The Vanished

R.C. Binstock

cover: from *The End of the Hamlet at Gruchy* by Jean-François Millet
interior sketch: Katarzyna Maciak

R.C. Binstock Books

ISBN: 978-1727023190

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018911705
CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, North Charleston, SC

for Nina, Nathan, and Jeanne

I am working on my end of the hamlet that overlooks the sea; my old elm is beginning, I think, to seem eaten by the wind. If only I could lift it into space as my memory sees it! O spaces who made me dream when I was small, will I ever be permitted to reveal you?

— Jean François Millet
letter to Alfred Sensier
Barbizon
January 3, 1866

Everywhere broken trees cover the ground, and among them is my old elm that I had counted on seeing again. That's the way of everything, and us too. My poor friend, I am quite sad.

— Jean François Millet
letter to Alfred Sensier
Gruchy
February 6, 1866

1867

Théodore Rousseau, painter, Barbizon, Île-de-France:

Before the paintings, he was a boy. Before he was a giant, the great Millet, he was a boy in Normandy. A poor one, to be sure; had only his family, a rocky farm, a village, and that glorious countryside. "Théodore," he used to tell me, "I am Gruchy, and Gruchy is me." No more the product of his home than any of us, perhaps, but added to it was his talent, his brilliance and fierce desire. A willingness to see clearly. "If I go to heaven," he once said as we painted together in the quiet forest morning, "it will be for my childhood," and I had no cause to argue. What if their rations were sometimes thin, if they wore those hard wooden shoes to till the grudging soil? He was content, and the truth of it rises in his paintings. He was content until they sent him away.

His father was an artisan, an artist in fact, for he not only carved wood but was renowned for his singing—every Sunday, in the church. Young Jean François adored him, with better reason than he knew. Deep in the country, in the 20s, for a boy to draw, to draw so *diligently*, should have been taken amiss; foolishness or lunacy in one cut out to be a farmer. But his father accepted this odd passion. It was Jean Louis Millet who sent him to Cherbourg to study; it was Jean Louis who released him from the fields. When François was

five or six he told his parents, “I mean to make pictures of men,” and that indeed was what he did, but who knows what might have happened had they laughed or switched his behind? God chose to grace Millet with talent, and to grace Normandy with Millet, and I suppose it is one of His miracles that the talent survived to flower. But credit the father as well as God.

You mustn’t think that he was not, in other ways, a normal boy. In constant mischief, by his own account. A natural curiosity, mind you, and an eagerness for adventure, both good things in an artist. He would go down to the ocean although explicitly forbidden; he’d leave his chores to make a sketch.

Later on he had his troubles—more than his share, some might say. He lost Père Millet just when he needed him most. His first wife, poor Pauline, sickened and died within three years, when he was yet short of 30. And there were hard times, very lean times, times of thick black despair for decades before his success, in Paris and even in Barbizon; many painters, perhaps most, would have given it up, found some other means of feeding all those babies Catherine kept giving him. Do not be fooled by his historical stature, by the Grand Master of *The Angelus*. For far too long he was on the bottom, and even by the end had risen only a little; true fame came too late. Persistence was all and he somehow made it through—with my help, I’m proud to say, and that of others, for we loved him, with all his debts, all his fussiness, even the stubborn streak that drove some to give up and cast him aside, despite the wonder of his work.

“If I go to heaven,” he told me, “it will be for my childhood,” and though he surely deserved reward for other, more obvious reasons, I am convinced he was right.

1997

Conall Moran, fisherman, Lambs Head, County Kerry:

Quiet evening, sound of wind, jet engines distant but closing. The sun still high but turning orange.

Best haul in now. She'll be waiting. Another day with the infant, all alone, eleven hours, like as not to go insane. If he could send her in his stead and stay at home with it he would but she can't fish. She's got to manage.

The airplane passes overhead, directly overhead. One of the big ones, he sees. Bound for America then.

He looks away before the flash. But the thunder shakes his soul.

He watches awestruck as they fall.

Part I

1

The first time she asked Why don't you leave me then? and I thought but didn't say Because we have a child—

The subway carried him on: a trip from Never to Not Ever. Jammed together, all alone. He searched the car for a companion, living eyes, any antidote at all to the half-numbed bitter and insistent vacant ache he had felt since he awoke. His fellow travelers dozed and swayed.

Posers all, he concluded, none more so than he. Strip them down and who could tell? He was repelled by his own guise—his efforts to look as if he weren't forty years old, despite his hair thinning and graying, despite the caution he couldn't hide—and wished for another, pose or no.

Like that girl: pale and slender, in flannel skirt and argyle socks, hand-knit sweater and buttoned boots. She looked like 1917. London, 1917. And her features were not unkind.

She stood and calmly held the upright as the train burst into sunshine, the river brilliant through the glass. Malcolm watched her as they went. Although he rued her affectation he admired her for her trouble, for her artful make-believe. It wasn't 1917; still she hinted that it was, that it had been or could be.

Then the train stopped at Charles and a woman stepped in. Stunning mutual recognition; he couldn't bear to turn away. Faded

aqua scrubs, sneakers, tote bags on shoulder and in hand, dark gleaming hair, dim supple skin, a face that—well, he adored it. His gloom lifted and flew away.

Without losing an instant he moved to one side, offering half his space to her. He glanced again at her face and caught her looking back at him. Her left hand sported no rings; his heart was beating very hard. She twisted once and was still.

Why be a loser all your life, all your life? At least you'll know what it's like.

"Just finished work?"

She nodded.

"Buy you dinner?"

"I have a boyfriend."

"I didn't ask to be your boyfriend."

She looked at him again. She had taken no grip despite the lurching trembling car, standing steady with her bags, leaning slightly with the turns. The train pulled into Park Street while they considered one another and when it stopped she headed out. They pushed their way to the stairs—that is she led and he followed—behind a multitude of backs.

"Let me carry those," he said as they went up, step by step.

She shook her head. "Who are you?"

"Malcolm Bernard. Sculptor. Teacher."

"From the French?"

"Ellis Island."

Waiting patient on the platform they said nothing at all. She stood as before, erect and still, and looked at the wall across the tracks. He longed for her attention but she merely turned, briefly, when she heard approaching wheels before addressing the wall again.

The gliding hulking thing drew near. He held his ground. At the very last second, moment, instant before she climbed aboard she asked, "Where should we eat?"

They rose up out of the ground into streetscapes washed by light and three stops later she left the trolley—she took his hand and pulled him off and the sensation was so rich, so far beyond expectation that when released he stared at his palm—and started north.

"What's your name?"

"Susan."

"You're a nurse?"

"I'm a surgeon."

"Riding the T?"

"You want to sleep with me or not?"

Although hungry he decided to skip solid food but she ordered a sandwich. When he reached for his wallet at the register she smiled.

They spoke only a little. When she had finished she rose and went through the restroom door. Malcolm noted with relief that she'd for once let go her bags. He waited forever and at last she came out and stopped short of the table and suddenly stretched, as if awakened—how dare I? he thought—and smiled again, a little shyly, and came the rest of the way.

"I live just around the corner."

Outside her building she stopped: "Are you married?"

"I am."

On the stairs she paused again and reaching back touched his face.

"Don't try to fool anyone."

Malcolm wondered, as he walked in, if he had ever been so free. Of second thoughts. About anything. Here were Penny's eyes before

him, made too real by Susan's words, reminding him again of his fury at her and their dependence on each other but he felt no doubt at all about what he was going to do. Not suppressing his awareness of consequence, not a bit, rather it simply wasn't there. No awareness; no consequence. No future; screw the past. He gazed at an awkward oil painting—gift of a friend?—and almost sobbed out his relief. What a pointless boob he'd been.

"Come in here. Why are you waiting?"

She was brushing her hair. He loved the smell of her chamber. She put the brush on the bureau—it helped to calm her, he thought—then came and took him in her arms. He loved her lips. He loved the taste. His lust was novel. Her cotton scrubs were worn and thin. His nerve faltered in passing and he noticed her white socks, her smallish sneakers in the corner. He reached out for her again but she had moved around the bed and was looking in his eyes as she took her shirt in hand.

