

Alan G. Hagberg
Writing as Alan H. Gael
P.O. Box 1197
Harwich, MA 02645
(774) 789-6647
info@alanhagberg.com

THE HOUSE THAT TURNED

Nine Strange Tales

by Alan H. Gael

About 58,000 words

CHAPTER ONE

THE BECKONING FAIR ONE

The three or four "For Rent" signs had stood within the low picket fence as long as the people of that quiet little dead-end block could remember, and if they had ever been vertical it was a very long time ago. They now overhung the fence each at its own angle, and resembled nothing so much as a row of wooden hatchets, ever in the act of falling upon some passerby, yet never cutting off a tenant for the old house from the traffic of the street. Not that there was ever any great traffic along the dead end; it moved a block and more away, beyond the tangle of rooming houses and narrow side streets that had grown up since the old house had been built, hemming it in completely; and probably the house itself was only being allowed to stand until the leases on the neighboring lots fell in, when no doubt a developer would clear the whole neighborhood.

It was of old red brick, and built into its walls were the keystones and decorative lintels of a more prosperous era. The children of the quiet block had swung on the low iron gate at the end of the entry passage until little more than the solid top bar remained, and the passage itself ran past boarded basement windows on which drifters had left their chalk marks. The path was washed and worn uneven by years of weather, and cats had made the approach their own. The chances of a tenant did not seem such

as to warrant the keeping of the signs in a state of legibility and repair, and as a matter of fact they were not so kept.

For six months Oren had passed the old place twice a day or more, on his way from his rented room to the study ten minutes' walk away that he had taken for his working quarters; and for six months no hatchet-like sign had fallen across his path. This might have been because he usually took the other side of the street. But he chanced one morning to take the side that ran past the broken gate and the passage, and to pause before one of the tilted signs. The sign bore, besides the agent's name, the announcement—written apparently about the time of Oren's own early youth—that the key was to be had at Number Six.

Oren was already paying, for a separate bedroom and workroom, more than a writer without private means could well afford; and he was paying besides for the storage of his grandmother's furniture. It invariably happened that the book he wanted at night was in the workroom, while the note or letter he needed by day was in the pocket of another coat behind his bedroom door. Brought suddenly up by the hatchet-like sign, he looked down through the scraggly privet at the boarded basement windows, then up at the blank second floor and the coping of the roof. He stood a minute thumbing his lean, clean-shaven jaw; then, with another glance at the sign, walked slowly across to Number Six.

He knocked, and waited two or three minutes, but, although the door stood open, received no answer. He was knocking again when a long-nosed man in shirtsleeves appeared.

"I was saying grace over my food," he said in severe explanation.

Oren asked if he might have the key of the old house; and the long-nosed man withdrew again.

Oren waited another five minutes on the step; then the man, appearing again and still chewing something, announced that the key was lost.

"But you won't need it," he said. "The front door isn't latched, and a push'll open most of the others. I'm agent for it, if you're thinking of taking it—"

Oren recrossed to the old house, passed through the gate, walked along the entry passage, and turned in at the wide front doorway. To the right, immediately within the door, steps descended to the roomy cellar, and the staircase before him had a carved walnut railing, and was broad and handsome and filthy. Oren ascended it, avoiding contact with the rail and walls, and stopped at the first landing. A door facing him had been boarded up, but he pushed at the one on his right, and a loose bolt gave. He entered the empty second floor.

He spent a quarter of an hour in the place, then came out again. Without going higher, he descended and went back to the house of the man who had lost the key.

"Can you tell me what the rent is?" he asked.

The man named a figure, the comparative lowness of which seemed accounted for by the character of the neighborhood and the abominable state of disrepair of the place.

"Would it be possible to rent just one floor?"

The long-nosed man was uncertain; they might....

"Who are they?"

The man gave Oren the name of a law firm on the courthouse square.

"You might mention my name—Barrett," he added.

Pressure of work kept Oren from going downtown that afternoon, but he went the next day. He had intended only to inquire about a single floor; the attorney, a mild man long experienced in properties nobody wanted, surprised him. The estate had been trying to be rid of the whole house for years, and the monthly payments, spread over a long term, would be less than Oren was paying for his divided life and the storage of his grandmother's furniture. Oren sat back and looked at the attorney briefly.

He went through the house from top to bottom the following morning, measuring and reckoning, and came back the next day to sign the papers. The upper floors he meant to advertise; even modest rent from the rooms above would make the payments easy. He had the for-rent signs relettered and left them in the yard, and told himself that, all things considered, he had done quite well.

He was entirely taken with that portion of the house he had already decided should be his own. Scraped clean and painted, and with that old furniture of his grandmother's, it ought to be entirely charming. He went to the storage warehouse to refresh his memory of his half-forgotten belongings and to take measurements; and from there he went to a hardware and paint dealer. He was very busy with his regular work and could have

wished the sign had caught his attention either a few months earlier or later in the year; but the quickest way would be to suspend work entirely until after his move.

Two weeks later his second floor was painted throughout in a tender, warm white, the paint was dry, and Oren was in the middle of his installation. He was animated and delighted, and he rubbed his hands as he polished and arranged his grandmother's things—the tall china cabinet with its good dishes, the long walnut table with its leaves, the low bookshelves (he had had two of them copied), the chairs, the brass candlesticks, the rose bowls. These he set against his newly painted white walls—walls of paneled wood in the most pleasing proportions, molded and coffered to the low-seated window recesses in a spirit of ease and rest that builders no longer knew how to achieve. The ceilings were high, and faintly decorated with an old painted pattern of stars; even the tapering moldings of his iron fireplace were as finely worked as jewelry; and Oren walked about rubbing his hands, frequently stopping for the sheer pleasure of the views from white room to white room.

"Charming, charming," he said to himself. "I wonder what Elsie Bengough will think of this!"

He bought a bolt and a lock for his door and shut off his quarters from the rest of the house. If he now wanted to read in bed, his book could be had by stepping into the next room. All the while he thought how exceedingly lucky he was to have found the place. He put up a coat rack in the small square hall and hung up his hats and coats; and passersby on the quiet block late

at night, looking up at the old house, could see the light within Oren's windows, or else the sudden darkening of one room and the brightening of another, as Oren passed from room to room making final arrangements or preparing to resume the work that his move had interrupted.

As far as the chief business of his life—his writing—was concerned, Paul Oren treated the world better than it treated him; but he seldom reckoned how far, at forty-four, he was behind on the handicap. He had chosen his path and was committed to it beyond withdrawal. In youth he had called the choice disinterested, generous, noble; and had he questioned himself now, he would still have maintained that a life without such things was no life for him. Only lately, and rarely, had he suspected that there might be more to it than this. He did not care to anticipate the day when, past the peak of his powers, he might ask whether less demanding ideals would have served him better.

In the meantime, his move into the old house with the carved railing merely interrupted *Romilly Bishop* at the fifteenth chapter.

As this tall man with the lean, angular face moved about his new rooms—arranging, changing, altering, hardly yet back into his working stride—he gave the impression of almost old-maidish precision. Twenty years in rooming houses, attics, furnished apartments, and plain rooms had taught him to do many things for himself, and to be methodical for the sake of time and temper. He had arranged with the wife of the long-nosed Barrett—a stout,

flat-voiced woman named Ruby—to prepare his breakfast each morning and clean on Saturdays; for the rest he welcomed a little housework as relief from writing.

His kitchen, together with the adjoining strip of a room into which a claw-foot bathtub had been fitted, overlooked the entry passage at the side of the house; and at one end of the kitchen was a large closet with a door and a square sliding hatch in the upper part of it. This had been a powder closet once, and through the hatch an elaborately dressed head had been thrust to receive the puff and click of the powder pistol. Oren puzzled a little over this closet; then, as its old use occurred to him, he smiled faintly, moved he knew not by what. He would have to put it to a very different purpose from its original one; it would probably have to serve as his pantry. It was in this closet that he made a discovery. The back of it was shelved, and, rummaging on an upper shelf that ran deeply into the wall, Oren found a pair of mushroom-shaped old wooden wig stands. He did not know how they had come to be there. Doubtless the painters had turned them up somewhere and set them there. But his five rooms as a whole were short on closet and cabinet space, and it was only by some ingenuity that he was able to find places for his household linens, his boxes, and his seldom-used but not-to-be-destroyed accumulations of papers.

Oren took possession in early spring, anxious to have Romilly ready for publication in the fall. He did not intend to force it; the book was crucial to his artistic development and must have its own length and time. In the workroom he had lately

left he had been making excellent progress; Romilly had begun, as the saying goes, to speak and act for herself. Now the distraction of moving was nearly over. On a March morning he went out, returned with two great bunches of yellow daffodils, placed one on his mantelpiece and the other on the table before him, and took out the half-completed manuscript of Romilly Bishop.

But before beginning work he went to his writing desk and took out his checkbook and bank book. He added them up, and his monk-like face grew thoughtful. His move had cost him more than he had intended, and his balance was rather less than two hundred dollars, with no immediate prospect of more.

"Hm! I'd forgotten how rugs and curtains and such things mount up," said Oren. "But it would have been a pity to spoil the place for the want of twenty dollars or so.... Well, Romilly simply must be out by fall, that's all. So here goes—"

He drew his papers toward him.

But he worked badly; rather, he did not work at all. The block outside had its own noises, new and frequent. Delivery trucks rumbled and called; at noon the schoolchildren trooped along the block and swung on his gate; later a man with a guitar stationed himself beneath the window. This last was not unpleasant, and Oren, pushing up the sash, threw the man a quarter. Then he returned to his table.

It was no good. He came to himself at long intervals to find that he had been looking around the room and wondering how it had formerly been furnished—whether a bright settee had stood under the farther window, whether a crystal chandelier had hung from

the high ceiling, where the writing table had been. He had far better frankly do nothing than get fruitlessly tired; and deciding to take a walk, he sat down briefly and dozed instead.

"This won't do," he yawned when he woke at half past four in the afternoon. "I must do better than this tomorrow—"

The next morning he sat down to work without answering any of his three letters—two bills, and a note from Miss Bengough forwarded from his old address. It was a fine day of white and blue, with a fresh noisy wind and a subtle turn in the color of growing things; once or twice a minute the room brightened and dimmed as clouds moved northward over the block. The soft, fitful light shone in the table and the worn old floor; the morning noises had begun again.

Oren made a pattern of dots on the paper, then got up to move the daffodils exactly opposite the center of a creamy panel. He wrote one sentence, two lines long, and then it broke into notes and jottings. For a time he persuaded himself that these memoranda were work; then he rose and began to pace. Perhaps the place wanted more positive color. It was mild and sweet as a kind old face, but a little bleached, a little wan. Yes: richer flowers, and perhaps some warm bright stuff for cushions at the window seats.

"Of course, I really can't afford it," he muttered, as he went for a tape measure and began to measure the width of the window recesses.

In stooping to measure a recess, his attitude suddenly changed to one of interest and attention. Presently he rose again, rubbing his hands with quiet pleasure.

"Oh ho, oh ho!" he said. "These look very much to me like window boxes, nailed shut. We must look into this! Yes, those are boxes, or I'm ... oh ho, this is an adventure!"

On that wall of his sitting room there were two windows (the third was in another corner), and beyond the open bedroom door, on the same wall, was another. The seats of all had been painted, repainted, and painted again; and Oren's investigating finger had barely detected the old nail heads beneath the paint. Under the ledge over which he stooped an old keyhole had also been puttied over. Oren took out his pocketknife.

He worked carefully for five minutes, then went to the kitchen for a hammer and chisel. Driving the chisel cautiously under the seat, he started the whole lid slightly. Again using the knife, he cut along the hinged edge and outward along the ends; and then he fetched a wedge and a wooden mallet.

"Now for our little mystery—" he said.

The sound of the mallet on the wedge seemed, in that sweet and pale room, somehow a little crude—even startling. The paneling rang and rattled and vibrated to the blows like a sounding board. The whole house seemed to echo; from the roomy cellar to the attic above a crowd of echoes seemed to wake; and the sound got a little on Oren's nerves. All at once he paused, fetched a rag, and muffled the mallet. When the edge was sufficiently raised he put his fingers under it and lifted. The

paint flaked and starred a little; the rusty old nails squeaked; and the lid came up, laying open the box beneath. Oren looked into it. Save for a couple of inches of dust and old cobwebs it was empty.

"No treasure there," said Oren, a little amused that he should have fancied there might have been. "Romilly will still have to be out by fall. Let's have a look at the others."

The raising of the two remaining seats occupied him until well into the afternoon. That of the bedroom, like the first, was empty; but from the second seat of his sitting room he drew out something yielding and folded and furred over an inch thick with dust. He carried the object into the kitchen, swept it over a wastebasket, and took a rag to it.

It was some sort of a large bag, of an ancient rough-woven material, and when unfolded it occupied the greater part of the small kitchen floor. In shape it was an irregular—a very irregular—triangle, and it had a couple of wide flaps with the remains of straps and buckles. The patch that had been uppermost in the folding was of a faded yellowish brown; but the rest of it was shades of crimson that varied according to the exposure of the parts of it.

"Now whatever can that have been?" Oren mused as he stood surveying it. "I give it up. Whatever it is, it's settled my work for today, I'm afraid—"

That morning, before coming to Oren, she had already filed two department-store columns, bullied a copy desk into restoring a paragraph it had cut for space, and sent a brief note to an

editor who owed her money. She came to him not as a woman with nothing else to do, but as one who had made room for him in a crowded and competent life.

It nettled Oren a little that his friend Miss Bengough should dismiss with a glance the place he himself had found so singularly appealing. Indeed she scarcely lifted her eyes to it. But then she had always been more or less like that—a little indifferent to the graces of life, careless of appearances, and perhaps a shade more herself when she ate a sandwich from a paper bag than when she dined with greater observance of ceremony. She was an unattached journalist of thirty-four, large, showy, fair as butter, pink as a dog rose, reminding one of a prize bloom from a florist's window, and given to sudden and ample movements and moist and emphatic utterances. She pulled a better living out of the pool (as she expressed it) than Oren did; and by cunningly disguised write-ups of department stores and clothiers she pulled also the greater part of her very varied wardrobe. She left small whirlwinds of air behind her when she moved, in which her scarves fluttered and spun.

Oren heard the energetic tread of her shoes on his staircase and her single loud knock at his door when he had been a month in his new place. Her clothes brought in the outer air, and she dropped a bundle of women's magazines onto a chair.

"Don't stop for me," she said around a mouthful of hairpins as she removed her hat and scarf. "I didn't know whether you were settled yet, so I've brought some sandwiches for lunch. You've got coffee, I suppose?—No, don't get up—I'll find the kitchen—"

"Oh, that's all right, I'll clear these things away. To tell the truth, I'm rather glad to be interrupted," said Oren.

He gathered his work and put it away. She was already in the kitchen; he heard the running of water into the kettle. He joined her, and ten minutes later followed her back to the sitting room with the coffee and sandwiches on a tray. They sat down with the tray on a small table between them.

"Well, what do you think of the new place?" Oren asked as she poured out the coffee.

"Hm!... Anybody'd think you were going to get married, Paul."

He laughed.

"Oh, no. But it's an improvement on some of the others, isn't it?"

"Is it? I suppose it is; I don't know. I liked the last place, in spite of the black ceiling and no decent water pressure. How's Romilly?"

Oren rubbed his chin.

"Hm! I'm rather ashamed to tell you. The fact is, I've not gotten on very well with it. But it will be all right in the end, as you used to say."

"Stuck?"

"Rather stuck."

"Got any of it you care to read to me?..."

Oren had long been in the habit of reading portions of his work to Miss Bengough occasionally. Her comments were always quick and practical, sometimes directly useful, sometimes

indirectly suggestive. She, in return for his confidence, always kept any mention of her own work scrupulously from him. His, she said, was "real work"; hers merely filled space, and not always even grammatically.

