela. For example, she had her visits to her grandmother's grave. She went whenever something reminded her strongly of her grandmother or she felt upset, and she'd stay for a while to be alone and think. And she went every year on her grandmother's birthday, just to leave a bouquet of flowers and make sure the mowers weren't missing weeds or pushing the stone off its base.

Last summer, the birthday fell on a Wednesday. It was a nice day, sunny, but not too hot, fairly quiet at the office. Pamela walked into the living room about a little after six and said, "It's getting about time to go."

I looked up. "Oh yeah, your grandmother's birthday."

"I got an iris with some violets this year. Pretty, huh?"

"Yeah. You want me to go with you?"

She shook her head and was set to say no, but sat and thought about it. "Yes, if you don't mind, please."

"I'll be ready in a minute."

I'd known Grandma Owen the last few years before she died, and liked her a lot. She was a thoughtful little old lady, treating me like a member of the family before she knew Pamela and I were getting married—before we

decided, for that matter—just because I was seeing her granddaughter, or maybe only because I was a guest in her house more than once. She seemed frail, and she had a slight cataract, so she moved and handled objects very carefully. When Pamela and I went to her house, she shook hands with me and greeted me by my full name, "Hello, James Grady." She asked me to take a seat if I pleased and offered us refreshments, but then told us where to find them in the kitchen. The first Christmas I knew her, she gave me a scarf. Eccentric little old woman.

When we got to the cemetery I drove around the little narrow, winding lanes till we got to the branch closest to Grandma Owen's grave. Walking down the line between stones, Pamela was unusually quiet. Normally, the birthday visit was no problem for her—no bad memories, no regrets, no sadness, no troubles like on the trips she'd go to mull things over. She was just quiet this time.

The groundskeepers hadn't been doing a bad job that year. I pulled out a few blades of grass growing flush against the stone where no mower reached, while Pamela arranged the bouquet at the front of the marker under her grandmother's name, pushing down on the jar of water, making a slight depression in the clay to keep the jar upright. As she rose from kneeling, I stood and remarked how pretty they looked, how fresh. She nodded and took a step back, so I turned to walk back to the car too. But about three graves toward the road I started to say something to her and she wasn't there. I looked back and she had only moved near the foot of the grave.

Pamela stood with her head down, taking in the effect of the purple and yellow-white flowers, I think. For the background, the grass was a dark green only slightly yellowed from the heat, and the stone was very light gray. A movement of air lifted a few strands of her hair and lowered them. She

stood still, her hands clasped in front of her, one knee crooked slightly to shift weight on the other leg. She's tall—as tall as I am—and she had on blue jeans, so with only the low stones behind her, few trees and no buildings nearby, her figure was sharply outlined against the dull background and dusk sky. She seemed a little sad, but I also thought how beautiful she was. "Pamela?"

She looked up. "Something wrong?"

"Oh. No." She came to me. As we walked toward the car, she hooked her arm into mine and said, "Jim, I'm sorry about how hard I've been on you about things."

"No, no. That was nothing. I wasn't trying to rush you. I just wondered if something was wrong—with the flowers or the grave or anything."

There must not have been anything wrong, because she was cheerful on the way home and in a good mood the rest of the evening. We pushed the air conditioner up high so we could pull up the comforter and bedspread, feel their weight while making love. But I wonder if she was only deciding to be cheerful.

/

About that time of August was when Thompson WoodWorks needed new contracts to replace the jobs we'd finished or were finishing. We only had one or two substantial projects going at that time and they were just about done. To our good, payments were coming in on time or not much past due, and Carolyn was keeping good contact with customers and arranging a good number of estimates on jobs. But not many people followed up on their plans—a kitchen cabinet job or two and one converting a wall into an entertainment center and that's about all.

The thing is, finishing up jobs and getting new ones and maybe a little slack time in between was the way it'd always been at Phil's. The only new factor was someone to hunt up business and help Phil out in the office so he could do more in the shop, so it certainly wasn't hurting to have her around.

There were no warning signs. Phil knew the market, and he never let on there was anything to worry about. One day before the middle of the month, he came in from the shop while Carolyn was at lunch and said, "Jimmy, a couple of us are going out to have a cold one after we close up this afternoon. Want to come? Call your wife, and we'll ask Carol when she gets back. How about it, what do you say?" No worries.

/

There's no answers coming out of any of this. What happened different from all the years before? Where's the change? I still don't see. I'm no better off.

> **Phil: This is stupid—the bookkeeper asking the boss how the finances went bad. But like I said, you knew the business. Better than me, obviously. What did I do? Or what didn't I?*

I should be able to come up with something. But I don't know what to write about from here. Maybe I'm trying too hard, expecting too much. If I keep going, write what comes to mind, that's bound to be important somehow. Then look it over and find important sections, connections. So maybe I'll just keep turning up problems for a while, but eventually I'll have to clear things up.

Part I

Chapter 4

Privacy

The first actual changes in the way Pamela and I got along—changes I can put my finger on, anyway—didn't develop till we moved to Dumont for her job, but as I think about the subject of us I can still go back to last summer. This is an important subject for me—one I want to go over very carefully.

> **Pamela: This is what's really important to me—sorting out the fights we had and that time we spent when we just weren't in sync. What I hate is not knowing* why *we lost touch.*
>
> **Pamela, Phil, Carolyn—anyone else I'm going to give this to: You may never even see this, but I hope you do. I may sort everything out for myself and have it turn out something simple. I doubt that. Or, what's worse, it could be too much to put off on you—too complicated. Then what? What good has it done?*

Right now, my ideas on Pamela and me go back to good times—because, good as they were, the bad times that were already going on for me and for other people were connected. Following out these connections, I can get perspective.

It was while Pamela and I were still completely happy that I realized Carolyn's relations were going through hard times. Though I knew she had

troubles, I found out a lot more. She did see someone for a while—one of the boys in the back. Since he was unmarried he didn't have quite as much in common with the others as they had with each other, and so he was a little bit of a loner. He liked them and his work though. Whenever Phil got a new saw or drill press or a special load of hardwood, he was one of the first to leave his bench to come help with it—or just look. He walked around any new equipment appreciatively, like Jacques Cousteau sizing up an experimental diving bell. Decent enough guy—he was faster returning borrowed tools than most of the boys in back. I didn't know till he told me after the fact that he'd dated Carolyn. She never mentioned it.

Once in a while, Pamela and I invited Carolyn over to supper (actually, a couple of those times she had some dish she wanted to make for us, broiled fish or Chinese vegetables, and didn't have the facilities at her house) or went somewhere with her, and she never brought a date. I knew she'd broken up with someone about the time she started at the office, and I assumed she wasn't seeing anyone—that she just wanted some breathing room. But love life or not, everybody needs an hour or so with somebody familiar at regular intervals. I think that's why Carolyn—a reserved, quiet young woman like she was—made friends with Pamela so well so quickly—and made friends with me and Phil too, though co-workers it's no surprise. Losing house, job, boyfriend, and good health in so short a time, she couldn't afford all the polite stages of introduction and acquaintance there are in getting a friendship going. And away from work or other obligations like going to the bank or the doctor's office, she did relax a little—not so much talking more, but more freely.

She kept to herself quite a bit, probably going to the office a couple of nights a week, but whenever she and Pamela went anywhere or the three of

us did anything, she didn't act like an overworked woman desperate to get out of her rut or a lonely person starved for company—just someone enjoying a night out. Is it a good or bad thing to cope with too much work as a standard operating procedure?

We never went to hear a band with her—too much smoke in the bars—but other than that, fine. She liked movies, the museum, malls. She made herself at home when she came over for dinner. One night she came over to try out some seasonings and relish with white beans and ham, showing up with a big pot already started and a couple of brown bags of fixings, needing our kitchen for final preparations, utensils, dishes, and tasters.

"I'll be back," she said, passing through the living room to the kitchen. "I'll put these on to simmer and start the bread."

"Want some help?" I called.

"I can manage."

"Okay." I just got plates out and left them stacked on the dining area table. Pamela came and stood in the door to talk. As I walked back to the couch, I saw Carolyn standing near the stove to watch over her food as it got started cooking again. From the living room, I listened to Pamela talk and heard Carolyn respond. Like extended family.

It was a nice evening—a few minutes to talk while the food finished up, a good supper (boiled ham's not the most flavorful way to fix it, but the relish sharpened the taste), and the time to take it easy, just linger at the table and eventually wander into the living room.

Pamela had put in a long shift—starting early, standing seventy to eighty percent of the day. We were listening to some of the albums she'd pulled out, and she was trying to organize them, putting them away in a better system as she took them off the turntable, but she was getting tired—

each side lasting long enough for the music to lull her closer and closer to sleep— until by the time she got to the James Taylor her eyes were easing shut. The second time she looked up and around, trying to figure out if she'd drifted off, I realized she was a goner. So I picked up the Carole King albums she had out to play next and stacked them on the coffee table.

It was getting on toward late and Carolyn apparently appreciated the opportunity to leave. She asked if she could borrow the albums and bring them back in a day or two. Pamela nodded a little vaguely and said, "Please. I want you to." We were playing stuff both Pamela and I had started out on as kids —songs just ahead of Carolyn's time, but ones she was interested in. I didn't think of it at the time but she may not have had a stereo—a good chance she didn't. But she saw Pamela was nodding off and felt like it was a good time to make her excuses and leave. Anyway, she kept the albums a few days and returned them with thanks.

When she had her purse, the music, and her stew pot ready, I opened the door for her and said goodnight. I looked out where her car was parked as she walked by me and then said, "Pamela, Carolyn's leaving."

"Oh. Let us walk you out." She snapped awake.

Though the parking spaces weren't far from the buildings in our complex, the few lights we had in the lot left it uncomfortably dark. Carolyn seemed about to say no, but nodded. "Thanks."

The air outside had dropped to somewhere around sixty-five degrees, though a few air conditioners still hummed, and the blacktop had just about lost all the heat it absorbed during the day. Pamela put an arm around me and handed me Carolyn's pot to carry. Carolyn took a deep breath and cleared her throat gently. "The weather reported low pollution and fair pollen."

"Going to sit out tonight?" Pamela spoke clearly and moved steadily, as if she hadn't been asleep, not dozing in front of her company. But I could tell she was tired by the way she leaned against me rather than simply standing next to me.

"An hour or so." Air conditioned air was filtered clean, but when she could get fresh air, she took it.

We talked another minute or so, and she waved and drove off. Pamela nudged her head against mine. "Bed?"

"Sounds good."

See? We were getting along wonderfully. Carolyn wasn't doing too badly either, for a single, but Pamela and I were happy as ever. We had that couple's habit of communicating in fragmented words and body language and eye contact and insight. Pamela was especially good—especially well practiced—at giving and picking up signals. We'd be alone and not have to talk for an hour or so at a time. It's different with other people around—having to speak the same language as they do, opening up the exchange to include everybody.

One weekend we were getting ready to go to a party the Walgreen's manager was throwing. Just by crossing each other's paths while getting ready we paced each other to be set to go at the same time, on time. Switching off turns at the bathroom mirror or meeting at the closet or dresser, we gauged our progress and adjusted—Pamela tossing me my socks when she was at the dresser anyway and then, when I got a little ahead, backing up to me holding the ends of her necklace over her shoulders for me to fasten. We knew each other's rhythms, routines—had them memorized, second nature.

It wasn't a very formal party, just coffee, drinks, and snacks. I had on

pants, shortsleeve shirt and tie, no jacket. Pamela was wearing a long khaki skirt and a checked shirt. She looked great. She dressed for work like that fairly often too— comfortable, and sufficiently professional-looking, and well-proportioned for her height. This skirt was loose enough around the legs to take up its own wave pattern as she walked—momentum keeping it half a second behind her step. And so she moved with a slight swirl, the out of phase motions counteracting each other, diffusing, softening her walk. Watching her I noticed that once in a while the flow of the skirt held to the contour of her leg long enough to leave me picturing her legs. Though she didn't jog every day, her legs showed good muscle definition, and they were long, soft, just slightly tanned. They looked good and they felt good. Run my hand down, wrap them around my waist.

**Pamela: I won't go on in case you think this is too private, but you know what I mean.*

Anyway, as parties go, this one didn't get too boring or too raucous because about half the people there were on friendly terms with each other, but on friendly business terms, so the festivity proceeded efficiently. The staff hierarchy and some simple goodwill outweighed cliques and grudges. The Walgreens manager served decent amounts of wine and beer and small enough portions of cheese and sausage not to distract us from socializing properly. Pamela and I didn't know anyone really well, but she mingled well, visiting with this group and that, and I followed up on her openings, mingling on my own a little bit.

The Walgreens manager played host proficiently. When we left (before it got too late) he walked with us to the door. "Glad y'all could come."

"Goodnight," we said. And I told him to say goodnight to his wife and asked him to say I was sorry I didn't get a chance to talk to her more.

"I will, goodnight."

Heading down their front walk, I mentioned to Pamela how nice they seemed.

On our way home, the night was so clear, so free of haze and humidity, I didn't feel like driving straight home. I stayed on Old Hickory past our turn, went up Myatt Drive, took a turn up Highway 31, and crossed over to park near the river. Pamela got out and walked around to the back of the car. In the mirror, I saw her lean against the fender and I rolled down my window to rest my arm on and look out. She looked up at the stars and then back down to the city's skyline—a few of the big office buildings way off downtown still showing lights. A few cars whizzed past where we'd pulled off the street, but otherwise there wasn't much besides the wind and the river noises—low-key, consistent sounds of movement, a slight rustling—drowsy, lulling. All the lights around us shined steadily in the clear air.

"Jim?"

I got out and walked back to her. "Hm?" She didn't say anything else, so I just walked around to sit besider her, putting my arm around her waist.

After we stayed still like that for a few minutes, she took a deep breath. "Let's take a walk," she said. "Let's take the car home and go for a walk."

"Okay. Sounds good." I figured she got tired of just sitting and wanted some exercise.

We stayed out late, walking an hour or so, until 1:30.

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About that time, within a day or two, Jacques decided to have his talk with me about Carolyn.

**Pamela: We may want to take this next section out before*

Carolyn reads it.

I came back from picking up a shipment from the lumber yard and wanted to make sure we hadn't duplicated material in stock. Jacques walked over and sized up what I was doing. "Got a minute?"

"Sure. I got this close enough." My estimate of lumber on hand showed us doubling up on several boardfeet, which was okay as a cushion.

"Over here, why don't we?" He pointed to one side of the shop where Phil shelved the least-used tools. "Just between you and me," he said, then looked at me like it was a question he needed answered before continuing.

"Sure."

"It's like this—you and Phil are the only ones I know of who know Carolyn better than me. And I'd guess you know her better than Phil. I wanted to see what you could tell me about her."

"About what?"

"Well." He thought. "You know we've been seeing each other."

"No." I must have looked surprised.

"Really? Hm."

"What do you need to know?"

"Well, I already got a fairly good idea what's going to happen but thought another angle on things first wouldn't hurt. See, we get along fine, but I'm thinking she might be more depressing than she ought."

"She had some bad breaks a few months ago."

"Yeah, I know. So, that's usual for her?"

"Not most of the time, no." Actually I didn't think of her as depressed—quiet, yes. But I knew she had reason to be.

"See, it's this way—I checked around till I felt sure she wasn't already settled in with anybody before I asked. Hate to get into an awkward

situation. Bad to ask when the way's not open. First date, we went out for a movie and something to eat. You know. It was like you'd expect."

"A regular first date."

"Yeah. And like you'd expect her to be. She didn't say much, but she held up her end of the conversation. She's interesting. And she can be pretty funny. So anyway, the first date went right and we fixed up to go out again a couple of nights later. Only when we saw each other again, the way she acted, we might as well have been going out for the first time. When I took her home we'd talked and I'd got an arm around her and she'd had hers around me, but that was it. Basically, we didn't make any progress. But that's okay. I figured no problem, because there's not always fucking in the first week with a woman. So, just taking it easy, having a good time, I stayed at her house for a while, and we talked till we both go to the point of 'getting late, got to go, long day.' Both of us, right?"

I nodded, showed him I had the idea.

"Okay, I walked to the door, and she came to let me out and told me she had a nice time, and I kissed her. Suddenly there's this nice warm tongue in my mouth. Maybe I could have reacted different, but we were already saying goodnight. So I left."

I wondered why he was telling me, what point he was trying to make. But I just nodded again and waited to see if he'd tell me any reason for this conversation.

"I was ready to go out again after that. Same kind of thing though, she said something funny now and then and we knew more about each other, but she still acted unsure. She hardly even acted like we were friends yet. But we stayed out all afternoon and all night and we made some progress. We got more physical. Touching, kissing. Good signs. Now, I didn't try to get her

drunk. That's no good. As it was, we had plenty of time to get real close." He stopped a minute and shrugged. "Sleeping together wasn't all that great. I mean, it was great. Sex is just great. Long dark hair, right? And big eyes—she's good looking, got to say that, and she carries herself good. She's got nice breasts, a good ass, maybe too skinny. Only problem was it felt like she started to get interested and then caught herself and cooled down. If you know what I mean, it's no fun having the one you're with suddenly back off."

"No, I guess not."

"My point is being with Carolyn's been strange. I know her reasons for acting the way she has. But there's nothing messing her up anymore. For instance, it's not like you two are making it on the side, right?"

"Right." This was a strange conversation—going all over the place, but this is pretty much, maybe not word for word, idea for idea what he was saying. I was just trying to answer his question, whatever it was, and get it over with.

"Yeah. So. Having her hold back all the time isn't worth it. Unless you think she's going to loosen up, I got to tell her we need to quit seeing each other."

I didn't know what to tell him. And after thinking a minute, I told him as much. What was I supposed to do—get involved? Be some kind of counselor?

"Well, I don't know, man. I guess I'll have to talk to her tomorrow."

"Sorry. I wish I could help. She and my wife are really good friends. If I could do something for y'all I would—for her sake too. But it's your relationship. You must know better than I do.

"Yeah. Yeah, thanks anyway. See you later."

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Pamela and I started off together perfectly—not love at first sight so I knew we'd get married, but a smooth start in that general direction. While we were still technically dating—before the point of sleeping over and meeting after work as a regular thing—she took me to meet her grandmother one evening before we went out.

The house was an old one they'd added a set of outdoor stairs to, making the second floor a separate apartment. I saw the tenants while I was there—a pale couple and a baby coming up the sidewalk, not problem-neighbor types. Pamela unlocked the front door and lead me through a high-ceilinged entry room and a dining room with a big, painted antique table into the kitchen. Grandma Owen sat in the sunlight reading a newspaper, and on her little table, next to the paper, was her afternoon snack—a piece of buttered toast and a cup of coffee or tea.

"Granny?"

"Yes?" She looked up, putting on her glasses. "Hello, Pamela."

"Granny, this is my boyfriend, James Grady." It was the first time I heard her call me her boyfriend. I already felt very seriously wrapped up with her, so I liked that word.

"Hello, James Grady." She offered me her hand. "Pam, would the two of you like a glass of tea?"

"Just a little. We can't stay but a minute. I wanted to be sure to bring Jim by to meet you though." This was exciting. This made things sound formal and official. I was in.

"Well, you're welcome anytime." I thanked her, sat down at the table and asked her how long she'd lived in this house. It was before Phil hired me full time and I knew nothing about architecture or furniture. But, though I was already a captive audience and glad of it, I'm sure she'd have been

interesting anyway.

We did only stay about half an hour. When we left, she said, "I'm pleased to have met you. Come see me again soon."

Pamela had reservations for us at a restaurant on Second Street and afterwards we walked down to go on the riverboat. We walked around the deck—watching night fall and listening to the water—for a long time before we went in. We ended up at a corner table of the coffee shop—sitting close, relaxing, watching the other people.

Pamela leaned over to whisper in my ear. I've always loved the intimacy of the way she moves in close to me, no shyness with me. "I've had a lovely day," she said. "You're sweet and you're fun."

We talked and sipped our coffee and after a few minutes she leaned into my shoulder again. "I enjoy being with you very much," she whispered. "And thank you for liking my grandmother, for not treating her like a little old lady." She sat back.

"You're welcome," I said. "The whole family's interesting."

Though she leaned in again, I don't remember what she said or if she said anything at all. What I know is her lips moved against my earlobe and neck and I didn't listen to anything else.

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The first time we made love was better than my old girlfriends, less tense. At the end of a date, I asked if she wanted to come to my apartment. We pulled all the pillows and cushions in the place into a pile in the middle of the room in front of the stereo. And then the first whole night we spent together was amazing—the way she behaved both before we went to bed and in the morning, carrying on naturally as if we already lived together for years. She was a loving woman our whole marriage—she is now. I don't

know what I'd do without her.

Part I

Chapter 5

Home

I could proceed from here to give the details of Phil's bankruptcy, Pamela's job offer in Dumont and our move. So far, I've followed out what happened last summer and those are the most important events I can identify coming out in the sequence. But I want to cover some more ground first—some background. Life in Nashville was good for us. It was an awful lot to leave behind so I want to give it its due. And other things happened worth bringing up—nothing earth shaking, but related to my inquiry.

We lived in that apartment in the Williams Circle complex since the third year we were married. A lot of my adult-life memories were in that apartment. I knew it—knew it well enough to wake up in the middle of the night and walk anywhere, bathroom, kitchen, front door, TV, without turning on a light—knew the colors, tan carpeting with gold fibers scattered through it, cream appliances, blue and white curtains, blue and navy couch—knew which locks stuck, which floorboards creaked, and which faucets needed an extra twist to keep from dripping. It wasn't a wonderful apartment, but it was a big loss.

I never really had a sense of what made up a home till after I worked for Phil full time. That was also about the time Pamela and I were getting into the stage where we developed our style rather than having it determined for us by wedding presents and the odds and ends we held over from being

single. But watching Phil redesign part of someone's home, fit that person's desires and needs, and helping him plan the new designs slowly made me aware of personality steering the home's direction, extending into it, bringing it to life. That's what makes living together a powerful experience—a couple coming into continued, day to day, instant to instant interaction of taste and influences and exchanges and changes. And Phil was good at helping this—at least from the house's standpoint.

Phil loved his work. He walked around the office with sketches of shelf units and magazine photos of cabinets or window seats to come up with ideas, and he came in from the shop waving especially good cuts of wood at us, and he absolutely crowed about them, laughing and insisting we picture this in somebody or other's house—the excitement of finding a silver dollar in a jar of pennies. After an estimate call he and Carolyn went out on, he came back in the truck by himself and said, "You'll have to pick Carrie up from those people on your way home. She stayed to work on closing the deal." Then he ran off to the shop and started hustling the boys in the back. So I finished up what I was doing and waited till Carolyn called to say she was ready. She told me he nearly knocked this couple down showing them what could be done with their ideas and their wallspace. She had to sort out an agreement on the spot because they were already sold and Phil was desperate to get started.

He wasn't much different at home. Pamela and I went to spend an evening with Phil and Winnie once, and after he got us comfortable he picked up a discussion with her where they'd left off. "We put paneling up to here," he said, slapping the wall about waist-high, "then wallpaper the rest of the way."

"Sure, honey. I think wainscoting's pretty."

"Yeah but look—all our furniture's light-colored, so with light wallpaper and this carpet the paneling's going to be accenting and making the room bigger."

"Yeah, that'll be nice." But however much she agreed, he pushed the idea all evening.

And he liked advising me and Pamela. But he waited till we asked, like he was making us think about decorating for ourselves, making us work for it, or he didn't want to impose or scare us off.

Actually, we had some advantages. Grandma Owen had left Pamela some antiques—pieces like our dining room table, which Phil admired whenever he visited, running his fingers along the grain, insisting we always use placemats rather than a tablecloth, but if not always, at least when he was there for supper, saying, "This, this is a fine piece to base a household on. Show it off, Pammie."