"I don't have any breasts," she said.

But it wasn't true. "You're lovely."

"So you say. But no breasts."

He was exactly the sort of man to fasten onto the experience, bent on preserving it forever, but he found himself baffled, overwhelmed, by the bewilderment of parts. Taste and texture, yes, and smell, and her bones and her noises, the astonishing deep-welled surge he had assumed was long gone, their grappling progress toward who knows and all of that was just the sex, just the fucking. He so wanted to be close to her. To be her friend. He knew his life had been changed by her entrance into it and he understood for once the rationale for copulation: he was in her now, as she was in him. But temporarily at best. Whereas she would be a part of him for who knew how long; she might never be withdrawn.

By god he wanted fixity. Even her pleasure was not enough.

"I don't want to finish."

"You have to," she said.

He wept as they lay on her bed and she smiled. She stroked his heaving chest; he was cradled in her hands. He wanted fiercely to see her, hear her, hold her. He lay and wept for his desires.

"Disappointed?"

"Of course." He saw her face. "I mean no, not by you."

She sat up and looked tired.

He started for the window, not to look out, rather in, but separation was too hard; he had to close the space between. He turned to approach her, standing naked by the bed.

"That was special," she told him. "Very special. It was. Now don't ever let me see you again. Don't get sick in my hospital. Don't go downtown on Tuesday nights. Don't use my trolley stop."

He gathered air enough to speak—

"Don't let me see you again."

2

By the house at the end of the hamlet of Gruchy a child stands looking at the sea.

The Last Happy Time. The phrase refuses to leave him, will be with him forever. And why not? What should he do? Exactly what sort of recovery is he expected to make? James does not for a moment doubt the wishes, sincere hopes of those whose sufferings are nearly as great as his own: his mother, his brother, his sister-in-law, and Barbara's family in America. No kindly person on earth would wish him anything but the salvage of what is left of his life. But what is that? Should he remarry? Can he be happy again? The others still touch the future: his mother has him and brother Joe; Joe and Lucy have young Hugh, plus another coming soon; in-laws Naomi and Daniel, destroyed though they are, have each other and son Malcolm and for that matter Aaron, who might one day make amends. And Malcolm of course has Penny and Stella and new-baby-to-be. If he said to them all, "You simply can't know what it's like. To be cast up this way." If he said it!—he has wanted to a dozen times or more. He is incapable of such cruelty. To imply to Naomi that her lot was not the worst would be a hideous act. To be anything less than brave (he's not stoic, just brave) would be thoroughly unlike him. But he is

not ennobled by it, gains nothing from it, cannot imagine moving on. With the lack of all he had there is nothing to move towards.

In childhood he'd read about the atom blasts freezing people in time, as shadows burnt into a wall. Burnt-in shadows never fade.

He walks into a lamppost and bruises his thigh, cuts his forehead, staggers and barely avoids a fall by grabbing at a letterbox. His briefcase is in the street. A pensioner rushes to take his arm and the Pakistani in the sorry little fruit shop near the corner hurries out, heedless of patrons, to offer help and a cloth, but yards away a man laughs. That's it, he thinks, right, thanking the fruitmonger and the woman with the terrier, I've got to get away.

A woman holds him and he reaches, reaches out for the water. Drawing breath and growing older in a cottage by the ocean, high up over the ocean. He has a blessing of horizons. He has an old elm and the wind. He has his bedding in the corner and the path back to town.

Look here; look at this kitchen. Could be called the torture chamber. And there upstairs—hall of horrors. You are deep in self-abuse. The only purpose you can have is the reduction of pain. So leave here now and start all over, as if born at forty-one.

He sees it there on the shelf. His heart stops, literally stops, misses a beat he is certain. He hadn't known it was there. Had not allowed himself the knowledge. Just a toy sent by Malcolm, a mechanical toy, but he remembers the snapshot—remembers mailing it to the States—and covers his eyes to block the image so ferociously revealed.

Small hands wave in the air, the swift horizon their design—

Was it "misfortune"? Was it malign? He has asked a thousand times but it gains him nothing, nothing at all; he can ask and ask and ask until the dead are awakened, at which point he may be told. Having lost wife and children, having become more pitiable than he could ever have imagined, having crossed over the boundary from Family Man to Always Lonely in the blink of an eye while checking in for his flight to Strasbourg, what difference could it make? There are more evil people than can ever be counted and other planes have been bombed—at least it didn't happen over a peaceful Scots village, thank god for that—so what difference could it possibly make? Evil is evil, gone is gone. Nor is random catastrophe new or remarkable, it's barely worthy of comment. The investigation "inconclusive", as was he until they were taken. Now his time on earth has all too clearly concluded, and in a place where his Barbara would never, ever, ever have permitted him to be.

A tree stands tall in boundless light—

Having decided to skip the lab (and not even to phone as he has on every absence in the past eleven months because it comes to him at last that Trevor and the rest are miserably wishing he won't phone, won't come in, won't feed their heartache anymore) but knowing he can't stay at home, nor go into the city, nor anywhere in town that he was or wasn't at with his dear ones, before, James wanders slowly to the church. The sort of keen and lonely place that gamely anchors the past, a fossil pining for its context. It is difficult elsewhere to have any sense at all of the town as a village, before the railroad and the wars. But at the church, with its low stone wall, to squint and banish the traffic and the housing estate is to see. To be silent like this, surrounded by grey stones, is to summon an embrace. He feels a terrifying longing to step into a man-trap that will send him back two centuries. He feels a helpless obligation to the

churchyard for sheltering him, and for being so full of former humans that there wasn't, when it mattered, sufficient space for three more.

The vicar stands watching. "Good morning," James tells him. "I hope you don't mind. It's peaceful here."

"You're very welcome and it is," says the vicar with a smile. "All these lorries rushing by and I find it more tranquil than I do Bushy Park half-past six Sunday morning."

"Why go to Bushy Park then?"

"I've a dog," says the vicar.

"I often wonder," says James, "which of these is the oldest."

The vicar points near his feet.

"Do you know me?"

"I do."

"You know what happened?"

"When I saw the photographs I remembered you well. You used to pass by quite often."

"Am I welcome here for that?"

"You're simply welcome."

"Have you anything to say?"

The vicar looks at the sky. "To be honest," he says, "I'm aware of my own frustration over being irrelevant. Mostly that, I suppose, and my relief that I'm not you."

A surprisingly restorative breath fills James's chest. He closes his eyes and kneels beside the ancient marker. "Can you tell me," he asks, the rough stone grateful for his fingers, "if I ought to go away?"

By the elm and the wall at the end of the lane in the hamlet of Gruchy, a child stands reaching for the sea.

From spivaks@citynet.net Thu Jun 18 08:17:22 1998
Return-Path: spivaks@citynet.net
Date: Thu, 18 June 1998 08:04:47 -0400
From: Susan N. Spivak <spivaks@citynet.net>
To: msbernard@staffmail.addison.edu
Subject: query

Hello? Malcolm?

Is that you?

3

In the old days the bar would have been smoky as hell. There were laws now that said the air had to be clear but the truth of it was no one smoked much anyway. It was awkward and expensive; you never knew who'd take offense. Someone in a position to set you up with work. A half-sober stranger who might screw you. Even Aaron's connection. one time. Not his personal connection but another he'd been sent to. "Get your fucking cancer stick out of my car" the guy had said. Amazing: there sat a gent with crystal meth in one pocket, crack cocaine in the other talking about cancer sticks. "You beat all, man," he'd replied, flipping the butt out the window before passing a bill and waiting patiently for his bag. Not that risky stuff either, just his usual bag. "Ought to do public service." The dealer had stiffened and stared at him hard. "On the radio, you know, or TV," he'd explained. "For the kids. 'Tobacco is for fools, yo. Stay in school.'" An evil stare that man had had, iguana eyes in bad skin, and not for the first time he'd wondered what he was doing in a car with a foul-smelling scumbag, jointly breaking the law. "I was *acquitted*," the scum had said in an even, quiet voice. "I did not *do* public service." He had thought: this one is crazy, was crazy long before the drugs. "My mistake, man," he'd owned. "Forget I said it.