"I'm afraid there isn't," Oren replied, still meditatively rubbing his chin. Then he added, with a little burst of candor, "The fact is, Elsie, I've not written—not actually written—very much more of it—any more of it, in fact. But of course that doesn't mean I haven't progressed. I've progressed, in one sense, rather alarmingly. I'm now thinking of reconstructing the whole thing."

Miss Bengough gave a gasp. "Reconstructing!"

"Making Romilly herself a different type of woman. Somehow I've begun to feel that I'm not getting the most out of her. As she stands, I've certainly lost interest in her to some extent."

"But—but—" Miss Bengough protested, "you had her so real, so living, Paul!"

Oren smiled faintly. He had been quite prepared for Miss Bengough's objections. He wasn't surprised that she liked Romilly as she at present stood; she would. Whether she realized it or not, there was a good deal of herself in his fictional creation. Naturally Romilly would seem "real" and "living" to her.

"But are you really serious, Paul?" Miss Bengough asked presently, with a round-eyed stare.

"Quite serious."

"You're really going to scrap those fifteen chapters?"

"I didn't exactly say that."

"That fine, rich love scene?"

"I should only do it reluctantly, and for the sake of something I thought better."

"And that beautiful, beautiful description of Romilly on the shore?"

"It wouldn't necessarily be wasted," he said, a little uneasily.

But Miss Bengough made a large and emphatic gesture, and then let him have it.

"Really, you are too trying!" she broke out. "I do wish sometimes you'd remember you're human and live in a world! You know I'd be the last to wish you to lower your standard one inch, but it wouldn't be lowering it to bring it within human understanding. Oh, you're sometimes altogether too godlike!... Why, it would be a wicked, criminal waste of your powers to destroy those fifteen chapters! Look at it reasonably, now. You've been working nearly twenty years; you've now got what you've been working for almost within your grasp; your affairs are at a most critical point—oh, don't tell me; I know you're about at the end of your money—and here you are deliberately proposing to throw away something that will probably make your name, and to substitute for it something that ten to one nobody on earth will ever want to read—and small blame to them! Really, you try my patience!"

Oren had shaken his head slowly as she talked. It was an old story between them. The noisy, capable, practical journalist was an admirable friend—up to a certain point; beyond that—well, each

of us knows that point beyond which we stand alone. Elsie Bengough sometimes said that had she had one-tenth part of Oren's talent there were few things she could not have done—thus making that talent a quantitatively divisible thing, a sort of ingredient to be added to or subtracted from the mixture of his work. That it was a qualitative thing, essential, indivisible, informing, passed her comprehension. Their spirits parted company at that point. Oren knew it. She did not appear to know it.

"Yes, yes, yes," he said a little wearily, by and by. "Practically you're quite right, entirely right, and I haven't a word to say. If I could only hand Romilly over to you, you'd make an enormous success of her. But that can't be, and I, for my part, am seriously doubting whether she's worth my while. You know what that means."

"What does it mean?" she demanded bluntly.

"It means," said Oren, slowly, "that I may have to start all over again. Begin fresh. Something new."

The blood mounted to Miss Bengough's face.

"After nineteen years?"

"After nineteen years."

"But, Paul—your public—such as it is—"

"My public," he said with gentle scorn. "My dear Elsie, has it occurred to you that I haven't got a public?"

She was clearly at a loss briefly.

"Well," she said bluntly, "you have me."

The words were out before she had time to stop them. But they were words of such honesty—such raw, splendid honesty—that Oren could only drop his eyes before them.

“I know I have,” he said presently, very quietly.

“And I can’t make head nor tail of what you’re doing,” she said, a little tremulously. “I can only say that if—if it means what I think it does—it does seem an awful pity—” and she fumbled in her bag for a handkerchief.

For a moment she had ceased to be the practical journalist; she was only a woman who cared a very great deal indeed. He could have done no better thing for himself than to have gone straight to her in that moment. Had he, any time these ten years, asked her to marry him, she would have replied quietly, “Very well; when?” He had never thought of it.

“Yours is the real work,” she continued quietly. “Without you we jackals couldn’t exist. You and a few like you hold everything upon your shoulders.”

For a minute there was a silence. Then it occurred to Oren that this was common vulgar grumbling. It was not his habit. Suddenly he rose and began to stack cups and plates on the tray.

“Sorry you catch me like this, Elsie,” he said, with a little laugh. “No, I’ll take them out; then we’ll go for a walk, if you like....”

He carried out the tray, and then began to show Miss Bengough around his rooms. She made few comments. In the kitchen she asked what an old faded square of reddish rough cloth was, that Mrs. Barrett used as a cushion for her wooden chair.

It was not quite true, and some part of her knew it. The columns she wrote, the interviews she rescued from stupidity, the small notices that kept tradesmen alive for another week, were also work; but in Oren's presence she had formed the habit of making herself smaller than she was.

"I think I know what it is," said Miss Bengough. "It's been used to wrap up a harp before putting it into its case."

"By God, that's probably just what it was," said Oren. "I could make neither head nor tail of it...."

They finished the tour of the rooms and returned to the sitting room.

"And who lives in the rest of the house?" Miss Bengough asked.

"I dare say a tramp sleeps in the cellar occasionally. Nobody else."

"Hm!... Well, I'll tell you what I think about it, if you like."

"I should like."

"You'll never work here."

"Oh?" said Oren quickly. "Why not?"

"You'll never finish Romilly here. Why, I don't know, but you won't. I know it. You'll have to leave before you get on with that book."

He thought briefly, then said:

"Isn't that a little-prejudiced, Elsie?"

"Perfectly ridiculous. As an argument it hasn't a leg to stand on. But there it is," she replied, her mouth once more full of hairpins.

Oren was reaching for his hat and coat. He laughed.

"I can only hope you're entirely wrong," he said, "for I shall be in a serious mess if Romilly isn't out in the fall."

As Oren sat by his fire that evening, turning over Miss Bengough's prediction that difficulties awaited him in his work, he came to the conclusion that it would have been far better had she kept her beliefs to herself. No man does a thing better for having his confidence undermined at the outset, and to speak of difficulties is in a sense to make them. Speech itself becomes a deterrent, to which other discouragements gather until the very event of which warning is given is as likely as not to come to pass. He heartily confounded her. An influence hostile to the completion of Romilly had been born.

And in some illogical, dogmatic way women seem to have, she had attached this hostile influence to his new rooms. Was ever anything so absurd! "You'll never finish Romilly here."... Why not? Was this her idea of the luxury that saps the springs of action and brings a man down to idleness? The place was well enough—it was entirely charming, for that matter—but it was not so demoralizing as all that! No; Elsie had missed the mark that time....

He moved his chair to look around the room that smiled, positively smiled, in the firelight. He too smiled, as if pity was to be felt for a maligned apartment. Even that slight lack of

strong color he had remarked was not noticeable in the soft glow. The chintz curtains—they had a flowered and trellised pattern, with baskets and reeds—fell in long quiet folds to the window seats; the rows of bindings in the old bookcases caught the light richly; the last trace of pallor had gone with the daylight; and if the truth must be told, it had been Elsie herself who had seemed a little out of the picture.

That thought struck him a little, and presently he returned to it. Yes, the room had, quite accidentally, done Miss Bengough a disservice that afternoon. It had, in some subtle but unmistakable way, placed her—marked a contrast of qualities. Assuming for the sake of argument the slightly ridiculous proposition that the room in which Oren sat was characterized by a certain sparseness and lack of vigor; so much the worse for Miss Bengough; she certainly erred on the side of redundancy and general abundance. And if one must contrast abstract qualities, Oren inclined to the austere in taste....

Yes, here Oren had made a distinct discovery; he wondered he had not made it before. He pictured Miss Bengough again as she had appeared that afternoon—large, showy, moistly pink, with that quality of the prize bloom exuding from her; and instantly she suffered in his thought. He even recognized now that he had noticed something odd at the time, and that unconsciously his attitude, even while she had been there, had been one of criticism. The mechanism of her was a little obvious; her melting warmth was the result of analyzable processes; and behind her there had seemed to lurk some dim shape suggestive of mortality.

He had never, during the ten years of their intimacy, dreamed briefly of asking her to marry him; none the less, he now felt for the first time a thankfulness that he had not done so....

Then suddenly and swiftly his face burned with shame that he should be thinking thus of his friend. What! Elsie Bengough, with whom he had spent weeks and weeks of afternoons—she, the good companion, on whose help he would have counted had all the rest of the world failed him—she, whose loyalty to him would not, he knew, swerve as long as there was breath in her—Elsie to be even in thought dissected thus! He was an ingrate and a cad....

Had she been there in that moment he would have abased himself before her.

For ten minutes and more he sat, still gazing into the fire, with that humiliating flush fading slowly from his cheeks. All was still within and without, save for a tiny musical tinkling that came from his kitchen—the dripping of water from an imperfectly turned tap into the vessel beneath it. Mechanically he began to beat with his finger to the faintly heard falling of the drops; the tiny regular movement seemed to hasten that shameful withdrawal from his face. He grew cool once more; and when he resumed his meditation he was all unconscious that he took it up again at the same point.

It was not only her florid redundancy of build that he had approached in the attitude of criticism; he was conscious also of the wide differences between her mind and his own. He felt no thankfulness that up to a certain point their natures had ever run companionably side by side; he was now full of questions

beyond that point. Their minds diverged; there was no denying it; and looking back he was inclined to doubt whether there had been any real meeting of them. True, he had read his writings to her and she had appeared to speak to the point; but what can a man do who, having assumed that another sees as he does, is suddenly brought up sharp by something that falsifies all that has gone before? He doubted all now. It did briefly occur to him that the man who demands of a friend more than can be given is in danger of losing that friend, but he put the thought aside.

Again he ceased to think, and again moved his finger to the distant dripping of the tap....

And now, if these things were true of Elsie Bengough, they were also true of the creation of which she was the model—Romilly Bishop. And since he could say of Romilly what for very shame he could not say of Elsie, he gave his thoughts full rein. He did so in that smiling, firelit room, to the accompaniment of the faintly heard tap.

There was no longer any doubt about it; he hated the central character of his novel. Even as he had described her physically she overpowered the senses; she was coarse-fibred, overcolored, rank. It became true the moment he put it into words: Gulliver had described the Brobdingnagian maids of honor just so; and mentally and spiritually she corresponded—was insensitive, limited, common. The model—he closed his eyes briefly—the model stuck out through fifteen vulgar and obvious chapters to such a pitch that, without seeing the reason, he had been unable to

begin the sixteenth. He marveled that it had only just come to him.

And *this* was to have been his Beatrice, his great vision! As Elsie she was to have gone into the furnace of his art, and she was to have come out the Woman all men desire! Her thoughts were to have been culled from his own finest, her form from his dearest dreams, and her setting wherever he could find one fit for her worth. He had brooded long before making the attempt; then one day he had felt her stir within him as a mother feels a quickening, and he had begun to write; and so he had added chapter to chapter.

And those fifteen sodden chapters were what he had produced!

Again he sat, softly moving his finger....

Then he bestirred himself.

She must go, all fifteen chapters of her. That was settled. For what was to take her place his mind was a blank; but one thing at a time; a man is not excused from taking the wrong course because the right one is not immediately revealed to him. Better would come if it was to come; in the meantime—

He rose, fetched the fifteen chapters, and read them over before he should drop them into the fire.

But instead of putting them into the fire he let them fall from his hand. He became conscious of the dripping of the tap again. It had a tinkling scale of four or five notes, on which it rang irregular changes, and it was foolishly sweet and bell-like. In his mind Oren could see the gathering of each drop, its little trembling on the lip of the tap, and the tiny percussive of its

fall, "Plink-plunk," almost inaudible. Following the lowest note there seemed to be a brief phrase, irregularly repeated; and presently Oren found himself waiting for the recurrence of this phrase. It was quite pretty....

But it did not conduce to wakefulness, and Oren dozed over his fire.

When he woke again the fire had burned low and the flames of the candles on the mantelpiece were guttering. Sluggishly he rose, yawned, went his nightly round of door locks and window fastenings, and passed into his bedroom. Soon he slept soundly.

But a curious little sequel followed in the morning. Mrs. Barrett usually tapped not at his door but at the wall beyond which lay Oren's bed; and then Oren would rise, put on his robe, and let her in. He was not conscious that as he did so that morning he was humming a tune; but Mrs. Barrett lingered with her hand on the doorknob and her face a little averted and smiling.

"My goodness!" her flat Midwestern voice said. "But that is a very old song, Mr. Oren! I haven't heard it these forty years!"

"What song?" Oren asked.

"The song you were humming, sir."

Oren had his thumb in the flap of a letter. It remained there.

"I was humming?... Sing it, Mrs. Barrett."

Mrs. Barrett made a dismissive sound.

"I have no voice for singing, Mr. Oren; it was my aunt was the singer in our family; but the tune is very old, and I believe it is called 'The Beckoning Fair One.'"

"Try to sing it," said Oren, his thumb still in the envelope; and Mrs. Barrett, with much confusion and blushing, hummed the air.

"They say it was sung to a harp, Mr. Oren, and it is very old," she concluded.

"And I was singing that?"

"Indeed you were. I wouldn't be likely to tell you stories."

With a "Very well—let me have breakfast," Oren opened his letter; but the odd little circumstance struck him as stranger than he would have admitted to himself. The phrase he had been humming had been that which he had associated with the falling of the drops from the tap the evening before.

Even more curious than that the commonplace dripping of an ordinary water tap should have suggested so closely an actually existing melody was another result it had—namely, that it wakened in Oren an abnormal attentiveness to other sounds of the old house. It has been said that silence obtains its fullest and most impressive quality when it is broken by some minute sound; and, truth to tell, the place was never still. Perhaps the mildness of the spring air worked upon its torpid old timbers; perhaps Oren's fires caused it to creak and settle; and certainly a whole world of insect life bored and burrowed in its beams and joists. At any rate, Oren had only to sit quiet in his chair and to wait for a minute or two in order to become aware of such a change in the scale of audible things as comes upon a man who, believing the summer woods to be motionless and silent, all at once finds his ear sharpened to the creaking of a thousand insects.

And he smiled to think of man's arbitrary distinction between that which has life and that which has not. Here, quite apart from such recognizable sounds as the scampering of mice, the falling of plaster behind his paneling, and the popping of wood from his fire, was a whole house talking to him had he but known its language. Beams settled with a tired sigh into their old mortises; creatures ticked in the walls; joints cracked, boards complained; with no perceptible stirring of the air, window sashes shifted with a soft knock in their frames. And whether the place had life in this sense or not, it had at all events a winning personality. It needed but an hour of musing for Oren to conceive the notion that, as his own body stood in friendly relation to his mind, so, by some fanciful extension, his habitation might stand in some relation to himself. He even amused himself with the far-fetched fancy that he might so identify himself with the place that some future tenant, taking possession, might regard it as in a sense haunted. It would be rather a joke if he, a perfectly harmless writer, with nothing on his mind worse than a novel he had discovered he must begin again, should turn out to be laying the foundation of a future ghost!

In proportion, however, as he felt this growing attachment to the house, Elsie Bengough, from being merely unattracted, began to show a dislike of the place that was more and more marked. And she did not hesitate to say so.

"It doesn't belong to today at all, and for you especially it's bad," she said with decision. "You're only too ready to let

go your hold on actual things and to slip into apathy; you ought to be in a place with decent heating and modern fixtures and neighbors coming and going. And it would do you all the good in the world if you had a job that made you get out and rub elbows with people. Now, if I could get you something, for two or three days a week, that would allow you plenty of time for your proper work—would you take it?"

Somehow Oren resented a little being diagnosed like this. He thanked Miss Bengough, but without a smile.

"Thank you, but I don't think so. After all, each of us has his own life to live," he could not refrain from adding.

"His own life to live!... How long is it since you were out, Paul?"