One Saturday we were meeting him and Winnie at Carolyn's to help her paint her bedroom, part of a deal with her landlord giving her fifty dollars off a month's rent. Pamela and I lay in bed late that morning, slow to get up, and she thought of a question she wanted to ask Phil. "I'd like to get Granny's dresser out of storage," she said. She'd thrown off the sheet but not gotten up—just lying still looking around the room.

"What about the mirror?" It was tarnished. Black puffs gathered at two edges and drifted toward the center, smoking up the image it cast.

"Wouldn't Phil know somebody who could fix it?"

I rolled over. "Uh, all I can think of is a couple of contractors. Window replacement. But yeah, Phil'll know somebody can cut you a mirror." It felt good to just lie there and stay put. We didn't have to be going till ten o'clock, and Carolyn was supplying coffee, doughnuts and muffins

She was quiet, and I fell back about half asleep. "Can we afford it?"

"I don't know," I said. "Sure." I looked at the clock. It said after eight. I sat up and swung my legs off the bed to wake up good.

"You don't think Phil's going to go out of business? Carolyn's a little worried."

"It's a small business. We've never had a whole bunch of clients at a time." I yawned and got up. "That's why he hired Carolyn—help him find more work and let him spend more time back in the shop."

When I got back from the bathroom she was sitting cross-legged and leaning back against the headboard. "You sure it's okay?"

I hunted through the closet for a pair of jeans. There were some old ones I didn't mind getting paint on and I found those and sat to put them on. "I guess so."

"You don't really want to talk about it, do you?"

I shrugged and looked for a shirt. "I don't care."

"Mm." She nodded and got up. While she got ready and then when we were in the car going to Carolyn's house, she talked about the weather, and how the muffins would be better for us than the doughnuts, and the toothpaste and soap we were low on, and how light traffic was.

Actually, she was right about Thompson WoodWorks being in trouble—or she and Carolyn were. She was probably a little angry that I didn't think much about it, but she didn't take it out on me—couldn't be too upset, couldn't know for sure it would happen.

Anyway, she and Carolyn and I sat and talked in Carolyn's kitchen, having breakfast, until Phil and Winnie rolled in. Then after we dragged the bed into the middle of the room and covered it up and spread newspapers on the floor, Pamela started painting and talking over her shoulder to Phil,

asking him about the dresser mirror.

"Bought you an antique dresser, huh? Hot damn, good for you."

"It was my grandmother's. I'm thinking of getting it out of storage, been wanting to for a long time."

"What kind of wood is it, or is it varnished?"

"Varnished."

"Shit, excuse the language. Oh well, at least it's not painted like that table of yours was."

"How long do you think it'd be to get a new mirror in? Do you think it'd be expensive?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'll put you in touch with some fellows." He stopped and went to look at the window. "Speaking of which, where's the tape? I can be getting this ready to be painted."

Carolyn walked over. "I thought it would be easiest just to be careful and not mind if the glass got some on it. They've painted the window shut anyway."

He looked. "No, no problem, it's just a few coats." Dropping his voice a little, he said, "You've got a sloppy landlord, Carol," and laughed. "But hey, look, I've got a screwdriver out in the truck. That and some leverage and we'll pop this baby right open. You'll want to get this open if you need to, and we'll get you some fresh air."

"All right. If you don't mind."

/

She didn't show it at the time—just painted and acted fine—but I think Pamela was concerned about me losing my job—and Carolyn and Phil too. She kept pausing near me, maybe exchanging a few words but more like thinking or waiting, then back to painting. Wanting to bring up the subject

again maybe. She did comment fifty dollars was a good trade for painting one room.

And she may have been angry with me. I'm not sure if she was, or why she would be. It wasn't just that I didn't believe the business was in trouble. It wouldn't be that. Maybe she didn't like it that I didn't seem bothered when the possibility was brought up. Or she might have been hurt because I didn't have a lot to say—thinking I *was* worried and didn't confide in her. Or if she felt angry, maybe it was because I didn't agree Thompson WoodWorks was in trouble, after all—because I didn't think enough of it.

Did I do anything to be angry at? After a year, it's kind of hard to feel defensive, or guilty. But I should be able to remember how things were—be able to figure things out, sort them out, account for them.

I think she felt angry, just a little, because she couldn't get across to me what she wanted to.

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Painting Carolyn's bedroom wasn't just saving money off her rent. It was a stage in her house's getting homier. She ended up getting to keep that house for several months after we left Nashville, and she'd already begun getting it into shape. We passed a new spice rack in the kitchen, new fern and afghan in the living room, and a shrink-wrapped poster of a nighttime landscape in the hall on our way to the bedroom. And she'd settled in. There were shoes in the living room and blouses on the couch, but that may have been relocating the bedroom's contents instead of the lived-in effect.

The bedroom was bare—a bed and an old chest of drawers. We put a gray-white on the walls—maybe to match the bedspread or maybe because she liked the color. The bed was stripped to the mattress, so I couldn't compare colors.

Once Phil cut the window open, smoothed off the jagged edge of paint with his Buck knife, and started taping the panes, Carolyn seemed to take a minute to picture how the room would turn out, as if Phil's tinkering made it more than a simple paint-job. She liked the idea—smiling faintly but pleasantly as she loaded her brush and scraped out the excess paint against the rim of the can.

Phil decided it was getting hot out and we needed at least a six pack. "Want to come, Winnie?"

"If you want company, or I can stay and be painting if you don't need me."

So the four of us turned back to painting by ourselves. I noticed Carolyn made careful brushstrokes, leaving an even coat, neat marks. So I followed her lead, and Pamela and Winnie did too. Without Phil driving the conversation, only painting comments and sociable noises like "How you doing?" passed back and forth. We took a beer break when Phil came back and then, with him, finished up fairly one-two-three. The final effect looked good—a cool, soft room.

That evening at home, we had big cold drinks and watched some rented movie—or at least had it playing—not very memorable. Pamela had a lot to do—letters to write, checkbook to balance—and sat where she could see the TV and catch a good draft from the air conditioning vent. And she acted tired.

Maybe tired wasn't all. I don't know if she was still irritated at me. But then, I hadn't done anything wrong—and I don't know if she felt unhappy with me in the first place. Really, that's a bad sign.

**Pamela: We'll talk about this, right? When you read this, we'll talk about it?*

I always felt before that I could tell about her—that she let me know. My not knowing either way meant not good. I should have seen that. It was new to us.

Part I

Chapter 6

The Books

That about does it for Nashville—time to sum things up.

At the end there, Thompson WoodWorks showed signs of wear. It was a raggedy operation, a jury-rigged, half-assed way to run a business, though, bad as it was, we sat at work hinting around how we thought it'd be worse shut down altogether. Early on in the last gasps, Phil had to let two of the boys in the back go—Jacques and another—and struggle along with the third. Once it became obvious what was going to happen, as soon as it became nothing but a question of when Phil went out of business, Carolyn did him proud.

She went part time to save him money (and she *still* put in more time than went on the books). In the mornings she filled out applications and went on interviews. Afternoons, she came in to catch up on Phil's office work—phone calls, correspondence, keeping his desk clear so he could find his sketches and notes. Some days she was still wearing her navy coat, skirt, and bow, some days shorts and a tee-shirt, but even days she dressed well I could tell she was spreading herself thin.

One day, Phil caught her in his office trying to put her records straight while stifling a cough that wouldn't go away. It took him half an hour to make her go home. She kept saying she had too much to do.

There was the usual scheduling, payroll, and general number

crunching for me. Plus I had to start getting creative, finding money, making money. I took the bulbs out of lights over the unused workbenches (saving utilities, but making the shop look deserted), made calls trying to renegotiate payments on accounts still due us, comparison shopped and argued lumber prices down. Phil wanted more.

One day he came in, sweaty and frosted with sawdust, taking a minute to ask me about an idea he'd had. "This wall job we're doing—Carol give you how much we asked for on that?"

"Yeah, it's right here." I flipped open my binder. "Fifteen hundred."

"Right." He dragged a chair over and sat down, leaning on my desk and propping his head in his hands, tired, thinking. "That sound about right to you? We quoted that because I remembered doing a similar job for about that much. Is that right?"

"I'd say so."

"Do me a favor, would you? Would you give her an update of some standard figures to work from? Seems to me we can make our bids and give estimates right on the mark and keep things going. That's what we want. We get the job just right, we're okay." He tapped me on the arm and winked.

"Sure, I got time for that."

Phil needed more time. Carolyn helped. She managed to line up another project, but we went under before Phil could get rolling on it. I tried to help.

**Phil: I'm sorry. I'm sorry we had to file.*

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The main difference between Carolyn and me was attitude. She worked hard and I worked enough.

One morning a couple of days after she cut back to part time, I stopped

by her house, just like when we were carpooling. I hadn't forgotten—I wasn't thinking to pick her up. I just wanted to say hi, to tell her Pamela and I wanted her to come to supper or go to the pool with us.

Later that day when she showed up at T.WW., she was dressed like she'd just come from an interview. But that morning she was in a University of Kentucky tee-shirt and old sweatpants, her hair pulled back and all but some wisps along her temples held in a rubberband—a short dark streak of tiredness showed under each eye, and her voice stayed dry, hoarse. "Jim," she said, surprised.

"Hi. How are you?"

"Okay. Good morning."

"G'morning."

"Would you like some coffee?"

"Sure, sounds good. Thanks." I walked in from the doorway with her to sit down. She still didn't have a coffee pot, but I was used to instant by this time.

She boiled the water and stirred me up a cup, then paused a moment before taking one herself. "Here, Jim."

"Thanks," I said again. We sat there and talked for a few minutes, Carolyn not very much of course—but kind of eager, even though she acted tired. She looked at her watch after a while and started up, rubbing her eyes. "Jim, I should get ready."

"Yeah," I said. "And I ought to get to work. I hope things pick up so we can get you back on a full schedule again."

She nodded. "Yes. Tell Pamela to let me know a good night for supper with y'all." She downed the last of her coffee. I said goodbye and started out. She turned toward the hall but stopped. "Thanks for coming by. Nice of

you."

"Take care of yourself."

As I said, she showed up for work later in an interview suit, made up, with her hair fixed. But she still looked tired. Maybe I wasn't as good, as adept at work, but Carolyn wasn't quite all right either. Health or not.

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When Phil did shut down business, I went right to the classifieds, and then asked at the unemployment office. I have to say for myself, I got good in the last days of Thompson WoodWorks. There was so much that needed taking care of. I got to know a lot of new techniques.

Then I found out how bad the job market was in Nashville. Not only what it was like for me, looking for a job for the first time since I came out of college with a year and a half of experience on my resumé already—but how bad it was for everybody who needed a job—and how long it had been bad. There were a lot of people with me down at the unemployment office, putting our names on the books for checks and a shot at the jobs that might open up. And it was a big office, rows of desks, ranks of chairs in the waiting area, a line of doors to little supervisors' offices on the back wall—so it had been designed to deal with crowds of people waiting to make a living. There'd always been more wanting than getting something to do.

I learned from those unemployment officers. They had a lot of sense about work, a lot of experience, racked up a bunch of miles with employers and employees, especially employees. Waiting my turn, I saw those officers take care of old, muscular people who didn't look like they'd left work voluntarily, children and unemployed moms or dads—none of them running one hundred percent awake or reasonable, dozens of people I forget, and—once—a woman in a cropped shirt who apparently thought a good flash would

get her more checks (they gave her a stack of paperwork and waited till she left to make eye contact with each other). As far as I was concerned at the end of last summer, unemployment officers knew it all.

The third week I went in, Larry, who I was assigned to, recognized me without getting my name off my card. It was nice getting a personal greeting—seeing him take an interest in what happened to me, individualized out of the group *Clients.* "How's it going, man? It reached ninety out there yet?"

"Close."

"Sit down and rest a minute. We got some new listings. Let's see what's what." He sat there and read a few pages. I waited, listening to the phones ring, drawers open and shut, voices barely audible. "Yeah, about three you're going to want to apply for here, Jim." He handed them over and leaned back, rubbing his neck. "Make sure you tell 'em about your time with the accountants. That's the kind of thing they're looking to fill."

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I didn't get anything in Nashville. Firms weren't looking for accountants six years out of the mainstream—or at least they put that low on the list of traits they wanted. I shouldn't have been surprised. T.WW. gave me better all around ability with accounts of different kinds, inventory, billing, expenses, scheduling. I could still figure interest in my head, still work an adding machine faster than most mere accountants can a calculator, and still scorch a calculator. But as far as any personnel manager knew, I was rusty. And hell, as far as I knew, I didn't have my pure staff-accountant attitude ready to go. That's what Larry knew—I didn't look right, not to an administrator looking at my file and a stack of others.

It's no fun realizing that, at your best, you're not good enough. Not to

get hired. Not to save a business you love working for. At my best, maneuvering as thoughtfully, skillfully, and fast as I could, I still did nothing for Phil and Carolyn. And I let Pamela get disappointed in me. It's bad memories.

Are not these woods

More free from peril than the envious court?

Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

Part II

Chapter 1

Pamela's Hours

I've left out weeks and weeks from the end in Nashville. They're not important to my questions concerning Pamela and me—what I've written covers how well we got along, like we always had, and what started to change—and those last weeks aren't vital to Phil, Carolyn, me, and work. If making myself depressed when I think about them is important, they have a lot of importance by themselves—my last day at Thompson WoodWorks, days of useless job interviews, packing the U-Haul, saying goodbye to Phil and Winnie and Carolyn. Waking up the last day to drive to Dumont turned out surprisingly easy.

My Buick was already there, and Pamela drove her Honda, so I was alone in this truck that responded to steering and acceleration with deliberate, sluggish care—driving through Madison, west around Nashville, past all the fringe area exits, through the high hills I was used to, toward Dumont. I didn't really seem to realize what this meant. All I remember thinking about was when the morning warmed up so much to take off my windbreaker.

My memories of that day are nothing but the landscape running past the windows, the roll of the land gentling out gradually, very neutral, very dry, calming, and bearable—numbing.

Those weeks made for some sad times. But I don't see me getting any

answers out of them. I will not write them here.

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Dumont is a little town maybe an hour's drive from Nashville, in Humphreys County. It's ten miles south of Crofton, which is almost due west of Nashville and south and a little west of Clarksville, the two closest cities. Crofton is small but has some industry—baseball jerseys and automobile engine bolts—and some agricultural business—a mill and two tobacco warehouses. Dumont has nothing.

I had a biased view, growing up in Nashville. Actually, Dumont had Pamela's drugstore, a couple of groceries, a restaurant, a farmer's co-op, gas stations, and a post office, just to name the highlights I remember off the top of my head. Compared to Snowden—three miles up the road toward Crofton, with two churches, a barbeque place, and a cluster of houses, total—Dumont bustled. It was hard for me to adjust, but not impossible. After all, I'd grown up around country people, my Aunt Adelle and Uncle Charles. Pamela and I together, though, didn't adjust well.

By myself, one of the hardest parts of getting used to the new place was my job, not having one. I had part-time bookkeeping work and odd jobs. There wasn't even enough call for an accountant for me to run an office out of the spare bedroom. In the spring, there'd have been some tax work, but to tell the truth, most of the people filing more than 1040A were farmers, and most of them had set themselves up with personal computer ledgers. But what I did in Dumont comes later (sad to say).

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Pamela got her drugstore from an old friend of hers, a guy who'd been a couple of years ahead of her in college. His family was from the Crofton area and the drugstore had been his father's. Jeff bought into a drugstore in

Clarksville and moved there, but had been commuting to keep the Dumont store open three days a week. He was willing to give Pamela a competitive salary and a free hand running the place. Cost of living in Dumont is low. So our moving there was the smart thing to do, no question.

The work I found wasn't much, but was better than my luck in Nashville. I felt happier. I had plenty of free time—a situation both good and bad for me. At first I went to spend time with Pamela at her store. We set up her books, talked about what we liked and disliked in Dumont, rearranged stock and furniture. Pretty quickly, Pamela got down to working with the prescription stock, and since she couldn't use my help there I only stayed to talk.

Pamela's very good at keeping track of more than one activity at once. We talked and she inventoried the drug supply. It wouldn't do to slip up—miscount or misplace something—but she never missed. When she got a rough check made, an overview, she started a complete count, reorganizing the medicines to suit her as she went, occasionally referring to her Lewis's *Compendium.* I stopped in on my way to and from jobs, and she sustained our conversations all the time she worked—running a commentary on where she was in her process, feeding me questions, making a pleasing, cheerful noise.

"I see what Jeff was trying to do here," she said, lifting a container in each hand, frowning at them and at the next in the row. "I follow his reasoning." She turned briefly toward me to nod, confirming this statement, and continued transferring containers to her cart. She was cheerful, satisfied with comprehending her situation and having a plan to settle it.

"What he's done is double sort. He's got commonly dispensed stuff arranged here handy and a separate section for what gets used less. It's

convenient, giving him what he needs to reach easily. But it splits his system." She took a bottle and walked along the shelves reading labels. "I don't think the short cut it gives him is worth putting a big part of your medicine out of place. I don't mean things ought to be lined up in some strict code, but there needs to be a consistent rhyme and reason for what you've got put where it is. Maybe it's just my taste for my own habits. But look here." She reached back and laid her hand on a container three-quarters full of translucent pills the size and color of honeybees. "These are a month and a half out of date." We stared at the expired bee pills. "What if, on the off chance, I had call for a dozen and a half of these?" Shaking her head, she set them to one side. "Mm, mm, mm." Musical, *fa, re, mi.*

Nudging her cart over a foot, she continued her reorganization. I had some comment to make showing I empathized, a story about a cook's inability to keep good records in his restaurant, though my clean-up wasn't as difficult as hers. That last remark was to show I recognized the importance of her accomplishments. She put health treatments under her control. I just cleaned up some man's math and told his family and employees to all close out the cash register the same way.

Sitting on her counter with my heels dangling, I wanted to feel a little superiority, I'm sure. Comparable competence, at least. I was watching her pull down dozens of pill bottles at a time and still know where to find one if somebody came in for a prescription. Maybe I thought, sure, I've had challenges too and handled them snap, like that.

> **Pamela: If you heard that one-upping tone in anything I said, I'm sorry. I don't remember saying anything along those lines, but I feel like I've lost track of what I did say—no record of it, only a sense of talking too much at random.*

Tuesday through Saturday, Pamela kept ten-hour days. She took off Sunday and Monday, but had our home number on the sign in the store window. Her idea was to have business hours anyone could make and be available for emergencies. Since she didn't offer much non-drug merchandise beyond toiletries—nothing people couldn't get from the grocery down the block—she saw no point in hiring a clerk to keep hours she wasn't going to be there to open the pharmacy. We only got a few calls during her off time, and only one or two asked for emergency toothpaste or Q-tips, or even aspirin. While she was organizing the store to suit her, she came home pleasantly tired, looking relaxed. She tinkered around the house a little and didn't mind the occasional phone interruption. Then she satisfied herself about the store's layout, and business settled down to normal—that is, quiet and irregular, fewer people stopping in just to meet her.

She started to come home bored. Unless I was off at work somewhere, I was always there. I found reasons to keep me home. After a couple of shelves and her ledgers, she didn't need me to help out with anything. I could only take so much sitting and talking when I felt like I was taking up space. And I wondered if I was getting in Pamela's way. I mean, it felt like I was getting in my own way.

> **Pamela: Maybe I should have come anyway. If I felt restless, what was it like by yourself in the store? You did like Dumont at first, didn't you? I hate to say it was a mistake moving there. We took some time settling in. We did all right.*

I saw Pamela briefly in the mornings, evenings around six o'clock, and days off. She tended to spend her time reading, sitting intently over her book at the kitchen table, or learning the whole routine of putting up preserves

and vegetables, or occasionally taking a long run. She concentrated on details and tried to hold a slow pace. Generally she got over the drugstore blues, the boredom, fine. We had time to talk, go out somewhere, drive to Crofton for the city park, shopping, a movie, though she tended to walk off from me in Wal-Mart, browsing the departments for forty-five minutes or an hour and finally coming back to find me in the cafeteria with coffee— "Okay, I'm ready. Didn't find a thing."

Sometimes her book wasn't good enough to keep her attention, so she left it face down on the table and paced until she thought what to do next. Once she came home from a run favoring one leg and cursing in a mutter. She'd been gone longer than usual and must have hit her leg or had a muscle cramp, because she sat and rubbed her calf a few minutes before going to take a bath. Sometimes she pushed too hard.

She didn't go right back to running, but she started taking walks around the middle of November and decided to try again the week after Thanksgiving, after three weeks off. She wasn't gone but a few minutes before she came back. I heard her run water in the bathroom, on and off for good intervals, then saw her through the kitchen door, crossing to the refrigerator with a limp. I decided to follow and see how she was, see what she said.

"Hey," I said.

"Hi." She poured herself a drink and took it to the table. She sat still for a minute, then reached for a pen and paper. "I'm writing to Carolyn. Any message?"

"Tell her hello and say I asked how she's doing. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine." She had a wet washcloth around her calf.

"Didn't hurt yourself?"

"I pulled a muscle. That's all."

"Is it a bad pull?"

"No, I'm fine. I'll get an Ace bandage and go back to walks for a while. Just leave me alone for a minute."

I went to the living room for my paper. Thinking I'd give her a chance to rest and see how she felt, I started to read. But I realized she'd acted angry as well as hurt, and I wondered why she didn't come in and rest her leg on the couch. Normally she'd let me in on what was wrong. This abruptness was new. I'd have gone back in to sit with her, except she seemed like she needed the time to cool off.

An hour later, she was still in the kitchen. I went in to get some chips before seeing what was on TV. More pages were crumpled up in the garbage than set aside to mail, but not too many. I thought maybe she was caught up in the letter and not so sore or angry after all, but when I asked how her leg felt she said, "Better," and told me before I could sit down that she did just want some time to herself, would I mind? Sounded tense—pain maybe. Twisted knee or torn ligaments kind of pain maybe. Whatever was wrong, I didn't want her taking it out on me. But before I started an argument, or came in late on one as I seemed to be doing, I wanted a minute to think, so I walked back to the living room.

When she finally came out of the kitchen, walking a little gingerly, she stretched out on the couch without saying anything. I think we both fell asleep with the TV on and wandered off to bed at different times. Next morning, neither of us said anything about it.

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Like I said, I'd quit hanging out in the drugstore in my spare time. If I had the afternoon off and it was nice out, I sat on the back step or dragged

out a lawn chair. Other times, and poor weather, I parked myself on the couch or by the kitchen windows for the view. Taking a drive in Dumont was monotonous and aimless. I always ended up home before I felt like I'd been anywhere. Easier to stay put.

At first I'd have a couple of beers during my free afternoons, but I had to keep myself to a pretty tight budget, so I switched to iced tea and, as fall set in, coffee—cheaper. Besides, who wants to be new in a town and get known as a guy who sits in his yard burning daylight putting down beers? Much better to burn daylight with caffeine and later pace a dark house till I got sleepy around twelve-thirty or one in the morning.

I began to prefer going outside to sit. Whenever I was alone with too much free time, I got tired of the house. It was a crackerbox, plain and simple. The walls were white and, except for kitchen cabinets, flat and featureless—no shelves, no odd angles. And not much in the way of windows—no room but the kitchen had more, or fewer, than two—standard, quartered rectangles. The wall of the dining area was all windows—four, spaced apart a couple of inches each. We had to buy our own rugs for the wooden floors, though the kitchen had linoleum. White bread as it was, the kitchen was the exotic part of the house. Might as well sit with a sheet over my head.

And I also wanted to feel the sun and smell fresh air before it got too cold. Once I started dragging the lawn chair out into the yard I had views—some low hills started past the last house on the street behind us, the trees in our yard had turned and were dropping leaves in any breeze, a couple of our neighbors had a garden with some late flowers, and the gardening woman was kind of cute, and I even got interested in the sky and clouds and birds and puffs of smoke. Soon I gave up taking a book or crossword puzzle or

unbalanced checkbook—just walked out with something to drink and my chair and picked out a good spot and a direction to look.