I'm sorry." The guy might have popped him anyway, he'd understood later, but for the money in his hand. Payment for goods not yet received. Best at times, Aaron knew, to be at a disadvantage.

That woman by the juke. She'd gone with him once before. Her name was Sally, a name he'd always loved, worshipped really, and she still had a little bit of Sally left in her. A kind smile, an eager bounce and liked to talk. Although she'd wanted it a lot—she'd hit on him, not the reverse, later mentioned a drought—he'd so enjoyed her conversation that she'd had to take his hand and literally pull him towards the bedroom. Just a step or two of course. No end of people he could chat with but few as appealing as Sally who'd strip down for him these days. Disappointing as it was to find her in the bar again (surely she could do better, hook up with some working guy?) he was glad for selfish reasons and what was more she'd noticed him. She smiled and waved and he grinned back but fought the impulse to get up. Let her come to you, he told himself, remembering her need.

Not only had he never touched the risky stuff—never—but he was clean of the other as well. Clean for good and all, now. Like anyone else in the life he could puke over all the talk of being clean he'd heard from people slumped on a mattress two weeks later, but he was good and damn clean. It was either that or die. A matter mostly of indifference to associates on that side—so accustomed to disgust over the wasting of his life they'd be relieved above all to hear he'd turned up on the slab—but to his shock he was far from indifferent. In fact he was determined as hell. No blinding light, no sweet jesus, no bitter tears of remorse, but simply this: not too late. Like a gift, a winning ticket, replacement of a product worn out through hard use. A new life, with no beginning—childhood gone, blessings lost, youth and looks down the drain—but still a life to be lived. Thirty years poison-free? Maybe more. And in truth he might still have a child. Rise above this liquid comfort (so many couldn't but he could)

and give up playing around and maybe a family. A woman his age, maybe a little younger. Another ex-shooter most likely but so what? Clean was clean.

It didn't cut it to be swilling as he pictured a clean life so he pushed the glass away. And smiled at Sally again. This time pay attention, he thought; find out what her story is for real.

A man appeared to his left. "Aaron Bernard. Is that you?" He turned and stared.

"DeMilo. Nick. I'll be damned."

"How about that? Thirteen years."

"Long time."

Nick sat down on a stool. He was older too, and heavier, but still handsome. Face of a modern leading man: masculine and earnest, maybe a little bit cold. A strong rush of real affection (high bright sun in the Sierra) was diluted by remembrance of their last few encounters. But before that they'd been friends.

"Buy you a drink?"

"I was deciding," said Aaron, "that I was through for the evening. But I appreciate the gesture."

"It's not a gesture. We're just getting started."

There was the hope he'd been feeling and there was Sally, who'd been heading over but now was stymied, hanging back, and behind her all the things he could have passed up had he cared to. "I'm pretty relaxed," he told Nick. "You go ahead. Buy me some coffee." He turned and beckoned to the woman. "Nick, this is Sally," he said as she moved into the bend of his elbow. "Sally, Nick's an old friend."

"Pleased to meet you," said Sally. He savored her hip beneath his hand.

"The pleasure's mine." Nick turned to Aaron. "Where's Meg?"

"I don't have any idea."

"Thought you'd get married."

"But we didn't."

Akim brought coffee and scotch. Aaron stroked Sally's hip. "You need anything, honey?"

"All set for now." He loved her dearly.

"Speaking of marriage I heard you and Kay quit."

Nick sipped his drink. "Ages ago."

"Had enough?"

The other smiled. It really was a handsome face, more attractive than Aaron had ever been at his best. He was worried about Sally—DeMilo had a real job, he must have, he was always that type and just look at his clothes, and he was attractive and well-spoken and manly and the hell of it was Sally must know the difference between clean-now and always-clean, she had to, and jerk that he had been Nick had never used at all. It wasn't possible; it would show.

"I guess not. On my third."

"Been a while?"

"Nine years, three kids."

"That's terrific, Nick."

"Congratulations," said Sally. She leaned closer, her fine hair tickling Aaron's ear. "I was married once, you know, but never got back on that horse. I admire your trying again."

"And then again."

"To get what you wanted."

"That's right."

"I wish," she said, sighing, "I'd done a lot more of that."

How to be rid of this bozo? asked Aaron. I used to like him a lot but that was thirteen years ago and then he turned so rotten and sour. So who cares? Just let me get her out of here.

"Do you have pictures?"

"You bet." Out came the wallet. Lots of cash, lots of cards. Three happy kids on a couch, one on Andrea's lap.

Oh god. He'd married Andy.

"You have a beautiful family, Nick," said Sally. "My goodness."

It had to be some sort of elaborate trick.

"Was she married before?"

"No." He laughed. "I got lucky."

"I'll say." She took the photo from his hand. "But if you'd given up you never would have known she was waiting." Wrestling privately with anguish, struggling stupidly free, Aaron wanted to sob for the desire on Sally's face—an acquisitive desire—as she looked back and forth. Then she handed Nick his life. "If you'll excuse me," she said, and headed off to the john.

"I know the whole sad story, Aaron," said Nick.

"She told you, eh?"

He put his wallet away. "I know you begged her to take you back. Flew cross-country to get on your knees."

"I guess she told you."

"I guess she did."

"Explain to me," said Aaron, signaling Akim for more bourbon, "what you had in mind here."

"Rubbing your nose in it."

"Oh."

"Making you feel as bad as possible."

"You actually seemed glad to see me."

"Are you kidding? Far from it. But I couldn't miss the chance to let you know who got your darling."

He waited for his drink and sipped it twice when it arrived.

"In other words, I fucked DeMilo's wife before he did."

Familiar glare.

"We spent endless hours in bed—"

"Listen, Bernard—"

"—doing everything you did with her later. Probably lots more."

"You asshole."

He sipped again. "Whatever you say."

"About five hundred guys porked that sorry piece of yours before you whined your way in."

"Could be. But they aren't drinking whiskey with me now."

"Talking about me?" asked Sally.

"As a matter of fact, we were. I asked him why you two aren't married."

She looked at Aaron and laughed. "We haven't known each other long."

"Like how long?"

"Why do you care?"

"I was wondering," said DeMilo, "if you were really with this loser or would prefer some fun with me."

She shook her head and pursed her lips. "A married man?"

"Your very first?"

"Can't say I like your implication."

It was a long time, Aaron realized, since he'd been so unable to speak. So unwilling to speak. A very long time. A siege of bafflement and pain. If life were really as clean as you wanted to believe, once you'd gotten off the junk, Nick would have grown in the meantime. Turned up married to Andy but a truly decent guy and very sorry for Aaron's woe. If life were that clean Sally would not be looking at this piece of crap with lust, with longing and lust, as if Aaron had vanished. If life were clean he would know what to do about it all.

"I may be married but I'm no loser."

"You can't be serious, Nick," Aaron said desperately. "Hasn't this gone far enough? I surrender. Leave me alone."

"That's just what I have in mind. C'mon, Sally."

She shook her head.

"Suit yourself."

But as he got down from the stool and threw a bill on the bar she took his sleeve in her hand.

"What's your hurry?"

"Got to go tell my wife the junkie says hi."

Sally held Aaron back as she pulled the other close. "You think I care?"

"Who gives a shit? Hands off." He struck her arm.

"You bastard," cried Aaron, lunging and weeping.

Sally's head hit the bar and she shrieked. Akim said, "You all get out of here now, Aaron, and I mean it, this instant," and Aaron heard the feral tone and quailed sorely to his soul. He was as scared of the bartender as everyone else, now. They had to get out. He grabbed Sally's left arm and Nick caught his frightened look (it was almost as if they were climbing again, almost like that long ago) and took hold of her right and they dragged her to the door, afraid to lift her in their haste; as they went he looked back and saw the curious eyes settling into their drinks and the fury of Akim (he was ten times more my friend than either of these, he thought, *was*) and clenched fists and then it was dark. Not so dark but the lightness of street lamps and neon, and the warmth of that bar—the only one he'd really liked—was gone forever.