"About two hours."

"I don't mean to buy groceries or mail a letter. How long is it since you had anything like a proper walk?"

"Oh, some little time perhaps. I don't know."

"Since I was here last?"

"I haven't been out much."

"And has Romilly progressed much better for your being cooped up?"

"I think she has. I'm laying the foundations of her. I shall begin the actual writing presently."

It seemed as if Miss Bengough had forgotten their earlier argument about *Romilly*. She frowned, turned half away, and then quickly turned again.

"Ah!... So you've still got that idea in your head?"

Something distant in his tone struck her; but she was a fighter. His own odd sensitiveness hardened her. She gave an impatient sound.

"Where is the old one?" she demanded abruptly.

"Why?" asked Oren.

"I want to see it. I want to show some of it to you. I want, if you're not wool-gathering entirely, to bring you back to your senses."

This time it was he who turned his back. But when he turned around again he spoke more quietly.

"It's no good, Elsie. I'm responsible for the way I go, and you must allow me to go it—even if it should seem wrong to you. Believe me, I'd stop if I thought it right to stop. I'm not simply being obstinate. I know what I'm about. Romilly shall speak for herself when the time comes."

The next moment something happened that was entirely unprecedented in Oren's experience. He heard a little cry from Miss Bengough; there was a sharp sound, and when he turned she had her hand pressed tightly to her wrist.

"Elsie! What's the matter?"

She had caught her wrist on a nail in the woodwork of the nearest window seat, and a drop of blood was appearing on the back of her hand. Oren was all solicitude.

"The window seat? Let me look—I can't think how I missed that—"

Presently he led her to the kitchen and bound the hand in one of his handkerchiefs; but his face did not lose its

expression of perplexity. He had spent half a day opening and making serviceable the three window boxes, and he could not conceive how he had come to leave an inch and a half of rusty nail standing in the wood. He himself had opened the lids of each of them a dozen times and had noticed no nail; but there it was.

"It shall come out now, at all events," he muttered as he went for a pair of pliers. And he made no mistake about it that time.

Elsie Bengough had sunk into a chair, and her face was rather white; but in her hand was the manuscript of *Romilly*. She had not finished with *Romilly* yet. Presently she returned to the charge.

"Oh, Paul, it will be the greatest mistake you ever, ever made if you do not publish this!" she said.

He hung his head, genuinely distressed. He couldn't get that nail out of his mind, and *Romilly* occupied a second place in his thoughts for the moment. But still she insisted; and when presently he spoke it was almost as if he asked her pardon for something.

"What can I say, Elsie? I can only hope that when you see the new version, you'll see how right I am. And if in spite of all you don't like her, well—" he made a hopeless gesture. "Don't you see that I must be guided by my own lights?"

She was silent.

"Come, Elsie," he said gently. "We've gotten along well so far; don't let us fall out over this."

The last words had hardly passed his lips before he regretted them. She had been nursing her injured hand, with her eyes once more closed; but her lips and lids quivered simultaneously. Her voice shook as she spoke.

"I can't help saying it, Paul, but you are so greatly changed."

"Hush, Elsie," he murmured. "You've had a shock; rest for a while. How could I change?"

"I don't know, but you are. You've not been yourself ever since you came here. I wish you'd never seen the place. It's stopped your work, it's making you into a person I hardly know, and it's made me horribly anxious about you.... Oh, how my hand is beginning to throb!"

"Poor girl," he murmured. "Will you let me take you to a doctor and have it properly seen to?"

"No—I shall be all right presently—I'll keep it raised—"

She put her elbow on the back of her chair, and the bandaged hand rested lightly on his shoulder.

At that touch an entirely new anxiety stirred suddenly within him. Hundreds of times previously, on their outings and excursions, she had slipped her hand within his arm as she might have slipped it into the arm of a brother, and he had accepted the little affectionate gesture as a brother might have accepted it. But now, for the first time, there rushed into his mind a hundred startling questions. Her eyes were still closed, and her head had fallen pathetically back; and there was a lost and

ineffable smile on her parted lips. The truth broke in upon him. Good God!... And he had never seen it!

And stranger than all was that, now that he did see that she was lost in love of him, there came to him not sorrow and humility and abasement but something else that he struggled in vain against—something entirely strange and new, that had he analyzed it he would have found to be petulance and irritation and resentment. The sudden selfish prompting mastered him before he was aware. He all but gave it words. What was she doing there at all? Why was she not getting on with her own work? Why was she here interfering with his? Who had given her this guardianship over him that lately she had put forward so assertively?—“Changed?” It was she, not himself, who had changed....

But by the time she had opened her eyes again he had overcome his resentment sufficiently to speak gently, if with some reserve.

“I wish you would let me take you to a doctor.”

She rose.

“No, thank you, Paul,” she said. “I’ll go now. If I need attention I’ll get it; take the other hand, please. Good-bye—”

He did not attempt to detain her. He walked with her to the foot of the stairs. Half-way along the entry passage she turned.

“It would be a long way to come if you happened not to be in,” she said. “I’ll write ahead the next time.”

At the gate she turned again.

“Leave here, Paul,” she said, with a mournful look.

“Everything’s wrong with this house.”

Then she was gone.

Oren returned to his room. He crossed straight to the window seat. He opened the lid and stood looking at it for a long time. Then he closed it again and turned away.

"That's rather frightening," he muttered. "It is simply not possible that I should not have removed that nail...."

Oren knew very well what Elsie had meant when she had said that her next visit would be preceded by a letter. She, too, had realized that at last, at last he knew—knew, and didn't want her. It gave him a miserable, pitiful pang, therefore, when she came again within a week, knocking at the door unannounced. She spoke from the landing; she did not intend to stay, she said; and he had to press her before she would so much as come in.

Her excuse for calling was that she had heard of someone looking for short stories, and he might be wise to follow it up. He thanked her. Then, her errand over, she seemed anxious to get away again. Oren did not seek to detain her; even he saw through the pretext of the stories; and he accompanied her down the stairs.

But Elsie Bengough had no luck in that house. A second accident befell her. Half-way down the staircase there was the sharp sound of splintering wood, and she checked a loud cry. Oren knew the woodwork to be old, but he himself had gone up and down frequently enough without mishap.

Elsie had put her foot through one of the stairs.

He sprang to her side in alarm.

"Oh, Lord! My poor girl!"

She laughed a little wildly.

"It's my weight—I know I'm getting heavy—"

"Keep still—let me clear these splinters away," he muttered between his teeth.

She continued to laugh and say it was her weight—she was getting heavy—

He worked at the broken boards. The extrication was no easy matter, and her torn stocking showed him how badly the foot and ankle within it must be abraded.

"Good God—good God!" he muttered over and over again.

"I shall be too heavy for anything soon," she sobbed and laughed.

But she refused to go back up and examine her hurt.

"No, let me go quickly—let me go quickly," she repeated.

"But it's a bad gash!"

"No—not so bad—let me get away quickly—I'm—I'm not wanted."

At her words, that she was not wanted, his head dropped as if she had struck him.

"Elsie!" he said, brokenly.

But she too made a quick gesture, as if she put something violently aside.

"Oh, Paul, not that—not you—of course I do mean that too in a sense—oh, you know what I mean!... But if the other can't be, spare me this now! I—I wouldn't have come, but—but—oh, I did, I did try to keep away!"

It was intolerable, heartbreaking; but what could he do—what could he say? He did not love her.

"Let me go—I'm not wanted—let me take away what's left of me—"

"Dear Elsie—you are very dear to me—"

But again she made the gesture, as of putting something violently aside.

"No, not that—not anything less—don't offer me anything less—leave me a little pride—"

"Let me get my hat and coat—let me take you to a doctor," he muttered.

But she refused. She refused even the support of his arm. She gave another unsteady laugh.

"I'm sorry I broke your stairs, Paul.... You will follow up that story lead, won't you?"

He groaned.

"Then if you won't see a doctor, will you go across the way and let Mrs. Barrett look at you? Look, there's Barrett out there now—"

The long-nosed Barrett was looking curiously down the entry passage, but as Oren moved to call him he made off without a word. Elsie seemed to want nothing so much as to be clear of the place, and finally promised to go straight to a doctor, but insisted on going alone.

"Good-bye," she said.

And Oren watched her until she was past the hatchet-like "For Rent" signs, as if he feared that even they might fall upon her and harm her.

That night Oren did not eat. He had far too much on his mind. He walked from room to room as if he could have walked away from Elsie Bengough's haunting cry that still rang in his ears. "I'm not wanted—don't offer me anything less—let me take away what's left of me—"

Oh, if he could only have persuaded himself that he loved her!

He walked until twilight fell, then, without turning on the lights, stirred up the fire and flung himself into a chair.

Poor, poor Elsie!...

But even while his heart ached for her, it was out of the question. If only he had known! If only he had used common sense! But those walks, those companionable afternoons—what a fool he had been!... Well, it was too late now. It was she, not he, who must now act—act by keeping away. He would help her all he could. He himself would not sit in her presence. If she came, he would hurry her out again as fast as he could.... Poor, poor Elsie!

His room grew dark; the fire burned dead; and he continued to sit, wincing from time to time as a fresh tortured phrase rang again in his ears.

Then suddenly, he knew not why, he found himself anxious for her in a new sense—uneasy about her physical safety. A horrible fancy that even now she might be looking over a railway trestle down into dark water, that she might even now be glancing up at the hook on the back of a door, took him. Women had been known to do those things.... Then there would be an inquest, and he himself would be called upon to identify her, and would be asked

how she had come by an unhealed wound on the hand and a bad abrasion of the ankle. Barrett would say that he had seen her leaving the house....

Then he recognized that his thoughts were morbid. By an effort of will he put them aside, and sat for a while listening to the faint creakings and tappings within his paneling.... If only he could have married her!... But he couldn't. Her face had risen before him again as he had seen it on the stairs, drawn with pain and swollen with tears. Ugly—yes, positively blotched; if tears were women's weapons, as they were said to be, such tears were weapons turned against themselves....

Then all at once he found himself carefully considering her two accidents.

Extraordinary they had been, both of them. He could not have left that old nail standing in the wood; and he was convinced that the step that had broken beneath her had been as sound as the others. Taken separately, each accident might have been dismissed. Together they formed a kind of grammar. If these things could happen, anything could happen: beam, jamb, plank, nail, stair, all might become instruments. The whole place was full of life even now; as he sat in the dark he heard its crowds of sounds as if the house had become one vast listening instrument....

Suddenly his meditation broke off. His ear had once more become conscious of that soft and repeated sound—the long sweep with the almost inaudible crackle in it. Again and again it came, with a curious insistence and urgency. It quickened a little as

he became increasingly attentive... it seemed to Oren that it grew louder....

All at once he started bolt upright in his chair, tense and listening. The silky rustle came again; he was trying to assign it to something....

The next moment he had leaped to his feet, unnerved and terrified. His chair tipped and went over, setting the fireplace tools clattering as it fell. There was only one noise in the world like the one that had caused him to spring thus to his feet....

The next time it came Oren reached behind him with his hand at the empty air and backed slowly until he found himself against the wall.

"Good God in Heaven!" The words broke from Oren's lips. The sound had ceased.

The next moment he had given a high cry.

"What is it? What's there? Who's there?"

A sound of scuttling in the baseboard made his knees go weak briefly; but that, he knew, was a mouse. That was not something that turned his stomach and reeled his mind to entertain. That other sound, the like of which was not in the world, had now entirely ceased; and again he called....

He called and continued to call; and then another terror, a terror of the sound of his own voice, seized him. He did not dare to call again. His shaking hand went to his pocket for a match, but found none. He thought there might be matches on the mantelpiece—

He worked his way to the mantelpiece around a little recess, without briefly leaving the wall. Then his hand found the mantelpiece and groped along it. A book of matches fell to the hearth. He could just make them out in the last glow of the embers, but his hand could not retrieve them until he had cornered them inside the fender.

Then he rose and struck a light.

The room was as usual. He struck a second match. A candle stood on the table. He lighted it, and the flame sank briefly and then burned up clear. Again he looked around.

There was nothing.

There was nothing; but there had been something, and might still be something. Formerly Oren had smiled at the fanciful thought that, by some merging of himself and his beautiful rooms, he might be preparing a ghost for the future; it had not occurred to him that there might have been a similar merging in the past. Yet with this staggering impossibility he was now face to face. Something did persist in the house; it had a tenant other than himself; and that tenant, whatsoever or whosoever, had appalled Oren's soul by producing the sound of a woman brushing her hair.

Without quite knowing how he came to be there, Oren found himself stepping over a loose board he had temporarily placed over the broken stair. He was hatless and going downstairs. Not until later did there return to him the hazy memory that he had left the candle burning on the table, had opened the door no wider than was necessary to allow the passage of his body, and had sidled out, closing it softly behind him. At the foot of the

stairs another shock awaited him. Something darted with a flurry up from the dark cellar entrance and disappeared out the door. It was only a cat, but Oren gave a childish sob.

He passed out through the gate and stood briefly under the "For Rent" signs, looking up at the glimmer of light behind one of his windows. Then, still looking over his shoulder, he moved stumblingly along the block. There was a small bar around the corner called Hadley's; Oren had never entered it; but he entered it now, and put down a dollar that missed the counter by inches.

"B-b-bran-brandy," he said, and then stooped to look for the dollar.

He had the little bar nearly to himself; what company there was—working men and the small tradespeople of the neighborhood—was gathered at the far end of the room, beyond the partition. Oren sat down on a hard wooden stool, drank half his brandy, and then, thinking he might as well drink it as spill it, finished it.

Then he fell to wondering which of the men whose voices he heard beyond the partition would be willing to help him move his things in the morning.

For he did not intend to go back to that room where he had left the candle burning. Oh no! He couldn't have faced even the entry and the staircase with the broken step—certainly not that pale, fascinating room. He would put up somewhere else—a hotel room, perhaps, for a night or two—presently—when he had finished his brandy—and think it through from a safe distance. He had signed papers on that house, certainly; he had given a down

payment and was obligated for monthly payments; but surely a man could think it through from a hotel room without the ceiling coming down on him. His glass was empty now....

He rose, had it refilled, and sat down again.

And if anybody asked his reason for moving again? Oh, he had reason enough—reason enough! Nails that put themselves back into wood and gashed people's hands, steps that broke when you trod on them, and women who came into a man's place and brushed their hair in the dark, were reasons enough! He was aggrieved and indignant about it all. He had bought the place for himself, not for invisible women to brush their hair in; that attorney downtown should hear about it before many hours were out; it was outrageous, selling a man a house like that without a word of warning!

Presently Oren, raising his eyes, saw that a face or two were watching him from the other end of the bar. The faces disappeared when he looked at them.

He moved to a corner where he could not be seen; but this brought him into the line of the barman, a white-haired retired farmer type who knew him by sight from around the block, and who presently made some remark about the weather. Oren did not know what he replied, but it sufficed to produce the further observation that the winter had been hard but the spring seemed to be coming at last. Even this slight contact with the ordinary steadied Oren a little; an idle, half-formed wonder whether the barman's wife brushed her hair every night and whether it gave

out those little electric cracklings was shut down with a snap; and Oren was better....

With his next glass of brandy he was all for going back to his rooms. Not go back? Indeed, he would go back! They should very soon see whether he was to be turned out of his place like that! He began to wonder why he was doing the rather unusual thing he was doing at that moment—sitting without his hat, drinking brandy in a bar. Suppose he were to tell that barman all about it—to tell him that a caller had caught her hand on a nail, had later had the bad luck to put her foot through a rotten stair, and that he himself, in an old house full of squeaks and creaks, had heard a minute noise and bolted from it in fright—what would the man think of him? That he was out of his mind, of course. The real truth of the matter was that he hadn't been doing enough work to occupy him. He had been dreaming his days away, filling his head with a lot of moonshine about a new Romilly (as if the old one wasn't good enough), and now he was surprised that an idle mind should work against him!