Inactivity became a hobby. Squirrels got used to me, only sitting up to give me a second look if I picked up my thermos or waved to a neighbor, the only broad gestures I ever made. When they—the neighbors—saw me out they came over and got chatty. After ten, twenty minutes, they left. That's how I got us introduced to some of our Dumont friends, though I'm sure they wondered about me—why squirrels played and looked for food at my feet and I never invited them—the neighbors—to come inside the house for one of these visits. The days I was able to sit out, I had my particular way of spending the afternoon.

It was an evolving habit. I always appreciated any view I picked, but as I dropped the busy work and became accustomed to the sights and sounds and smells I stopped thinking about them or scanning the scenery—even the attractive gardening woman, whose dying plants brought her out less often anyway. Once I settled into my chair, I looked— looking in a way that relates to watching the way hearing does to listening or feeling to touching. Passive, I suppose. Inactive, I'm sure. My eyes probably didn't focus. I developed a sort of zombie mindset that was very relaxing but a little frightening whenever I realized, afterwards, how much time I could lose track of. Frightening, but maybe satisfying too.

The first evening my sense of time absolutely went critical was near the end of November. I was looking at the pattern of evergreens and bare, black maple and oak limbs on the hills. I noticed the sun had set but didn't think about its relation to how late that made it. The hillsides reddened and turned a mottled darkness. Eventually I'd have realized my jacket wasn't warm enough and gone into the house, but Pamela beat me. Instead of the

cold, I became aware of a sound. I heard it twice and it registered as a voice indoors somewhere—once again, Pamela's voice, no longer muffled, "Jim?" I looked as she took a step toward me from the back door. The house lights outlined her from behind—her hair pulled back, arms hugging her blazer closed tight, long wool skirt. But enough glow was left in the west to show her eyes and nose, one cheek, her mouth. Then, as she came away from the house, a streetlamp flashed on her profile and brought a slight tone of color from her hair and clothes.

She stopped a few feet from my chair. I looked at her but couldn't see the different shades of blond and brown in her hair, her earlobes, the color of her eyes, or the line of her throat. I squinted. "Jim?" Her voice sounded curious, but only reluctantly so. We'd never talked about what I did during the day, on the job or off. It seemed as if she didn't want to find out if it was going to be this odd.

I shifted in my seat, sending more blood to my sore butt and legs. I suddenly felt irritable—at myself for wasting the day, at her for catching me at it and bringing it to my attention. Why didn't she show some interest in seeing me or simply accept my sitting in the yard to relax? I wondered exactly what it was I was doing out there. I shook my head as if waking up.

"Evening," I said, getting up and taking my chair to haul back to the house. "How're you doing?"

Part II

Chapter 2

My Career Turns

Long before life with Pamela took a downturn, work hit a rough period—a stretch of opportunities strange to my image of myself. Activity definitely picked up after our move. I found a few things in my line, very few, and then careened into odd jobs. I did some painting for a farmer, and I helped an insurance agent in Crofton change offices—mostly brawn, but there was some brain to it, learning his file system quickly to pack and unload it properly, or assembling his computer-modem-phone network, for instance.

For almost ten years I had been an accountant, nothing but. I'd worked grubby jobs in college, slinging Cokes, baseball cards, and gasoline in a minute market, waxing hallways on campus. Since then, I'd strictly done staff or small business accounting. Tracking all the ups and downs of a network of abstract bank accounts, schedules, and tax forms and then seeing the effect on material products interested me. Sometimes fascinated me. I'd never pull down six figure salaries or get world famous, but I liked it and I was pretty good. Consequently, to feel satisfied and comfortable in a career and get thrown into other lines years after everything seemed fixed nicely into place, and not have any options what line to be thrown into, didn't sit well. I thought I'd always call myself an accountant, know the skills of my trade, keep up with the professional look and feel, and progress in it. There

are things you want to expect security in. I didn't want to make my living with some jury-rigged batch of part-time paychecks and cash deals.

By the end of October, I admitted to myself (and to Pamela —we were still talking openly and comfortably) that I needed these jobs I told myself I was taking only because I had free time to do favors. Then I began to look for better pay, more substance—make the best of it. One of the most solid situations I got was painting a fence on a farm out Snowden Road. It payed two hundred and fifty and ended up taking a little more than two weeks. I showed up at the farm about nine-thirty. If I had something I needed to do that afternoon, I left at twelve to eat and get cleaned up. Otherwise I put in an hour or two more.

The first day I drove right up to the farm house to let the farmer know I was starting and to get the paint. I reached his porch ready to knock when he called from behind me. He came out of the barn toward the backyard gate, a couple of dogs, part collie, part some fuzzy mutt, trotting up to smell his hands and then run on.

"Morning. You picked a good day to get started, eh?"

The sun was bright, the clouds tiny and widely scattered. The temperature felt like the mid-sixties already. No wind seemed to be stirring, except, when I paid attention, I noticed a slight movement against one cheek, but only by contrast with the stillness against the other. "Yeah," I said. "Great day."

"Come on, let's find you some paint." We crossed the gravel drive and entered the barn through a standard-sized door next to the high double doors. The big doors were open, letting an angle of light fall on the dirt floor, but we went into a plank floored space separated from the main area by a waist high railing. Besides the paint and painting gear, the farmer stored tools,

gardening and mechanical, in here, some spare auto parts, chains and rope, a radio, a bin of flat aluminum cans, a rusty toy wagon, a stack of magazines.

"You can just get in here by yourself in the mornings and pick you up a can of paint and your necessaries." He handed me a brush and scraper and carried the paint can out himself, shutting the door behind us. "And when you're done for the day, drop them off where you got them."

"Well, I have to be in Crofton this afternoon, so I'll probably leave by lunch."

"Aw hell, Jim, I ain't paying you by the hour—just per fence. It's no matter to me. Just suit yourself. I appreciate your doing it."

"Glad to."

"I don't know where you'd want to start. Up by the house where I can look out a window and not have to see old gray fence would be nice, but I suppose down on the stretch by the road, make a good impression."

"I'll get to the road second, middle stretch last."

He laughed. "Mighty white of you." He handed over the paint, "Talk to you later," and went off to work.

*Pamela: *I wish you'd known this farmer. He, and his wife too, though I didn't meet her much, were really nice. I should have taken you out and introduced you. Of course, I say this and I can't remember the guy's name. They're the ones who sent me home with the cookies and firewood when I finished. I didn't have the heart to tell them we didn't have a fireplace. For once I was glad I carry all that junk in the trunk. I didn't have room to take too much away from them.*

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The fence went around two sides of a field (wire fence on the other two sides). It faced Snowden Road, ran up parallel to the driveway, and ended in an L going around the front yard and the side of the house. It was a great house—big two story brick with shutters and two chimneys and a porch, big trees all around it, flower beds along the foundation, and a bird feeder in back near the kitchen window.

I scraped a section of rails and painted it, both sides, climbing over at the next section. Standing back, I liked how it looked—bright, crisp. I started the transformation on the next section. In the long run, with painting and a couple of similar jobs, I racked up more active, productive hours in the great outdoors than slack time sitting in a trance in my backyard.

Really, there's not much comparison. I saw a few birds, several cows, and once a deer, but mostly the fence filled my field of view, though it didn't take so much attention I couldn't think about plans for the day, a budget, lunch, current events, Pamela, and sex, whatever came to mind. The painting had its little routine, but no intricacies or surprises like accounting or pharmacology.

The first day was pleasant. My lower back and knees and hamstrings weren't adjusted to the stooping, or my arms and shoulders to pushing the blade and sweeping the brush, so I lurched up whenever this or that muscle prodded me hard enough to pace and twist and stretch. It made for variety. Otherwise, I scraped till the old coat quit coming off, pulled grass away from the uprights, climbed over to scrape and clear the other side, then painted, climbed back, and painted. One-two-three, one-two-three, dip. After I'd gone through these steps a couple of times, I felt this compact little set of actions was soothing without being too numbing. Like I said, it left my mind free to wander, get some exercise.

Let me complete a section—get finished—and stand up, it was easy to see my accomplishment. There was a neatness to this work. But it was also easy to see how protracted my stretch of unpainted sections was. Down a thousand miles away, cars tooled by, blowing road dust on the fence rails I had to look forward to. I shook my legs and swung my arms, taking a deep breath to refresh myself from the heavy, clinging smell of linseed-oil-based paint, trying to catch a whiff of leaves, tall grass, water, woodsmoke, even a little sharp edge of distant manure or wet hay, anything. Then back on the fence.

A little after noon rolled by, I gathered my equipment, walked back to the crabapple I left my windbreaker on, and started for the barn. It was a satisfying walk, though mostly because I was done for the day. It wasn't bad work at all, and it was sure better than a day visiting the stumps in my backyard. I'd been more active, been more thoughtful. But it didn't mean much to me. I have more to think about, more to answer to, concerning the odd afternoons spent in my yard. More problems to settle. That idleness counts for more than whatever career satisfaction I got out of looking back at a smooth white fence and its contrast against the light gray yet to go.

From the barn, the end I'd started on stood out sharp against the green and brown grass and patches of red clay. A stand of trees made a dark space distancing the bright rails from the hazy brightness of the horizon.
"Beautiful," McDonald said. He stood in the gravel in front of the barn with a mug of coffee and a cigarette. I guessed he'd finished lunch and wanted a good breather before going back to work. "How'd your first day go?"

"Oh, I'm getting used to it."

"You didn't have a hat, did you? You ought to have a hat."

"Yeah, I think I'll get one." I went into the barn to unload myself. This

time, McDonald didn't offer to carry anything. And when I came out, thinking about going to see Pamela for lunch, he struck in again with conversation, like he wanted some company. He looked a little tired, compared to that morning. His hands were streaked with grease, and the knees of his pants were splotched with black and red dirt. Though the air was still not hot, his hair hung in tufts gathered by sweat. Marking time with someone to talk to must have been new for him. As for his dogs, they stayed in sight but tended their own business.

"Here's something else I wanted to tell you—another couple of hundred yards down the driveway and you're going to be a little far from a handy bathroom." I hadn't even thought of that. Hadn't felt the urge, and don't know if I'd have marched into his house looking for the handy bathroom if I had. "My wife's at work, so if you got to take the pause that refreshes and hunt a peeing tree, you only have to worry about the view from the road."

"Thanks." I boosted myself onto the trunk of my car. To be polite, I wanted to stay as long as he wanted a break.

He talked a few more minutes, then stomped out his cigarette and shook my hand. "Really do want to tell you how much I appreciate your painting my fence for me."

"Well, you're welcome."

"I'd rather do the barn. That needs it bad. Can't afford it, though."

I hadn't noticed. It was huge and weathered gray, what was left of the paint peeling and shabby. Some board edges were splintering away, and rusty nailheads stuck out.

"See you in the morning if I'm nearby," he said. I waved and drove down to the road.

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After a short lunch, I had to be in Crofton to do Garrett's Log House's books. I parked far from the door, though the noon crowd seemed to be past, and went in the back door to pick up the register tapes and ledger. I called hello to the owner in the kitchen as I walked out front for a table. The waitress, whose nametag read *Rebekah,* signaled from across the room, raising a coffee pot. I nodded and set to work.

This was it. This was accounting, in its purest form, like I hadn't seen in years. (For Phil, I'd always taken part in the ramifications, paying salaries, placing orders, receiving and sending out bills.) I'd have liked using my software, but that would mean a trip home and back. This was straightforward bookkeeping, and I was at home enough.

"Sorry I took so long, Jim. There was that hot brown and chicken salad to get out." She poured a cup of coffee. "Anything else for you?"

"No thanks, this is fine."

She made a delivery to another table, and I leaned over my spray of register tapes. I progressed without trouble, without stopping, though I think Rebekah warmed my coffee once, until all but the last two or three customers—latecomers—were gone.

"Come here, Grady. Come here." The owner waved me over from the kitchen door. He was a high strung man—built thin but working on a fair gut, moustache, short hair, glasses, canvas apron like a ballpark ticket taker. Like a lot of business owners, he let himself work too long every week. "Let me tell you something, Grady."

"Yeah?"

"You're doing a good job. I'm satisfied with the books." He shifted his feet around until his back was to the dining room. As he pivoted, I had to sidle into the hallway. "Real good. But let me point something out. My

waitress hasn't got a mark on her." I'd been listening, but that was a real attention getter. "Look at me. I keep back here; howsomever, I pretty much manage not to get grease and gravy on me. Not bragging but pointing something out to you. Grady, you got white all over you. Paint in your hair, on your arms and your shirt, a big stripe across the seat of your pants. It's not like you been rolling in the dirt, but I'm running a restaurant and people work here ought to be clean."

Not knowing health department codes, I asked, "That applies to people who don't work with the food?"

"*I* would appreciate it."

I saw. "Right," I said.

"Good job."

Taking the books to a corner table to finish up, I worked fast—touchtyping and trusting every keystroke registered correctly, eyeballing short calculations, taking cash register tapes and bank receipts at their word. I didn't want to take any longer than necessary, looking like I did.

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Actually, I hate half-assed records. His books came out even, but I should have made sure. The thing was I wanted out. Rebekah came to see if I wanted a last cup of coffee or anything else before I left and gave me a *he's like that* look.

The next trip to Garrett's Log House, I wore a dress shirt and carried my calculator in a portfolio case instead of tucked under my belt. This was more than I usually did for bookkeeping, but then, a paint splattered sweatshirt was less than usual. I hated his implication I didn't know my business—plain and simple as it was in this case. Worse, I felt uncomfortable wondering if I'd quit giving it due attention—if I was a better fence painter.

Part II

Chapter 3

Driving Back Home

As we reached the Charlotte Pike exit going to Nashville to Christmas shop, we came up to some traffic that brought me back to my old driving ways, the old days. We had three east bound lanes. About twenty yards ahead was a group of five automobiles, one in the center lane, two in the others. A four- wheel drive was held up in the left lane by a red VW, probably doing the speed limit. The pickup in the center was going a good clip, and as it pulled ahead of the VW, the four by four started over. But a hatchback from the right lane tucked itself right behind the pickup. The four-by-four slowed, drifted all the way across to the right lane, accelerated past the hatchback and pickup, pulled out from behind the right hand car, and returned to the left lane. The VW driver sped up the way people will when there's passing going on, then dropped back. As the four by four left the group, the hatchback passed the pickup truck, and a minute later the VW moved over to take an exit. It was a full scale Blue Angels show.

Pamela and I laughed at how long these maneuvers lasted, one and then another and then another. It's not that I was surprised—I was still in good form for handling traffic—but after Dumont, this was a prime example of expressway hot foots. Old times.

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Before shopping, we met Carolyn in a doughnut shop near, I supposed, her new apartment. Pamela called to her as we walked in. Carolyn

answered, waving us over. She had her jacket on and was drinking a large coffee. Her hair was shorter, barely shoulder length, and permed, and she had an office flourescents tan, but she hadn't changed much else since summer.

We talked half an hour or more, mostly Pamela and Carolyn catching up on news they'd left out of the last few months' letters and calls. Pamela gave a good picture of Dumont—our little house and neighborhood, the byways of town and the highway to Crofton, what there was (and wasn't) to do, her regulars and how they'd gone from shyness for their new druggist to a kind of formality, almost deference. She laughed and said she'd never felt like a civic leader before, pillar of the community.

Carolyn had less news, really just updates of life in Nashville. She didn't talk much about work, may not have mentioned it by name. I found out later she was a computer operator for one of the universities, Tennessee State I think, and that may explain it: after a long week, she wanted to leave the office at the office. She seemed glad to kick back, like she'd slept late and dragged out of bed midmorning, dressed in comfortable old clothes, and done nothing for breakfast but come here for coffee and maybe muffins. I wonder what she looked like Monday mornings.

"Have you talked to Phil yet?" she asked.

"No, I'm going to call before we leave here and get him to come down and meet us in the mall."

Pamela said, "I thought you called last night."

"No, this'll be simpler." We talked a few more minutes, and when they started leading up to goodbye I went to the phone. Then we wound up the visit and left.

"He meeting us at the mall?"

"He's in the middle of splitting firewood. But I gave him our plans for the day and he's going to meet us at the cemetary."

The plan was to shop one mall the first part of the afternoon, go check on Grandma Owen's grave, and finish up at another mall that evening, then out for a drink maybe. We started by browsing at first, buying anything we saw that was absolutely perfect for someone on the list, but mostly getting ideas.

"There's Carolyn, Phil, and Winnie," Pamela named off her fingers. "I sort of have an idea for your parents already. And my cousin, and Jeff, and probably something for that couple next door who gave us the green beans and squash."

That's the most she said to me the whole time in the mall. And she said it as much to herself as to me. I thought she was concentrating. She always enjoyed crowds—passing through them and bucking the flow to keep her direction, and people watching. It was early December, the end of the first week. The stores had decorated and put out displays, but people hadn't reached that rush to finish shopping, that frenzy. Clusters of three or four came and went, weaving around each other, couples with strollers or toddlers easily enough distracted for one parent to buy surprise presents, occasionally a mall walker with a regular stride and eyes either set coldly ahead or searching for acquaintances, depending on the intensity of the program. And Pamela walked among them, briskly, her coat bundled over her arm. She stopped in front of stores she liked the look of, listed ideas— "purses, a glass pitcher, some kind of hat for Phil?"—and went in to stroll the aisles.

Once we'd been up and down the mall once, we sat on a bench next to a group of animated elves checking a list. When we'd had a chance to flex our toes and loosen our grip on the two sacks we'd picked up so far, I said, "Well,

let's go."

"Wait here. I'll go get what I want to give you."

"I told Phil we'd be there in twenty minutes."

She handed me her sack, "Meet you at the car," and ran off.

She got there almost as quick as I did. I unlocked the trunk to put the gifts away and saw her crossing the lot from the middle of the mall. She tossed in her bag and got into the car. She wasn't badly out of breath, but she massaged her leg. I started the Buick and put it into reverse. "Was this your idea or his?"

I craned my head back over the seat watching for traffic. "I mentioned that was where we'd be."

This was Pamela's—our—first trip to the cemetery since we moved to Dumont. She had no real occasion for the visit. We were going to make sure it was clean—the stone hadn't been nudged to one side by a mower, weeds hadn't grown alongside, dust and clippings hadn't filled in the name and dates.

Phil met us at the gate, part not knowing the gravesite, part respecting Pamela's privacy, I'm sure. We pulled in and parked next to him in a gravelly area by the lane. He got out of his truck (I noticed the T.WW. decal was peeled off) and came toward us, waving and rubbing his hands together, looking satisfied with himself, us, and everything up to the weather and wind direction.

"Hey, Jimmy. Pam." He hugged us together. "God, time passes. It's good to see you again."

Pamela kissed him on the cheek. "How are you?"

"Just fine. How're y'all?"

"Great," I said. "Good to see you."

"Yeah. I don't want to keep you. But, hell, I had to say hi and see what's happening with you. Sorry I couldn't get away earlier." He took us by the forearms and eased us closer together like he wanted to take a picture.

We stood and talked, our breath condensing faintly, though it didn't seem all that cold. Phil insisted he didn't want to keep us, so the conversation was a brief version of the one we had with Carolyn—questions and personal reports, Nashville-Dumont comparisons

"You know," Phil said abruptly in the middle of telling us about the building contractor he worked with, "a friend of mine in Clarksville does fencing. When I got time, if he needs me, I go up there. I ought to stop in sometime and see you."

"We'd be out of your way," I told him.

"Not that much, not enough to worry about."

"Really?" Pamela said. "Well, I wish you would, then."

"All right. I'm going to go on, but it's not going to be so long between times now."

We said goodbye for a minute, and he hopped in the truck and left. We went to the car to drive to Grandma Owen's grave. "I'm glad we got to visit with him a little while too."

"Yeah," Pamela said, "I miss him, and Winnie."

The grave didn't look too badly neglected. Though no one had given it personal care, we only had to pinch off the dry weeds left in a fringe around the edges of the stone and gather up some twigs and leaves and pieces of plastic floral arrangement scattered around.

I realized it had been four years since Grandma Owen died. The period had the funny quality of surprising me—really, that long?—yet seeming too recent to all for all that happened since. I remembered the first

time she hugged me the way I always saw her hug Pamela.

One afternoon when we'd been married about a year, Pamela and I dropped by her house. Pamela opened the front door and called—no answer, so we started looking through all the rooms. I stepped out the back door and found her. She was walking around her yard, examining the plants. I called Pamela and went out to greet Grandma Owen.

"Well, James Grady," she said as I got near. (I think if we'd told her my middle name when she first met me, she'd have used that too.) "I'm so glad you've come to see me." She put her arms around me, kissed my cheek, and patted my back, just like she hugged Pamela. Then she took off her sunglasses and squinted up at me. "Come on with me and let's go in the house." Till then, she'd always come up beside me, rested one hand on my shoulder and reached to pat my forearm. If Pamela hadn't been with me, I think she would have been as happy I was visiting. It was like being adopted.

I scraped together the pile of leaves and sticks from the grave and carried them to the lane. I didn't know if anyone would come collecting, so I stamped them down to stay put. When I turned to go back, I saw Pamela was still at work.

I stood and waited. She quit and seemed getting ready to go, then crouched and pulled more weeds. "Come on, honey, hurry up." I started for the car.

"Just a minute."

To remind her, I said, "We got to get done tonight, or most of it. Unless you want to come back next weekend."

"I wouldn't mind."

"Okay. No problem."

She hm-ed and said something under her breath. I think I made out that she repeated, "No problem."

"It's not okay?" Maybe I responded with a little impatience.

"Yes. But you act like we still live here. It's never like you completely forget—just figure arrangements out to suit you. Call somebody up, hop in the car, and there you are."

"I'm sorry I didn't call Phil before. If you're that busy at the drugstore, we'll just come for the afternoon. Or if you'd come on now, we'd get enough done so we can finish shopping in Crofton."

"You know I'm not that busy. You ought to know that." She walked up past me to the car.

We did finish up that night before going back to Dumont. We ate fast food before shopping. The idea about stopping for a drink someplace in the city wasn't brought up.

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*Pamela: *I knew the problem back then. I didn't handle matters as well as I might have, and you couldn't get your time fit. You had more hours to stay at the store than you had work to do, and you had trouble getting satisfied with time off. And I went off randomly to this little job and that one or sat around—either got in the way or ignored you. I realized even then how we started those arguments. Now I see the worse problem—we never finished them. They trailed off into a stale, unpleasant background. The flare-ups recurred for much too long, and the aftereffect added up bad enough. But if we'd had many more like Nashville, I wonder if we'd have gotten back together in Bowling*

Green. Did you know this? Were you worried?

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The yelling fight in Nashville was a hard one to put behind us. We had an hour in the car together afterward. A quiet drive with the heater warming our feet, my arm around her, and her head on my shoulder, a good radio station on, and a fun day behind us could have been relaxing, comfortable, romantic, exciting. This was an hour in the dark.

Part II

Chapter 4

Phil Visiting

As an occasion set aside to look forward to the new year and sing "Auld Lang Syne," last New Year's Eve had no real point for me, no interest. I didn't foresee the best times of my life coming soon or have any old acquaintances in Dumont to give my best wishes to.

Our gardening neighbor and her husband invited us to the little party they held—snacks at eight, wine if we wanted any before the two bottles of champagne came out at eleven-thirty, three or four other guests. For decoration beyond the Christmas tree (beginning to shed and due to come down in a day or two, our neighbor told me) they covered their living room and dining room ceilings with helium balloons trailing curly ribbon. Two others, pink and blue, bobbed from the bathroom doorknob. The television was pushed into a corner out of the way—two kitchen chairs standing where it seemed to belong—but a special program of music and comedy routines played anyway, background festivity.