He was aware of dead weight. She was sagging in their hands. DeMilo said, "Sally, wake up," with great kindness, and shook her gently, and she did and stood briefly but when released headed down. Aaron took her in his arms to stop her fall to cold concrete.

"Sorry," she whimpered softly, eyes closed, clutching his jacket. "Just hold me a minute, I'll be fine."

4

From spivaks@citynet.net Sat Jun 20 22:56:03 1998
Return-Path: spivaks@citynet.net
Date: Sat, 20 June 1998 22:56:03 -0500
From: Susan N. Spivak <spivaks@citynet.net>
To: msb@staffmail.addison.edu
Subject: re: surprise

Malcolm:

Nothing bad happened, right?

I meant what I said and I'm not sure I've changed my mind. I'm frankly embarrassed that I took part in this -- this stupid male fantasy -- and I resent it. I resent it. But I won't apologize for having a continuing interest. You didn't strike me as the kind of man who could possibly forget all about me. Not that I especially want random men roaming around remembering me. But I suppose if you'd seemed otherwise I wouldn't have done it.

I wish your cryptic inquiry had been more direct but I'll answer it anyway. I'm half Japanese and half Jewish. That is I'm all American but my parents (they're both dead) were a displaced person and the daughter of immigrants. My father survived the Germans because he was big and strong and 15 when he went into the ghetto; my mother was born into internment in California. They met in 61 (she was half his age) and five years later had me. He died six years ago following a heart attack -- they couldn't kill him in the camps but they stole his old age -- and she went two years later. "Complications of pneumonia" i.e. grief. She was 51 years old.

You were right, I'm not a surgeon. I'm a surgical nurse. I should be a surgeon; I'm disappointed that I'm not. Further bulletins as events warrant.

Did you want me because I was Asian? Partly so? I mean partly for that reason, not partly Asian. But that too I suppose.

Oh all right, Malcolm, it was great. Six years ago a fuck like that would have cheered me so much. Made me feel like I was driving around in an open car with the radio on. Playing a Joan Armatrading love song. But I'm a lot older now (death is bound to help you grow) and what it made me want to do, in fact, was run the other way. I feel permanently scarred: I fucked a married man and loved it. I don't think I've ever even typed those letters before: F U C K. FUCK. Don't you see what you've done?

I had another woman's husband only one other time. Just the once. I asked him while we were fucking: What makes me different from your wife? He said You haven't had kids. You mean tightness? He said No.

I could be your friend. I could admire you. I could be intimate again (back to euphemism, see?) and have a good time with no real attachment to speak of. You're pleasant looking and I like your approach and you mostly know when to keep your mouth shut, which goes a long way with me. But you're a liar and I can't get past that. Bad enough that you're unfaithful -- I'll bet you have children, right? -- but beyond that your performance was dishonest in some way. I'm going on intuition here and can't prove a thing but I'm pretty damn certain. Your body is willing but your mind won't follow. And that makes you unreliable.

At this moment you're deciding I'm insane. Who cares? It's only email.

Susan

P.S. I am your children's future.

[excerpt from Catherine Millet, March 1865, Barbizon]

... even after twenty years it is not always easy. Just last week he was caught in a fit of agitation over a painting he could not find. His treatment bordered on abuse. "When did you paint it, François?"

"Perhaps eight years ago." I laughed and told him he could not expect to lay hands on such an ancient piece all of a moment. Not in his customary mess. He was at once furious at me, and though soon calmer was deranged for the rest of the day. Until I found the foolish thing, of course, and then he cried "Give it to me!" and ordered me out of the studio.

Later on I was quiet and I suppose a bit cold and as I brought our food to table my master said "Come, excuse my temper. I was so eager to have that painting." He laughed. "And my head hurt fiercely, although it seems better now." I was unready to forgive but for the sake of the children I smiled and ate my soup. A little later I asked, "Would you tell me why so eager?" "I want to paint it again." "I understand. Your childhood place—" "Not the subject; the painting." "Were you always unhappy with it?" "It's not complete. Not correct." "Why did you hide it for so long?" He sat back and pushed his bowl. "You will excuse me," he said, "I have some work that I must see to" and was gone.

18 June

Dearest Barbara,

I don't know where to send this card. Not to the house, for reasons I don't have to explain. Not to Cornwall. Nor to any earthly place. I suppose I have two choices: the fire or my pocket. I think the latter might be best—if you exist you're with me. But I'll put on the proper stamp.

No one knows where I am. They all know I'm well and safe (I couldn't let them think the worst) but do not know where I am. I need to be alone. I need to stand with them as well but even more to be alone. And out of reach.

Will mention briefly that I know you take good care of the children. I can't think of them for long.

I miss you so.
your husband James

5

"It's a beautiful day."

Dan put the paper in his lap and looked across at his wife. Standing as she was at the edge of the porch she was backed by the sky. To his distress he saw again her weak and motionless hands. He hated himself for having noticed it the first time, last September or October; no matter how much she improved he could never misplace his awareness of their crippling. Just the four clichéd words but once her hands would have assisted. Now they hung at her sides.

"I thought we'd call up the Grubers, see if they want to take a sail."

Naomi shook her head. "Ray's in Georgia."

"Dave can come with us, can't he? Or lend us the boat."

"I don't want to go sailing. I think it would depress me."

"Tell me what," he instructed for the four hundredth time, "would cheer you up."

She turned to show a faint smile. "I am cheerful, dear. I don't need anything special. I just don't want to sail."

"Want to go for a walk?"

She shook her head. "Not just now. You read your paper. I'm fine."

But she wasn't, he knew, turning back to A14. He longed to throw a silent tantrum—no she wasn't wasn't wasn't! It was a hell of a thing: he'd spent his life trying so hard to take care of his family and now his failure at an impossible remove of time and space had rendered the enterprise moot. He couldn't make her fine now; he couldn't make or keep her fine. She would never be fine again. Nor would he but so what? He had never wanted that. It didn't interest him at all. Having Barbara and her children back interested him greatly, relentlessly, fiercely; his own status did not. Being able one last time to lay his head on the pillow knowing everyone was OK, safe for one more blessed night—that interested him as nothing ever had. And was as vanished as the plant, or Korea in '51.

But still, Naomi being fine—it often seemed just out of reach. Not for a day, not for an hour, just maybe a minute: I'm really fine. To forget about what happened. If he could only give her that.

He sighed and winced. As if he would. As if she wanted him to. That was the thing, they said at group: it never ever goes away and if it did you'd feel worse.

In other words, give it up; she will not be fine again.

Penny put her hand into the bathwater. Good for five minutes at most. Stella adored her bath but when it cooled was instantly cranky.

"Ready to get out, honey?"

"I'm playing wis Baby."

"Baby can come with us while you put on your nightgown. OK?"

A moment's thought. "OK. Where's his guitar?"

Most every bathtime, Baby's guitar or his camera—he could wear one or the other on his belly, but not both—disappeared under the bubbles. His cowboy hat too on occasion. Just a silly plastic toy

that got into the house by some forgotten route, but Stella was very attached.

We're all that way, really, Penny mused as she toweled her daughter off and carried her, bearing Baby in turn, into her bedroom. Ever attached. How to explain the varied victims of our love?

"I'm worried about Malcolm."

Ah, he thought, the holy trinity: Malcolm Aaron James.

"I spoke to him yesterday. He had nothing much to tell."

"He had a lot to tell, I'm sure. He doesn't like to make us listen."

"He won't include us you mean."

She tapped impatiently on the rail.

"The little darling, she's OK?"

"I didn't say Stella. I said Malcolm."

"I heard what you said."