Yes, he would go back. He would take a walk in the air first—he hadn't walked enough lately—and then he would take himself in hand, settle the hash of that sixteenth chapter of Romilly, and thenceforward remember that he had obligations to his fellow men and work to do in the world. There was the matter in a nutshell.

He finished his brandy and went out.

He had walked some time before any other bearing of the matter than that on himself occurred to him. At first the fresh

air had increased the effect of the brandy he had drunk; but afterwards his mind grew clearer than it had been since morning. And the clearer it grew, the less final did his boastful self-assurances become, and the firmer his conviction that, when all was said, there remained something that could not be explained. His agitation of an hour before had passed; he grew steadily calmer; but the disquieting conviction remained. A deep fear took possession of him. It was a fear for Elsie.

For something in his place was hostile to her safety. Of themselves, her two accidents might not have persuaded him of this; but she herself had said it. "I'm not wanted here...." And she had declared that there was something wrong with the place. She had seen it before he had. Well and good. One thing stood out clearly: that if this were so, she must be kept away for quite another reason than the one that had so troubled and humiliated Oren. Luckily she had said she meant to stay away; she must be held to that intention. He must see to it.

And he must see to it all the more that he now saw his first impulse—never to set foot in the place again—was absurd. People did not do that sort of thing. With Elsie made secure, he could not with any self-respect allow himself to be driven out by a shadow, nor even by a danger merely because it was a danger. He had to live somewhere, and he would live there. He must return.

He mastered the faint chill of fear that came with the decision and turned in his walk abruptly. Should fear grow on him again, he would perhaps take one more drink....

But by the time he reached the short street leading back to the block it was late enough that Hadley's was dark and shuttered. One or two men were standing talking on the curb. Oren noticed that a sudden silence fell on them as he passed, and he noticed further that the long-nosed Barrett, whom he passed a little lower down, did not return his good night. He turned in at the broken gate, hesitated barely a moment in the passage, and then mounted his stairs again.

Only an inch of candle remained in the brass stick, and Oren did not light another. Deliberately he forced himself to carry it through his five rooms before going to bed. It was as he returned from the kitchen across his small hall that he noticed that a letter lay on the floor. He carried it into the sitting room and glanced at the envelope before opening it.

It was unstamped and had been put through the door by hand. Its handwriting was clumsy, and it ran from beginning to end without comma or period. Oren read the first line, turned to the signature, and then finished the letter.

It was from the man Barrett, and it informed Oren that he, Barrett, would be obliged if Mr. Oren would make other arrangements for the preparing of his breakfasts and the cleaning of his rooms. The sting lay in the tail—that is to say, the postscript. This consisted of a verse of Scripture. It embodied an allusion that could only be to Elsie Bengough.

A seldom-seen frown had cut deeply into Oren's brow. So! That was it! Very well; they would see about that tomorrow....

For the rest, this seemed merely another reason why Elsie should keep away....

Then his suppressed rage broke out....

The foul-minded lot! The devil himself could not have given a leer at anything that had ever passed between Paul Oren and Elsie Bengough, yet this nosing busybody must be prying and talking!...

The sequence, once perceived, was hideously plain: first the room had sweetened idleness; then the tap had taught him a song; then the nail and the stair had rebuked the woman from whom Romilly had been drawn; then the comb had appeared. The house did not reveal itself at once. It educated him.

Oren crumpled the paper up, held it over the candle flame, and then ground the ashes under his heel.

One useful purpose the letter had served: it had created in Oren a wrathful blaze that effectually drove away pale shadows. Nevertheless, one other puzzling circumstance was to close the day. As he undressed, he happened to glance at his bed. The coverlets bore an impression as if somebody had lain on them. Oren could not recall that he himself had lain down during the day—off-hand, he would have said he certainly had not; but after all he could not be sure. His indignation on Elsie's behalf, acting perhaps with the residue of the brandy, excluded all other considerations; and he put out the candle, lay down, and passed immediately into a deep and dreamless sleep that lasted, in the absence of Mrs. Barrett's morning tap, almost a full day.

To the man who pays heed to that voice within him which warns him that twilight and danger are settling over his soul, terror is apt to appear an absolute thing, against which his heart must be safeguarded in an instant unless there is to take place an alteration in the whole range and scale of his nature. Mercifully, he has never far to look for safeguards. Of the immediate and small and common and ordinary things of life—of habits and routines and modes and conventions—he builds up fortifications against the powers of darkness. He is even content that not terror only but joy also should for working purposes be placed in the category of the absolute things; and the last treason he will commit will be that breaking down of terms and limits that strikes not at one man but at the welfare of all souls.

In his own person, Oren began to commit this treason. He began to commit it by admitting the inexplicable and horrible to an increasing familiarity. He did it unconsciously, by a neglect of the things that he now regarded it as impertinent of Elsie Bengough to have recommended. Two months before, the words "a haunted house," applied to his lovely bemusing rooms, would have chilled him; now, his scale of sensation having grown dull, he could ask "Haunted by what?" and remain unconscious that horror, when it can be proved to be relative, loses by so much its proper quality. He was setting aside the landmarks. A mist and confusion had begun to gather around him.

He might have spared his craft. The matter was the easiest imaginable. As in time past he had known, in his writing, moments

when his thoughts had seemed to rise of themselves and to clothe themselves in words that could not afterwards be altered, so now the questions he put to himself seemed to be answered in the very moment of their asking. There was a heady exhilaration in the swift, easy process. He had known no such joy in his own powers since the days when his writing had been a daily freshness and a delight. It was almost as if the course he must pursue was being laid out for him.

And the first thing he must do was to define the problem. He defined it in terms of a kind of mathematics. Granted that he did not have the place to himself; granted that the old house had beyond all reason caught and held his spirit; granted that, by virtue of the common denominator of the place, this unknown co-tenant stood in some relation to himself: what next? Clearly, the nature of the other must be ascertained.

And how? To Oren it was now brilliantly clear. The key, of course, lay in his half-written novel—or rather, in both *Romillys*, the discarded and the proposed new one.

A little while before Oren would have thought himself mad to embrace such a notion; now he accepted the dizzying hypothesis without a tremor.

He began to examine the first and second *Romillys*.

From the moment of his doing so the thing advanced by leaps and bounds. Swiftly he reviewed the history of the Romilly of the fifteen chapters. He remembered clearly now that he had found her insufficient on the very first morning on which he had sat down to work in his new place. Other instances of his aversion leaped

up to confirm his inquiry. There had come the night when he had nearly thrown the whole thing into the fire; and the next morning he had begun planning the new Romilly. It had been on that morning that Mrs. Barrett, hearing him hum a brief phrase that the dripping tap had suggested, had told him he was singing some tune he had never heard before, called "The Beckoning Fair One."...

The Beckoning Fair One!...

With hardly a pause in thought he continued:

The first *Romilly* having been definitely set aside, the second had instantly fastened herself upon him, clamoring for life in his brain. He even fancied now, looking back, that there had been something like passion, almost like hatred, in the supplanting, and that more than once a stray thought given to his discarded creation had—and it was astonishing how credible Oren found the almost unthinkable notion—had offended the supplanter.

Yet that a malignancy almost homicidal should be extended to that poor mortal woman who had been his model....

In spite of his growing accustomment to a scale in which the horrible was becoming familiar, a "Good God!" broke from Oren.

This intrusion of the first *Romilly's* model into his thoughts again was a factor that for the moment brought his inquiry to a stop; the mere thought of Elsie was fatal to anything abstract. For another thing, he could not yet think of that letter of Barrett's, nor of the little scene that had followed it, without a flush and a quick contraction of the brow. For, wisely or not, he had had that argument out at once.

Striding across to Barrett's house the following morning, he had confronted the man on his own doorstep. Coming back a few minutes later, he had been strongly of the opinion that he had only made matters worse. Barrett had been vagueness itself. He had not been to be either challenged or bullied into anything more definite than a muttered farrago in which the words "certain things... Mrs. Barrett... respectable neighborhood... if the cap fits... actions I won't name" had been constantly repeated.

"Not that I make any charge—" he had concluded.

"Charge!" Oren had cried.

"I have my ideas of things, same as you have yours—"

"Ideas—mine!" Oren had cried wrathfully, immediately lowering his voice as heads had appeared at windows up and down the block. "Look here, my man; you've an unwholesome mind, which probably you can't help, but a tongue which you can help, and shall! If there is a breath of this repeated—"

"I won't be talked to on my own doorstep like this—"

"You shall, and I'm doing it—"

"Don't you forget there's a God above all, who has said—"

"You're a low scandalmonger!..."

And so forth, continuing badly what was already badly begun. Oren had returned in a fury to his own house, and from that time on, looking from his windows, had seen Barrett's face at odd times lifting blinds or peering around curtains, as if he sought to put himself in possession of heaven knew what evidence, in case it should be required of him.

The unfortunate business made certain minor differences in Oren's domestic arrangements. Barrett's tongue, he gathered, had already been active; he was regarded with sidelong looks by the people of the block; and he judged it better, until he could find other help, to buy his provisions a little farther afield rather than at the small shops nearby. For the rest, housekeeping was no new thing to him, and he would resume his old bachelor habits....

Besides, he was deep in certain rather complicated investigations, in which it was better he should not be disturbed.

He was looking out of his window one noon—rather tired, not very well, and glad it was unlikely he would have to stir out of doors—when he saw Elsie Bengough crossing the block toward his house. The weather had broken; it was a raw and gusty day; and she had to make her way against a wind that set her full skirts billowing about her and her scarf spinning behind her.

Oren acted swiftly and without thinking. Seizing his hat, he sprang to the door and went down the stairs at a run. A kind of panic had seized him. She must be kept from setting foot in the place. As he ran along the entry passage he was aware that his eyes went up to the eaves as if something drew them. He did not know that a slate might not accidentally fall....

He met her at the gate and spoke with a strange volubility.

"This is really too bad, Elsie! Just as I'm called away on an urgent errand! I'm afraid it can't be helped, though, and that you'll have to think me an inhospitable beast." He poured it out just as it came into his head.

She asked if he was going into town.

"Yes, yes—into town," he said. "I've got to call on—on Crawford. You know Crawford, don't you? No, I remember you don't; a big fellow you once saw me with.... I ought to have gone yesterday, and—" this he felt to be a brilliant stroke—"and he's leaving for Chicago this afternoon. I had a letter from him this morning."

He took her arm and began to walk her up the block. She had to remind him that his way to town lay in the other direction.

"Of course—how stupid of me!" he said with a little loud laugh. "I'm so used to going the other way with you—of course; it's the other way to the bus stop. Will you come along with me? I'm so awfully sorry it happened like this...."

They walked to the bus stop on the main street.

This time Elsie bore no signs of having been through interior struggles. If she detected anything unusual in his manner she made no comment, and he, seeing her calm, began to talk less recklessly through silences. By the time they reached the stop, nobody seeing the pallid, hatless man and the large, ample-skirted woman at his side would have supposed that one of them was ready to sink on his knees with thankfulness that he had, as he believed, saved the other from an unthinkable danger.

They boarded the bus, Oren insisting he didn't need his overcoat and that he found the day, if anything, rather warm. They took the front seat on the upper deck.

Now that this meeting had been forced upon him, he had something else to say that would require tact. It had been on his

mind for some time and was peculiarly difficult to put. He revolved it for several minutes, and then, remembering the success of his story of a sudden errand in town, cut the knot of his difficulty with another lie.

"I'm thinking of going away for a little while, Elsie," he said.

She merely said, "Oh?"

"Somewhere for a change. I need a change. I think I'll go tomorrow, or the day after. Yes, tomorrow, I think."

"Yes," she replied.

"I don't quite know how long I'll be," he continued. "I'll let you know when I'm back."

"Yes, let me know," she replied in an even tone.

The tone was, for her, suspiciously even. He was a little uneasy.

"You don't ask me where I'm going," he said, with a labored attempt to rally her.

She was looking straight ahead, past the bus driver.

"I know," she said.

He was startled. "How do you know?"

"You're not going anywhere," she replied.

He found not a word to say. It was a minute before she continued in the same controlled voice.

"You're not going anywhere. You weren't going out this morning. You only came out because I appeared; don't treat me as if we were strangers, Paul."

A flush had come into his cheeks. He noticed that the wind had given her the color of early spring. Still he found nothing to say.

"Of course you ought to go away," she continued. "I don't know whether you look at yourself often in the mirror, but you're rather noticeable. Several people turned to look at you this morning. So you ought to go away. But you won't, and I know why."

He shivered, coughed a little, and then broke silence.

"Then if you know, there's no use continuing this discussion," he said shortly.

"Not for me, perhaps, but there is for you," she replied. "Shall I tell you what I know?"

"No," he said in a voice slightly raised.

"No?" Her round eyes were earnest on him.

"No."

Again he was losing patience with her; again he was conscious of the strain. Her devotion and loyalty plagued him; she was only humiliating both herself and him. It would have been bad enough had he ever by word or deed given her cause for fastening herself on him like this... but there; that was the worst of that kind of life for a woman. Women such as she—working women, in and out of offices all the time—always, whether they realized it or not, made friendship a cover for something else. They accepted the unconventional arrangement, came and went freely as men did, were honestly accepted by men on their own terms—and then it turned out to be the other thing after all, and they went and fell in love. No wonder there was gossip in shops

and on street corners! In a sense the gossipers were right. Capable, yet not sufficient; having foregone some of womanhood's old protections, yet with all the woman's hunger; half modern, yet not wise: Oren was tired of it all....

And it was time he told her so.

"I suppose," he said, looking down between his knees, "I suppose the real trouble is in the life women who earn their own living are obliged to lead."

He could not tell in what sense she took the lame remark; she merely said, "I suppose so."

"It can't be helped," he continued, "but you do sacrifice a good deal."

She agreed: a good deal; and then she added after a moment, "What, for instance?"

"You may or may not be gradually arriving at a new kind of life, but you're in a false position today."

It was very likely, she said; she hadn't thought of it much in that light—

"And," he continued desperately, "you're bound to suffer. Your most innocent actions are misread; motives you never dreamed of are attributed to you; and in the end it comes to—" he hesitated a moment and then took the plunge, "—to the sidelong look and the leer."

She took his meaning perfectly. She merely shivered a little as she pronounced the name.

"Barrett?"

His silence told her the rest.

Anything further that was to be said must come from her. It came as the bus stopped and fresh passengers boarded.

"You'd better get off here and go back, Paul," she said. "I understand perfectly—perfectly. It isn't Barrett. You'd be able to handle Barrett. It's merely convenient for you to blame Barrett. I know what it is... but you said I wasn't to tell you that. Very well. But before you go let me tell you why I came this morning."

In a dull tone he asked her why. Again she looked straight ahead as she replied:

"I came to force your hand. Things couldn't go on as they have been going, you know; and now that's all over."

"All over," he repeated dully.

"All over. I want you now to consider yourself, as far as I'm concerned, perfectly free. I make only one condition."

He hardly had the spirit to ask what it was.

"If I merely need you," she said, "please don't give that a thought; that's nothing; I shan't come near for that. But," she dropped her voice, "if you're in need of me, Paul—I shall know if you are, and you will be—then I shall come at no matter what cost. You understand that?"

He could only groan.

"So that's settled," she concluded. "And I think that's all. Now get off. I'd advise you to walk back; you're shivering—good-bye—"

She gave him a cold hand, and he stepped down to the curb. He turned as the bus pulled away. For the first time in all the

years he had known her she left him without a smile and without a wave of her long arm.

He stood on the curb sunk in misery, looking after her as long as she remained in sight; but almost as soon as she disappeared he felt the heaviness lift a little from his spirit. She had given him his liberty; true, there was a sense in which he had never surrendered it, but now was no time for splitting hairs; he was free to act, and all was clear ahead. Swiftly the sense of lightness grew: it became a positive rejoicing in his freedom; and before he was halfway home he had decided what must be done next.