The neighbor husband held down one conversation after another from the sofa, getting up occasionally to pour wine for someone or get himself more smoked ham and crackers, then back to hunting stories or admiration for a guest's daughter's solo in the Crofton High chorus. His wife acted as if there was no party, but a coincidental gathering of some people she liked in her house. After an hour she put her pumps under the coffee table and walked around barefoot, quietly singling out someone occasionally and discussing

very everyday subjects that left no openings for others to join in party chat. She did ask Pamela if she expected to start running again soon—something of a holiday wish. But the gardener woman started talking with me by asking if I'd seen how pretty the ice was on the trees that morning. Perfectly straight face. She drank from a mug of hot chocolate, but I suspect schnapps had been added. As the night went on, she moved about the house more, disappeared frequently with empty plates and crumpled napkins, talked with people less, and smiled more.

It was all a pleasant evening, a nice party, but I couldn't get caught up. I took part and enjoyed the conversation and food, but by ten o'clock I was looking at my watch, wondering how long till we could reasonably go home. Pamela was having fun, and it would have been rude to leave before midnight was well celebrated, anyway. I tried to circulate more and not think about going yet, but after a while I noticed Pamela keeping an eye on me. Later she glanced at her watch, excused herself from a group, and started toward me. "Do you want to go home in a bit?"

"Okay," I said, "when you're ready."

We stood then and compared our impressions of the party and people. Most of the evening we'd been in different groups. I thought it was funny how we came to similar ideas about the people we hadn't known before. She seemed to feel about the party the way I did, glad we came but not catching the intended spirit. Soon, the neighbor husband interrupted, turning the television around to show the Times Square crowd and a digital countdown. He shouted, "Okay, everybody, midnight. Kiss-kiss." He gave a woman standing nearby a quick smack on the lips and went to find his wife. I snorted off a laugh. He overdid hosting. Hard to find him sincere.

"Kiss-kiss, Jim," Pamela repeated, slightly mocking him too, and put

down her glass to lean toward me. "Happy New Year."

For another twenty minutes or so, we stayed—splitting up to see people, say, "best wishes," and make up resolutions. Repeating, "Happy New Year," we said goodnight and thanks to the gardening neighbor and her husband and stepped outside.

We crossed the yard and were home in a moment. But I was wide awake to begin with and the cold shocked me, made me more aware, or it gave me a sharp impression to remember by. Though porch lights marked the door we left and the one we walked to, not many other lights were on in Dumont, everyone ignoring the holiday or doing it big in Crofton. The sky was that deep country black I still hadn't gotten used to. The stars stood out bright and sharp, and so did our breath, which didn't seem to want to dissipate but hung still in the air behind us. The grass rustled crisply under our steps. I shivered, clutched my coat shut, then—as the cold kept penetrating—wrapped it tighter, and finally ran. In heels and a dress, Pamela had more awkward going, but stayed with me and took my arm for warmth while I fumbled with my keys. Once inside, I didn't think any more about the holiday. I watched *It Came from the Desert* and went to bed.

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We felt more like celebrating four days later when Phil showed up. It reminded me of old times having him come unannounced. Pamela was glad for company. In the meantime, matters went on pretty much as before, each of us going on with business and not having all that much to say to each other. One night I came home from doing some work for an old man Pamela knew through the drugstore. He had a stroke and wasn't able to get out or keep up with chores around his house. I became a handyman and errand runner.

*Pamela: *You remember old Mr. Norris. I'll need to cover him in another chapter. To me, it seems like he helped us out a lot. He was a strange old bird, but he gave me some ideas to bring home. But I'm not to that point yet. You and I had a little way to go first.*

Anyway, I came home. Pamela was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the living room floor surrounded by stacks of books, records, videotapes, and photo albums, reading the back of a box she'd just taken some rig made of wooden slats from.

"Need some help?"

"No, I don't think so. I'll let you know."

I hung up my coat and came back. "What is all this stuff?"

"Bookshelves. They unfold, see. I've had most of this stuff in the closet. Time it got put to rights."

I looked at some of the titles. "I never knew we had these."

"Now you will."

"What'd the shelves cost?"

"Thirty-nine ninety-five. I found them in a magazine."

"And you got four?"

"They stack. I figured two and two next to each other on that wall."

"Can we afford a hundred and sixty dollars?"

"I don't think it's a problem. You keep track of the bills. Can't we afford them?"

I felt a little foolish. Yes, we could afford them. Pamela made pretty good money and I was starting to put in quite a bit of work for Norris. Gas bills were high, but what else did I expect in January? And no other expense took a major bite out of the checking account. I nodded and left her alone.

/

Phil knocked on the door one night about seven. I had the TV on, and Pamela was listening to music and reading.

"Have I come to the right house? Hi kids." He walked in and looked around for the kitchen. "I expected to need to call for directions, but I got off the road and the old guy at the gas station knew your street. I don't guess there's much of town to search through finding you, anyway, is there?" He came back balancing a cup of coffee and shrugging out of his coat. "Brought y'all something." Coat off, he dug in the pocket and pulled out a brown bag. "Cookies and the Sunday paper magazine. There's a great piece in there about what they're doing with Union Station. Wonderful pictures."

All that evening we sat around the kitchen table together. The surprise of seeing him—surprise and the feeling that an evening of nothing special was saved—had Pamela and me more excited than we'd been in a long time, Phil building on this by insisting we help ourselves to cookies and asking us what we'd been up to. Seeing Pamela listen so carefully and talk so eagerly made me realize the tinge of frustrated quiet we'd gotten ourselves into, the reluctance to risk touching sore spots, that kept us from getting along as well as we used to.

"What about Carolyn—how's she doing?" Pamela asked. "I haven't talked to her in a couple of weeks. Have you seen her?"

"Yeah. She's doing real fine."

"What's new with her?"

"Well—Carolyn's been seeing somebody, but it's a pretty complicated thing, and I probably shouldn't say who. That's her private life."

"Oh Okay." But as Phil went on to tell us about her job and apartment, Pamela didn't seem dissatisfied. Either all the other news was

plenty or she figured Carolyn would tell her the whole story herself.

**Phil: I'm not going to ask you to look at all this I've written, but I do want you to see this to know how glad we were for your trip and so I can tell you I admire your not treating other people's concerns lightly. Not like what's-his- name who used to work for you, that Jacques guy, telling me some pretty confidential things and not going about it very neatly. Nice of you to think so well of Carolyn. And of us, to drive so far to Dumont.*

We made popcorn and played a new variation of Spades I'd picked up. Finally, about ten thirty, Pamela was all talked out and tired. "I'll have to get up in the morning, sorry to run off. Be careful driving."

We said goodnight. Phil stayed put while she walked off to bed—staring into his mug and shaking his head at something that must have struck him funny. I stood to see him out but shifted gears. He wasn't going. "Want some more coffee—help keep you awake?"

"How about a beer?"

"Can you stay that long?"

"As long as it's okay with you."

I opened one for me too. A minute passed before Phil spoke again. He took a big swig, said *aahh,* and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "See y'all are still using the old oak table. Beautiful. Fits in the house perfect."

I grunted, disagreeing. "It's a crackerbox of a house."

"Well sure, it's simple. I bet the fellow built it built it for himself."

"Yeah?"

"Certain he wasn't a pro—rough edges, that cold draft and all. And

something else, look here, you don't get a wall full of windows in a set of nickel-dime, off-the-shelf developer's blueprints. Somebody took him some plans and played with them a little bit. Bet you I could find more of his personality here and there."

I agreed with him about the lack of airtight construction and tried to see what he was finding to appreciate. Skeptical about the house (*I'd* lived in it), I still believed he knew what he was talking about. And I wanted to see it.

"What you need to do is treat it like a display case. Put you some good woods and good carving in here." He walked into the living room and tiptoed down the hall to the spare room, pointing out the furniture he remembered and liked. We came back to the kitchen for another beer and talked about furnishings. I asked him what he was working on—how things were going.

As we got well into the second drink, Phil got quiet again. Thinking he was running down, I got up to start another pot of coffee. I figured I'd put a cup or two into him and see if he wanted to go on to Clarksville or stay the night.

"You know, Jimmy, I don't love Winnie very well."

I don't think I turned to look too fast or anything. I just wanted to go along and see how he meant it. He wasn't drunk. He hadn't gone moody on me. He didn't even sound any less chipper than usual. I finished priming the pot and sat back down.

"That's a really rotten thing to say, I know."

"No," I told him.

He shook his head. "But we're not one of those deep-in-love couples. Nowadays, I'm always skipping off to Clarksville. She took her vacation alone last month. This's a hell of a way to live, Jim. I love her, but not real

well."

I poured him some coffee and we changed the subject. After an hour or so of talking about nothing important or memorable, drinking coffee, and shuffling cards, he shook my hand, popped me on the back, bundled up, and trotted to his truck. Shrugging, he pointed down the road. Asking if that was the direction he wanted. "Yes," I shouted. I stood in the door holding my hands under my sweater. "Then left through the stop light." He beeped a short note on the horn and drove off, waving.

/

The beer and coffee combined to keep me awake. And having my sleep schedule thrown off. I still felt keyed up from the surprise of Phil's visit. And there was—what?—his news? bad news? confession? I wondered if he suddenly spilled his admission because he saw Pamela and me as a deep-in-love couple and felt the contrast, because he recognized something like his situation developing between us, or because he needed to tell somebody. If he even had a reason. None of these was a good train of thought to get started on. Even the last possibility made it some deep trouble he felt urged to release.

I roamed around the house trying to get sleepy. To keep my mind off things I knew would keep me wide awake, I tried to admire the house as Phil had, looking at Pamela's wall of shelved books and albums, straightening out the afghans—one red and black, one crazy quilt pattern—I'd left on the couch, running my fingers over the leaves and vines carved into the dresser—quietly, not to wake Pamela four feet away in the dark room. Having searched out everything I liked in the house and not tired yet, I took my coat and walked out the back door.

The grass was frosty and held the shape of my steps. I tracked

through the yards of two neighbors, crossed the highway, and walked into a field toward a distant stand of trees, and as I went I began to pick up the crunching sound under my feet. The moon was near half phase and sat low in the sky. But with its light, the glow from a low bank of clouds, and the shine of a farmer's security lamps down the road, I had sure footing and could see individual trees in the woods ahead. I walked fast to keep warm and to feel I was accomplishing more than one of my old afternoons in the yard. The cold made my nostrils numb and left a streak of smarting nerves down my throat. I walked a very long time, until I passed through that field and through the thicket I'd thought was so far ahead, and until two farm dogs started barking sporadically—curious, it sounded like, about the sound of my steps and my breathing—and then I decided it was a good time to go home.

I can't really say I walked for very long. Forty-five minutes—an hour. It was cold and seemed longer. It wasn't unbearably cold, but enough I wanted to be home in a nice warm bed instead. I thought hard about unpleasant topics and it seemed a long time. Feeling sorry for Phil took a little while. Then I came to realize he described himself and Winnie as they'd always been. In all the time I knew them, they were never a romantic, deep-in-love couple—never behaved *affectionately*—not even in a settled, twenty year marriage way. But they were always content and comfortable. Even their fights lacked intensity. They were happy, just not as an immediate result of being together, not because they exchanged happiness.

Pamela and I were never in danger of falling into their problem (or of having their kind of safety). Before we got married, Pamela molded me some space in the patterns she lived in, and over time I stayed someplace in her habits. I loved her trust and her keeping active and her intimacy with me. I thought of us this way. As much as she did for herself, as much as she

wanted people and things around her she loved, as much as she'd lost in her parents' and grandmother's deaths, it was important to me that what I could do for her affected her specially. Maybe I wasn't essential, but I was irreplaceable.

I remember the walk I took as a long one because I dreaded the thought that our connections, our contact was burning out or losing the balance that kept us close. That thought jumped up every time I turned around. Though I wanted to come home a changed man, though I wish I could say I managed to figure out what to do, I didn't return with an answer. I hardly knew anything except I was finally tired, and I didn't like how things stood.

That's something anyway.

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The bedroom air made me shiver until I reached room temperature, strange to get warmer as I undressed. Feeling my way into bed and curling up, I caught the scent from Pamela's skin, took the cotton of her nightgown in my fingers. "Everything all right?"

I was unhappy and sleepy but not drowsy, just punchy enough to take that question as something meaningful, a moment. "Yes," I said. "Are you okay?"

It was a stupid question, why wouldn't she be? but I was in a stupid condition. My pass at openness and confidence and caring plopped out like dough sliding from a breadpan. I should have kicked myself for such a sloppy come-on line.

She mumbled, "Okay. Okay," and breathed with a soft whooshing release. Asleep.

Part II

Chapter 5

Work and Reconciliation

In February, I approached a forty-hour work week again. I had two restaurants (including Garrett's), a mechanic who needed help staying in business, and a dry cleaner as clients. And Harold Norris, the seventy-odd year old man I was errand runner and handy man for, threw more work my way when he put together the two facts that I was an accountant and he had large amounts of money to keep track of.

When I first knew him, he was sociable—said "Hi, how you doing?" every morning, showed me pictures of his family and himself, asked about me and my life. He showed enough interest to be outright curious sometimes—"Where you from? Your wife? How long y'all lived in Dumont? What the hell brings you all the way out here?" Though I suppose the stroke slowed him down, he often came with me while I went around doing work for him.

One of the first things I did every morning was feed the animals—chickens, a Labrador ("Take my word," Norris told me, "best breed of dog there is—worth every cent."), and two cats that seemed to live in the barn. When I arrived, he called, "That you, Jim?" and "Hi, how you doing?" He put his coat on, with a little struggle, took his hat and cane, and preceded me outside, even though he needed me to help him down the porch steps. Usually, he kept a few paces behind me, putting his weight on his good leg and lifting the cane from the ground when we stopped. A couple of times, he said he'd like to collect the eggs. Gripping the basket and cane in his right

hand, he limped down the line of nests, taking eggs with his left and occasionally patting one of his hens on the back. The dog learned to jump on me, not Mr. Norris, when we opened the pantry for dog food, but she stood at his side wagging her tail while I lifted the big sack and poured. Norris talked to her while he opened Gainesburgers to mix in, and she responded in a mumble of growls and whines. Working for him gave me nothing to complain about. He was pleasant enough.

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Pamela said he'd seemed accepting and willing to make do with his condition when his niece and nephew brought him into the drugstore on their way home from the hospital. He walked into the store ahead of the young couple with a prescription in his affected hand, stopping at the counter and hanging the cane on his wrist to take the slip and hand it over. But he let the niece pick out other supplies he needed and pay for them, let the nephew take the bag. They said the nephew would stay while the niece went home to take care of their business in Clarksville, but they needed to find someone to help out, because he couldn't stay as long as it would take for therapy to teach the uncle to compensate. Pamela told them about me, the five of us met once, and the nephew went home with the niece two days later.

"You only have to be there a few hours a day, some days more than others. And I don't guess he'll need you if they come for visits weekends," Pamela said. "For instance, very complicated cooking, or whatever needs doing outside. It would be bad if he fell all alone out there. And he's lost enough feeling he might let a little frostbite slip up on him. Basically, the real problem is he's just active enough to forget himself, forget limitations. I worry a little, but not too much." The first of February was moderate, but then sharp cold set in for a couple of weeks.

I don't know what I thought about that job at first. I was glad Pamela thought of me when Norris and his family came in— natural idea to occur to her right away, of course, since I'd been taking that kind of work—but then again it seems she knew I had mixed feelings about painting on McDonald's farm and lugging office furniture for the Crofton insurance guy. But she got me the job—she did it for me. I should have been grateful—owed it to her. And it did turn out well.

Mainly I think I was preoccupied, trying hard to work things out between us. The good thing was being able to schedule my own hours. Except for Pamela's days off, when I still needed to put in time at Norris's, I could be gone doing my work during her business hours and be at home when she was. The bad thing was that a reconciliation doesn't just start up on the first try. The closest I came turned out an indifferent to mediocre success. One day when I went to Crofton, I stopped at the big grocery and bought half a dozen roses and some parsley- like filling-in ferns. Pamela said, "Wow. These are beautiful." She kissed me and took down a vase. There were patches of snow on the ground, and the glare and sunlight coming through the kitchen windows lit up the roses sharp. She stepped back. "Beautiful. What's the occasion—early Valentine? What're they for?" When I told her no occasion, just because I wanted to, she said, "Oh."

Later she brought them into the living room and set them on the coffee table. "Anniversaries, my birthday, yes. But you've never just brought me roses before."

"Sure I have. Haven't I?"

She shook her head. "But thanks anyway." Smiling curiously, pleased, but wondering about face value.

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In puttering around the house and driving Norris places, I gradually pieced together that he was pretty well to do. His house was a nice, big, old one—on attractive, wooded, maybe at one time landscaped acreage—surrounded by fields that could very well belong to him. One day I found a set of tarnished silver and kind of wanted to see how it looked polished. He said his wife bought it a year before she died, four years ago altogether. There were so many pieces it took me two days even with the new kind of polish that wipes right off. One day, as we drove through Crofton, he pointed to a row of brick buildings stretching down most of a block and said, "Those are mine."

This was such a great opportunity for me to clean up. Norris desperately needed careful financial management. I dropped hints. He seemed to miss them. But, eventually, through his own storytelling and running commentary, he stumbled across a decision I'd been hoping for.

Getting to know him better, I found out he had a pretty high opinion of his own talents. He made razor sharp little deals. Bought land and businesses the moment before they turned valuable. Helped out his bright little niece and her husband when they needed it, passed on a shoe store to his own boys, and still had plenty to keep himself in clover. A little ego's forgiveable in an old man, especially when he's reserved about it, and when he actually has done very well. I started to like him all right.

Since his stroke, his thinking sometimes got a little fuzzy, like wanting to put two kinds of pill in one bottle for convenience's sake, and I think it reminded him of a few times he hadn't been quite the ace answerman he enjoyed being. One day when I helped him upstairs to move some clothes and bedlinen from his regular room down to the temporary bedroom, he dropped into his desk chair and fidgeted through drawers and file folders. I waited a

moment, shifting the hooks of his coat hangers in my hand, then turned toward the stairs to unload and come back for him. "There it is," he said. "Show me something, Jim. Where does it say on there, 'rent'?"

I took a yellowed folder. Stapled to a bundle of receipts and wage statements was a 1968 tax form. Running my thumb down the page, I stopped on the rent line and showed him.

"I'll be damned. Sure is. Never did find that. First year I owned that rent property and I couldn't figure how to declare the rent. Lucky thing for me wasn't audited."

To stop myself from laughing or groaning, I resettled the load of clothes again. "Lucky thing."

After a couple of weeks and several casual questions about financial matters, Norris asked me if I wanted to look over his investments and see how they stood. I jumped. He went on, "Afterwards maybe you can get started on my taxes for me."

"Glad to," I said and gave him my rate for accounting— higher than my errand running rate. He waved it off like he trusted me to be square with him.

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A week or two into February, I was driving him home from a therapy session. I hadn't thought the stroke affected his speech, but lately he talked a little more distinctly. By this time, he acted at ease with me—a small dose of patronizing mixed in, not much. Watching out the window, resting his hand on the buttons of his coat, he asked me about interest rates on long term certificates and the market value of his business property, my other jobs and my situation at home, and the number of banks he should keep accounts with. I answered, "I'm not sure," and, "I'll have to look that up," so often I got

sucked into making very rough estimates and discussing details I wouldn't have been too comfortable with otherwise. He talked, nodded, listened, and breathed it all in intently.

I got him home, brought him his mail, and asked if I could do anything else before I left—had my hand on the door, didn't even take off my coat.

"No, you go on. I'll make me some stew, watch the tube, go to bed. I'm a little tired out."

This was after five o'clock. He had no stew meat cooked, maybe not even thawed. He might get supper started all right, but he wouldn't be able to eat before the late news. "Let me see what else we can put together."

"Well no need, but thank you."

Norris's niece had left him several frozen meals. I handed him a baggie of spaghetti sauce and took out vegetables to chop for a salad.

"Know something there, Jim?"

"Yes?"

"I been thinking. And I want to show you something."

He wanted to go upstairs, and I helped him and followed him down the hallway to the front balcony. "Why don't you open them up. The doors stick a bit." The doors popped open, glass rattling. The screen door squeaked and swept up a furrow of snow. "Jim, I know you got you some difficulties at home. Family life ain't exactly sitting easy, is it?"

I stuttered a couple of words and said, "We're all right.

"No, I know. But look a'here." He pointed out. I stepped to the rail, thinking there was something particular I was supposed to see. All there was was the gray light left after sunset and his yard and driveway. Between the trees, I could see parts of a couple of fields, and then the woods—light snow on everything.

"Makes you think, doesn't it?" he said. I leaned out, looking harder. Pretty view, but what was the point—where was I looking? He stood against the wall of the house, smiling, showing teeth, nodding. The cane hanging over his wrist, he rubbed his hands together warming them. "You've done a lot for me and I appreciate that."

Building myself up to ask what he wanted to tell me, I told him no problem and looked again, thinking maybe it was something obvious, or something he didn't realize was gone since last time he looked. He chuckled and poked me with the cane. I laughed politely, good-naturedly. "Mr. Norris—" I started.

He pushed with the cane again, got me under the ribs in back. "What?" I said. The cane hit me in the side again, hard enough my weight went onto the railing and made it creak. He nudged a couple of times, then brought the cane down for support. "What?"

"See? Don't that make you think?" His head bobbed, agreeing with himself. "Look out there—how high up we are. Make you feel alive." It was gray-dark. We were fifteen or sixteen feet above the front walk. Snow melted under my hands.

"Okay." I hoped he wouldn't reach out and push me any more. He just chuckled and nodded, then turned around to go inside. Therapy had him walking better these days. Kept the cane for other uses, I guess.

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Pamela had just sat down to eat when I came home. I said hello and took chicken from the oven and strawberry preserves from the refrigerator for my rolls.

We talked on general, low key subjects until we finished eating. Then, to keep her at the table, I got us each a cup of coffee and dragged my chair

closer to her. "Tell me something. What's the story with Norris?"

She explained his stroke to me, leaving out the words I heard from his niece and nephew and from the hospital—hemiparesis, ischemia, dysarthria. Instead—a relatively small death of brain cells dulled sensation and left him mildly paralyzed. His speech, for instance, was only slightly affected. I'd hardly noticed it, but Pamela knew him before and could hear slower, less distinct articulation. The physical effects made him cautious, she said, unsure of his coordination, strength, and perception, even though his recovery was going well.

That evening, on my own initiative, I wouldn't have judged Norris to be acting cautious. I hadn't aimed to find out the medical side of Harold Norris. But I listened. Pamela looked caught up in her subject—both interested and concerned, tapping her finger on the table and describing arteries and hospital tests in vivid detail. And as Norris's errand-running handyman, I probably needed to know this anyway. My curiosity wasn't satisfied, though.

/

We spent the evening on the couch, watching rented movies—Mel Gibson, comedy, action. During a slow scene, I went to the kitchen for coffee. Pamela asked if I'd bring her an aspirin when I came back. "Feeling all right?" I called.

"Yeah. A little sore—one aspirin worth. Shoulders, my leg, you know." It sounded more like tired muscles than a pain. I brought aspirin and water. Sitting down, I draped my arm over the cushions to rub her shoulder with my thumb.

"I was also wondering," I said, trying to hook back into the end of her explanation. "What's Norris like?"

"I don't know. He only came into the pharmacy a few times. Why,

what's up?" She made me repeat how he jabbed me with his cane—turned the movie off and nestled into the couch facing me to listen. "No, really?"

"For all I know, the railing could've cracked and come in two."

"I never would have said so. He only came in a few times before the stroke, but I thought he was kind of a quiet little old man. Confident—he'd question me on product comparisons. But restrained, calling me 'Miss.' 'Thank you, Miss.' He *did* that?"