He had to wait for it, he knew. No use pursuing. Sit and wait. It wasn't that she made things up, fretted for nothing; it wasn't as if their sons and son-in-law didn't have problems, lots of pain. But they were all she talked these days, all she thought about it seemed. As if, he realized with a shock, they'd traded roles: his well-worn fantasy exploded with his daughter, his Barbara, depriving him all at once (staring at the tall brown woman, the one who'd come with the news) of the security he'd found in worrying about the kids, the grandkids, the plant, worrying her, whereas she, who'd bade him stop it maybe ten thousand times, could now do nothing else but. In fact she lived for it, he saw; she slept and ate and bathed not for herself, not for him, but to maintain their joint anxiety for Malcolm Aaron James.

As Naomi descended to the yard the plant floated in his mind; once summoned it wouldn't leave. Like the ghost of true emotion he once might have had (every feeling for a year just another guise of

grief) came regret that he had sold the damn thing and retired. If he still went to the office—if the office still existed, if it hadn't been demolished—he would have work to take his mind off the loss, the missing piece, and she the grace of hours alone.

The plant, he thought, watching his wife of forty-five years stare into the woods, flanked by limp depending hands—the plant was not a silly pastime. The second thoughts he entertained were not about making and selling, about yelling at Greg, about cash flow and bottom lines. Not even the vacant lot where they'd torn down his life's work like it was so much stinking junk. His father's business and his uncle's and after their deaths he'd bought out his cousins, nervy little bastard who didn't know any better, and they'd been happy to sell but once he made it they'd felt cheated. Did you know you'd be paying yourself this handsomely, Daniel? Were those new clients in the wings? And he'd have given it back—sold them 40% at least, fair is fair—but by then he'd had the boys, two sons to take up the concern (and a daughter for in truth he'd never ruled Barbara out) and he'd been saving it for them. Through the guilt, the guilt and shame before Pops, who lived with Rachel and her lies; through tense discussions with Naomi. They're big-shot lawyers; mine is mine. I paid good money. Let them cry.

Except that now—and here was the point (she was wandering in the yard pulling up random weeds, she couldn't *garden* anymore, so distracted was her mind that two straight minutes finding every damn ailanthus under a shrub was beyond her)—he had nothing. Nothing to leave behind him and no child to leave it to, no child who wanted it that was. They had accepted his cash but rejected his work. His work and pride. One gone to England in her youth, now fled further and forever; another steady and fond but ever unforthcoming as he shut his father out of all that mattered, wouldn't talk about his marriage, his students, his work to save Dan's soul; the last a feeble junkie bum whose existence had come to squat. Who had

amazed them all by showing up at his sister's, his niece's and nephew's funeral, god knows where he got the money, and then refused to stay the night. To just have breakfast with them. Therefore what (gripping the newspaper so hard it tore in his fight against the urge to get up and rush the yard and grab Naomi by the shoulders and shake her, Shaken Mother Syndrome, as he asked her the question) had he saved it for? For what had he earned the resentment, the enmity of his cousins, burly Stan and lank Rachel, with whom he'd played in its corridors? For what had he invested every bit of his soul not devoted to his family in a building and machines and sweating workers who made boxes, cardboard boxes, sent them to Worcester and Hartford and as far as Ocean City, polluted the air and the water and filled the dumps with useless waste and earned good money and were now a barren muddy hopeless patch of rubble-strewn ground that he couldn't even drive within two miles of so great was his fear of seeing the hole, the bleeding hole, the hole that matched the one in his heart where his daughter, his darling girl, the greatest light of his life had been ripped out with his grandkids and crushed for no good reason, no comprehensible reason, no reason at all? To be left with a woman he'd never comfort again?

"Are you all right, dear?" she called. "What made you jump up that way?"

He opened his hand to let the newspaper fall. There was black ink on his palm. She was standing, he saw, near the center of the yard, a bunch of weeds in her fist. The stems were hanging by her knees; the ugly roots stuck out behind. For a moment he felt that if he could run to her fast enough, hustle her into the car, drive her far enough away they'd be all right. If he could just put some space between the two of them and home. But his keys were inside and she'd not willingly go and he was now, he knew at once, too weak to pick her up and carry. If he could get her far enough, fast enough, she'd see reason but he couldn't. She was trapped and so was he.

"What was it, Naomi, about Malcolm?" he asked. "I want to know. I wish you'd say."

She waved the weeds at him, dismissively—not dismissing him her partner, nor the topic, not even their joint condition, merely showing him the limits of their purpose in the world—before moving up the kitchen steps and through the door, inside.

6

In the hallways and in class he felt both guilt and relief (is that really all there is?) and mused about the neatness of it, all of that in a single evening.

Another voice in Malcolm's head repeated *Got what I wanted* as when he'd reveled in Go Fish. Got what he'd asked for, anyway.

But when he turned a blank corner he thought she was there. Regret clung like a lamprey to the aftermath, and sorrow. Over what? An adventure for them both. She'd been eager and enjoyed it and instructed him to get lost. So why sorry? Why "disappointed"? He and Penny-once-his-joy had problems, big problems, and here was a useful experience, maybe, something to stimulate his self-improvement without costing her a thing. What could he wish had been different?

He had told her his name; now why had he done that? He was the only such in town, she could have called his house, for pete's sake. And why had she sent him that email? Where would he be if she had not? Was this lingering doubt, this persistent inability to shrink her to an anecdote on account of her message? Her having gone back on her own strict command within hours?

He hadn't checked his mail since Friday. Maybe she'd thought better of it, had changed her mind again. He had no idea what he hoped for. To make love to her again; to make love to that blonde a

few paces ahead; to make love to Penelope as he had long ago? Or to somehow rewind, to cancel out the last five days, whatever it would take to get a start on something new? The work, the work, he insisted to himself, his meter following the blonde's. Twenty years or more had passed since a wise man had told him "When I'm preoccupied by sex it's because I'm not working" and the sense of that was clear. Get to work, idle fool, and everything will be all right.

"You're lovely" he'd said. Like that man in Seattle. This time she'd let him in her bed. A lot could happen in a year.

Where was her cervical cap?

What would mama-san say?

And all this telling of lies. Hadn't she played into his hands? Falsehood and doubt, they went together; from bad to worse.

Still, no harm done nor foul committed. no one would ever have to know. All fluids washed away so what's to hide?

Even then, to tell the truth—even waiting on that platform—she'd been thinking of Wayne.

He said You haven't had kids.
I'll bet you have children, right?

In the bathroom just last evening: Hilda lying on her back, Huckle's head between her thighs. Sergeant Murphy seeking ecstasy in that enormous mouth. Brave little dog, or crazed with lust; she'd bite it off without noticing. Risks of doing it with a hippo. "Oh you Hilda," he'd said aloud, "they simply can't resist your charms." He'd tried a few different poses but this had seemed the most natural. No Lowly Worm, to his regret, but the store had been sold out. "Always the first to go," they'd said.

Later on, cooking dinner, he'd heard his Stella's high voice ring: "What are they doing to Hilda?" With Penny up there too he'd been

free to just laugh. But later on she'd been incensed. "I can't believe you would do that with your own daughter's toys."

"She didn't know what it meant."

"It wasn't *harmful*. Just perverted."

After a silence of half a minute—Stella watching a tape—she'd gone on in milder tones: "Another stupid male fantasy."

"Some women like it."

"Hurray for them."

So wildly different from the old days. When they'd discussed it all the time. The tales she'd told him from her youth. When she'd taken him in the bushes at the beach and in her office after five and under forest waterfalls. When he'd known that sooner or later, mostly sooner, the enchanted release of an encounter with her body—her enthusiastic body—would help him lessen his confusion, cut with clarity through fog, come what may.

What pained him so greatly now was not the altered behavior (though he rued it very badly) but the attitude. The distance. The distance bordering on distaste. As far as he could tell most wives changed after a baby. "Let's be honest," Rudifer told him. "She has sex to fall in love, you fall in love to have sex, which works out fine until the child. Then she stops needing sex—a means to an end—and you're all *where did that go*?" That Penny had lost the greatest part of her interest didn't surprise or even hurt him, but what did was her dismissal. Of his impulses and needs and of their former life together. You'd never know now that she had once adored the bed.