The minister of the church nearest his house lived within ten minutes of the block. To his house Oren turned his steps. It was necessary that he have all the information he could get about the old house, and the Reverend Ashby was the person most likely to furnish it. This preliminary out of the way—and Oren chuckled—things might be expected to happen!

But he gained less information than he had hoped for. The house, the minister said, was old—but there was no need of a minister to tell Oren that; it was reputed (Oren took note) to be haunted—but there were few old houses about which some such rumor did not circulate among the credulous; and the deplorable lack of faith of the modern world, the minister thought, did not tend to dispel such notions. For the rest, his manner was the careful manner of one who prefers not to make statements without knowing how they will be received. Oren smiled as he perceived this.

"You may leave my nerves out of the question," he said. "How long has the place been empty?"

"A dozen years, I should say," the minister replied.

"And the last tenant—did you know him—or her?" Oren was conscious of a slight electric feeling as he offered the minister the alternative of sex.

"Him," said the minister. "A man. If I remember rightly, his name was Madley; a painter. He was a great recluse; seldom went out, and—" the minister hesitated and then spoke with a little rush of candor "—and since you appear to have come for this information, and since it is better that the truth be told than that garbled versions get about, I don't mind saying that this man Madley died there under somewhat unusual circumstances. It was determined at the autopsy that there was not a particle of food in his stomach, although he was found to be not without money. And his frame was simply worn away. Suicide was mentioned, but you'll agree with me that deliberate starvation is, to say the least, an uncommon form of suicide. An open verdict was returned."

"Ah!" said Oren.... "Does there happen to be any recorded history of this part of town?"

"No complete one; partial accounts only. I myself have made a number of notes on its ecclesiastical history, its old records and so forth, which I would be happy to show you if you cared to see them; but it is a large parish, I have only one assistant, and my time, as you will readily understand...."

The extent of his responsibilities occupied the remainder of the conversation, and Oren thanked the minister, took his leave, and walked slowly home.

He walked slowly for a reason, twice turning away from the house within a stone's throw of the gate and taking another turn of twenty minutes or so. He had a delicate piece of work now before him; it required the greatest mental preparation; it was nothing less than to bring his mind, if he could, into such a state of emptiness and receptivity that whatever might be done with it—he left the matter broadly thus—might be done as it best could be done. He was, as it were, clearing the decks. He had more than a suspicion of what awaited him; and he was resolved that when at last he faced it he should face it with the utmost of what poor preparation was available to him.

He entered his house with some such feeling as a man has when he is about to undergo an operation. He was serious, intent, a little white. He went straight to his sitting room and sat down.

The fire was unlit—it was a mild night—and in the stillness of the room he waited. He could have drawn a diagram of every sound in that house: the pop of a joint, the skitter of a mouse, the settling sigh of a beam. All the old familiar voices were about him, and not the least of them was the murmuring of the tap. It had a new tune tonight; or rather, the old tune, but heard more clearly now, more urgently, and with a kind of sweetness that had not been in it before.

He waited, his hands folded in his lap and his eyes quiet on the fireplace.

One by one the sounds of the house asserted themselves and fell still. The tap dripped its small bead of music. Outside, the block was quiet; a car passed in the distance on the main street; from somewhere far away came the sound of a neighbor's radio, a man singing—then silence.

Oren waited. He had his strange, still patience about him tonight—the patience of a man who believes he has put himself in the way of something.

He went to his bedroom. He had set the stage, as it were, with practiced care. His small bedroom fireplace was opposite the dresser on which his mirror stood, and his bed and window took up the remaining walls. Oren drew down the shade, removed his coat, and stooped to find his slippers.

He could have given no reason for the conviction, but that the manifestation which for two days had been withheld was close at hand he never briefly doubted. Nor, though he could not form the faintest guess of the shape it might take, did he experience fear. Startling or surprising it might be; he was prepared for that; but that was all; his scale of sensation had become composed. His hand moved under the bed in search of the slippers....

But for all his steadiness and preparation, his heart all at once gave a leap and a pause that was almost terrible. His hand had found the slippers, but he was still on one knee; save for this circumstance he would have fallen. The bed was low; the

reaching for the slippers accounted for the turn of his head to one side; and he was careful to maintain the position until he had somewhat recovered himself. When presently he rose there was a mark on his lower lip where he had bitten it, and his watch had jerked from the pocket of his vest and was swinging at the end of its chain....

Then, before the watch had ceased its little swinging, he was himself again.

In the middle of his mantelpiece there stood a picture—a photograph of his grandmother; he placed himself before this picture so that he could see in its glass the steady reflection of the lamp that burned behind him on the dresser. He could see also in the picture's glass the small gleamings from the bevels of the mirror and the various objects about it. But he could see more. These small reflections did not change their position; but there was one that moved. It was fainter than the rest, and it moved up and down through the air. It was the reflection of the lamp on Oren's dark plastic comb, and each of its downward motions was accompanied by a silky and crackling rustle.

Oren, watching what went on in the glass of his grandmother's picture, continued to play his part. He felt for his swinging watch and began slowly to wind it. Then, for a moment ceasing to watch, he began to empty his trouser pockets and to place methodically in a little row on the mantelpiece the change he took from them. The sweeping, faintly electric sound filled the whole bedroom, and had Oren shifted his angle of observation he could have brought the dim gleam of the moving

comb so into position that it would almost have outlined his grandmother's head.

Any other head of which it might have been tracing the outline was invisible.

Oren finished emptying his pockets; then, under cover of a simulated yawn—not so much summoning his courage as overmastered by an enormous curiosity—he swung suddenly around. That which was being combed was still not to be seen, but the comb did not stop. It had shifted its angle slightly and moved a little to the left. It was passing, in fairly regular strokes, from a point rather more than five feet from the floor, in a direction roughly vertical, to another point a few inches below the level of the dresser.

Oren continued to act admirably. He walked to his small washstand in the corner, poured out water, and began to wash his hands. He removed his vest, and went on with his preparations for bed. The combing did not cease, and he stood for a moment in thought. Then his eyes brightened. The next step was very cunning—

"Hm!... I think I'll read for a quarter of an hour," he said aloud....

He passed out of the room.

He was away a couple of minutes; when he returned the room was suddenly quiet. He glanced at the dresser; the comb lay still, between the collar he had removed and a pair of gloves. Without hesitation Oren put out his hand and picked it up. It was an ordinary comb, taken from a rack in a drugstore, of no special

weight or substance, and no more capable of moving of its own accord than the earth is capable of departing from its orbit. Oren put it down again; then he glanced at the bundle of papers he held in his other hand. What he had gone to fetch had been the fifteen chapters of the original *Romilly*.

"Hm!" he muttered as he dropped the manuscript onto a chair.... "As I thought.... She's just blindly, ragingly, murderously jealous."

On the night after that, and on the following night, and for many nights and days—so many that he began to lose count—Oren, courting, cajoling, neglecting, beseeching, and eaten out with curiosity, continued his search for the unknown companion of his house. What had first been atmosphere, then accident, then sound, had now become a courtship.

As time went on, it came to pass that few except the postman mounted Oren's stairs; and since men who do not write letters receive few, even the postman's step became so infrequent that it was not heard more than once or twice a week. A letter came from Oren's publisher asking when they might expect the manuscript of his new book; he delayed for some days to answer it, and finally forgot it. A second letter came, which also he failed to answer. He received no third.

The weather grew bright and warm. The privet bushes among the hatchet-like "For Rent" signs came into flower, and on the main street the baskets of the flower sellers lined the storefronts. Oren bought flowers daily; his room clamored for flowers, fresh and continually renewed; and Oren did not stint

its demands. Nevertheless, the necessity of going out to buy them began to trouble him more and more, and it was with a greater and ever greater sense of relief that he returned home again. He became conscious that once more his scale of sensation had suffered a subtle change—a change that was not a restoration to its former balance but an extension that again included terror. It admitted terror in an entirely new form. The name of this terror was agoraphobia. Oren had begun to dread open air and space and the horror that might descend upon an unguarded man.

Presently he arranged to have his food and flowers delivered daily to his door. He rubbed his hands when he had hit upon this solution. That was better! Now he could please himself whether he went out or not.

Quickly he confirmed himself in the choice. It became his pleasure to remain shut in; and the pleasure was already one of the house's victories.

But he was not happy—or if he was, his happiness took an extraordinary form. He fretted and was discontented, could sometimes have wept for mere weakness and misery; and yet he was dimly aware that he would not have exchanged his sadness for all the noise and bustle of the world outside. And speaking of noise: noise, much noise, now caused him the sharpest discomfort. It was hardly more to be endured than that new-born fear that kept him, on the increasingly rare occasions when he did go out, hugging close to walls and reaching for the comfort of iron railings. He moved from room to room softly and in slippers, and sometimes stood for many seconds closing a door so gently that not a sound

broke the stillness that was in itself a delight. Sunday now became an intolerable day to him, for since the coming of the warm weather there had begun to assemble in the block beneath his windows each Sunday morning certain members of the sect to which the long-nosed Barrett belonged. These came with a drum and brass instruments; men and women lifted troubled voices; and Barrett himself, with upraised face and closed eyes, prayed that the sound of his voice might penetrate the ears of all unbelievers—as it certainly did Oren's. One Sunday, in the middle of one of these performances, Oren sprang to his shade and pulled it down, and heard as he did so his own name made the subject of a fresh torrent of prayer.

And sometimes, not expecting an answer, Oren stood still and called softly. Once or twice he called "Romilly!" and then waited; but more often his whispering did not take the shape of a name. The less he named the presence, the more completely it seemed to possess him.

There was one spot in particular of his rooms that he began to haunt with increasing frequency. This was just within the opening of his bedroom door. He had found one day that by opening every door in his place—always excepting the outer one, which he opened only with reluctance—and by placing himself on this particular spot, he could actually see to a greater or lesser extent into each of his five rooms without shifting his position. He could see the whole of his sitting room, all of his bedroom except the part hidden by the open door, and glimpses of his kitchen, bathroom, and study. He was often in this place, barely

breathing and with his finger on his lip. One day as he stood there he suddenly found himself wondering whether this Madley—of whom the minister had spoken—had ever discovered the strategic advantage of this spot.

Light, moreover, now troubled him more than darkness. Direct sunlight, of which as the sun moved daily around the house each room had its share, was like a hot wire in his brain; and even diffused light was a dull and numbing ache. He began, at successive hours of the day, to lower his shades one after another. He made short careful excursions to do this; but he was ever careful to leave his retreat clear, in case he should need sudden recourse to it. Presently this lowering of the shades became a daily methodical ritual, and his rooms, when he had completed his round, had the blood-red half-light of a darkroom.

One day as he drew down the shade in his little study and backed carefully out of the room again, he broke into a quiet laugh.

"That takes care of Mr. Barrett!" he said; and the thwarting of Barrett continued to amuse him for an hour.

But on another day, soon after, he had a fright that left him trembling for an hour. He had seized the cord to darken the window over the seat in which he had found the harp bag, and was standing with his back well protected in the embrasure, when he thought he saw the tail of a black-and-white checked skirt disappear around the corner of the house. He could not be sure—had he run to the other window, the skirt must have already

passed—but he was *almost* sure it was Elsie. He listened in an agony of suspense for her step on the stairs....

But no step came, and after three or four minutes he drew a long breath of relief.

"Lord, that would have been awkward!" he muttered....
"Horribly awkward... no woman would stand that... any kind of woman... oh, horribly awkward in the extreme!"

Yet he was not happy. He could not have assigned the cause of the fits of quiet weeping that took him sometimes; they came and went like the shifting illumination of the clouds moving over the block; and perhaps after all, if he was not happy, he was not quite unhappy. Before he could be unhappy, something must have been withdrawn from him, and nothing had yet been withdrawn, for nothing had yet been granted. He was waiting for that granting, in that flower-laden, terribly enticing place of his, with the walls subdued by the crimson shades to a blood-colored dusk.

He paid no heed to the fact that his money was running low, nor that he had ceased to work. Ceased to work? He had not ceased to work. Those who supposed that Oren had ceased to work knew very little about it! He was in truth only now beginning to work. He was preparing such a work—such a work—such a creation was a-making in the depths of his Art—let him but get this period of probation and poignant waiting past and men should see.... How should men know her, this Fair One of Oren's, until Oren himself knew her? Beautiful creations are not dashed off carelessly. The men to whom it is given to father them must weep wretched tears, as Oren did; must swell with vain presumptuous hopes, as Oren

did; must pursue, as Oren pursued, the capricious, fair, mocking, slippery Spirit that, ever eluding, ever sees to it that the chase does not slacken. Let Oren hunt this Huntress a little longer—he would have her panting in his arms yet.... Oh no; they were very far from the truth who supposed that Oren had ceased to work!

And if all else was falling away from Oren, gladly he let it go. So do we all when our Fair Ones beckon. Quite at the beginning we nod wisely and promise ourselves that we will put Her Ladyship through her paces, neglect her for a day, turn her own jealous ways against her, flout and ignore her when she comes wheedling; perhaps there lurks within us all the time a cold sprite who is never taken in; but in the end all falls away. She beckons, beckons, and all goes....

And so Oren kept his strategic post within the frame of his bedroom door, and watched, and waited, and smiled, with his finger on his lips.... It was his devoted service, his worship, his pledging of himself—all that he had ever understood of Love. And when he found himself, as he now and then did, hating the dead man Madley and wishing that he had never lived, he felt that this too was an acceptable offering....

But as he thus prepared himself, as it were, for a union, and fretted and chafed more and more that the Bride made no sign, he made a discovery that he ought to have made weeks before.

It was through a thought of the dead Madley that he made it. Since that night when he had thought in his inexperience that a little studied neglect would bring the lovely Beckoner to her

knees, and had made use of her jealousy to banish her, he had not set eyes on those fifteen discarded chapters of *Romilly*. He had thrown them back into the window seat and forgotten their very existence. But his own jealousy of Madley put him in mind of hers toward the jilted rival of flesh and blood, and he remembered them.... Fool that he had been! Had he then expected his Desire to show herself while there still existed the evidence of his divided loyalty? What—and she with a passion so fierce and single that it had not hesitated at the destruction, twice attempted, of her rival? Fool that he had been!

But if *that* was all the pledge and proof she required, she should have it—ah, yes, and quickly!

He took the manuscript from the window seat and brought it to the fire.

He kept his fire always burning now; the warmth brought out the last trace of fragrance from the flowers that banked his room. He did not know what time it was; long since he had allowed his clock to run down—it had seemed a foolish measure of time in regard to the immense things that were happening to Oren; but he knew it was late. He took the *Romilly* manuscript and knelt before the fire.

But he had not finished removing the clip that held the pages together before he gave a sudden start, turned his head, and listened intently. The sound he had heard had not been loud—it had been, indeed, no more than a tap, twice or thrice repeated—but it had filled Oren with alarm. His face went dark as it came again.

He heard a voice outside on his landing.

"Paul!... Paul!..."

It was Elsie's voice.

"Paul!... I know you're in... I want to see you...."

He cursed under his breath but kept perfectly still. He did not intend to let her in.

"Paul!... You're in trouble.... I believe you're in danger... at least come to the door!..."

Oren smothered a quiet laugh. It amused him somehow that she, in such straits herself—poor thing—

He had heard that she had lost her position at the magazine some weeks before. No doubt the reason was the change she had noticed in him; she had gone to pieces a little, people said, since something had happened about which the neighborhood was not perfectly clear. But that was not his affair. He had actually forgotten her address. No doubt Barrett had been busy among the journalists she worked with. Well, let them say what they liked; the word of a Barrett and his kind was nothing to Paul Oren—

"Paul, I'm going to knock until you open, or I'll get someone to come up—"

He made no answer.

"Paul!... Paul!..."