I still didn't know if I wanted to go back to work for Norris. I wanted to know why his niece and nephew couldn't trade off weeks for a while. Or his own kids, where were they? Anybody but me. Later I decided to check out the situation when I went the next morning—wait and see. I told Pamela what I'd thought of Norris on first impressions, mostly the kind of thing I wrote at the beginning of this chapter.

Pamela nodded and faced the blank TV screen, frowning. After a moment, she toned, "Mm, mm, mm," and swung her legs up to cross on the cushions. "I'm getting so worn out here."

Surprisingly, this did not strike me as a change of subject. I don't know how we moved to a completely different idea and still had it make sense. I don't know why I felt like dropping my questions about Mr. Norris. Maybe we felt more at ease, began a reconciliation. Maybe I was confused and tired. Pamela told me how being the only person doing everything in the drugstore (or doing nothing when no customers came in) exhausted her. She said she just couldn't find her pace for living in Dumont. She could stand it better if only it were like Nashville. She lacked recreation, lacked revitalization. We sat like this through most of another movie and fell asleep on the couch.

I'm sure we began our reconciliation when we woke up at three in the

morning. Pamela woke me when she sat up and looked around. "I'm sorry," she mumbled. "Didn't mean to disturb you."

White noise and snow were on television. I rolled off the couch and reached to shut it off. "I'm hungry," I noted.

"No you're not. You're sleepy."

I pulled myself onto the couch. "Okay." Pamela draped her arms over my shoulders and dropped her head. She was sleepy.

"I'm hungry too," she said.

"Crofton has a bakery open twenty-four hours." Her head rose. She squinted at me, or else her eyes were closed—I'm not sure. It was dark. I added, "And we're still dressed to go out."

Her head fell back to my shoulder. She cleared her throat. "I'm only letting you take me so we'll have something ready for breakfast and get to sleep twenty minutes later." She didn't move for a moment, then jerked awake and stood up. "But we take my car. It gets warm fast."

The drive was really interesting. It had snowed around noon, and the sky cleared, so the stars showed very bright. It was clear enough that every degree of warmth had been sucked from the earth while we slept. I huddled against the dashboard vents while Pamela drove.

"Now, we ought to get muffins, or at least croissants," she said. "Something that won't rot out our teeth, clog our arteries, and go sour in our colons."

"Absolutely." The snow swirled in the road where the headlights hit, making wave patterns and crawling motions as it approached our slipstream. It spiraled up alongside and behind the car, reflecting red in the taillights before disappearing on the black road behind us. Between Dumont and Crofton, especially past Snowden, the trees grow close together along several

stretches, and in some spots reach out over the road. The pattern of branches flashing by overhead and the whoosh when we passed tree trunks, I thought, were beautiful.

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The ride home was even better. Much better. I'd eaten part of my breakfast, and the car got warm. And Pamela felt awake without having to burn nervous energy, talking and fiddling with the radio.

She became—what's a good word?—*aroused.* You know, it can start for such scant reason. I'm not even sure what I did. Whatever it was was unconscious. Put my hand on her knee, maybe—or on the nape of her neck, more likely, since she'd have that leg on the accelerator. Or I might have touched her hair or made a comment about her or directed her attention to the night view.

She leaned over quickly and kissed me, for whatever reason. I did, then, put my wrist on her shoulder and run a few strands of her hair across my fingertips. We rode a moment that way. Pamela glanced over. She stared at me an instant, her eyes open wide in the dim light of the Honda. She looked puzzled, with her eyebrow furrowed slightly and her eyes so wide. I leaned over, wanting to see how much of the bluish-gray rim of her iris I could see, but she'd turned back to face the road. So, already leaning over, I kissed her on the neck.

She pulled the car to the roadside. By this time, she was getting me *aroused.* I could say it would've made sense to get home first, but all things considered, no, we wouldn't have waited.

However, Pamela and I are each about five-ten, five-eleven. And this took place in her Honda. Sure we'd had sex in the car before, but that was the Buick, a completely different proposition.

Getting into the backseat caused trouble—but was necessary. The front seats, with that console in between, were out of the question. We had reached a certain stage—past the point of opening the door, getting out, moving the seat, and getting in the back. With my coat and shoes off and Pamela's shirt all the way open except maybe one button (and, somehow, I'd maneuvered her thermal undershirt out of the way)—in this state—we couldn't handle going out into the snow. And the possibility of finishing the ride home right then was definitely out of contention. So we were simply forced to climb over the seat and just try not to crush the sack of doughnuts.

I switched off the lights before we started over. And I don't want to know what kind of picture we made—trying not to fall off the seat and get wedged against the floor, Pamela clutching at seatbelts and the armrest, me leveraging my forearm against the headrest.

In the *Honda*'s backseat.

I know I make it sound difficult and cramped. To tell the truth, yes, it was. But it was good desiring each other in this small car, way out alongside some dark country road. She said, "Is that better?" Having had sex, I said yes. I don't know what she meant particularly, but I can say we were better off from there on.

Part II

Chapter 6

Coming to Terms

**Pamela: What do you think—am I coming to explanations? I know I'm not reporting every exact detail as it happened—rubbed your thigh or the nape of your neck, for instance. But, your opinion, my feeling easy with telling you that Norris business and your being interested and wanting to tell me about the drugstore, that cleared the air for us, right? And no self- consciousness in the car. Remember how natural we seemed together after we'd been going out a couple of months? How you and I got away from that after years married is still a question. There was a problem before Dumont, wasn't there? Something holding back, pulling me away from you —something making you sort of short tempered. And I haven't even started to ask questions about the strain after Dumont. But, so far, don't you think it's important that when we built up a load of too many* other *problems, there wasn't a problem between you and me? Sleeping half the night piled up together on the couch and making love in a small car were new experiences for our marriage, but those're just part of our coming to terms with each other.*

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Within a week, we had a fight. But it was a small one. And we wouldn't have even been in a position to have that fight if we weren't getting along.

We started going for walks together. I developed the habit to keep from sitting around aimlessly—and kept it up even though with work I didn't have time that needed killing. Pamela walked because she wanted exercise. And, too, it's the way she is—rather be doing something than sitting idle.

One day we walked over to Snowden Road and headed out away from town. Though the six feet or so of shoulder was wide enough that cars were no bother, every semi truck that passed by threatened to blow us over or catch us up and suck us into the middle of the road. The ditch running alongside was cold mud, and across the ditch were embankments, hillsides, brush, wire fences—at best, bad footing. After about five minutes, and three semi slipstreams, I tapped Pamela on the arm and turned up a narrow paved road that angled off Snowden Road.

Going along with no sign of cars, I dropped to a stroll. No scenery to speak of—bare black tree limbs, gray sky, pale dead grass—but I was out for a walk, not sightseeing. Pamela was out to walk. She got ahead of me, then stood and stretched her arms above her head while she waited, bunching her jacket up around her ears. She tried to keep pace with me after I caught up but before, she knew it, found me trailing her by seven or eight yards, again, again. She smiled over it and called to me at first, then just settled into the routine, starting to stretch and shift from foot to foot whenever she noticed I was more than a few steps back.

"I'm going to cool down, going like this," she commented. "I don't want to get warmed up unless I'm going to keep steady until we get home."

I suggested, "Slow down, then. We're not in a hurry to get anywhere."

"I'm trying."

We exchanged a couple more observations, then nothing. She walked with her arms in her pockets, as if swinging them sped her up.

**Pamela: I'm not done with that matter yet, but what caused some difficulty was we were running in cross channels most of the time in Dumont, weren't we? Walking for a change of scene from the house and backyard versus walking for—what?—the sensation of moving, of working your muscles. Rigging together a batch of half-jobs against managing a whole, awkward, half-empty drugstore. Becoming more satisfied with my situation—you less with yours. We never thought of this till now. Or I didn't. Did you? That's the thing that slowed down getting to reconciliation—we never realized.*

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On that note. I stayed on as Norris's accountant, even though I didn't figure out (never have) the idea behind cattle- prodding me around his balcony, because the work satisfied me. I wasn't a full-time accountant located in the front office of a business, like I was for Phil, and Harold Norris was no Phil Thompson, but I'd turned the corner. It felt good to ease off from scrabbling for bits and pieces of scarce work. Keeping the books for Garrett's Log House or the Breckinridge Street Texaco never seemed to be guaranteed long term—not much more security than my fence painting position. Norris expressed very firmly and directly his interest in keeping the services of an accountant. And he never turned very dangerous again.

Though he rehabilitated himself as much as he ever would— able to negotiate stairs one step at a time, able to write longhand slowly and print clearly, to lift and walk with medium- weight loads, to stand still and let his dog jump up to lick his face or bend down to catch up a chicken or cat—he still called me for some handyman days, along with accounting afternoons. Maybe he wanted to make it less necessary that I take another, full-time job—I don't know. One day, I walked in for a few hours of faucets and washers, and he called, "That you, Jim? Come on back."

He sat at the kitchen table with the phone. His Labrador looked up and swept her tail back and forth for me. "Now, before you decide anything, let me send my accountant over to talk to you." He rattled his cane on a chair for me to sit down. "Good. Good enough."

I didn't get to go plumbing. Instead, the next morning I drove to Crofton to talk to an office tenant who was considering a new location. Norris had this lawyer in his building for more than ten years and didn't want to lose him.

"Offer two-seventy-five." (Crofton rents were low compared to Nashville.) "If you have to, you can get yourself talked down to two-twenty, but stick on two-fifty as long as you can. I'd like the two-seventy-five. And, well, don't want him enough to go near two-ten." He knew the range of downtown rates fluently.

Having parallel parked, I jogged across the street and walked along looking for 408 1/2 Bell St. It was marked by a brass-accented lawyer shingle—a door of what looked to be good oak, with frosted glass and a brass handle and thumb latch. I opened it to go in. The stairs were carpeted, the handrail oak and brass. A Leroy Nieman print—a basketball player, silver framed—hung before me. I turned and walked back up the street toward

Three Corners (fine apparel for men). I wasn't dressed to deal with a man who decorated his ground-floor entry. My wool sport coat was fine, but not the khakis. Those got dropped off in the Buick after I picked out a pair of gray slacks appropriate to wear into the summit.

After a fifteen minute session trading genial smiles and nods with the receptionist in the empty waiting room, I was called into an inner office. The lawyer and I shook hands, exchanging general greetings and pretend-conversation. Then, as soon as I mentioned the office space (that I liked the room), he engaged the issue.

"Mr. Grady, reception and my own office are over a card and gift shop. I would switch the office with my conference room. However, the conference room is actually smaller. My private entrance, here, goes down a fire escape and ends in an alley, and I share parking with the clerks of the gift shop."

While he described for me the new set of offices he planned to move into, I looked at the view from his conference room window. The buildings across the street were all brick, with stone sills on the second floor windows. At the end of the block, the street forked—continuing commercial to the left, starting with old-home residential and leading to the high school to the right. I nodded to show him I understood he had an opportunity to move into ground floor office space with four rooms, almost five-hundred-fifty square feet, and two bathrooms, one with space to add a shower stall. He would have track lighting; five walls of shelving; two-inch, key-only-turned deadbolts; and clients' parking rights in a thirty-two space lot, shared with a bank, no less. The front door of this office was wide enough to allow a four by six desk through.

I turned from his window and pulled out a conference chair to sit down. "Mr. Norris could afford to get by at two-hundred- and-fifty dollars a month.

I'd be comfortable arranging that in a four year lease."

Frowning, he rested his knuckles on the table and nodded to himself. Very serious, very intent, silent.

"Since he knows you're looking for more space, he'd be sure to give you a call if he has something in your line come available." Since it wasn't my turn to talk, I didn't add any more than that, just looked at him as long as he wanted to think. It was a comfortable chair, and I felt like a rest.

"Done."

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When I got back to Dumont early that afternoon, I stopped at Norris's to give him the news and see if anything needed done around the house. He met me in the entry hall and started leading me back to the kitchen before I told him what happened or showed him the lease. He acted like he already knew it turned out well. I cut to the unadorned confirmation for him. "Ha, smoked him, did you?"

He opened the back porch refrigerator—an old, latch- handled Shelvador—and came back toward me gripping two beer bottles by the neck. I held out the lease. "Here," he said and traded with me, sitting to look for the specific terms I'd filled in. I twisted open both bottles while he read. "I see he fought out the two-fifty for himself. But four years! You gave as good as you got, didn't you?"

He wanted details, and I gave him a few highlights—things that would make him happy, how well I liked his building, what the lawyer said he had planned until I talked him into staying.

"Jim," he said, "I thank you. Go on home. Anything needs doing around here can wait. I want you to go home and you and Pamela go out and eat tonight. In fact, let me pay you now for what you got coming—have some

pocket change."

"No." I took a last swig of beer and stood. "Next Friday's fine. Thanks. See you tomorrow, Mr. Norris."

"Yes, sir, I'll see you then. G'night, Jim."

When Pamela got home, she kissed me hello and said, "New pants. I like them."

"Yeah." I told her the story. "I offered him numbers he liked. And Norris is still satisfied."

"Something for everyone then. So—do you want to eat out?" I think she was more impressed that I bought a new pair of pants. Maybe that I'd suggested going somewhere for the evening.

And Norris—I didn't think I'd made the lawyer "get up, sing, dance, and balance a feather on his nose" as much as he said I did.

**Note: I need to come back to this matter later, after the Dumont section. I'm wondering about the talk I had with that supplier the other day. Different kind of situation, wrong supplies he sent, but similar in a way. Worth looking into.*

As much as I preferred being Norris's accountant to a lot I'd done in Dumont, I looked for Pamela's perspective to agree with how I felt about it, or come close. I knew her. Out of all of Dumont—restaurants, farmers, and the old man showing me the view from his balcony and pushing me off to make a point—I needed to know her best.

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But, the day we took the walk up the country road, I could have seen we weren't quite clicking—not quite yet

We walked. The trees scattered over the fields were black—the bark wet from melting ice. Ahead of us, in a clump of woods, a load of ice slid off a

limb and spattered onto the ground. The jostling sent a short series of thumps, more ice falling onto leaves and sticks.

"It's too cold. I should be walking faster."

"Yes," I said. "It's too cold to take a walk." It wasn't really, but it wasn't just cool, either. Somewhere in between where it was a little of both, but neither. Or I'm just saying that because it's the right idea for Pamela's tone of voice— kidding around, irritated, but not those, either.

I felt an odd mixture, myself. I'm sure I was glad to be out with her. I wondered if she was irritated, and I was tired of all that kind of wondering. For months I'd worried about me and us. Whenever I tried to compensate for a problem, I didn't succeed too well.

That is the reason for this inquiry. If I'd known better what to do, I wouldn't have burned myself out with poorly calculated reactions, reflex responses—flowers, surprise pharmacy visits, "how was your day" questions. By God, I'm going to understand what I do for a living, understand Pamela, understand our marriage.

**Note: Still questions to work out. Once done, go back over from start. Later ideas help early! Write, read, then give to Pamela and ?*

Pamela said, "I think I'll call Carolyn, instead of writing. I don't have much to say. But I want to tell her hi for a few minutes." (Carolyn had moved to Bowling Green a couple of weeks before for her job at the university museum. We offered to go back to Nashville and help, but she didn't have much to move. Phil and Winnie were plenty, she said.) "Let's go home."

We turned and started back the way we came. "Brr." Pamela stuck her arm up the back of my coat. "Better." We got home and she said, "This is so much better." She whopped me on the arm with the sleeve of her jacket on

her way to the phone. "Make me cold."

How serious was she? How serious could she be with her arm up my back? Keeping so close I got a little hot. Possibly I was only a handwarmer. But when she hung up, she came into the living room to sit with me. "Thanks for the walk," she said, and kissed me.

Complicated, good.

The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

...

But for those obstinate questionings

Of sense and outward things,

Fallings from us, vanishings;

Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality"

Part III

Chapter 1

The Trip to Bowling Green

Pamela and I never lived apart until Bowling Green. It wasn't an easy change to make. Wasn't a simple matter. I went to Bowling Green for good reasons, and eventually the move ended up bringing us together again on our best terms. For its own sake, the separation—the center of all my memory on that milestone decision to separate—hurt. It hurt then, and it's unpleasant to think about, to write about now. We made the decision anyway: I would move to start work with Phil, and Pamela would come too when she could manage it—square away the drugstore in Dumont and a new position in Bowling Green, both. Even a few months before, could I have decided in favor of a change with such an involved set of motives (for and against) and results (long term and immediate)? I'd never *want* to deal with a choice like that.

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Phil called and said, "We got a business proposal for you. Come on up." A couple of days later, we took the back highways—through Charlotte, Ashland City, Springfield—to Franklin, then rode I-65 on in. So we puttered along from one Main Street to the next, with farm traffic in between, then whooshed up the last leg—picked up too much momentum maybe, since we rushed into making a wrong turn off the interstate. We took Scottsville Road in toward town and had a choice between a Best Western and a Friendship

Inn—missed the fancier Executive Inn and Ramada situated on the far side of the exit. Given what we saw, the limited choice, the Friendship Inn was "fine, okay," and The Kitchen Table (waffles and more) was across the parking lot. We could have said, "This one looks luxurious, relaxing, splendid," and could have had a Hillcrest Lounge just off the lobby or, better, room service—and could have written it all off as a business expense. But no.

As an introduction, maybe persuasion, we got a grand tour of Bowling Green. Phil came by to pick us up after we checked in and called the number he gave us. Heading up Scottsville Road into town, we saw the university's museum and part of campus, drove down the hill through town and out the road to see the house Phil was contracting to restore, then around to go back out past our motel to the Thompsons'.

Winnie and Carolyn held us a corner table in the lounge. Nice as their motel was, nice as a cold beer was, chicken strips and cheese crackers, another cold beer, and the chance to sit back and stretch my legs—I still felt less than happy. The trip back and forth on Scottsville Road was traffic, stop lights, car dealers, too many restaurants, one half-empty and half-a-dozen full shopping centers, including two fancy new ones adjacent to the mall. It's like Clarksville, like Nashville without a big city's downtown—just the aspiring little city's sprawl. I thought if that was Scottsville Road, I didn't want to see Scottsville.

I'm not one to turn up my nose at a little traffic, or a good choice of eating places, or even row after row of clothing shops, shoe stores, video rentals, and Baskin Robbinses. But this was spread on thick—a smear of jammed-up drivers and crowded businesses. And maybe I was thinking ahead, not sure what to think, and not happy about that.

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Winnie Thompson was the same as ever. Carolyn, though, even in the half-light lounges put on, I thought Carolyn looked different somehow. First thing when we sat down, Pamela reached over and tapped the ends of her hair—"I like this a lot."

"Thanks." Carolyn ran a hand down the back of her head, self-conscious. The Dorothy Hamill cut ended at the nape of her neck. "It's two weeks old. I got it mostly for the weather, but I've started to like it better than long."

That was the difference—most, some of it, anyway. Some newness was hard to put a finger on—a little less solemn but not more cheerful, not as pale, but not pink or tan either, voice a fraction less measured, clothes a touch more personal in style. Nothing I can describe—create before and after pictures for, but a slight alteration that left an effect, an air.

> **Pamela: Am I right—did you notice? Or am I making all this up because, working with her, I found out differences later? It's easy to say I noticed new hair so I must have been sharp enough to pick out the subtleties. For that matter, it was half-dark and I may be remembering the way I strained to see her.*

Nothing important in Phil ever changed. He loved Bowling Green already without even having moved up yet—drove us past his new favorite bar, which by the way had good food and "Look at that stairway, the door, the brickwork!" He laughed going down the hills, bounced his truck over the streets' dips and ridges, rolled up on a curb and pointed out the thick, healthy trees and flower gardens running along a residential street. He praised the town and the job—his part, the building and restoring, and mine, project manager (a title he and Carolyn made up for us to define later, I think).

Bowling Green wouldn't be the same without Pamela and me. The same as what?—but I didn't ask.

Phil loved Pamela and me. He loved Carolyn and Winnie. Sliding around the booth in the Hillcrest Lounge, he said, "One hell of an opportunity"—clapping an arm around Carolyn's shoulder and bouncing her—"and I owe it to Carly—recommended me to the advisory committee when the grant came through—every bit of the whole deal." He snorted and bounced her again. "We owe it to her, eh, Jimmy?"

"Well, yeah," I said and asked what the restoration involved. He kept asking me if I remembered such and such about the house we drove by, mostly interior details I couldn't begin to guess at, then drawing structural or ornamental work he wanted to put back in or add—making a check mark in the margin of his note pad every time he mentioned something for me or a subcontractor to do. Pretty soon he was talking in bursts, drawing arrows and circles, tearing off fresh sheets to start full blown sketches on.

Carolyn sipped her drink and hmmed to clear her throat. "What do you think, Jim?"

"Yeah." He leaned over the table toward me and handed me the note pad with half a drawing of baseboards. "What do you say?"

Looking over to Pamela, I said, "I have to think it over. When can I tell you—tomorrow?" It had to be tomorrow—at least that long.

He shifted like he wasn't comfortable in his seat, like there was no logical connection between what he said and what I answered. Carolyn sipped her watery scotch rocks. Phil held out his hands for an explanation—to her, to me. "Smile. Come on. You want to do this. What is there you got to think for?" He jiggled in his seat, wanting to get up and pace. He called for another beer. "Okay. There's not *really* a hurry. Tell me tomorrow. We'll

celebrate anyway though, okay?"

For a little while, we did—not long. Talk, talk. Winnie went up to bed before ten. Drink, tell stories. Then Carolyn had to go to get enough sleep for work in the morning, and Pamela walked with her to the door, intending me to come along a few minutes later when they wrapped up talking.

"Jamie O'Grady," Phil said. Leaning forward against the table he wrapped a forearm around his glass and hugged it to his chest. His voice was low, his eyes drooping. "Me boy. God's in his heaven, and everything's better than we got a right to expect, huh?" He wasn't too drunk, but tired enough to turn a fair buzz into a happy-drunk. But he felt a little let down, I could tell—me holding back his visions. "I've already talked to two other people thinking about having us do restorations—*already.* Restoration or projects just as big. Beautiful town, Bowling Green, I'm going to like it here—beautiful people. Winnie can like it too. Carly gave her approval of Bowling Green but never said a thing about having houses, buildings—I think there's antiques shops, two, maybe three museums. Wait'll you see inside her museum. And I've already heard about plenty of work for us, plenty, Jim."

It sounded good, I told him. I thought everything would turn out—though I didn't put it that way, not to bring up the subject of everything having a ways to go before turning out well. "Jimmy, I've told you things about dissatisfaction, once upon a time. Well, you know Winnie and me, we've always gotten along good. I want you to know we get along well." I finished my beer, and Phil followed me into the lobby, where he was in time to hug Carolyn goodbye, to hug Pamela and me in one armful, squeezing us together. Before turning to climb upstairs, he looked serious at me and shook a finger: *what is there you got to think for?*

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The street lamps were those unhealthy, unnatural pink ones. And the Kitchen Table (waffles and more), the Gulf station, the Pantry, the Best Western, and the Friendship Inn were lit up to lure—welcome— customers and provide security. Even so, behind us the fields past the interstate sat black, no indication of city glow—suddenly rural, completely unlike Nashville. It was late and I was tired.

In the room, Pamela in the bathroom getting ready for bed, I turned the TV away from my side of the bed (Pamela likes staying in motel rooms but usually wants a television picture going to fall asleep by) and sat to pull off shoes, socks, pants, shirt.

"It's a good, good opportunity," Pamela said over the sound of water.

"Yes." I figured—hoped—pretty soon she'd get to what she thought we could do and how she felt about it—and be up front about it. Obviously she'd stay with her drugstore at least for a while, and I could come to Bowling Green to start work—or not. It seemed likely there were less obvious considerations and variations.