He would rather have done it with Penny. Yes. Appealing and fresh as Susan Spivak had been. Long-legged and young as the blond would be if he ever got that close. Aging male lust or no he had sense enough to see that what he wanted was not affairs but a wife who liked to fuck. As he'd believed he was getting. Six years of good sex—was that it? Was it really? He would be married to her forever (or at minimum until Stella was, say, 20) and he surely

wasn't going to make a habit of last Wednesday. He'd stopped approaching her out of honor—she was willing to relieve him but with her lack of desire he felt both instrumental and humiliated—and had no way to go back. He was totally at sea. He was grateful to and absolutely furious at Susan; she was offering him the means to let his wife off the hook and that was grievously wrong.

What you don't know, he typed, after selecting REPLY, **is that the second one's inside her. And I'm not connecting to it. Although I dearly love the first.**

He stared a while at his words, which seemed extremely insincere, not to mention dimwitted, and typed **It's very upsetting**. Then he backspaced over all of it and started again.

> *Insane? No. I'm intrigued. Amused. Maybe a little afraid. And flattered that you want to be in touch after all. All right, maybe you don't, but at least you sent this message. I know something about you. I'll try to tell about me -- if you want me to that is.*

He would, he realized, his fingers still on the keys, give almost anything to sleep with her again. Not anything, no, that was stupid; he wouldn't dream of hurting Stella and thus would never risk his marriage. Would he diminish his career? Give up his gallery agreement? Forsake all future recognition? Still his desire was truly urgent, with a stark and eerie power that was reason for alarm.

What I want, he told himself, is to have her again, for free.

But it was Penny in his mind as he saved the unsent reply, got up, went to the lounge to take his lunch from the fridge. It was Penny whose hair he stroked, whose limbs he firmly gripped. To be the one who leaves, he thought. If just a single time to be.

7

San Francisco again. He would have sworn it wasn't possible. Easier to imagine being praised by his mother, praised and petted as before, than to dream himself walking these streets. But here he was with his latte at 23rd and Dolores. A perfect Noe Valley day (up near the park, where Cad had lived, it might be ten degrees cooler) and parading for review the same attractive cheerful people Aaron remembered, maybe richer but still pleasant, still open, still polite because they liked it that way. A difference obvious to him from his first day in the state, thereafter often on his mind. He had left three years later disappointed by the shallow, passing quality of many of his friendships but fully grateful for the courtesy received.

It was easy in San Francisco to sit and slowly sip a coffee. On a bench in the sun watching the palms on the median. Which was good because he didn't want to move on; he had no chosen destination. He had leapt to one decision before making any others. *I've got to get out of here*, naturally enough, and *First stop, California*—after nearly two days of hiding out in his room so he wouldn't lose his clean or try to fix things with Akim—had appeared to make sense. But here he was on a bench that could have been anywhere, it was June and Minneapolis was probably warm, here he was on a bench as if he didn't have a clue. Why had he come—to reminisce? To feel sad for what was gone? To feel sad for what remained? To tear

down all the built-up memories he'd sheltered through the years of his pathetic corruption, picturing the Castro or the bridges or Chinatown (the junky tourist shops they'd gone to and the wonderful meals they'd had) just as the latest load took hold and he was bootstrapped into bliss, unready to surrender his capacity to care, to miss San Francisco, but that was as it had to be—with relief you bought detachment—and anyway who'd want to keep caring when it wasn't you in your veins but the drug? More than once he'd been tempted to find a way back so he could shoot in the Haight instead, at night in Golden Gate Park, and more than once coming out of it he'd wanted to blow his head off.

To Half Moon Bay or not to Bay? he asked himself, tossing his cup in the trash. There wasn't much for him here. He didn't long for old sights—in fact was definitely sorry he'd come to the Valley and certain he'd prefer to keep his memories intact, though he was glad to have seen the palms—and besides it was expensive and he had little money left. Best to mount up and head south. He'd had the brains to pick a junker with a big soft back seat and once he got out of the city he could sleep in the car, he almost looked forward to it, and with produce so cheap it wouldn't cost much to live. Such a hospitable place.

Still unanswered, he admitted as he started toward the Mission: head south where? Would he carry out his plan or was it just another lie? And if he did do it, why? And if not what was the difference? It had been so amazingly long and Andy had other fish to fry—probably one year to the next without thinking of him, except that now she'd been reminded—and there was little to be said. She'd made a choice, surely smart, probably right, and that was that. No way to change it if she wanted and she didn't. Couldn't. Wouldn't. He didn't want her to either: it wasn't Andrea he ached for, still considered rightly his but her before, at twenty-six, and she was thirty-eight now and a mother three times and a complete and

utter stranger. She might not even know his face. Better to take 280 south as fast as the Buick could go, steer himself to Santa Cruz. He still had friends there he believed.

But as he closed in on the Mission and turned left towards the door instead of crossing to his car he considered for the thousandth time what she'd written. On a yellow sticky tag(new to him at the time but Andy, their editor, had used them like crazy) that he'd put on the Walkman (another scary innovation) she always listened to while working. He had wandered to her cubicle on some pretext or other, really to continue a barely first-gear flirtation with a woman he hardly knew but found wildly appealing—to the point that it spooked him, her looks so much to his taste that the first time he spied her from a dozen yards away he'd actually told the empty air, "That's what I want for Christmas"—and dejected by her absence had taken up the small pad and written "THIS MACHINE IS AN INSTRUMENT OF THE DEVIL" and put it on the player. After lunch, a pointless sandwich in San Carlos because where the fuck was she? he'd returned to find it stuck to his keyboard. "Are you his messenger?" she'd added. He still had the thing somewhere, he decided, passing into the Mission's gloom, in the two measly boxes he had managed to keep track of through all the empty ruinous years and had left in self-storage down the street from the crummy room he'd given up, kissed goodbye to forever and that was reason enough to go, to say her name, to see her deep brown eyes again.

It's very lovely in the North. Early summer, James thinks. In hardly more than a moment he will arrive at One Year On. He briefly wonders what he'll do—most likely drink, start in before and with luck keep on until after—but the prospect is untroubling. He has diminished the world. His cottage is pleasant and his landlady thoughtful, the people as contained as he remembered them to be,

but in truth these things don't matter. He won't be bothered, that's all.

No need to drink, he realizes as he walks by the lake (there might be a monster at the bottom of every one, he has reflected several times, in the mud of every lake in Scotland, in Britain, every lake the planet round, for the way people behaved), no need to run from the occasion. In fact he'll stay awake all night, count up every bitty second. Suddenly he knows that he has found what he came for. He stands bereft at water's edge and almost wallows in relief. Tears come easily and bless him, washing down to his neck and collar, not the tears that have squeezed out of him like a miser's tarnished pennies creeping wretched from their purse for the last fifty weeks but real and true, honest tears, the ones he imagines them crying if he had been lost instead, free to mourn and carry on and say aloud their lives were ruined which he has not been able to do. Not caring who might see (wouldn't Barbara be astonished) he bends to lift a huge stone and hurl it at another two yards away, flinching from the CRACK and yet adoring it as well, almost perversely pleased with his ability to rage. "It isn't right!" he shouts at the lake, his voice dispersing over the water; two fishermen look from their boat and a couple down the shore stop and stare. Inhibition and a sense of privacy return but he's indebted to himself for the moment of escape, of clean and self-sufficient grief. Anger. Disgust. How absurd of a man to act as if a plane crash—accident or sabotage, happened or planned, they might all debate forever while it repeated itself tomorrow and a thousand times more but dead is dead—were his fault. The theft of his family his crime. That is what *courage* means, he decides, and also *strength*: acceptance of the penalty for others' misdeeds. Put a stop to all that.

He sits down on a bench under a tall shading larch, viewing the boat with the men and another motoring off and the gleam of several window panes high up the far slope, no longer crying after all.