It seemed to him that with the sound of her voice the temperature of the room dropped a degree. The fire burned lower. He half rose from his knees, and the papers rustled.

Suddenly she cried: "Paul, I can hear you—I know you're there—I know it—"

And the strange thing was that something in the crying of her voice—some echo of an old companionship, of an old tenderness—made him feel for the briefest of moments something like the person he had been. He almost moved toward the door.

But the moment passed. The flame of the fire leaped up again. The warm scent of the flowers reached him. His resolution returned, stronger than before.

"Go away, Elsie," he said quietly.

There was a silence on the landing. Then:

"I won't go until you open the door."

"I'shan't open the door."

"Then I'll—I'll get help—"

"Get it, if you like. I'm perfectly well."

Another long silence. Then slow footsteps, descending.

Oren knelt again before the fire and took up the manuscript.

There came a period—he could not have said afterward how long it lasted—in which the days seemed to Oren like spaces of crimson light, and the nights, when he lay on his bed in the warm and fragrant and terrible dark, like some stupendous interval of suspension. He ate when he thought of it, which was seldom; slept when he could no longer keep awake; and for the rest turned, in a kind of beatitude, between one beauty and another. He had ceased to think of Elsie, or of his publisher, or of the block outside, or of any of the ordinary landmarks of his existence. These had retreated to a great distance, dim and small, like things seen the wrong way through a glass.

Something was growing. He felt it growing the way you feel a change in the weather on your skin before you can name it. Each morning when he woke it was a little more present than the day before; each night when he lay down to sleep it stood a little closer in the dark. He was grateful for it with a gratitude that had something abject in it; and sometimes, lying still, he addressed it in a whisper, using no name, for he had not yet been given one.

He had had a visit once—he did not know how long ago—from a Western Union boy beating at the door. There had been a telegram of some kind, from his publisher or possibly from Elsie. He had not opened the door. After a while the beating stopped. He lay on his bed listening to the silence resume itself, and was glad.

Gradually his power was draining away. The thing that lived with him in the house fastened on Oren's strength. The steady draining sometimes left him for long hours of prostration gazing vacantly up at the crimson-tinged ceiling, idly letting such thoughts as came of themselves have their way with him. Even the strongest of his memories had no more than a weak hold on his attention. Sometimes a half-memory—of a novel to be written, a novel it was important that he should write—tantalized him for a moment before vanishing; and sometimes whole novels, perfect and complete, rose before him. And sometimes the memories were of old rooming houses, old lodgings, old arrangements: but all that was past. He had at last found a place that he did not intend to leave until they carried him out—a place that some might have thought a little overrich with the scent of long-dead flowers,

that others might have found too heavy with the atmosphere of things morbid and gone, but a place of such authority, such delights, when once a man had ceased to struggle against its will! A novel? Someone ought to write a novel about a place like that! There must be plenty to write about in a place like that, if one could but get to the bottom of it! It had probably already been painted, by that fellow Madley who had lived there before him—but Oren had not known this Madley, had a strong dislike of him without knowing why, would rather he had lived elsewhere—couldn't stand the thought of him—hated him, Madley, in fact. That was a joke, too, when you thought about it. He seriously doubted whether Madley had led the sort of life he ought; Oren was in two minds sometimes whether he wouldn't tell that long-nosed moral watchman across the way about him; but probably Barrett already knew, and had prayed over him too. Why, Oren himself had had a row with Barrett about something or other... some woman or other... Elsie Bengough her name was, he remembered....

Oren had moments of deep unease about this Elsie Bengough. Or rather, he was not so much uneasy about her as resentful of the things she did. Chief of these was the way she persisted in thrusting herself into his thoughts; and whenever he was quick enough he sent her packing the moment she appeared. The truth was that she was not merely tiresome; she had always been that; it had now come to the point where her very presence in his fancy was an intrusion on the fullest enjoyment of certain experiences.... She had no delicacy; really ought to have

understood that people are not open to the thoughts of everyone at every hour; ought in mere consideration to have allowed him certain times quite to himself; and was monstrous in her ignorance of the fact—if she did not know it—that there were certain special hours when a man's blood ran with fire and daring, in which he had a perfectly good right to treat others as he had treated that prying Barrett: to shut them out entirely.... But no; up she came, the thought of her, and ruined everything. Bright towering visions, beside which even those perfect silent novels of his dreams were commonplace, vanished utterly at her intrusion. Therefore Oren struggled to suppress even the faintest thought of her.

Nevertheless there came an occasion on which this woman Bengough absolutely refused to be put down. Oren could not have told exactly when this happened; he only knew by the gleam of the street lamp on his shade that it was sometime in the night, and that for some hours she had not presented herself.

He had no warning of her coming; she was simply there. Strive as he would, he could not shake off the image of her face. She haunted him.

But for her to come at that moment of all moments!... Really, it was past endurance! How she could bear it, Oren could not conceive—actually to look on, as it were, at the triumph of a rival.... Good God! It was monstrous! Tact—feeling—he had never credited her with an overwhelming amount of either; but he had never attributed mere—oh, there was no word for it! Monstrous—

monstrous! Did she intend thenceforward—? Good God! To look on!...

Oren felt the blood rush to the roots of his hair with fury against her.

"Damnation take her!" he choked....

But the next moment his heat had changed to a cold sweat of cowering terror. Panic-stricken, he tried to understand what he had done. For though he did not know what, he knew he had done something fatal and irreversible. Anger he had felt, but not *this* white blast of rage that suddenly flooded the dim red room. *That* appalling flash was not his—not his *that* open rift of searing brightness—not his, not his! His had been the hand of a child, preparing a small blow; but what was *this other* terrible hand that was drawn back to strike in the same place? Had *he* set that in motion? Had *he* provided the spark that had ignited the whole accumulated force of that formidable and relentless place? He did not know. He only knew that the poor igniting spark in himself was blown out; that something pressed upon him—he could find no other way to say it—and that for very pity of the appalling odds he must cry out to her against whom he had lately raged, to guard herself... guard herself....

"Look out!" he screamed....

The revulsion was instant. As if a cold wave had broken over him, he came to himself to find that he was lying in his bed, that the mist and horror that had for so long enclosed him had cleared away, that he was Paul Oren, and that he was sick, bare, helpless, and unutterably alone. His faculties, though weak,

answered at last when he summoned them; and he knew that it must have been a hideous nightmare that had left him drenched and shaking.

Yes, he was himself—Paul Oren, a tired writer, already past the best of his work, and coming down the other side empty-handed. He had reached too high. He had tried too much, had misjudged his strength, and was a failure, a failure....

It all came to him in the single word, complete and final; it needed no elaboration; he was a failure. He had missed....

And he had missed not one happiness but two. He had missed the ease of this world, which men love, and he had missed also that other glittering prize for which men give up ease, the winning and holding of which is the only excuse for the mad gambler who ventures the game. And there was no second try. Fate has no tomorrow. Oren's tomorrow must be to sit down to profitless, ill-done, unwanted work again, and so on the next day, and the next, and as many days as there might be....

He lay weakly considering it....

And since the whole attempt had failed, it was hardly worth troubling about whether a little might not be saved from the general wreck. No good would ever come of the half-finished novel. He had meant it to come out in the fall; was under contract that it should; no matter; it was better to pay the penalty than to waste what days remained. He was spent; age was not far; and paths of modesty and sadness were the proper ones for the rest of the journey....

If only he had chosen the wife, the child, the faithful companion by the fire, and left the others to follow their *ignis fatuus* as they liked!

In the meantime it began to puzzle him exceedingly why he should be so weak, why his room should smell so powerfully of decaying flowers, and why his hand, straying to his face in the dark, should encounter a beard.

"Most extraordinary!" he began to mutter to himself. "Have I been ill? Am I ill now? And if so, why has nobody come?... Extraordinary!..."

He thought he heard a sound from the kitchen. He rose a little on his pillow and listened.... Ah! He was not alone, then! It would certainly have been extraordinary if they had left him ill and alone. Alone? Oh no. He would be looked after. He wouldn't be left, ill, to fend for himself. If everybody else had forsaken him, he could trust Elsie Bengough, the dearest friend he had, for that—bless her faithful heart!

But suddenly a short, stifled, choking cry rang out sharply: "Paul!"

It came from the kitchen.

And in the same instant it struck Oren—he did not know how—that two, three, five minutes before, another sound, unnoted at the time but suddenly transfixing his attention now, had tried to reach his understanding. This sound had been the faint click of metal on metal—just such a sound as Oren himself made when he put his key into the lock.

"Hello!... Who's that?" he called sharply from his bed.

He had no answer.

He called again. "Hello!... Who's there?... Who is it?"

This time he was sure he heard sounds, soft and labored, in the kitchen.

"This is a queer business altogether," he muttered. "By God, I'm as weak as a kitten.... Hello there! Somebody called, didn't they?... Elsie! Is that you?..."

Then he began to knock with his hand on the wall beside his bed.

"Elsie!... Elsie!... You called, didn't you?... Please come here, whoever it is!..."

There was a sound as of a door closing, and then silence. Oren began to grow frightened.

"It may be a nurse," he muttered. "Elsie would have to get me a nurse, of course. She'd sit with me as long as she could spare the time, brave girl, and she'd get a nurse for the rest.... But it was awfully like her voice.... Elsie, or whoever it is!... I can't make this out at all. I must go and see...."

He put one leg out of bed. Feeling its weakness, he reached with his hand for the support of the wall....

But before putting out the other leg he stopped and thought, picking at his unexpected beard. He was suddenly wondering whether he dared go into the kitchen. It was such a long way; no man knew what might descend upon him if he went that far; when a man has an overwhelming impulse to get back into bed he ought to heed it and obey. Besides, why should he go? What was there to go for? If it was that Bengough woman, let her look after herself;

Oren was not going to venture himself for the sake of a spoilsport like her!... If she was in, let her let herself out, and the sooner the better! Oren simply couldn't be bothered. He had his work to do. Tomorrow he must set about writing a novel with a heroine so winning, capricious, adorable, jealous, wicked, beautiful, and altogether terrible that men should stand amazed. She was coming over him now; he could tell by the very change in the air of the room when she was near; and that soft thrill of bliss that had begun to stir in him never came unless she was beckoning, beckoning....

He let go the wall and fell back into bed as—oh, unthinkable!—the other half of a kiss that something had interrupted was placed upon his lips, robbing him of very breath....

In the bright June sunlight a crowd filled the block and looked up at the windows of the old house with the carved railing within and the agents' "For Rent" boards hanging like wooden hatchets over the picket fence. Two police officers stood at the broken gate of the narrow entry passage, keeping people back. The women kept to the edges of the crowd, moving now and then as if to see the drawn crimson shades of the old house from a new angle, and talking in low voices. The children had been sent indoors.

A long-nosed man had a little group around him, and he was telling some story over and over again; and another man, small and fat and wide-eyed, tried to get the long-nosed man's audience for some account in which a key figured.

"... and it was revealed to me that there had been something that very afternoon," the long-nosed man was saying. "I was standing right there, where Officer Sommers is—or rather, I was attending to my business, when they came out. There was no deceiving me, oh, no deceiving me! I saw her face...."

"What was it like, Mr. Barrett?" a man asked.

"It was like hers our Lord said to, 'Woman, doth any man accuse thee?'—white as paper, and no mistake! Don't tell me!... And so I walked straight across to Mrs. Barrett, and I said, 'Ruby,' I said, 'this must stop, and stop at once; we are commanded to avoid evil,' I said, 'and it must come to an end now; let him get help elsewhere.'"

"And she said to me, 'John,' she said, 'it's eight dollars a week.'—them was her words.

"'Ruby,' I said, 'if it was eighty thousand dollars it should stop.'... And from that day to this she has not set foot inside that gate."

There was a short silence; then,

"Did Mrs. Barrett ever... see anything, like?" somebody asked vaguely.

Barrett turned austerely on the speaker.

"What Mrs. Barrett saw and what Mrs. Barrett didn't see shall not pass these lips; even as it is written, keep thy tongue from speaking evil," he said.

Another man spoke.

"He was pretty far gone over at Hadley's that one night, wasn't he, Pete?"

"Yes, he'd had quite a few...."

"Not standing treat, neither; he was at the bar all on his own...."

"That's right; we talked about it...."

The fat, scared-eyed man made another attempt.

"She got the key from me—she had the number of it—she came into my shop one Tuesday evening...."

Nobody heeded him.

"Quiet down," a large man said gruffly, "she hasn't been found yet. Here's the detectives; we'll know more in a minute."

Two plainclothes detectives had come up and were talking to the officers at the gate. The little fat man ran eagerly forward, saying that she had obtained the key from him. "I remember the number, because of it being three ones and three threes—111333!" he said excitedly.

A detective put him aside.

"Nobody's been in?" he asked one of the officers.

"No, sir."

"Then you, Brackley, come with us. Smith, hold the gate. There's more of the squad on the way."

The two detectives and the officer passed down the entry and entered the house. They mounted the broad carved staircase.

"Doesn't look like he's been out much lately," one of the detectives said as he kicked aside a litter of dead leaves and paper outside Oren's door. "I don't think we need knock-break a pane, Brackley."

The door had two small glass panels; there was a sound of shattering; and the officer put his hand through and drew back the latch.

"My God!..." choked one of the detectives as they entered. "Get some light and air in here, quick. It smells like a charnel house—"

The crowd outside watched the crimson shades go up and the windows of the old house flung open.

"Better," said one of the detectives, putting his head out of a window and drawing a long breath. "Looks like the bedroom in there; will you go in, Simms, while I go over the rest?..."

They had raised the bedroom shade too, and the waxy-white, hollow-cheeked man on the bed had made a blinker of his hand against the flood of brightness. Nor could he believe that his hearing was playing tricks on him, for there were two police officers in his room bending over him and asking him where "she" was. He shook his head.

"This woman Bengough... goes by the name of Miss Elsie Bengough... can you hear? Where is she?... No good, Brackley; help him up; easy with him; I'll just step to the window a moment...."

The other detective had been through Oren's study and found nothing, and was now in the kitchen, pushing aside an ankle-deep mass of dead flowers and vegetable rot that covered the floor. The kitchen window had no shade, and was shadowed by the blank end of the house across the passage. The kitchen appeared to be empty.

But the detective, moving aside the dead flowers, noticed that a shuffling track that was not of his own making had been pressed to a closet in the corner. In the upper part of the closet door was a square panel that looked as if it slid on a track. The door itself was closed.

The detective stepped forward, put out his hand to the small knob, and slid the hatch along its groove. From that little aperture, made once for powder and ornament and idle vanity, came a stale breath of dust and cloth.

Then he took an involuntary step back.

Framed in the opening, and pressing forward a little against the frame, was something that resembled a large soft bundle wrapped in faded brownish-red rough cloth. The bundle shifted. Or seemed to.

The detective stood very still for a moment.

Then he moved again—quickly now—turning the handle of the closet door itself. There was weight behind it, considerable weight, and he had to put his shoulder to it to open it fully. The old harp bag lay on the closet floor, its straps loosened, its flaps spread open as if something had used them for hands. The triangle of black-and-white checked skirt was visible at its mouth, and above it, through the gap in the cloth, a face. Pale as chalk. Eyes closed.

But the lips parted on a breath.

"My God," the detective said, in a tone entirely different from any he had used before in that house. He was already on his

knees, his fingers at her throat. He turned and called toward the hall, his voice cracking.

"Simms! Get on that radio—tell them we need the second ambulance inside now—she's alive—she's alive—"

He went back into the small hall.

"Alive?" Simms said from the bedroom doorway.

"Alive," the detective said flatly. "Get them in here."

They had gotten Oren into his clothes. He still used his hands as a blinker against the light, and his mind was very confused. A number of things were happening that he could not understand. He could not understand the extraordinary accumulation of dead flowers everywhere; he could not understand why there should be police officers in his room; he could not understand why one of them had gone to some trouble to find him a glass of water and stood there while he drank it. He could not understand what they seemed to be doing with such urgent quietness in the kitchen—his kitchen....