I had two problems to run through. First I had to square away all the reasons for my choice, so I needed Pamela's perspective and feelings. And I wanted her to help with the reasons.

She came and got into bed and neither of us spoke about it a few minutes. Then, "It's a good opportunity."

"Yeah. And Phil's real happy about starting up here," I answered.

"And I think I'll like getting a job here. It wouldn't be too long till then."

"Yeah."

We exchanged many such obvious points before trying out serious considerations, and I rambled over them, putting them in different words to

see how they sounded. And we said, "I'm going to miss you if we do this," and "Long distance between here and Dumont can't cost that much," and "We'll see each other all weekend every weekend." We began to mumble and break off in the middle of thoughts. I decided to let the reasoning settle overnight and see how the problem stood come morning—or it got late enough that seemed like the thing to do.

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I didn't sleep. The parking lot security lights washed out the television flickers showing on the opposite wall—even through the motel double drapes. What lights shine at night in Dumont are sputtering gleams in comparison.

And for other reasons I didn't sleep. My mind's eye kept running over the part of Bowling Green I knew best—Scottsville Road with all its attractions. My thoughts picked up insistence over the sounds of the air conditioner and some distant Coke machine—*what do we do? can we get away with trying to live apart?* And I listened to Pamela breathing, wanting to know how come she got to be tired enough to sleep and not me.

I pulled on jeans and a shirt, shoes without socks, and struck off across the parking lot toward the Table restaurant. I know I didn't make any noise to wake Pamela, and the night only sounded of muffled noises when I opened the door—a bit of traffic, humming lamps, air conditioners. The anxiety of my problems dulled to a manageable level as I concentrated on my footing in the grass and ditch between the Inn lot and the Table lot, distracting my thoughts.

One other customer, a drowsy man, sat in the Table at the counter—a farmer or a farmer's college boy, judging by the pickup outside, the denim jacket he wore in spite of the warm night, the herbicide cap on the counter by his plate. One waitress. The cook, whose arms and shoulders showed

passing the orders window, back and forth. I slid into a seat at the middle of the counter, ordered coffee and toast. Coffee: no, I didn't want to sleep, not me.

The second problem, complicated enough on its own terms, offered me a piece of cake, a walk in the park, a Sunday drive, a breath of fresh air comparatively. I took them. Listing the start up work for Phil's enterprise—contacting the appropriate Kentucky tax folks, arranging unemployment insurance and subcontracting groundwork, finding a bank and office space and services—I relaxed, sitting loose and easy on the stool before I knew it. I hadn't been with Thompson Woodworks at the beginning, but I knew there were steps to follow, knew subcontracting from the days T.WW. took on pieces of a job, knew bargaining from the end in Nashville. I lurched from this chore to that, but got somewhere, made progress with these difficulties.

"Jim?"

It took a moment to sink in that someone in Bowling Green would be talking to me at two-thirty in the morning, and I swiveled in the seat only when I realized that was Pamela's sleepy sounding voice.

I wondered what she was doing over here in the Kitchen Table (waffles and more). How did she know that's where I went? Even granted she saw the car where we left it, I could walk to any number of places, and she sure didn't need to be wandering place to place alone in a strange town at two-thirty looking for me.

> **Pamela: You came straight there. You're going to have to tell me. Was this some understanding, insight coming out of knowing me inside, outside, and upside down? More familiarity with me than I have myself—know what I'll do before I do it.*

She slipped into the next seat, ordering a glass of milk— skim milk if they had it. "What's up, sweetie?" ("Sweetie" is a word from her grandmother's vocabulary.)

The farming boy looked up, thinking of the waitress with the coffee pot to warm his cup, then around. Seeing someone else had spoken, he ducked his head again. We were as good as alone.

I started to tell Pamela what getting Phil's renovation up and running entailed, but stopped myself, bringing my cup to my lips. I realized all my planning for the difficulties or my job depended on my eliminating the first problem. The debate whether we were in shape to live apart had resolved itself of turned neutral for the time being. To be honest, I wanted this job— full time, working for Phil, a good boss, the guy who got me started before I even had a degree, a new business with a good first contract located in a city that was spreading out, security. I wanted to see it this way.

"I don't want to have to leave you to come here."

Pamela slipped her arm through mine.

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"About damn time, Jim. Aren't you glad we've already gone and celebrated?" We were sitting in Carolyn's office in the museum, so Phil kept his voice down, but he clapped his hand on my shoulder and shook it. "What say, Carly?" She smiled. "How come you kept us waiting, didn't just say yes to start with?"

"Well, we had to talk it over."

"Sure," Carolyn said.

I matched my tone of voice to Phil's. "Can't just pack up and leave her with ten minute's warning and a hearty handshake."

He snorted. "Leave her. Quit it." But Carolyn sat back, frowning.

"I mean, she has her job, Phil."

"Jimmy. They got pharmacies in Bowling Green."

"She can't just shut down in Dumont. But she'll move here after she and the owner find a replacement. And, meantime, she's going to come up every couple of weeks and talk to people—move once she gets a job. She's looking forward to it."

Carolyn said, "Tell her good luck. I was looking forward to having her in town."

"Oh, Jim," Phil said, "aw, Jim. Hell. I didn't mean for this. I wouldn't want to tell you kids to split up." He set his mouth and squinted like he was trying to think a way out of his predicament.

"Every weekend she's not here I'll be there. I don't think it'll take her long to find herself a good drugstore." Consoling him. I stood and put my hand on the back of his chair. "We're going to check on a couple of apartments from the paper for me, then look around town, the mall, and head home this afternoon—unless there's anything?"

"No, no. But y'all take care. I'll see you soon."

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**Note: How* did *Pamela know to find me in restaurant? For that matter, what woke her up? Old married couple? Start trying to think of, write down situations like this, whether she can know more than I think. Maybe get her to help?*

Part III

Chapter 2

Cycles of Reunion and Making-Do

Visiting one another is a hell of a way to run a marriage. For over a month we kept a schedule of alternate weekends—me in Dumont from Friday evening to Sunday night, Pamela here the next Saturday morning till she left sometime Monday while I was at work. Very methodically, every other Friday morning I packed a small suitcase or old briefcase with my razor, jeans, some shirts and underwear, anything else I didn't already have extra of at home, maybe nice clothes if I thought we'd go out to Crofton for dinner. Phil and Carolyn gave me messages to take Pamela, and I left straight from the site without stopping at the apartment. I was ready to go.

By my second trip, I remembered the highway exit and small town turns without needing signs—felt comfortable with my route. In a way, I started this inquiry then. Not writing, obviously, not at sixty-five miles an hour, but when I did decide to start writing, it was partly out of frustration at losing questions and ideas I wondered about on those drives, those and other drives I took later—and partly for the sake of questions I still had turning over in my mind pretty often, basically, *how did we end up in Bowling Green this way? what did I miss?*

"Pamela, it's me," I said, almost two hours after leaving work. "What are we doing for dinner?" That was something we missed—at least I think she did—that we never cooked together in the Bowling Green/Dumont days.

Instead I turned right around and got back in my car and we went for Reggie's barbeque, or Pamela threw a match on a heap of prepared briquets and we grilled burgers. Even the middle day of the weekend was no better, what with chores, errands, visiting, recounting any news not already shared by phone, griping both old and new gripes, and handling Norris's business. The day blew by and all meals were catch as catch can. Pamela always liked cooking together—good settled way of spending time together, busy, productive, and little demand on the mind compared to our jobs.

But we had other fish to fry in three days. And, to tell the truth, what we'd be doing for supper wasn't the first priority for either of us on a warm Friday evening or sunny Saturday. Sex with my wife two or three nights a week was fine, very acceptable, but having no opportunity at all five days straight, no choice, no chance, none, makes it seem very rare. We never got quite that much use out of the living room furniture before.

All in all, they weren't bad weekends. Norris wasn't satisfied with only seeing his financial advisor one day out of fourteen, but I was. He got no less financial advice than before, and he was getting around as well as any seventy year old—agile enough to keep busy with his chickens, his dog, or a favorite tenant, energetic enough to take messages to the pharmacy for Pamela to relay. The three of us coped.

I drove back to my apartment, not too unhappy for the next day or so. And every Sunday night, I realized I was unloading more from the car than I packed.

My apartment was on Rock Creek Drive, on the far side of Bowling Green from I-65 and, crossing town in another direction, from Phil's restoration, though the drive to and from work turned out as easy as my route in Nashville. I stored my unexpected bonuses of winter clothing in the

spare closet, stacked cassette tapes on the bar separating the living and dining areas, put Pamela's brush on a special bathroom shelf and her shorts in a dresser drawer.

That wasn't a bad apartment. Quiet, a little over 500 square feet, only three other apartments in the building, red brick exterior with some limestone block detailing. I had a small patio (poured concrete, half a step above the grass, half a step down from the back door) to sit and drink a beer with Phil. The landlord provided some basics (Pamela and I didn't have a spare bed to bring up), and I picked up an odd or end as needed. No large bugs. An adequate place to live, no worse.

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The job didn't take long to get used to, or I should say didn't give me long. When I started, I started straight in. The first day, I drove out Cemetery Road to the site, Phil introduced me to the owner and the curator who'd be leasing the house and hosting the exhibits or tours or whatever, and we promptly forgot they were there—Phil had me by the elbow and we circled the house, assigning ourselves work. My list hasn't gotten shorter since.

The house, an 1870s, two-story farm house, was not in bad shape, but it wasn't in good shape either, definitley not period condition. The museum curator said it was built by a leading citizen, one of the area's first big tobacco farmers as a society home for his kids, who immediately liquidated when the old man died about the time of the first world war. The current owner picked it up last year as a simple real estate deal, and in the intervening time that's what it had become—a so-what piece of property, barely standing out from a dozen other period homes on that side of town and in the neighboring countryside—tall, white buildings with porches, balconies, and steep roofs. Clapboards drooped loose, low-power air conditioners stuck out of five

windows, and Sears storm doors sat in door frames a foot taller, the difference made up in aluminum siding. The scrolled baseboards in several rooms had been replaced with pine one-by-sixes. Stairs had split or warped. Phil saw before he got the assignment that we'd be subcontracting roofers, plumbers, probably an electrician, a bricklayer, a landscaper, the double-pane window people, painters.

But despite the indifferent treatment it had received since the '20s, Phil wanted this house. He wanted to get his hands on the mantlepieces, the baseboards, and the gingerbreading—put doors, bannisters, and shelving back as they ought to be. And now, this owner—nominally the co-recipient of grant funds, actually a signature halfway up the paper trail—said, "Do it up right." And me—with the house, the job—I was satisfied.

One day early in the project, Phil and I stood out front approving material and work orders. "The stairs tomorrow," he said. "I want a lot of that in Douglas fir." I made the note as he started back to the house. "And, Jim, check for termites around. If there's any sign, we'll spray and we'll need same-kind replacement lumber."

I dropped my portfolio pad in the car and began looking for a stubby screwdriver in his truck. Half ready to head down to the basement and stab at a few two-by-fours, I thought I'd need to hurry up so I could make my calls. Just then, it occurred to me that's what I was supposed to do, not inspect for termites myself—no more than I'd be the one scrabbling around with a spray canister over my shoulder. As project manager, I made arrangements for a pest control inspection in the overall scheme.

Whether Phil—when he said to me, "check for termites"— assumed I'd operate on the same assumptions he did, or phrased it like I would check out of habit from days when I actually would, or didn't even think of it past

needing someone to inspect—I don't know. But he didn't literally intend me to. He and Carolyn cooked up *project manager,* meaning administration.

Separating myself from the termites, I liked managing a project. Liked it miles and away more than painting fences, moving lawyer-furniture, playing errand boy. But one thing I expected didn't turn out. I'd counted on being on site at the project. Instead, I'd show up, talk to Phil, use the phone, and take right off to look after whatever appointments or trouble I found. I can't call it disappointment, can't call it relief. A vague picture of standing in the yard with a clipboard and calculator—arms folded, wind in my hair—got replaced with the actuality of a wide range of creative paper shuffling and cheery impersonal exchanges. Easiest, or least official, least commercial, were meetings with Carolyn or her supervisor, the curator. She was accustomed to working with me, and the curator only asked how the house would end up, never what was happening on the way to the final product.

Meetings with Carolyn had a disadvantage. She talked to Pamela on the phone almost as often as I did. My idea was I'd stay busy at work during the week, preoccupy my thoughts. No, every other day Carolyn brought her up in conversation. I looked forward to meetings with Carolyn—my old friend (one of three within seventy miles) who actually cooperated with me on doing anything for Phil's project. I enjoyed seeing her. But I never got away from her without missing Pamela.

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The next time Pamela came up to Bowling Green, two weekends after the termites, we picked out a house. I called my landlord before she came and asked if he had any houses he'd rent me. He gave me two addresses, we chose between them, and Pamela and I decided I'd go ahead and move in.

My home, soon to become ours, was out Old Morgantown Road—closer

to work than Rock Creek Drive, same distance to the highway. Three bedrooms (including an eight by ten cubbyhole), living room, combined dining and kitchen. Backyard with trees, driveway, flowerbed out front. No more than four other houses in the subdivision built from the same floorplan as mine.

The choice took part of Saturday morning. Then, right away it seemed a normal weekend. I monopolized her time as usual. Pamela scanned the *Daily News* classifieds. We found some lunch, ran around the mall (Pamela could always take or leave malls until Dumont—then, fascination). I took her to the movies. She got Carolyn, Phil, and Winnie to meet us for dinner.

We got a big table in a restaurant Phil liked, not his favorite, but another place with beer, a several page menu, and an old building. The Parakeet was in a simple brick structure I'd say had originally been a barn except for the fact it sat in the middle of a block of banks and city government buildings just as old. But I had to agree it was a great place. Frankly, not counting fast food joints, I hadn't been anywhere but Phil's favorite restaurants. I only ate out when we went somewhere after work or when Pamela and I had the night out, and we knew we could trust Phil's opinion. Phil went everywhere.

Most of the evening at the Parakeet, the five of us held our normal conversation on politics, how hot it should get, how this dish or that tea tasted, mostly following Phil from topic to topic. But Pamela and I thought of something to throw in about the new house every so often. I may have gotten a little windy, in fact, after we stayed an hour past dessert and I had beer in me. Good insulation, nice neighborhood, friendly neighbors (based on meeting one when we tried the wrong address), no cement parking lots out the windows but *green*— grass and trees. I bet I could talk the landlord into

selling if I wanted. Literally, I tried to bet Phil a buck.

Pamela, similarly excited, cut off a Dumont story in the middle, inspired by a sudden thought: "Oh! Carly, want to come to the house next time I'm up? Dinner in, uh, two weeks." Carolyn nodded, said yes. "How about y'all?"

Phil leaned into Winnie, inclining his head, letting her know he was agreeable, it was up to her. "Just tell us what you want us to bring," she said.

We set the time. Then Phil insisted on picking up the whole check—our housewarming present. Though we weren't making a late night of it—weren't letting the beer do all our thinking—my excitement and Pamela's latched onto this idea and kept it circulating. Finally someone (maybe me) suggested it wouldn't be much of a housewarming if we weren't there. So the five of us ended up inspecting an empty, unlighted building retaining all the day's heat. Carolyn was the first to show any sense, saying it was time she went home and got some rest.

The next morning Pamela and I slept in and left the apartment late. Our feeling of establishing another home not quite satisfied by the tag end of last evening, we ate lunch at Mariah's (Phil's all-time favorite in Bowling Green), transferred a few pictures and cassettes to the new home, and went shopping for other things I couldn't do without until Pamela got a job and moved in with all our stuff—linens and towels, a few more dishes, ice trays. Pamela blew through Wal-Mart *and* the mall, stocking up—organizing in her mind my house, her house, and the contents of my apartment.

In all the exchanges of packages, bags, and boxes Sunday night and Monday morning before I went to work, from car to car, from apartment to house, I still felt I knew what was going where. There was a logic to which

things could go early and which had to wait till Phil, his truck, and I made the move official. But I came home from work that night and looked for the book I was reading. Everything else, old and new, was put away where expected, but no book—not in the apartment, the house, or my car.

I didn't find it till the next weekend, in Dumont. Waiting while Pamela ran a work errand, I sat on our couch, picked the book up from the coffee table, and started reading from my last dog-eared page without thinking. Then I startled myself, "*Hey!*" dropped it, wondered where it came from, checked my dog-earing to make sure it was the same copy and not one Pamela just happened to have—the whole bit unreal, unnerving, almost slapstick.

When I asked Pamela what happened, she tipped her head to one side. "Hm. I needed it. I got started reading and couldn't leave it. Weren't you done?"

But I really caught her in the snatch and run act the next weekend. During the week, we discussed my reasons for coming to Dumont, and I called Mr. Norris to arrange advising him by phone and mail. I promised I'd contact him once a week and said he could call whenever he wanted (as he already did, frequently), but successfully persuaded him buying fax machines wasn't necessary, however much he wanted one. So, now that I became Norris's agent in Kentucky full time, Pamela started making her trip to Bowling Green every weekend, to be available for job interviews, to see Carolyn and the Thompsons, to take advantage of all the activities Bowling Green offered and Dumont didn't.

But I caught her reorganizing our households that first time up. I saw her car out the kitchen window, but she didn't come to the door. After waiting a couple of minutes, I walked out, and she stood there at the back of

the Honda trying to get leverage on her rocking chair. "About time," she said. "I could use some help here." Reaching into the hatch for a grip on the arms, she'd wedged herself between the back of the chair and the side window. Her voice came out a little muffled.

*Pamela: *I'm sorry. But you did look funny kicking up gravel and dust trying to get traction to pull. I'm sure it was a lot less trouble putting the chair into the car and it didn't look like it was swallowing you. You don't have to tell me how many of those struggles you went through before we moved you up. Not if you don't want to. But I do wonder why.*

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Having Pamela spend more time in Bowling Green made it feel more like home. I changed my driver's license, read up on the Kentucky income tax, settled into living in a new state (or commonwealth, according to this history book I got, though I think it must be a different kind of commonwealth than Puerto Rico). But the next weekend, when it would have been my turn to travel, I missed that time on the road. By Wednesday I decided I had nothing better to do with my evenings, hopped into the Buick, and took off for nowhere in particular. I never really felt like going and being around a lot of people. Every few days I burned some energy and several dozen miles. I found out Morgantown was a worn out, worn down looking place with some outlandishly twisted, hilly road on the way, like a slalom course through the woods—glad I didn't discover it one fine, icy winter's day.

A couple of times I drove around Nashville and came back, explored the south side, where there's wilderness on both sides of the interstate, then suddenly hospitals, theaters, and country music museums, and I visited Grandma Owen's grave (saw fresh flowers my second trip, so Pamela did a

little driving in her spare time too). I discovered I had no urge to see our old apartment or visit old hangouts—didn't miss them.

One night I showed up in Dumont. Surprised Pamela. Didn't make it back over the state line till late.

On another drive, I saw a sign pointing down a side road to a place called Pilot Knob, then twenty feet on, a supplementary sign advertised antiques. Since I had no real calling to continue my trip to Russellville, I thought why not see if I could find anything to surprise Pamela with next time she walked in the door. Pilot Knob was a post office, a restaurant, several houses, and the antique shop, as far as I could tell. But the shop was something.

One room had nothing but old farm implements and tools—shelves and shelves of them, a washstand piled with hatchets, crowbars, and scythe blades, steel tobacco signs and no trespassing signs with bullet holes. A marketplace for farmers to sell their grandfathers' junk. And this place had four other rooms just as full—seventy-five-year-old toys, oak desks, button and spool bedsteads, sepia postcards with fountain penned addresses and one-cent stamps.

Two women seemed to be the shopkeepers. One—white-haired, thin, loud—came up to me. "Help you find something?"

"Well," I said. I looked at a cabinet I liked—free standing, about five feet tall and four wide, doors paneled with tin and glass panes. "What wood is this china cabinet?"

"That's no china cabinet. That's a pie safe."

"Oh."

"We had a china cabinet in till last week. Sold it."

"What wood is this one?"

"Cherry. This is cherrywood here."

"Really? How much are you asking for it?"

She looked for a sticker on the side. "One-twenty."

"Wow." I couldn't pass on that. "My wife and I just got a house, and this'll be real nice for our dishes and silver."

"Congratulations. Where is she at?"

I didn't go into the explanation, just said, "Home."

"Sorry we got no good china cabinets in for you. I can take your name."

"I think this'll be fine." I pressed on a shelf and shook it to make sure it would support the weight.

"Well, all right," she said, "so as you know that's just a pie safe you're buying."

As she watched me and her grandson fitting it into the trunk and tying the lid snug against layers of newspaper, I thought about the picture I'd make unloading it. Where Pamela had a chair to get hold of, I'd be struggling with a pie safe. Either I got carried away with my sense of being project manager and householder or Pamela caught me up in her schemes of getting, keeping, and moving. Whatever the case, I hardly felt at all ridiculous walking around the house with an eighty pound shell of cherrywood on my back.

Part III

Chapter 3

Questions on Responsibility and Appeal

As I've said, I always looked forward to going for lunch with Carolyn, one of the three people in town I knew well enough to call friends. It was a pleasure to see her.

Certainly, I've known Phil longer. He's been good to Pamela and me. I was glad, moving into a strange city, to be working with him again. Winnie I saw in the same situations as in Nashville—over to their house for an evening, the group of us going out somewhere—but more often than before. I felt like I knew her better. Didn't think of her as a friend only through Phil. And after a month in Bowling Green, I recognized people to talk to—acquaintances.

It was that I didn't see Carolyn as often as I did Phil. And that she was such a friend of Pamela's. Business meetings we held were very informal and very efficient, relief from the usual. I kept her up-to-date on the progress of the restoration, we discussed the niceties of expenses and the results Phil got, and she was responsible for the reports to the funding organization, the Kentucky Homes Historical Foundation.

I'm not sure why my trips to her office turned into lunch meetings so often. Obviously, for one reason, I'd worked my way from the site that far into town by the right time of the day. It was a good excuse for her to get away from her desk and files. We didn't mind talking shop with our mouths

full. Occasionally, Phil and Winnie wanted the four of us to meet, but generally not—just a straight business lunch.

For instance, one day we went to Mariah's, unusual for a working lunch because it's a nice restaurant with a bar and it's far from the museum, but I kept Carolyn reminded of the time so she could make it back, and I had my file of bills to pay.

This is an interesting point. Working in an office, Carolyn stuck to a more definite schedule. I remember that structured day from my time with the accounting firm; then I never expected anything else. Now I didn't follow such pre- established form. Meantime, my days at Thompson WoodWorks never made it an issue either way. Eight to five was generally the case, not absolutely. Now, we put in the same amount of time on the job, I'd say, though following different avenues. It's possible this defined schedule was better for her—less opportunity, less inclination, less reason to work overtime, to overwork—yet still a challenge, pushing the limits of certain hours, bureaucratic paperwork, supervising and being supervised.

My schedule was good for me—planning and delegating, clocking my own time, assigning my own tasks, managing myself more than managing others, really. I set myself to pay those bills, designated that table across from the waiters' stand as my desk, cranked out the product. Carolyn told me I could come to the museum archives and use the reading room, but I did just as well staying where I was, all things considered. I outlasted the lunch crowd and had it just as quiet as a private office, buying coffee and iced tea and cheesecake to pay rent on my table, but keeping to myself enough that I didn't make work for the waiters. By two o'clock I was their buddy—someone to talk to while folding napkins.

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A week or two before, Pamela and I were in Mariah's. We got there late, and most customers had left, so most waiters took off. The man taking our orders wasn't outfitted in the white over tan clothes everyone else waiting tables wore. Blue shirt, loose tie, jeans. As he walked off, Pamela looked after him, trying not to stare. When he brought our drinks, he glanced around, saw no other tables needing service, and leaned over the back of one of our vacant chairs, conversationally and cheerfully saying, "Hope you folks'll be patient with me. I'm out of practice, but thought it'd be best to give some of the staff a break. I'll try not to mix anything up for you."