He allows for the first time in a year his wife's presence; she has come to sit beside him. She has taken his hand. The children play on the shore, running one way then the other, old enough to be trusted but still the boy bears watching. Caked in mud if they aren't careful. His wife has forgiven any bones she has to pick on account of the beauty, the glorious spot and the expansive June sky, the sort of place she adores, the two of them drifting in the familiar sleepy warmth they have known for fifteen years since their very first meeting in the commons over dinner, feeling that young for a moment despite the evidence before them.

He can imagine them alive; he can imagine them dying. While Barbara grips his hand and laughs and whispers in his ear and the children pet a dog he sees as well the crowded cabin, all three beginning to doze although perhaps not the mother, more than likely she is reading yet another of the articles she never finds time for and reaching out now and then to stroke their heads. Ideally sleeping, the explosion might not have killed them straightaway; many seconds from blast to impact and he hopes they never knew. The authorities informed him—and Mother and Joe and Lucy and Naomi and Daniel and Malcolm and Penelope and Aaron and all the other survivors, all the reporters, all the watchers and listeners and readers of the world—in exhausting blatant detail, relentless as the Furies, he knows precisely where the hole was and how far from their seats and the timing of the sequence from tranquility to death and in the end no one can say. What really happened. Died in their sleep or in terror. Calling for daddy. No one knows a blessed thing except they were crushed, crushed to pieces. Transformed to mangled metal and flesh. He held his hands over his ears when they talked about "remains." The others heard that bit for him. He made them keep it to themselves, hated himself but he did. There was something to be buried; that was enough; that was all.

He can imagine them dead. Near his parents' home, his school. Still there now, always there, always will be, next to his father, some day his mother too, the house sold or torn down the village wrecked by a storm or say a Cornish lake creature rising up to scour the land wipe the whole west country clean they would be there.

He sits and waits.

"François!"
"Yes Grandmother?"
"What is that?"
"A little drawing."
"Does the father need your help?"
"He sent me back, Grandmother. He said I'd done enough today."
"And the uncle?"
"Grandmama, he's resting. You don't mind if I finish this picture?"
"If it honors the Lord I'm glad for it."
"Dear Grandmother?"
"Jean François?"
"I want to live here forever."
"My darling child, where would you go?"

He was forced to acknowledge that he had been there before. Before he ever knew Andy. He and Nick had made friends and he had gone down for brunch. He'd met Kay and admired her, walked the beach, praised their garden. They'd split up not long after so he hadn't been asked again. Surprising that Nick had kept it; Kay must have gone back to New Mexico, let him hold on to everything, but even so you might have thought he'd want to make a fresh start. Surprising that Aaron had not recognized the address, nor the house, had needed close to twenty minutes of staring at the thing to know it wasn't his first visit. But of course to admit that this home,

listed as Andy's, was Nick's as well was to accept the ugly truth. Already proven by the photo but tortured into his soul by his return to the scene. He tried to picture himself as he must have been then, sitting on the deck lusting after Kay's slim thighs and talking current events, badly wanting Nick to like him. So boyish. So dumb. He'd hadn't known then about smack and withdrawal or about a dead sister, a lost nephew and niece. He hadn't known about despair and degradation and regret. About the kind of regret he felt now over Andy, regret that came too late, that came only when it *was* too late, because you couldn't see the error until it was made and couldn't be fixed. Deep source of sorrow and shame. Nothing else was so bitter.

Just as he was thinking he should leave for a while—there was pasture on his side and all the houses on the other seemed working-couple empty but even so he might have been noticed—a car pulled into the drive. There she was. There was Andy. She was dressed in jeans and sweater, exactly the same shape she had been when he knew her, precisely, and aside from some gray in her hair was unchanged.

"Andrea."

She turned on the stoop, eyes high and wide, dropped her key ring in a clatter.

"It can't be you. Can it? Aaron?" She came down the steps. "It is, isn't it?"

He nodded. She approached him as a skeptic to a ghost. "My god you've aged."

I love the light, whispers Barbara. How I adore the summer light. They'll be fast asleep an hour before this highland sun is down.

Jesus no! the pilot cries.

I really would, says brother Aaron, barely able to speak, be buried for them if I could. I would do anything, he says, to spare you this.

If black sheep Aaron were here James could tell him how it is. Maybe tell him the dream. After a year all the others have abandoned the deaths, the actual deaths, given them up—for good reason, he knows—and embraced instead the loss, or even nurtured it (Malcolm) to reconstruct ongoing life. So he is left by himself but thinks Aaron would understand. He doesn't know just why he thinks that, they've met only the three times and one of those at the grave but something about his brother-in-law's pleading eyes on that occasion, something about his weakness, something about his having come all that way despite what clearly was the lowest low point of his existence was then suggestive and remains so. Barbara wasn't ashamed of you, he had the impulse to say as the dirt was shoveled in, she wanted you to get better, but they held opposite sides and were unknown to each other. And the rest would have objected. His wife and children were the pure, he knew, as far as Naomi for instance was concerned, the slaughtered lambs, and Aaron the fallen. No one wanted the innocents tainted; they were sorry the guilty had come.

This dream, asks Aaron: have you had it many times?

He shakes his head. He can't tell it. A young boy covered in blood. Blood and vomit and waste. What he read long ago: radiation, final stage. He is holding the boy and the boy is still alive but they are covered in blood, in blood and feces, in a bathtub perhaps. He cradles the boy. Not his son. Just a boy, a little older, a boy he's never seen before and hasn't seen even now because his face is obscured. He cradles the boy who dies in his arms. Dies gently with no pain but still dies. Can't be stopped. Rests in peace but can't be stopped. If James were to rise the boy would fall; if he tried to leave

the tub it would bring pain. Keep off the pain. He simply dies. And James awakes.

A heavy cloud, far the largest in the sky, moves in front of the sun and for a while the lake goes dim. The boat is gone and he's alone. He's been alone all the while. No sleepy wife, no son or daughter. No plane. No mourning brother-in-law, only the here-and-gone hound. He remembers something his little girl said, at a farm in Devon where they met five baby goats whose mother was elsewhere but her milk was brought to them twice daily, it was all explained, and as she stood in their shelter much like a little cottage his dear one saw the window and called it to his notice. *They can look out of it at night*, she said, *and think of what their mummy looks like.*

An ancient woman sits down. She's old and frail, in need of rest, and even now in his gloom he must look a nice lad.

"Lovely day," she says. He nods.

She nods in turn and says no more.

"Must I go there?"

"Child, you must."

"But Mother why?"

"The abbot's going. Thus so must you to learn your Latin."

"Let the new abbot teach me."

"Heauville is not so far."

"Oh Mother! How can you do this, send me away? I want only to be here with you!"

"You'll see us often. And return in good time."

"How have I sinned?"

"Don't weep like that, François. You're almost a man, aren't you ashamed?"

"You know, Buzz," she said on the deck, half-glad, amused and annoyed, "this is the first time I've had to myself in over a month."

She'd led him around her home rather than through it; it was still locked up tight. Between two nearby houses he could see a filling station and then water and sky.

"This the first time I've seen you—heard you call me that name—in twelve years."

"Yes, well," she said in her coming-to-the-point voice exactly as he'd known it, her be-that-way voice, her fine-let's-not-enjoy-each-other's-company voice, "that's because you left me."

"For ten days."

"Long enough."

"You must have known I was being stupid."

She sighed. "As I recall I told you so."

He got up and walked to the edge of the deck, looked down into their yard. It was a big yard, bigger than the others nearby. A wooden swingset stood near the center, amid many balls and trucks. The vegetable garden was gone; in its place was a wading pool.

"It was a mistake, Andy," he said.

"It was a *betrayal*. You weren't just gone; you were with Meg. It was very, very painful."

He turned around to find her smiling. It wasn't mean but wasn't kind. She was as appealing as she'd been, older but appealing—he almost smelled her naked skin. To be near her was a little like needing a fix, pressing his insides just that way, urging him on. But he'd been right; he didn't want her. He wanted Andy long ago. He wanted not to have gone so wrong. He wanted the life they might have led. It was pointless to have come, then, pointless to stay, but despite all that he argued for the record and for pride.