"What's the matter?" he muttered.

Nobody answered him directly. A young officer sat on the edge of the bed beside him and talked to him in a calm, careful voice about nothing in particular—the weather, the drive to the hospital, how he would feel better soon—in the way that a man talks to keep another man from thinking too clearly about something.

No, Oren could not understand it at all.

They got him down the stairs and along the entry passage. He was aware of voices outside, of a crowd held back by officers

along the fence. Then his attention caught on a small fat frightened-looking man who was giving some statement to an officer writing in a notebook—"I'd seen her with him... she came into my shop... 111333 the number was"—and Oren lost the thread of it, because they were bringing him out through the gate now, into the hard summer sunlight, and there were two vehicles drawn up in the street.

Two.

Oren stopped walking. The officer at his elbow kept him moving gently, speaking to him again in that calm deliberate voice, trying to turn his face away from the second vehicle; but Oren was looking at it, and as they loaded the stretcher into it—carefully, carefully—he saw that the figure strapped to it was not still. A hand moved. Or he thought a hand moved. He was not a reliable witness to anything anymore, and he knew it; but he thought a hand moved.

"Elsie—" he said.

The officer at his elbow said "Easy now" and helped him into the first vehicle and closed the door. Through the window the crowd was a wall of turned faces, mouths opening and closing. Oren pressed his hand to the glass.

The second vehicle pulled out first. As Oren's followed, he turned in his seat, away from the detective beside him, and looked back through the rear window at the old house. The crimson shades were up. The windows stood open. The rooms were only rooms, pale and ordinary in the June light, stripped of whatever had lived in them.

The For Rent signs were still standing in the yard among the privet bushes, white and patient, just as they had always stood. One of them said the key was to be had at Number Six.

They had never found a tenant. They were not going to stop trying.

Oren watched until the house went out of sight. Then he faced forward, and the street ahead was empty and bright, and the two vehicles moved along it together toward the hospital at the edge of town.

CHAPTER TWO

PHANTAS

"For, barring all pother,
With this or the other,
Still free men are lords of the main."

THE CHAPTER OF MASTERS

Six months after they brought him in, Oren was sleeping better. That was the main thing the doctor noted, on the occasions when Oren sat in the chair across from him and they talked: how are you sleeping. Better. Good. And the writing—are you writing at all. Not yet. That was all right. Give it time.

He read, instead. Books came on a library cart on Thursdays, pushed by a white-haired woman named Mrs. Aldrich who had been doing this same circuit of the ward for eleven years and who chose books for her patients with the mild, unsentimental efficiency of a woman distributing bread. She knew what Oren needed before he did: not novels, not yet; nothing that made demands on feeling. Histories. Accounts. Plain factual prose. Here is what happened. Here is what was observed.

On a grey Thursday in December—sleet at the high ward windows, the radiator clicking—she left him a collection called *Great Lakes: Maritime History and Notable Incidents*, compiled by a professor at Michigan State and published by a small press in

Ann Arbor. It had the particular smell of a book that has been many places and belongs to none of them.

He read it slowly, the way he read everything now. A chapter on schooner traffic in the 1840s. A chapter on the storms of 1913. Then, appended to a chapter on fog-related incidents in Lake Superior, a brief account extracted from the log of the USS Saginaw, dated August 14th, 1953—little more than a year ago, Oren calculated, though the year felt much further—describing what the ship's crew had reported seeing in a fog-bound passage north of Whitefish Bay: an old wooden schooner, listing dangerously, bleached white, with two figures visible on her deck.

The account noted that the wreck had subsequently been identified from recovered hull fragments and a nameplate as the *Mary of the Straits*, lost with all hands in 1852.

A footnote—brief, dry, the kind of thing that passes unremarked in a book of this kind—added that the officer of the watch who had filed the report, Lieutenant J. Abel Keeling, had later requested that his statement be stricken from the official record, as he could no longer account for certain of its details. The request had been denied.

Oren turned back to the beginning of the account. He began to read.

As Abel Keeling lay on the schooner's deck, held from rolling down it only by his own weight and the sun-blackened hand that lay outstretched upon the planks, his gaze wandered, but

ever returned to the bell that hung, jammed with the dangerous heel of the vessel, in the small ornamental belfry immediately abaft the mainmast. The bell was of cast bronze, with half-obliterated bosses upon it that had been the heads of cherubs; but wind and fresh-water spray had given it a thick incrustation of bright, beautiful, lichenous green. It was this color that Abel Keeling's eyes liked.

For wherever else on the schooner his eyes rested they found only whiteness—the whiteness of extreme age. There were slightly varying degrees in her whiteness: here she was of a white that glistened like salt-crystals, there of a grayish chalky white, and again her whiteness had the yellowish cast of decay; but everywhere it was the mild, disquieting whiteness of materials out of which the life had long departed. Her cordage was bleached as old straw is bleached, and half her ropes kept their shape little more firmly than the ash of a string keeps its shape after a fire has passed; her pale timbers were white and clean as bones found on a beach; and even the pine pitch with which, for lack of tar in those last weeks, she had been dressed at the seams had dried to a pale hard gum that sparkled and glittered in the open cracks. The sun was yet so pale a buckler of silver through the still white mists that not a cord or timber cast a shadow; and only Abel Keeling's face and hands were dark, burned and shrunken from his pitiless rays.

The schooner was the Mary of the Straits, and she had a frightful list to starboard. So canted was she that her mainyard dipped one of its iron shoes into the glassy water, and, had her

foremast remained, or more than the broken stump of her jiggermast aft, she must have rolled over entirely. Many days ago they had stripped the mainsail from its yard and had passed it under the *Mary's* bottom in the hope that it would stop the leak. This it had partly done as long as the schooner had continued to glide one way; then, without coming about, she had begun to glide the other, the ropes had parted, and she had dragged the sail after her, leaving a broad dark tarnish on the silver-still lake.

For it was broadside that the schooner glided—almost imperceptibly, ever settling down. She glided as if something drew her, and at first Abel Keeling had thought it was the iron of her fittings being pulled, drawing her through the pearly mists that lay like face-cloths to the water and hid at a short distance the tarnish left by the sail. But later he had known that it was no pull of iron against iron. The motion was due—must be due—to the absolute deadness of the calm in that silent, sinister, three-mile passage. With the eye of his mind he saw that pull now as he lay against the capstan housing, all but toppling down the deck. Soon that would happen again which had happened for five days past. He would hear again the crying of gulls and the creaking of cedars, the mat of yellow weed would creep in toward the *Mary* over the mirror lake, once more the sheer face of the shore-rock would rise, and the men would run.

But no: the men would not run this time to drop the fenders. There were no men left to do so, unless Bligh was still alive. Perhaps Bligh was still alive. He had walked half-way down the stern-deck steps a little before the sudden nightfall of the day

before, had then fallen and lain for a minute—dead, Abel Keeling had supposed, watching him from his place by the capstan—and had then gotten up again and tottered forward toward the forecastle, his tall figure swaying and his long arms waving. Abel Keeling had not seen him since. Most likely he had died in the forecastle during the night. If he had not been dead he would have come aft again for water.

At the memory of the water Abel Keeling lifted his head. The lean cords of muscle about his parched mouth worked, and he made a small pressing of his burned hand on the planking, as if to verify the steepness and his own balance. The mainmast was some seven or eight yards away. He put one stiff leg under him and began, seated as he was, to make shuffling movements down the slope.

To the mainmast, near the belfry, was fixed his contrivance for catching water. It consisted of a collar of rope set lower on one side than the other, and tallowed beneath. The mists lingered later in that gully of a passage than they did on the open lake, and the collar of rope served as a collector for the dew that condensed on the mast. The drops fell into a small earthen crock set on the deck beneath it.

Abel Keeling reached the crock and looked into it. It was nearly a third full of fresh water. Good. If Bligh, the mate, was dead, so much the more water for Abel Keeling, master of the *Mary of the Straits*. He dipped two fingers into the vessel and put them into his mouth. This he did several times. He did not dare to raise the crock to his broken lips for dread of a remembered

agony—he could not have said how many days ago—when a devil had whispered to him, and he had gulped down the contents in the morning and for the rest of the day had gone waterless. Again he moistened his fingers and sucked them; then he lay sprawling against the mast, watching idly the drops of water as they formed and fell.

It was odd how the drops formed. Slowly they collected at the edge of the tallowed collar, trembled in their fullness for an instant, and fell, another beginning the process at once. It amused Abel Keeling to watch them. Why, he wondered, were all the drops the same size? What cause and law did they obey that they never varied, and what fragile surface-tension held each small globe intact? It must be due to some principle. He remembered how the pine pitch had hung on the buckets in great sluggish gouts, obedient to a different rule; oil was different again, and so were the balsams of the forest. Only the open lake—perhaps because the heavy and motionless water put him in mind of it—seemed obedient to no law.... Why was it so?

Bligh, of course, would have had his answer: it was the Hand of God. That sufficed for Bligh, who had gone forward the evening before, and whom Abel Keeling now seemed vaguely to remember as the deep-voiced believer who had sung his hymns as, man by man, he had committed the bodies of the ship's company to the water. Bligh was that sort of man; accepted things without question; was content to take things as they were and be ready with the fenders when the wall of rock rose out of the opal mists. Bligh, too, like the waterdrops, had his Law, that was his and nobody else's.

There floated down from some rotten rope up aloft a flake of bark, that settled in the crock. Abel Keeling watched it dully as it settled toward the crock's rim. When presently he again dipped his fingers into the vessel the water ran into a little vortex, drawing the flake with it. The water settled again; and again the minute flake drifted toward the rim and clung there, as if the rim had power to draw it.

It was exactly so that the schooner was gliding toward the shore-rock, the yellow and green weeds, and the gulls and the cedars. Put out into mid-water again—while there had been men to put her out—she had glided to the other wall. One force drew the chip in the crock and the ship over the still lake. It was the Hand of God, said Bligh.

Abel Keeling, his mind now noting minute things and now clouded with stupor, did not at first hear a voice that was shakily lifted over by the forecastle—a voice that drew nearer to an accompaniment of swirling water.

"O Thou, that Jonas in the fish
 Three days didst keep from pain,
 Which was a figure of Thy death
 And rising up again—"

It was Bligh, singing one of his hymns:

"O Thou, that Noah kept from flood
 And Abram, day by day,
 As he along through Egypt passed

Didst guide him in the way—"

The voice ceased, leaving the verse unfinished. Bligh was alive, at any rate. Abel Keeling resumed his fitful musing.

Yes, that was the Law of Bligh's life—to call everything the Hand of God; but Abel Keeling's Law was different: no better, no worse, only different. The Hand of God, that drew chips and schooners, must work by some method; and Abel Keeling's eyes were dully on the crock again as if he sought the method there.

Then conscious thought left him for a space, and when he resumed it was without obvious connection.

Steam, of course, was the thing. He had seen the early fire-boats on Lake Erie, wallowing and puffing at half the speed of a well-handled schooner, their paddle wheels churning uselessly in a chop. He had watched with contempt those early efforts: noisy, stinking, unreliable, no match for a fair wind and good canvas. But the principle behind them—that was something else. To store up force and loose it at will, indifferent to calm or gale alike. The fire-boats he had seen were clumsy infants, their boilers exploding in mid-lake, their machinery balking at every third watch. But what if the principle were carried to its logical end? A vessel that would not wallow, that would not puff helpless black smoke, that would not depend on the whim of the weather any more than a locomotive depends on the inclination of a hill? What would such a vessel look like? She would be low and lean, perhaps—not the broad beamy hull of a schooner packed with lumber, but slim and urgent as a hunting dog. She would drive

through the water rather than over it. She would be smooth iron throughout, every spar and line subordinated to one purpose: speed. Relentless, weather-proof, self-sufficient speed....

"To Noah and his sons with him

God spake, and thus said He:

A covenant set I up with you

And your posterity—"

It was Bligh again, wandering somewhere in the waist. Abel Keeling's mind was blank once more. Then slowly, slowly, as the water drops gathered on the collar of rope, his thought took shape again.

A steam vessel that depended only on coal—no. Coal was finite; the bunkers would empty; and then she would be no better than the *Mary of the Straits* herself, becalmed and helpless. This ship, that the hand of man should one day make for the Hand of God to manage, should be a ship that took the force locked in her fuel and spent it with no waste at all, that converted every ounce of her burning into forward motion as efficiently as a rifle converts its powder into a ball in flight. She would have no paddle wheels; those were for infants. She would push the water away from behind her—drive it aft in a column—and the reaction would carry her forward. She would store her force and release it in a smooth, continuous, irresistible thrust.... Bligh would call that equally the Hand of God, this driving force of the ship of the future that Abel Keeling dimly foresaw as he lay between the mainmast and the belfry, turning his eyes now and

then from ash-white timbers to the vivid green bronze-rust of the bell above him.

Bligh's face, dark red with exposure and ravaged from within by the faith that consumed him, appeared at the head of the stern-deck steps. His voice beat uncontrolledly out.

"And in the earth here is no place
Of refuge to be found,
Nor in the deep and water-course
That passeth under ground—"

At some point a meal tray arrived and was placed on the stand beside his bed. He did not look up. He was aware of it the way you are aware of weather: a fact at the edge of attention that registers and is set aside.

Bligh's eyes were lidded, as if in contemplation of his inner rapture. His head was thrown back, and his brows worked up and down tormentedly. His wide mouth remained open as his hymn was suddenly interrupted on the long-drawn note. From somewhere in the shimmering mists the note was taken up, and there drummed and rang and reverberated through the passage a deep, bellowing, dismal blast—alarming and sustained. A tremor rang through Bligh. Moving like a blind man, he stumbled forward from the head of the steps, and Abel Keeling was aware of his gaunt figure behind him,

taller for the steep of the deck. As that vast and hollow sound died away, Bligh laughed in his mania.

“Lord, hath the deep a voice to praise Thee? Lo, again—”

Again the cavernous sound possessed the air, louder and nearer. Through it came another sound—a slow throb, throb—throb, throb. Again the sounds ceased.

“Even Leviathan lifteth up his voice in praise!” Bligh sobbed.

Abel Keeling did not raise his head. There had returned to him the memory of that day when, before the morning mists had lifted from the strait, he had emptied the crock of the water that was his allowance until nightfall. During that agony of thirst he had seen shapes and heard sounds with other than his mortal eyes and ears, and even in the moments that had alternated with his light-headedness—when he had known these to be the work of a thirst-tormented mind—they had come again. He had heard the bells on a Sunday in his own home along the Cuyahoga, the calling of children at play in the muddy lane, the unconcerned singing of men at their daily labor, and the laughter and talk of women as they spread linen on the fence to dry or set supper out on the long table. These voices had rung in his brain, interrupted now and then by the groans of Bligh and of two other men who had been alive then. Some of the voices he had heard had been silent on this earth this many a long year; but Abel Keeling, thirst-tortured, had heard them, even as he was now hearing that hollow moaning with the intermittent throbbing that filled the passage with unease.

"Praise Him, praise Him, praise Him!"

Bligh was calling deliriously.

Then a bell seemed to sound in Abel Keeling's ears, and, as if something in the machinery of his brain had slipped, another picture rose before him—the scene when the Mary of the Straits had put out from the harbor of Erie, to a brave bravery of shouted farewells and the crying of her cordage in a fair west wind. She had not been this bleached and dying schooner then. The scroll-work on her prow had been bright with fresh paint; her belfry and stern-galleries had gleamed in the early sun; and from her mainyard had hung the burgee with the owner's mark in red and black. Her canvas had been new and white, and from her masthead had flown the American flag on a morning that smelled of lake water and hemlock and the whole long summer ahead....