"You're the manager?"

He nodded. "The owner, yeah."

"Oh," Pamela said, pleased. "We like your restaurant very much."

"Thanks." When he next came back, bringing our food, he picked up where he left off—"I lose a lot of waiters and waitresses every summer. College lets out. These kids'll stay up all night for a party, or when they got to study, but they'll still wear out working all the same old hours all night. Enjoy the chicken."

Pamela *hm* ed after he moved away, sounding sympathetic. "What do you think happened to his hands? It looks old."

"What looks old?" I was confused whether she meant his own hands or hired hands.

"The injury. It's old scarring." She paused to see if I followed her. "You'll see when he takes our plates." Medical concern. She went on talking and eating like normal— automatically, routinely counting him among her circle of sufferers of allergies, hypertension, diabetes, stroke, torn muscles, infected cuts, sore gums, migraines, flu, and smoke poisoning. I, on the contrary, kept wanting him to walk past, slowly.

His hands were missing fingers. Specifically he'd lost the ends—the ungual phalanges, Pamela said later—of the right middle and ring fingers, and the left pinkie was gone. His right index finger had no nail, and a few pale lines of scars ran across other fingers and the hands, backs and fronts. But I didn't stare.

We stayed for a while, and she didn't mention it. When we walked out and turned up the street, she shook her head. "That was something fairly serious happened to him. But it looks like he's got full function." We walked to the Buick. She fanned her face trying to stir the humid air.

I wanted to find out what happened and figured Pamela'd want to know too. The day Carolyn and I went to lunch at Mariah's, I remembered to look but didn't see him, all through the meal and the whole time I stayed. But while I was talking with the staff wiping tables and folding napkins, I realized they might know.

I worked carefully. "Pretty slow this time of day." "How do you like it, working here?" "Hi, I'm Jim Grady. Only lived here a couple of months." "It's a very nice restaurant." I found out his name was Mohr. He was tough but didn't seem that way, and he cooked whenever he could get away from his desk. Though they were young—two waitresses and a waiter working in and out of my area, college age—they were at least sophisticated enough that they weren't abuzz with Mohr's unusual feature. Having said that, I suppose it makes me nosey or less mature, but they were used to him. Finally, I said the right thing—"He seems like a good guy."

"Yeah, and he's not a bad boss really. But, you know, he's not much of a talker. I mean, he's friendly, but, well."

"Don't talk about himself," one of the waitresses said.

"Yeah, that's it."

The waiter lowered his voice and I almost expected him to look over his shoulder. "You know for sure what happened to his hands?" he asked the waitress folding napkins with him, the older one, maybe twenty.

"Wasn't he in Vietnam? My dad's got scars that look just like that on his shoulder."

"No, let me tell you," the other said. She leaned over the table next to me, put one hand down, then the other on top, her fingers making a lattice of x's. "He got them caught in some machine. See? Like an engine fan cut them off."

"Fan doesn't turn that way. It'd just push the little finger in, not catch it and cut it off."

"A car engine's just my example."

The first waitress exaggerated a shiver to excuse herself from this conversation and concentrated on folding napkins, forming semicircles rising from accordion bases, a row of them looking like shell halves or antique folding fans. The other two mentioned harvesters and hamburger grinders and asked me if I wanted dessert or anything else to drink. I had coffee, finished the bills, and went home to put them on my computer and drink a beer.

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I never have had any more luck than the three of them on that question, and Pamela's never shown curiosity, though she refers to Mariah's as "that man's place." But I had other inquiries warming up—segments of this overall question and answer routine.

As I got basics of project managing under control, I became better able to see what worked well enough to pass but could stand improvement—to see exactly where problems got started. The second time we got a poorer grade of

wood than we ordered from the building supply house, I did more than return and reorder. I got one of the boys to help me load it back up, and this time I took it myself so I could have a word with the guy in charge of the lumberyard. If he didn't know where the switch came from, he could point me in the right direction to chart the paper trail—starting with Phil handing me his want-list and coming back around to me walking to the pickup carrying an eight-foot board that wasn't the ornamental quality walnut we ordered.

Jack kept me waiting a few minutes while he called the front office to clear the exchange. Since I wasn't angry to begin with, though, the wait didn't aggravate me. I leaned on the truck and smelled fresh-cut lumber till he came out. "Sorry about this. I expected you wanted the cheaper, the less expensive."

I climbed into the bed of the truck to slide lengths of wood to him. No, I explained, our requirements were pretty specific. I thought it was cleared up, an easy investigation. I'd be easy-going but clear and firm.

"My fault," he said, and I told him we appreciated the effort even though it wasn't necessary. And still, before we started pulling out the good walnut, he remarked, "Course you realize that other met standards fine." We knew. It was just that it didn't fit the need.

"Well all righty, just so you know I wasn't giving you substandard. And I didn't even expect you to split the difference with us or nothing."

I didn't think he was hinting for a kickback. It was easiest just to assume he was friendly and overhelpful—on call from then to find out specifically if he had such and such, send him a written order, and have one of the crew who knew what to get pick it up. Simple.

**Note: Regarding Norris's tenant in Crofton. What Jack did*

was change our order without telling us. Norris authorized the amount of rent I got for him, but all I did was not tell him I didn't dicker like he expected me to. Half-truths, lies, and withheld information are all related, but they cover a big stretch of ethical ground. His main points were keeping the lawyer and keeping a respectable amount of rent coming in. I did that. No ethical difficulty.

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That guy's name wasn't Jack. What was it? Something like that. Mike.

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Actual revision of plans needed documentation. Phil said, "Jim, this is what I need you for, buddy. I'm not any good at this."

"What?"

"Can you and Carly change the budget? Not up or down. Alexander put me onto a way to save plumbing money and I think it'd be a good idea to spend it on the back porch instead."

Ron Alexander was the owner. He came around the site a lot. More than it was worth his while as figurehead grant recipient—silent partner, that's about all he was supposed to be. Phil tolerated him. I didn't have to see him as much at first.

"Have you heard of a tub restorer? Me neither, but Alexander said he knows a guy who knows a guy, right? Says the process makes them good as new. According to prices I got we'll save a hundred probably." The house's three bathtubs weren't original, but were old—all footed, one with ball-and-claw feet —all were chipped and worn—two had been painted all around the outside with exterior enamel. Our plumber estimated for replacement, and

Phil refused to get sappy, nostalgic, expensive reproductions, but simple, high-quality modern freestanders cost plenty too. Restoration was more in line with the project's intent anyway.

"He wanted to use the money for a stone wall at the bottom of the driveway, but we can't, can we?"

I ran through allowable expenditures—masonry repair, architectural detail repair or replacement, exterior rehabilitation (whatever that means). Compatible additions came closest, but there'd never been a wall on any of the property, no near contemporary house in the area had one, and Phil obviously didn't want the showy feature on his house. Botton line: "No."

"I want to do the back porch, Jimmy, the rear entryway. It's got no detail work, no railings, no nothing, just a big stoop. I know all they wanted back then was the kitchen door. Nobody saw it. But people will now. I want to lattice it. It'll be great."

I called the tub restorer and Mike at the lumberyard and did the math on the estimate, the materials, and the per-hour for Phil's labor. A conservative total was slightly more than the old budget set aside for new tubs. I wanted to ask Carolyn if she thought the curator leasing the place would cough up a little money to help out. That was the day we went to Mariah's.

Usually we just walked out of the museum and ate in a campus cafeteria or off-campus sandwich shop. Nice enough old buildings, brick, but all students and plastic trays, white tile, and linoleum. There weren't too many summer students—we could work—but I thought we'd need to discuss getting the curator to come up with the money. And I just preferred the atmosphere of Mariah's to a cafeteria.

In fact, Carolyn said Dr. Edwards planned on taking a percentage of

restoration costs—in addition to his rent—had even looked into home improvement loans—before the Kentucky Homes Historical Foundation grant came through. He'd saved up quite a sum for his share and for suitable antique furniture, and would willingly cover the slight difference latticing made in our cost. "You want to come back to the office?" she asked. "He should be there." I said no, asked her to wait while I made out a preliminary budget and some tax suggestions for him.

I wanted to stay and get some work done. And, actually, I wanted her to stay too. Carolyn seemed happy in Bowling Green. She took to museum administration very well, very capably, getting a good grip on what was needed so she could work efficiently, without pressure. She had good friends in town now —Pamela visiting often, Phil and Winnie and me living here. Her health was better—no medication, just more throat lozenges and more distance from the smoking tables than most people needed. Still no color in her face. She hardly got outside to walk with all the hills in town and the heat of the last couple months. But she swam—went to the pool, did her laps, went straight indoors—so she was fit, good figure. I should say better figure. She was still underweight, but had lost the sharp edge of her jawline and shinbone, developed some curve to her hips and ass.

She looked at her watch and relaxed. She had some time to take it easy while I wrote out the Edwards information. She asked about Pamela, then after a moment said, "It can't be easy on you, missing Pamela. But at least you appreciate what you have together now."

We talked and I referred to tax credit statements from my briefcase. "Bowling Green's different for you. I suppose we're in a similar situation." This was talkative for her. I finished my note and sat back to make conversation. "I enjoy seeing Phil," she said. "We're still friends."

"But he's a busy man." I meant work and home, but personality too. I thought of Phil and Carolyn as contrasts.

"Yes." She finished her tea and held the glass tilted up, resting the ice on her teeth to sip as it melted. "I like Bowling Green, but it helps having someone you're close to here." Winding up the lunch, we paid and tipped. I took out the check register and bill file, turning down her offer of space in the museum reading room, and said goodbye.

To tell the absolute truth, I didn't want to stay in the restaurant and work and I didn't want to go back to the museum. I wanted to take her home, undress quickly, and have sex. More than that, I wanted to sit there all afternoon and talk—naked, maybe take a shower together, but talk, ask questions, seriously. This was serious.

It's not that I felt lonely. Pamela came to town every weekend, staying as long as she could without neglecting the pharmacy. I'd seen her three days before.

It's not that I felt slighted. Pamela called me, made time to talk whenever I called (middle of the day or late at night), sometimes wrote notes before she left Bowling Green.

It's not that I didn't think I was doing my part. I wanted weekends to come. Wanted to hear her voice on the phone. I enjoyed her news of Dumont and sympathized with her troubles there more than when I lived there.

I wasn't going without enough sex. I didn't feel like trying out an open marriage. I didn't associate Carolyn with Pamela as a substitute or a twin.

Admittedly, I had thoughts about sleeping with her. But then I stopped. First I pictured her in the black cotton sundress she wore sometimes—tee shirt material, a nice fit, snug. I pictured her without it, guessing she had small nipples, perfectly round, pale pink. I decided she had

no appendectomy scar, based on no real reason except the illogical exclusion that she'd had smoke poisoning, not appendicitis. Then I quit imagining her body and specific anatomy because, even though I'd been thinking she probably wasn't involved with anyone, I had to answer myself of course not—she'd have told me, confided in Pamela. She was lonely, but no more so than a lot of people. Not lonely enough to spontaneously make her think of me for a passionate romantic afternoon away from the office. Acting out any moment from my inspired imaginary scenes wouldn't work. It would never happen.

Her recovery from the losses I knew about—home, perfect health, two relationships, two jobs, her hometown—had progressed well enough that no sign showed until times like this when she relaxed and started talking and got thoughtful. I wouldn't count on those being all the losses she'd gone through, either. *I* certainly can't claim to know the whole story.

And like I said, Pamela and I were making a two state marriage work—just imagine when she found a job to suit her here. There was no practical opportunity, much less advantage, for either Carolyn or me. I desired an attractive woman, a woman I worked with, Pamela's best friend, my friend. So. I like fantasy, but I don't spend much time on it.

Bills to pay, other questions to work on, I told her goodbye, said I'd talk to her in a day or so. It was good seeing her.

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Not that this is any of my business, but I wonder—six, seven months ago she wasn't as satisfied with the way things were going for her. Neither was Phil. I know they kept in touch after Thompson WoodWorks.

Prying, unfounded speculation. And as far as I'm concerned, an irrelevant digression.

Part III

Chapter 4

Finding Out the Balance

Ron Alexander was no landlord like Norris. Besides the museum house, he owned a few odd pieces of rental property— mostly student housing. But he made his living as an administrator at the airport. Small airport, couldn't be much to administrate, but he had money, so I suspect he had a hand in coal or stocks.

The man had money. He dressed well, at least every time I saw him at the site—and you wouldn't expect a guy to dress up to come see construction. Wore a golf cap from Bowling Green's better club. And he drove a Mercedes. I don't know Mercedeses, but this was a smooth little two-door, silver, remote locks and alarm, the cellular phone antenna coiled tight and inconspicuous at the right trunk hinge, rich black interior.

For somebody comfortably well off, Alexander was an annoying son of a bitch. Aggravating, irritating. One day, in casual conversation with Phil, I was talking about my house— back when I first moved. Alexander came up and overheard something I said about rent or conditions of the lease. "Should have moved into one of mine," he said. "I have two vacant right now."

"Well, yeah, I'm happy where I am. My wife and I."

"Come take a look at mine. Good opportunity."

I felt I knew why he had vacancies. It was summer and these were student houses—low maintenance priority for him, and probably some

strange doors and walls thrown in to make apartment rental possible. "Thanks," I said. "I'm already in a lease."

He shook his head. "You ought to move into one of my houses." I absolutely couldn't tell if he was kidding or seriously urging me to move.

When I said, "Oh, well," or "Just my luck," something nonargumentative, he shook his head again and turned to Phil, asking what was on the day's program.

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If he could help it, Phil preferred accomplishing his program to reporting on it. I tried screening Alexander for him, but he always quizzed me on the budget and asked me to tell Phil he'd be by later.

Phil liked owning the company he worked for. Not having direct responsibility for his projects, like the jobs he did in Nashville after Thompson Woodworks, made him uncomfortable. But managing business matters came third at best—after his craft and getting to see the people. "I'm really glad now we got you in on this, Jimmy," he told me the day I took care of the botched walnut delivery. I don't know whether it's a sign how much he liked my managing or how much he hated doing it himself, but when I filled out the information for printing our permanent checks, he said use his home address and phone for now, and for the business name, "I like 'Homecraft,' but something like 'Design and Remodeling' is better, more informative. So let's say 'Thompson & Grady Design and Remodeling.'"

Most likely, or the way I take it, he offered this sort of partnership as a mark of respect. I realized how valuable a project manager was to him.

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While I'm in the area of this subject, I don't think Phil and Winnie were having any more trouble, if there ever really was any trouble. He loved

her. I'm sure when he came to Dumont he was, in general, unhappy and making himself dissatisfied with his feelings for Winnie—or dissatisfaction with Winnie may be what that was.

He went to see her at work. They spent weekends over at Lake Barkley Lodge. They did things together, though not necessarily the same things—like her gardening while he added a car-length spur to the side of his driveway with gravel and railroad ties. I saw them this day. Coming and going with his buckets of gravel, Phil leaned over once to nudge her shoulder with his half-open hand. She rested her trowel in the turned dirt and sat on her heels, watching him, a half-smile growing as he got busy with his rake evening and shaping the spur. A proprietary smile—*her* husband.

They invited me over to go along with them to the farm and garden center, picking up the railroad ties. Actually, Winnie invited me for the ride and to visit that evening. Phil decided I should undertake a project—that old, flat, plain yard lacking flower beds, raised and framed in garden ties, well-filled with loam. "Surprise Pammie, Jim, what say?" Like he was training me in building, like he wanted me to be able to leave accounting behind.

But Winnie's inviting me, that and something else I noticed at the farm and garden center make me think. As Phil and I stood in the open air pen picking out the best of the ties, she stood by the gate, running her fingernails around the bowl of a birdbath. But I realized her attention was somewhere else. She looked after a college-aged couple walking to their car with a porch swing between them. They looked very young, but mature somehow—because of their easy way with each other maybe, or their home-making purchase.

Once, years ago in Nashville, Phil hugged Pamela and me together and

asked about our making babies. Pamela and I had already decided a child or children would best wait till our mid-, late-thirties (a variety of reasons, but a case of lucky foresight considering our unsettled approach to thirty), but we just remarked we'd wait and see. Phil laughed and winked. Winnie later caught us alone. Trying not to be too direct, too preachy, she told us how she and Phil'd worked on having children fifteen, twenty years before. Their difficulty. Pregnancy ending in miscarriage. She didn't explain how long they tried, whether doctors had anything to say, how many miscarriages, about adoption. We took it as an object lesson and, like most people would, thought it won't happen to us. We still plan on a baby in six years.

I wonder was there more to it? If advice, was it motherly advice? We're just barely young enough to be their kids, but as generations go they could think of us as son and daughter. Was there a suggestion those positions were open for us? It's plausible, just short of good evidence—weak connection.

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I did undertake a couple home beautification additions— partly because Pamela and her boss Jeff had found a replacement from his Clarksville staff (waiting now for a Bowling Green job for her to move up), and partly because I wanted to keep my mind and back muscles busy. Walls needed a fresh coat of paint, the yard a set of rose bushes. In the dead of summer, I cleaned out our little fireplace. I drove back to Pilot Knob searching for more gifts of furniture.

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I made another try for Carolyn. We rode to the Thompson's one night for supper, and I took her home late. Standing on the sidewalk in front of her house, we talked—I said, "Good seeing y'all tonight"—slurred, half "you," her

specifically.

It flashed across my mind it was good seeing her. Her hair blended into the dark, framing, featuring her line of face and throat. While Pamela's trim, Carolyn's thin. But the outline of her waist and hips showed pleasingly. Slight curve of her breast as she turned partly aside shifting her feet. This realization carried with it the reasoning, sure, she didn't need an affair with me in her life, neither did I, but maybe we'd like one. What about that?

To find out what about that, I stepped up and kissed her. Waited for a response. Her hand rested on my shoulder. She kissed back briefly in the moment I lifted my face. Her eyes blinked, slow. I waited for one of two reactions—either a remark that wasn't quite a rejection or the statement this was not possible. I guessed close. The hand on my shoulder tapped twice. She said, "I enjoyed dinner too."

She patted me on the back, told me goodnight, went indoors. Least possible awkwardness for me. Simple.

Had she been dismissing college kids as she walked on campus recently—boys who wanted to meet someone they thought was an especially womanly nineteen year old? Had an old uncle visited recently, kissing her goodbye in a way I reminded her of?

Carolyn had been through the fire, and a lot more since. I was right—no advantage, no good opportunity in investing further in me. She concentrated, focused more than to spend time wondering about what seemed unlikely. Or potentially hurtful.

I, on the other hand, wanted more. Because things started going better for me, I think I wanted lots more. After all, I was only beginning to get used to being saved from the days of painting fences and having an old man fling me from the second story of his house. This feeling of wanting

hadn't settled on a very reasonable level yet. Manage a problem-free project and find it challenging. Sleep with Carolyn and have Pamela start work in a Bowling Green pharmacy. Completely unreasonable.

Did I take the lesson of my friend Carolyn's quiet little chill? Me? I was an idiot. I went to a dance club where girls came in groups and went to dance or sit alone with boys. Though summer, the college crowd was thick. A dance tune boomed over the floor. The lights at tables and the bar provided plenty of visibility with sufficient romantic dimness. Skirts were short, blouses tight, hair, though a little high, carefully done.

Fortunately for me of course, an accountant—fairly young and dressed casually but stylishly—still looks like a policeman checking for underage drinkers, or like a trolling professor. With no openings for conversation, I didn't get to make a fool of myself. I sat there with an overexpensive beer till I learned that a quiet, friendly, neighborhood restaurant suited me better—better than sad, horny idiocy.

Then I went home.

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Apparently, my attraction to Carolyn was more obvious than I thought—surfaced more than I was aware of myself. At least Mohr—admittedly, a man with limited opportunities to see my relationships—had confused which way things stood.

One afternoon I sat at the bar in Mariah's with a beer, enjoying the cool, peaceful room and drink—deciding whether to call Phil to come over, stick around and have some supper, or wait out this beer, maybe another, and go home for hot dogs and leftover cole slaw. Mohr walked by a few times, going in and out of his office. The first time he passed through behind the bar I asked how it was going.

I just wanted to talk to him. If I found out about his hands, fine, or if we just shot the breeze awhile, the word from my waiter and waitress buddies made him out a nice guy. The injuries I imagined had lost their novelty.

After a moment to recognize me: "Hi. How are you doing?" He dropped his notepad on the bar and pulled up the bartender's stool. Thought about it and had a beer with me. It was a long day for him, a long day for me. Business was pretty good, and in this economy such luck was almost scary. The weather, the heat—inescapable.

"So where's your wife this evening?" He gestured at my wedding band. "Can I ask which is the wife and which is the friend? So I know next time I see you."

It seemed a straightforward question, no implications in "friend." I'd embarrassed myself, lived with it, forgotten it. I was a couple of days past oversensitive inferences or taking offense. I gave Pamela's height, described differences in hair and characteristic clothing. For a laugh, I threw in one of Pamela's moles and her appendectomy scar. He grinned for the joke, nodded acknowledgement.

He couldn't inquire after everybody like this. Not a special customer or anything, I just made conversation on a couple of occasions, and I came in in a lot of different circumstances—with Phil, with two different women, with a group, alone. He could remember that. Friendly, and it paid to get to know me.

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I had one more time I needed to go talk to Mike at the lumberyard about an order. One afternoon I stopped at the site and Phil took me to one side. "That's not what we wanted," he said, pointing to a stack of plywood,

two splintered sections thrown on top. "I saw Robbie fall through that thing with a circular saw going. Broke clean through, horses on top of him. Tell you, Jim, I expected to see blood and some arms and limbs flying." Paused. "Rob's a big fellow, but I don't believe what we ordered would've done that."

The invoice billed us seven and a half dollars less than I remembered. I got right in the car. My questions and being so angry confused Mike at the lumberyard—just completely thrown by the fact I didn't already know why he sent the cheaper grade. "Doesn't Mr. Alexander own this house anymore?"

That put me back a little. I explained what happened and Mike got concerned and solemn. Sympathetic "Whoa." Rob wasn't hurt, I told him and left it at that. I had other points I could make about Mr. Alexander but wasn't sure exactly how to put them, and he seemed more on our side now anyway. A strategic piece of luck for me.

Now I was the one completely confused. I got Mike to exchange the plywood and cut way down on the chances for any future mixed messages. But I stayed wide awake several hours that night wondering why Alexander kept getting involved. And what was I going to do? It was Phil's project, he had to hear eventually. Carolyn probably. How did I explain? Should I try asking Alexander what was up, or accusing? Mostly—why the hell did he care? There was no money out of his pocket in the first place. More important, none of this money he supposedly saved went into his pocket. He couldn't really lose money, even though the material he sent over was lower quality, except in an unusually exacting real estate appraisal, because nothing was quite substandard. But he had no stake in any decisions and no kickbacks coming. What was he doing then?

I knew all the finances after the money passed through the museum—could follow every check, each one written by me, to the bank that cashed it,

could get two ID's and the fingerprints of the clerk that counted out the money. I knew who we paid what. From the museum back up to the Kentucky Homes Historical Fund was a closed system. Alexander couldn't get a peek at a nickel there.

The few times I'd met with Carolyn to tell her Phil or I found a way to save money, she asked was there any work in a related area needing done. It didn't take her long, she said, to find out grants got used up—if not spent, slipped over into the general account whenever the university can run with it. She saw it happen herself with museum Special Collections money within weeks of joining Western Kentucky (not at Tennessee, not being on the need-to-know list there).

Any money he saved remained sealed in the bureaucracy, airtight. I felt sure he could only go to this effort for nothing. Pamela pointed out, when she came in that weekend, Carolyn had the grant doling experience, might know a way to the bottom line here. I wanted a better report to give first.