"I did my best," he told her quietly, trying to be calm, returning her smile after a fashion, "to apologize. Take it back. Let you know how wrong I was. What a fucking fool I'd been."

At that moment her own smile diminished, then flickered and vanished, and her features showed plain weariness instead. "Being

human," she said, her voice flat, "I couldn't hear you." She looked away, toward the house. "This is so like you, Aaron. I guess you still think there's no reality outside you, that you can define things however you want, whenever you take a whim. I can't believe I'm sitting here in 1998, still trying to explain to you that you *left* me. *You sold me out*." She was right, it was a terrible flashback nightmare, she sounded just as she had cutting the thread of his future and thereby killing all his hope, making it irretrievably clear that he could never change her view of what he'd done. He wanted badly to change it now, for entirely different reasons—Jesus fucking *Christ* couldn't she understand how young he'd been, how unprepared, how unlucky to have met the true love of his life before he had the foggiest useful notion of what to do with her?—but understood it was the same as before: not a chance. Not the phantom of a chance.

"The only reason I came," he said, still quiet, looking again at the yard, his voice catching, "is that knowing you had a family I understood what I'd thrown away. After all these years of remembering you, wondering how you were, picturing you in the dark, despising myself for ever speaking a word to Meg, believing if I'd just not ruined things for us my life would be so different, so much better, knowing it was crazy, after all that I saw you on the sofa with your children and then the pain really came." He turned around. "Like when you hurt yourself climbing, Andy, or falling off a bike, you don't feel it because you're in shock but then you wake up in the night with the painkiller wearing off. Do you know how that is? They could have been mine. *You* could have been mine. Maybe it was the snapshot, maybe it's because Nick and I were pals, but it finally broke through. You could have been mine." He saw a trembling around her mouth and turned to face the yard again. "It was a *mistake*, Andy. The worst I'll ever make. I'm here to rub my own nose in it, I guess, and I'm sorry to bother you, but I had to. Now I'll leave."

"All right," she said, and paused. "It was a mistake. And you're sorry."

He didn't want to be forgiven, he just wanted to get out.

"But what can I do now, Buzz? Give you a penance?"

He turned around.

"Open my legs?"

"You really hate me, don't you?" he asked. "How can you hate me so much after all these years, a husband, three kids, gray hair, with your Toyota and your fucking back yard? How can you?"

Her smile was back. "I don't hate you. I just wish you hadn't come. I'd almost forgotten how awful it was. When Nick said he'd seen you I remembered you fondly. I was happy for the news. I even told the kids about the chipmunk at Crater Lake. I never hated you, Aaron, and don't you forget it. I never for a second hated you. It ripped my heart out when you left but I didn't hate you. I wasn't even angry, really. I only wanted you far away."

He held his face in his hands. He heard her stand and unlock the door, go in, come out, go in, come out and walk the planks to kiss his shoulder, stroke his forearm, say goodbye. Then she went inside the house again and shut the door tight.

To look out that cottage window, even once—though it is late and no moon, dead dark, nothing whatever to see there—might be the very last thing James could bring himself to do.

[1837, Paris]

A young man enters the café. He's very quiet, they can tell, quiet and young and poor, of course; they're none too good, his pants and coat, and out of date. He might as well be wearing sabots! It's a tired old joke by now, making sport of the peasants who march on the capital every day looking for work and something new, and the patrons of this place, which is near the

carriage terminus, are further jaded than most. And not by nature unkind. But his demeanor invites abuse.

"Where is the Louvre?"

"Can you say please?"

"Please, where is the palace of the Louvre?"

"Can you say please, ladies and gentleman?"

He is silent, his lips tight.

"You can't expect us to help you."

"Can't I?"

"If we help where will you be? You come all this distance to Paris and expect to be led around? You must learn your own way, just as the rest of us did."

"None of you were born here, then?"

"No one is born in Paris, my son," cries an old woman in the corner. "When the child's about to drop they send you out to the country to have it." She looks around. "I ought to know, I bore nineteen. All boys!" The café shakes.

A large man with callused hands stands before him.

"If I tell you how to get to the Louvre," he asks, "what will you do for me? My work for a day? Will you repair my wife's cupboard?"

"I'm a farmer."

"You amaze me," says the man. "But no matter. Will you at least buy me coffee?"

The peasant looks at the grinning faces. In an instant he is calmer, then not anxious at all. The proprietor, from the north himself, sees understanding in the confident, sensitive eyes.

"I've little money," the stranger says quietly, "but if you need it, it's yours."

The large man turns away. "I don't want it," he replies.

"Where'd you sleep last night?" asks the owner, setting out a chipped cup.

"I didn't, really." He eyes the coffee warily as it's poured, and the roll placed on the plate. "I have to save my few francs."

The man waves the air. "My pleasure. A welcome token." He leans closer. "And in apology for the remarks." He smiles. "I'm called Louis."

"Bretagne?"

"Yes indeed. And you're Norman."

"I am called Jean François."

"Do you want tea, Jean François?"

"Is this coffee?"

"You haven't had it?"

"Never once."

"Try it then. You'll soon be devoted."

It gives Louis much pleasure to watch the young man sip cautiously, then sip again, then make a face he can't hide. "It's very fine."

"Listen," says an older man who joins them at the counter, a small man with eyeglasses and a cap dusted with flour, "listen, if you're a farmer what do you want with the Louvre?"

"I'm also a painter," says the Norman. "That is I am a painter and also a farmer."

"You mean an artist?"

"I aspire."

The baker shakes his head. "You'd better find some more money." The visitor drains his cup and Louis refills it.

As the baker explains how to get to the museum—apparently the stranger has been days looking for it—Louis watches the faces closely. The younger man's defies appraisal.

"What's your family name?"

"Millet."

"You have the funds to get started?"

"I have enough. Until I sell a few portraits."

"You'll need sitters first," says the baker, then looks at the clock and hurries away.

"I admire your courage in asking. I remember how hard it was."

Jean François smiles weakly. "Necessity breeds courage. And feeling like a fool. I walked here, you know, I left everything I'm fond of and I couldn't bear another hour of waiting to see those paintings, not when I've given up so much."

"Seen any at all?"

"Yes, in Cherbourg. I studied there. I'm not quite the country idiot your companions seem to think."

Louis waves the air again as his customers file out. "They don't," he says, "they don't. They were looking for some fun before starting their work. Their days are dismal, mostly." He looks down to see an empty cup and plate, takes another roll and puts it in the young man's pocket, pushes his shoulder. "Go on to the Louvre, then," he says. "You've waited too long already. They should be open when you arrive."

In his guest's eyes he sees gratitude, the thanks he'd just as soon not hear, but along with it that quality sensed by all: conceit, pride, call it what one might. He clasps the hand that is offered and sadly waves the air again—no one is watching the gesture—as the Norman heads for the door.

"Come back soon," he calls in time.

"You have my pledge," replies the other.

Louis scans his café (only Pierre and Small Dog, his livelihood safe with them) and comes quickly around the counter, hurries to the door. "Millet! Wait!" he calls at the shabby, rumpled back moving rapidly down the street. The young man turns. "Come back here a moment!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Listen, Millet—Jean François—go back to Normandy, why don't you? You look at me, take a long look, I'm enormously sorry I left. There's nothing good here, really. You can learn to be an artist in Le Havre or Caen or even Cherbourg, you know, there's nothing special about Paris. Except a lot of awful nonsense. And they hate us here, you know? See your fill at the Louvre and the Luxembourg and anywhere else you want and then have done with this place."

Eight miles down the coast highway on the verge of San Gregorio he decides it's Santa Cruz after all, Richard and Kathi'll take me in until I figure out what's next but as the junction with 84 comes into view he thinks god stinking damn it no this fucking ocean's much too wide, I'll never cross it on a bet, and he turns the car east.