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Maybe I was preoccupied that weekend. Friday evening I came home and her Honda sat in the driveway. Normally, she wouldn't get off work by this time. I expected her early on Saturday. Her overnight bag lay overturned on the bed next to jeans and a T-shirt. A sack of foil-wrapped vegetables on the counter. Otherwise, an empty house.

Objectively, I'd say this was material for confusion, even some concern. I put the food in the refrigerator crisp bin and sat down to watch news. I could wonder where she went for half an hour before I started worrying.

Maybe fifteen minutes later she came in, sweaty from running, kissed me warmly, and kept going—heading for a shower. "I feel like seeing a movie later," was all she said, calling from the bathroom. "Want to come?"

After she showered and we started on something to eat, she explained Jeff and her replacement came to Dumont to look things over. She showed them around and left at noon. She took her run to wait till I came home. No more or less a mystery than I'd decided to allow for.

Unlike most weekends, we didn't make any plans other than the movie until late the next day. I still had homework intended for Friday night. And Pamela took a walk for the paper, came back to flip through the want ads and the yellow pages, made a few inquiry calls. We didn't feel so anxious to take up time that weekend.

The next Friday, similar circumstances, Pamela hit a payoff. She drove past a closed drugstore on Scottsville Road and noticed the sign referred prescription customers to a store closer to downtown. Hoping both stores' pharmacists weren't pulling shifts at the one store, she called the guy there she'd talked to before, pointed out he had to be busier with more customers, and got an appointment. When she came home: "I'm assisting the head pharmacist!"

Actually, when she told the story, it didn't sound much like assisting. It sounded like going to meetings for the head pharmacist. The *owner*'s assistant wasn't an executive type, and the head pharmacist couldn't stand him. Because she made and followed up her opportunity—made it easy on the owner—and had been running a store, she got hired, starting a week from Wednesday.

Even though she cut the weekend short to return to Dumont and get ready, I was glad, excited. Relieved. My wife and I were going to get to live together.

**Note: The week in the meantime I started writing out this inquiry. Already making notes to myself about work.*

During the long drives I took, already asked myself how work and Pamela and I fell out as we did. On this blazing return to full good fortune, I wanted to ask my questions. It was important. By this time, it was very important to ask.

Part III

Chapter 5

Unsettled Questions

Just before I started writing, before rearranging space in the closets and on the bathroom shelf for Pamela to move in, I set out to speak with Ron Alexander. Find out his story. That was Monday. The Thursday and Friday before, I spent going back in my records—any other unexplained misfires I'd not seen or let slide? (One questionable instance—an inexperienced bricklayer arriving for a two-man job. One phone call brought his boss twenty minutes later—no problems, no conspiracy.) Saturday: Pamela. Sunday: day of rest.

I worked on site as much of the day as possible—staking out the front hall, phoning business I normally handle in person, making early-Thursday appointments for meetings I couldn't phone in. Alexander didn't happen to show, so Monday evening I got his address to go find him.

He lived on the nice stretch of Cave Mill Road, not too close to the shopping centers on one end or the roller rink and liquor store on the other. Brick ranch-style; two-car garage with a paved parking space alongside; short, thick shrubs and grass shaded an even green; curtains—same style, different materials—showing in each room's windows. Alexander answered the door, wearing shorts and polo shirt—showed me through the living room and kitchen to a den. A good house, he was friendly enough, but I'd have preferred seeing him at the museum house and asking him there. This way, I

was getting myself out of the comfortable, safe situation of not having to know what was wrong and of having Alexander aware that I knew nothing, just jumping wide-eyed out into the middle of it. And I didn't think I'd like the excitement of learning all that much.

There was a short routine of "Would you like something to drink? That chair all right? How're you doing, Jim?" before I could start giving my general report—my means of leading up to asking if he had a reason to put himself in the middle of operations.

"I was wondering," I said finally. "Do you know Mike at the lumberyard?" Or maybe I called him Jack. "The guy in charge of the stacks?"

He thought. "Yes. Slightly overweight. Moustache."

"That's him. I wondered if you were checking our orders with him. He mentioned you'd been by."

"Sure, sure. It's no trouble to help out. Too bad you couldn't manage the border wall."

I wanted to ask him to explain himself. Then tell him to butt out. For a moment I imagined myself sly—uncovering a confession. Wasn't he up to something? And I was investigating. But there was nowhere to start with sly. "Help out," I repeated.

"Going well, isn't it? Getting it done up right?"

"Phil's doing fine."

"Sure. Glad I can save y'all some money here and there."

What was that? A polite way of saying we couldn't handle the restoration ourselves? And *done right.* Squeezing out a few bucks here and there is a job *going well*? The man invested in real estate and worked higher-up white collar yet didn't know paper pushing well enough to stick to a contract? That's hard to believe. Maybe he was blowing smoke. That's easy

to say, but doesn't answer any questions.

I caught him up on Phil's progress and got introduced to his wife—"beautiful house. . . Nashville, till a few months ago. . . nice to've met you"—and went home. When the door was shut behind me, the TV on, and my tie off, I thought over my half-assed discoveries, which informed but did not satisfy.

Carolyn once told me the Kentucky Homes Historical Fund bankrolled restorations in the Lexington area mostly. They had a hand in some small repairs to a place called Whitehaven in Paducah (in Kentucky and Tennessee, if it's got a name, either it has an important past or very rich, pretentious owners, Phil says, and nobody in Paducah is that rich). Otherwise, the museum house was the first KHHF project outside the central and northern parts of the state. All but two of the board members come from the Bluegrass aristocracy—those two were a historian retired from the University of Kentucky (window dressing) and an executor of the estate of a founding donor. Carolyn did her work—got the museum house proposal before them by talking to these two, and got it passed by arguing for the good PR of wider distribution of funds throughout the Commonwealth.

An introduction to the administrators and beneficiaries of the KHHF helped interest Alexander in the museum's plans for an exhibit house. Maybe he thought saving money would extend our working time (and so extend his time in contact with important Lexingtonians?) or allow for more and bigger restorations. Maybe he felt left out.

It was only Monday but seemed like I hadn't had a weekend in months. To be so tired, all I'd done was find out how closely I needed to watch Alexander's help and the whole project from then on—how much checking up I had coming to me. Since I'd been thinking about Pamela's and my good

luck, her job in Bowling Green, my job in Bowling Green, our staying together despite Dumont—since I'd been thinking about that and losing track of all those questions I wanted to figure out, I took my mind off Alexander by going back to old problems. The ones apparently over and done with, historical curiosities. I started writing.

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Looking back also let me look forward to Saturday. Pamela was coming to stay. Or, rather, I was going to go get her. Between work and writing, I hardly noticed she called only once that week. "Jim," she said, her voice half lost in the sound of her breathing, like she held the phone between her jaw and shoulder. Boxes were jostled in the background, booming faintly. "You're coming early Saturday morning with the truck? Carly called. She'll be down with Phil and Winnie before noon. Be sure Phil remembers the way." We talked a minute, then "Oop, got to go. Love you." She sounded happy.

When I rolled into Dumont, Pamela was marking boxes according to the rooms she'd stacked them in. She wore shorts and a faded Music City T-shirt, hair hanging over a red sweatband, still happy.

When the Thompsons and Carolyn came, Phil and I loaded the big furniture. After lunch, our old gardening neighbor and her husband popped up to help, and we left town by mid-afternoon. Before dark we had the truck unloaded and returned, had told Phil, Winnie, and Carolyn good night and thanks. Boxes sat everywhere; none of the furniture was where it belonged, even the chairs and such I already had—all of it pushed out of the way; Pamela was tired. I was tired. But to celebrate, we went to "that man's restaurant."

Showering, changing clothes, and eating later, it was eleven o'clock

and we were very tired, so much so I sat on the edge of the bed and almost dozed off without undressing. The chance to just sit at the restaurant table and drink a bottle of zinfandel while there had also relaxed us. Yet instead of coming right to bed, Pamela moved among the boxes. "We could have brought half this stuff up during the week. I need to get my clothes out to iron tomorrow." She walked down the hall to the living room. "Where are my shoes?"

For a few minutes I didn't hear any tape torn off cardboard or any suitcase zippers. I went and found her sitting in the dark massaging her eyes. "Moving and starting a new job are both high stress," she explained when I touched her on the shoulder and she realized I'd been standing there awhile. "Where is the aspirin?" We went to the medicine cabinet and back to bed.

We woke up after nine. "How'd you like dinner last night?" I asked to keep her from dressing and starting to unpack. I wanted her to stay in bed another hour or so.

She sat up, scooting pillows together for a backrest. Though her hair stood out at odd angles and she spoke thickly, she didn't droop her eyelids or sit stiffly like mornings after sleeping poorly or overworking. "Well," she said. "I like that man—I think I'll like Bowling Green—but that is a nice place to go, yeah."

We'd seen Mohr personally rearrange half a room, pushing two tables apart and carrying away chairs to make space for twin babies' highchairs. The couple, occupied with one baby each and tired, stood by while he did this, then started fussing with the twins as soon as he stepped back. Mohr paused at our table to say hello, and as we talked I heard a muffled, embarrassed whispering.

"Sir?" The father leaned over with his hand out to shake. "Thanks."

The mother, her child swiping at her nose, said, "Help like that's just the salt, the salt of the earth"—hesitating, as if searching for the right expression, testing it.

He thanked them back, told them he was glad to do it. Leaning to us, he said confidentially, "Lost out on a lot of that before I got back into restaurants." She thought that meant he saw more of his own family now. I assumed he was stuck in an office before and preferred coming to work and seeing people.

Recalling this and dinner, Pamela said, "That was nice, that was nice." She wasn't wide awake, but she was happy— forgot her headache, the disarranged house, the ironing she hadn't unpacked. We stayed in bed talking and relieved some stress.

**Note: Come to think of it, that readjustment stress Pamela talked about didn't last long. I noticed this morning she was up on the first alarm—no snooze, ready for work. I should tell her. Official Welcome to Bowling Green. Good to pay her a little attention. Dinner, a little music (Carole King, the Temptations), massage that old torn leg muscle, a little this, a little that. Good ideas.*

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Besides getting settled in at work, Pamela spent a lot of time planting her feet in Bowling Green. She had her favorite restaurant already—she liked the hills, the houses, our house, the university, the trees up and down the streets and along the highways—and "Carly's here." Some things weren't good—a big construction project west of town, the way so many businesses had crowded onto Scottsville Road—but she lived with it. She worked hard

getting a good footing.

One of the nursing homes welcomed volunteers and Pamela went out there once a week to review pharmaceutical stock or play cards with a resident, whatever. She toured Carolyn's museum, Civil War fortifications on Hospital Hill (trenches and breastworks), the Corvette plant, the Lost River Cave cleanup project. She turned my backyard additions into a full scale garden with rocks and mulch and manure.

One evening she came to get me for help with the gardening. She wanted to see if I'd go outside with her, I think, but pretended she was only coming to get a book of home and landscaping photographs. She also accidentally knocked half a dozen other books into my lap. It's a small room, a little crowded to be reaching over someone to get to a shelf.

Phil never said anything negative about the design of our house, about the room I write in specifically—where our books, computer software, and my files are stored. But it's obviously an afterthought room, the odd space left by indifferent planning, a seven by ten 'spare bedroom' or 'nursery' or 'study.' As a study, with only a desk and chair and wall mounted shelves, it was still tight. I'd have liked to have it less cozy or close, but I made do. Actually, making do for two or three hours that day, I was ready to quit. I told her I'd come out in a minute, wrapped up what I was doing, and shut down the computer.

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This is a difference. Before, at one time we were too clinging, at another time distant. Expecting some kind of two-minds-with-but-a-single-thought life, then each expecting we'd go about our own business. Interdependence, however, is all right. Pamela's a point of reference for me, a good perspective, someone I trust.

Pamela felt connections with me, and she counted on our common experiences and interaction. Close interaction and habits. Not that she *depended* on me, she had a lot of expectations, plans, habits I was some part of—in a way, she depended on me.

This may relate to why, after several months of trouble together and a separation that, all told, went fairly easy on both of us, we wanted to and did come back together. What she does and who she does it with are so important to her she can't reject them. She invests so much in occupation and activity that making a change is less like taking off clothes or cutting hair than losing weight or amputating a finger or shedding skin. It takes more than a decision, a choice, an urge, or a dissatisfaction to bring it about. In some cases it just can't happen. I couldn't deliberately cut off a finger, or even burn away a wart myself. Healthy skin can't just jump off. It renews itself slowly, and we don't even think of the dust it turns into as skin anymore, just something to blow away.

Pamela talked to Norris even more often than I did, and I'm sure she still wanted to visit Dumont. There was always her life in Nashville and her grandmother—memories and the memorial of that grave. Though I was an immediate concern, the personal history of her—our—last year had spread out her edges. There was more give in the connection between us. Counterpoint: as for me, I paid more attention. To my own interests and to what other people did and why. Making me (I hate the sound of *sensitive*) closer to Pamela in a way, more aware of her, better able to take a good perspective.

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Not knowing how careful to be may have helped Thompson WoodWorks fold—knowing when someone was hinting for a high estimate on

insurance repairs or some other gift, knowing who was already buddies with or relatives of or owing favors to who. Phil only wanted to pay attention to his work, not the customers (regular customers, certainly not any crooked ones), so that's why he hired Carolyn. She didn't get enough chance to work up to speed. I became T.WW.'s bookkeeper gradually, too gently— was never made to figure myself into the less upright or straightforward transactions.

Now in the last month, I've handled filling out information for Mike's employer's contractors file. When a homeowner comes into the building supply house intending to walk out with the necessities for building a deck and gets the wind knocked out of him by the stockpile required for just a half deck, Mike's employer offers the name of a builder or two who can easily handle such a job. I don't know that Mike's employer is *helpful* in the same ways Mike is, but referrals being what they are I wouldn't discount the odds of a favors system. I could run it that way, but I'm not sure I'm in a class to keep Phil or me or both clean. But I do know to pay attention now.

Speaking of paying attention, it's unsettling how much monitoring someone like Alexander takes—how thoroughly and fundamentally crooked he must be to cheat his way around the edges of a contract, play people fast and loose, and never have one spark of thought go off in his mind about it. Not realize there's nothing in it for him. Such an innocent little weasel.

Part III

Chapter 6

Recollections

Not long ago I decided I needed to improve my approach in this inquiry—somewhere along the line writing part II. Besides the questions I was asking and the progress of my answers, I got interested in what I forgot and then remembered. It seemed like there was more to say if I'd just make myself get access to it. To help keep better account of what I'd at first thought was a distinctly two-part question—1.Pamela and 2.my career track—I did some research a couple steps removed from my own actions and involvement.

To find a book that did me any good I had to take a double lunch hour looking through both the public and university libraries, and then I only found a couple of good ideas. I've gotten used to the layout of the streets on the two hills Bowling Green's built around. Carolyn's museum has two driveways—one you approach uphill, a steep but short grade to the parking lot, the other down, the pavement dropping sharply away from the street in a gentler decline looping past the front portico. I don't drive on campus much, but most of those streets are the same. At one point as I tried to find a parking lot I was allowed to leave my car in, it looked like I could turn right and drive up a 25 degree angle or turn left and drop the Buick eight feet directly into a parking space. Instead, I chose to go straight, leaving campus to park in front of someone's house and walk back across the street. I got the

book on a visitor's limited checkout after filling out three forms and offering two IDs, then went far away—Hospital Hill, nine blocks, where the streets are smoother and the parking area is a swath of gravel spread wide alongside the road. Despite my trouble getting it, the book, *Memory and Its Multifarious Processes*, did have one or two good ideas.

The wind was still, no traffic closer than a block or two, and as I stepped out of the car, I heard faint *umph* s and exhalations, like making-out sounds (or something I didn't even want to see, much less interrupt). A shady spot nearby looked comfortable enough without having any trees large enough for a couple to sit, stand, or lie behind. I took my sandwich and memory book and sat in the deepest shade. A breeze and a cold drink were the only things I could have asked for.

Though I never felt it as sharply as the book described, the idea of jamais vu caught my attention. *As deja vu creates surprise by one's response to an unknown situation, never previously experienced yet apparently recognized, jamais vu surprises one with the sensation of novelty in response to a familiar situation, particularly a situation that has always been* available *to memory. The surprise of recalling a lost memory—literal conscious recognition—is a distinct experience.*

Reviewing business and personal activities (Norris's lawyer, filing for unemployment, living without Pamela. . .) left me with a similar feeling. Not jamais vu, but similar Though I deliberately came up with these things as matters important to me and to each other, as the material I'd get answers from, they came across as if the same events (Norris's lawyer, Mohr's friendliness) had happened again in different ways and I remembered both sets. To put it another way, I knew I'd done all this, and then I recollected everything as something to write down. It's not that I forgot or never knew I

hadn't kept Thompson WoodWorks from going out of business. I knew I didn't do much for myself in the way of scaring up serious work while in Dumont—knew I stumbled into Bowling Green by pure luck. But they seem to separate into twin memories when I sit down to write out questions.

It may have something to do with the questioning, the selecting. Like I said, I wrote down memories that were important to the main inquiry. Other things I remember perfectly well didn't get written down because they weren't relevant. Norris walked to our house one evening after his niece and nephew visited. He just wanted to talk about his will to me—eight beneficiaries, niece and nephew foremost, the other six receiving remembrances in three figures. He stayed two hours, drank a cup and a half of decaffeinated Pamela brewed for him, his dog lay on the kitchen floor quietly the whole time, and when he said he was getting tired I borrowed Pamela's car to take him home, because hers gets warm faster. I remember this, but it tells me nothing.

The other interesting idea from *Memory and Its Multifarious Processes* was that nobody wants to get to know what he's forgotten. Mistakes that are over and done with can be aired, preferably not. That's what divides having done some of these things from thinking about them to get answers—pulling the whole year out in one piece isn't the same kind of remembering anyone usually goes through.

And I really shouldn't leave some of these things in black and white for just anyone to see, especially this Part.

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Talking about the way memories get confused and out of order, this book said you can't define—pin down, limit, distinguish—anything with a history. But Pamela has a very strong sense of personal history and keeps

herself in good order. In an average week she shows more attachment to her memories of Grandma Owen than I do to my Aunt Adelle and Uncle Charles, for instance—getting out pictures maybe, or planning a day on her calendar to go check the grave, or polishing the table and chairs she inherited.

If that casts me as someone living in the present (if any definitive contrast comes out of that) it doesn't mean Pamela is stuck in the past. Maybe very aware of it in relation to what happens next. Maybe too aware of it as fixing what can happen. But she changed willingly enough to a better job in Dumont and then actively looked forward to the chance to come to Bowling Green the same way I rolled with the flow. So she's not exactly stuck in her ways.

Example, how she looks for strict lines of progression out of past situations. Not long ago, after talking to Carolyn on the phone, she came and said, "We get to meet the guy she's just started dating." She said Carolyn hadn't seen anyone much for several months—"not since that little shit of a carpenter who used to work for Phil, what was his name, Cuiston—nobody more than one or two dates." And she said, "I'm glad she's let it go about breaking up with Anthony last year. She feels better about that whole thing now." Happy for Carolyn getting on with things, she felt less angry on her account—normally she at least grumbled in passing about Anthony "dumping" or "hurting" her like that. But she still worked it into the present situation.

Regarding Carolyn's getting "better about that whole thing now"—though I didn't know her before for comparison, I wonder if her housefire, smoke poisoning, and lost jobs and relationship brought her outlook down—gave her rougher self esteem—and if I was a friend at the right time. It's a good thought, a little self-serving. What I owe her (Phil and me both) is

clearer than anything she owes me. Smoke poisoned, her engagement broken off, overworking herself at T.WW. and overworked by the University of Tennessee, she managed to find her way out to a position where she could help Phil and then help me. If I (if Phil and I) helped her in any way it was coming to carry out her pet project—coming to Bowling Green, a strange city where she lived alone.

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I never worry about Carolyn mentioning our uncomfortable situation to Pamela—or my discovery of certain non- negotiable boundaries, I should say. Apparently, however, she never felt uncomfortable, never recalled any particular event worth mentioning or alluding to, never remembered any such situation as especially out of the ordinary. Or she decided I was allowed a mistake. This meant, I suppose, there was nothing I should remember either. When she and her boyfriend stopped by the house for introductions and then stayed later than planned, as they left, she hugged Pamela, turned, and hugged me goodnight too. I'm not going to say love made her a new person. Sitting around talking about the clouds and stars and humidity, she was as cool as ever, less talkative than the boyfriend. But she didn't care about missing their movie time. And she was comfortable with the friendly goodnight she gave me—more open, less reserved, still quiet and cool.

**Note: This will be enough mention of the sexual miscalculation. Confessed, done my penance, learned my lesson, and rehabilitated my attitude for a productive return to the outside world.*

Epilogue

I haven't written anything but short business reports for a few weeks, and no more trips to the library. We finished the museum house and received positive comments from the tenant. The next day, we started a new project west of town, another house restoration, one of the jobs Phil had a line on when he first checked into coming to Bowling Green. This one came through because of the new road. Property values are up and the owner wants to sell. After twenty years vacant, the house is giving Phil plenty to do, but the private market takes less paperwork than universities and grants foundations, so I have time for arranging future work. I'm trailblazing.

I haven't written anything lately. Basically, I never intended to keep a journal, only go back over events I thought were relevant to some of my problems. All my answers have turned out at least a little bit right, mostly right. By now, I know well enough. I know how to explain my reaction to Pamela's discussion of birth control the other day.

She said she wanted to go for a drive Saturday. I suspect she wanted to get me alone and keep me busy. I'm glad I decided to go to Glasgow Reservoir Park—Morgantown Road is a prettier drive but loaded with curves and narrow roads up hills.

"You know," she said. "No method of contraception is one- hundred-percent."

"Oh?" I said after quite some pause. Further, I brought myself to ask,

"And how are we doing on the percentile?"

"Probably okay. I'm only a couple of days late."

The day was sunny and hot. With the air conditioning on, I didn't want to drive fast and push the engine too hard. But when we got to the park, we didn't stop and give the car a rest either. We sat discussing both possibilities of the situation, driving around as if the attraction of the park was its roadways. I did shut off the air conditioner and roll down my window, getting a slight driver's sunburn before the end of the day. Pamela more properly kept her arm inside.

She contributed to the discussion tentatively, as if thinking of the uncertain outcome, as if feeling out my reaction, or as if reacting the same way I was. My response mixed an unsure anticipation with a definite urge to say, "No," loudly and repeatedly. I restrained myself and tried to think about the anticipation, to consider both possibilities fairly, though I'd have to admit which I hoped for.

A pregnancy test kit (she was embarrassed to get one from her store, where she could have picked one up when she first wondered, before we talked) and then her period later confirmed it was only a case of being three days late after all. Pamela said, "Stress, maybe." And I felt a little ashamed of my surge of pointless fear. Something good came from it besides my disturbed image of parenthood. We decided to have a child when we turned thirty-five. This gave us several years to become financially sound, better settled in the community (and maybe into our own home), and more parental-feeling. Right now, for instance, Pamela says she isn't an assistant head pharmacist really. She's a staff pharmacist who also has to have meetings with store managers. But the dirty work's going to earn her some recognition in a year or two, or make them owe her.

Of course, the same four or five years could give us the chance to become career-unstable again. Thirty-five's still a good age, letting us get good at coping, or letting us change our minds. But the economic indicators lately are gradually moving up from deep recession. Bowling Green has more alternatives than Dumont, and I'm allowing for more options than in Nashville.

Divorce by thirty-five is remotely conceivable, but there's no reason for it. We're way past the four-year turning point psychologists write about, when infatuated passion is over, and we've gone to endorphins and devotion rather than uninterested detachment.

For a family for us, thirty-five is a prime number.

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VITA

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