Then suddenly a voice about him seemed to be saying, "And a half-seven—and a half-seven—" and in an instant the picture in Abel Keeling's brain changed again. He was at home again in the harbor skiff, instructing his son—young Abel—in the casting of the lead line.

"And a half-seven!" the boy seemed to be calling.

Abel Keeling's burned lips moved: "Excellently well cast, Abel—excellently well cast!"

"And a half-seven—and a half-seven—seven—seven—"

"Ah," Abel Keeling murmured, "that last was not a clean cast—give me the line—thus it should go.... Ay, so.... Soon you

shall sail the lakes with me in the Mary of the Straits. You are already perfect in the stars and the motions of the planets; tomorrow I will put you through the backstaff...."

For a minute or two he continued to mutter; then he dozed. When again he came to semiconsciousness it was once more to the sound of the bell—at first faint, then louder, and finally becoming a clamor immediately above his head. It was Bligh. Bligh, in a fresh fit of delirium, had seized the bell lanyard and was ringing the bell insanely. The cord broke in his fingers, but he thrust at the bell with his hand, and again called aloud.

"Upon a harp and an instrument of ten strings... let Heaven and Earth praise Thy Name!..."

He continued to call aloud, and to beat upon the bronze-and-green bell.

"Ship ahoy! What ship's that?"

One would have said that a genuine hail had come out of the mists; but Abel Keeling knew those hails that came out of the mists. They came from ships that were not there. "Ay, ay, keep a good lookout and watch your soundings," he muttered again to his son.

But, as sometimes a sleeper rises in his dream and walks, so all of a sudden Abel Keeling found himself on his hands and knees on the deck, looking back over his shoulder. In some deep-seated region of his consciousness he was dimly aware that the cant of the deck had become more perilous, but his brain received the

warning and lost it again. He was looking out into the bright and baffling mists. The silver of the sun was of a more ardent brightness; the lake below it was lost in brilliant haze; and between them, suspended as if weightless, no more substantial than the dark spots that float before dazzled eyes, a pyramidal phantom-shape hung. Abel Keeling passed his hand over his eyes, but when he removed it the shape was still there, gliding slowly toward the Mary's quarter. Its form changed as he watched it. The spirit-gray shape that had been a pyramid seemed to resolve itself into four upright members, slightly graduated in height, that nearest the Mary's stern the tallest, and that to the left the lowest—it might have been the shadow of a great set of organ pipes on which that vacant mournful horn had been sounded.

And as he looked with fooled eyes, again his ears were fooled:

"Ahoy there! What ship's that? Are you a ship?... Here, give me that horn—" Then a metallic bark. "Ahoy there! What in the devil are you? Didn't you ring a bell? Ring it again, or blow a blast or something, and go dead slow!"

All this came, as it were, indistinctly, and through a high singing in Abel Keeling's own ears. Then he caught what seemed to be a short bewildered laugh, followed by a colloquy from somewhere between water and sky.

"Here, Ward—just pinch me, will you? Tell me what you see over there. I need to know if I'm awake."

"See where?"

"There, off the starboard bow. Stop that ventilation fan—I can't hear myself think. See anything? Don't tell me it's that damned Dutchman—don't pitch me that old Vanderdecken story—give me something easy first, something about a lake monster.... You did hear that bell, didn't you?"

"Quiet a minute—listen—"

Again Bligh's voice was raised.

"This is the covenant that I make:

From henceforth nevermore

Will I again the world destroy

With water, as before."

Bligh's voice died away in Abel Keeling's ears.

"Oh—my—Lord—Almighty!" the voice that came from between water and sky sounded again. Then it spoke more deliberately. "I say," it began, with careful restraint, "if you are a ship, do you mind telling us where the masquerade is going on? Our radio is down, and we hadn't heard about it.... Oh, you do see it, Ward, don't you?... Will you please, please tell us what in the name of all that's holy you are!"

Again Abel Keeling had moved as a sleepwalker moves. He had raised himself by the belfry timbers, and Bligh had sunk in a heap on the deck. Abel Keeling's movement overturned the crock, which sent its small trickle of contents racing down the deck to lodge where the still and brimming lake made, as it were, a chain

with the carved rail of the stern deck—one link a gleaming edge, then a dark baluster, then another gleaming link. For one moment Abel Keeling noticed that what had driven Bligh aft had been the rising of the water in the waist as the schooner settled by the head—the waist was now entirely submerged; then once more he was held entirely by his dream, its voices, and its shape in the mist, which had again taken the form of a pyramid before his eyes.

“Of course,” a voice seemed to be continuing, still through the confused ringing in Abel Keeling’s ears, “we can’t fire a warning shot at it.... And, Ward, I don’t believe in ‘em, d’you hear? I don’t believe in ‘em, I say. Shall we wake up the old man? This might interest the Skipper—”

“Oh, lower a boat and pull out to it—into it—over it—”

“Look at our boys crowded on the rail up there. They’ve spotted it. Better not give an order you know won’t be obeyed....”

Abel Keeling, cramped against the belfry, had begun to find his dream interesting. For, though he could not name her lines, that shape in the mist was the shape of a ship. No doubt it was cast up by his brooding on ships of half an hour before; and that was odd. But perhaps, after all, it was not so very odd. He knew that she did not truly exist; only the appearance of her existed; but things had to appear before they truly were. Before the Mary of the Straits had existed she had been a shape in some man’s

imagination; before that, some dreamer had dreamed the form of a ship that went against the wind; and before that, far back in the world's beginning, some bold man had first ventured out over the water on two planks lashed together. And since this shape that moved before Abel Keeling's eyes was a shape in his dream, he, Abel Keeling, was the master of it. His own dying brain had contrived her, and she moved upon the limitless water of his own mind.

"And I will not unmindful be
Of this, My covenant, passed
Twixt Me and you and every flesh
 Whiles that the world should last,"

sang Bligh, rapt in his rapture.

But as a dreamer, even in his dream, will scratch upon the wall by his bed some key or word to put him in mind of his vision in the morning when it has left him, so Abel Keeling found himself seeking some mark to be a proof to those to whom no vision is given. Even Bligh sought that—could not be quiet in his bliss, but lay on the deck uttering great passionate amens and praising his Maker upon a harp, as he said, and upon an instrument of ten strings. So too with Abel Keeling. It would be the testament of his life to have praised God not upon a harp but upon a ship that should carry her own power, that should store her fuel's force as she stored her provisions, that should be something wrested from the confusion of uninvention and ordered

and mastered and bent to Abel Keeling's will. And there she was, that ship-shaped thing of spirit-gray, with the four uprights that resembled a set of stacks now broadside and of equal height. And the ghost-crew of that ship were speaking again.

The broken silver chain by the stern-rail had now become continuous, and the balusters threw a herring-bone across their own still reflections. The spilled water from the crock had dried on the planking, and the crock was not to be seen. Abel Keeling stood beside the mast, erect as God made man to stand. With his leathered hand he struck the bell. He waited the space of a minute, and then cried:

"Ahoy!... Ship ahoy!... What ship's that?"

The ward was very quiet. Down the corridor a radio played for a moment—a man's voice, something with a steady beat—then was turned off. The afternoon light at the windows had shifted; the sleet had stopped. Oren's finger held his place on the page. He turned it.

We are not conscious in a dream that we are playing a game whose beginning and end are in ourselves. In this dream of Abel Keeling's a voice replied:

"Hello, it's found its tongue.... Ahoy there! What are you?"

Loudly and in a clear voice Abel Keeling called: "Are you a ship?"

With a nervous laugh the answer came:

"We are a ship, aren't we, Ward? I hardly feel sure.... Yes, of course, we're a ship. No question about us. The question is what on God's earth you are."

Not all the words these voices used were plain to Abel Keeling, and he knew not what it was in the tone of these last words that reminded him of the honor due to the *Mary of the Straits*. Blister-white and at the end of her life as she was, Abel Keeling was still jealous of her dignity; the voice had a youngish ring; and it was not fitting that young men should speak carelessly of his schooner. He spoke curtly.

"You that spoke—are you the master of that ship?"

"Officer of the watch; the captain's below."

"Then send for him. It is with masters that masters hold speech," Abel Keeling replied.

He could see the two shapes, flat and without depth, standing on a high narrow structure with rails. One of them gave a low whistle and seemed to be wiping his face; but the other spoke something into a tube or funnel. Presently the two shapes became three. There was a murmuring, as of quick consultation, and then suddenly a new voice spoke. At its tone and quality a sudden tremor ran through Abel Keeling's frame. He wondered what

chord it was that voice struck in the forgotten recesses of his memory.

"Ahoy!" called this new yet half-familiar voice. "What's all this about? Listen. We're the United States destroyer escort Saginaw, out of Duluth last September, and nothing particular the matter with us. Now who are you?"

"The Mary of the Straits, out of the port of Erie, Pennsylvania, on the day of Saint Anne's feast, and only two men—"

A gasp cut him short.

"Out of WHERE?" that voice that so strangely moved Abel Keeling said unsteadily, while Bligh broke into groans of renewed rapture.

"Out of the port of Erie, Pennsylvania, on the southern shore of Lake Erie.... Nay, give ear, or I cannot make you hear me while this man's spirit and flesh wrestle so together!... Ahoy! Are you gone?" For the voices had dropped to a murmur, and the ship-shape had blurred before Abel Keeling's eyes. Again and again he called. He wished to be informed about the manner in which that ship stored and released its force.

"The engine!" he called, in an agony lest the knowledge almost in his grasp should be lost. "I would know about the engine—the driving force—"

Like an echo there came back the words, used without comprehension: "The engine?..."

"...that drives the vessel through calm and storm alike—not wind—not paddle wheels as on those first fire-boats, which waste their force and beat uselessly in any chop—but a force stored and driven steadily aft—pressing the water behind it—urging the ship forward by pure reaction—"

"Can you make out what it's getting at?"

"Oh, we shall all wake up in a minute...."

"Quiet, I have it—the screws, the shaft—it wants to know about our propulsion. Well, no harm in humoring the thing. Ahoy there!"—the voice came to Abel Keeling a little more strongly, as if a shifting air carried it, speaking faster as it went on. "Not coal but oil—and we're steam turbines, d'you hear? Steam turbines, two shafts, combined shaft horsepower sixty thousand—sixty thousand—and we can turn out thirty-two knots in a following sea. Got that? S-t-e-a-m t-u-r-b-i-n-e-s. And we carry five-inch guns fore and aft, torpedo tubes amidships, and radar from the foretopmast to the antenna aft. Welded nickel steel throughout, forty-three hundred tons displacement. Care to come aboard?"

Abel Keeling was frowning to himself. It bothered him that words in his own vision should carry no meaning. How did words

come to him in a dream that he had no knowledge of when fully awake? The *Saginaw*—that was the name of this ship; but the *Saginaw* he knew was a town on the bay of the same name, in Michigan, landlocked and far from any sea....

“And as for armament,” the voice with the tones that so deeply troubled Abel Keeling’s memory continued, “we’ve four twenty-one-inch torpedo tubes, twin five-inch turrets forward and aft, and radar-controlled forty-millimeters all along the bridge. I forgot to mention that she’s all-welded construction, her fuel tanks carry enough oil for three thousand miles at twenty-five knots, and she handles in any sea state you care to name. Care to come aboard?”

But the voice was speaking still more rapidly and with increasing unease, as if to fill a silence with no matter what, and the shape that was uttering it strained forward anxiously over the rail.

“Ugh! I’m glad this happened in daylight.”

“I wish I was sure it was happening at all.... Poor old fellow!”

“I suppose he’d keep his feet if her deck went vertical. Think she’ll go down, or just... dissolve?”

“Kind of go down... without much wash....”

“Listen—here’s the other one—”

For Bligh was singing again:

*"For, Lord, Thou know'st our nature such
If we great things obtain,
And in the getting of the same
Do feel no grief or pain,*

*"We little do esteem thereof;
But, hardly brought to pass,
A thousand times we do esteem
More than the other was."*

"But oh—look—look—look at the other!... Oh, I say, wasn't he a grand old boy! Look!"

For, transfiguring Abel Keeling's form as a prophet's form is transfigured in the instant of his vision—flooding his mind with the white eureka-light of perfect knowledge—that for which he and his dream had been straining had come. He knew her, this ship of the future, as if God's own hand had drawn her lines directly into his brain. He knew her as those already entering the grave know things: miraculously, completely, accepting life's impossibilities with a quiet "Of course." From the burning chambers of her turbines to the last drip of her lubricating oil, from her keel-plates to the breeches of her quick-firers, he knew her—read her gauges, walked her engine room, felt the vibration

of her shafts underfoot, and lived the life of the man who commanded her. And he would not forget on the morrow, as he had forgotten on many morrows, for at last he had seen the water about his feet, and knew that there would be no morrow for him on this earth.

And even in that moment, with but a sand or two to run in his glass—indomitable, insatiable, dreaming dream upon dream—he could not let go until he knew more. He had two questions to ask, and a master question; and only a moment remained. Sharply his voice rang out.

“Ho there!... This ancient schooner, the Mary of the Straits, cannot make thirty-two knots, but yet she has sailed the waters for twenty years. What more does your ship do? Can she soar above them, as the wild fowl soar?”

“Lord, he thinks we’re an airplane!... No, she can’t....”

“And can you go under them, as the fish go?”

“No.... Those are submarines.... We’re a surface ship....”

But Abel Keeling waited for no more. He gave an exulting, wondering laugh.

“Oho, oho—thirty-two knots, and only on the face of the waters—no more than that? Oho!... Now my ship—the ship I see as a mother sees full-grown the child she has but conceived—my ship, I say—oho!—my ship shall.... Below there—trip that windlass!”

The cry came suddenly and sharply as a muffled sound came from below and an ominous shudder ran through the schooner.

"Good God, her fittings are breaking loose below—that's her finish—"

"Trip that windlass, and double-lash the rest!" Abel Keeling's voice rang out, as if there had been any to obey him. He had braced himself within the belfry frame; and then in the middle of the next order his voice suddenly failed him. His ship-shape, which for the moment he had forgotten, rode once more before his eyes. This was the end, and his master question—the answer to which was now twisting his face and almost bursting his heart—was still unasked.

"Ho—he that spoke with me—the master," he cried in a voice that ran high. "Is he there?"

"Yes, yes!" came the other voice across the water, sick with suspense. "Oh, be quick!"

There was a moment in which hoarse cries from many voices, a heavy thud and roll on wood, and a crash of timbers and a gurgling and a rush of water were indescribably mingled; the anchor windlass below had broken its fastenings and gone thundering down the slanted deck, carrying Bligh's unconscious form with it. The deck came up vertical, and for one instant longer Abel Keeling clung to the belfry.

"I cannot see your face," he cried, "but it seems to me your voice is a voice I know. What is your name?"

In a torn sob the answer came across the water:

"Keeling—Abel Keeling.... Oh, my God!"

And Abel Keeling's cry of triumph, that mounted to a victorious "Huzza!" was lost in the downward plunge of the Mary of the Straits, that left the passage empty save for the sun's fierce blaze and the last smoke-like evaporation of the mists.

Oren set the book face-down on his knees.

The ward was dark. The night lamp at the nursing station cast a small orange circle at the far end of the corridor, and beyond the high windows the sky was the particular blue-black of a December night with no moon. He did not know what time it was. He had been reading since morning.

He turned the book over and found the last lines of the account again. *Keeling—Abel Keeling.... Oh, my God.* Below it the brief footnote about the lieutenant who had wanted his own words stricken from the record. Who could not, afterward, account for certain of the details. Oren understood that. He had given statements himself, in the weeks after the house, and there were details he had not been able to account for either. There were whole months he could not account for.

He thought about a man dying in a becalmed ship who had spent his last lucid hours imagining a vessel he could not quite

name—something that would carry its own force inside it, that would not depend on wind or weather, that could go wherever its master directed. He had understood the thing completely in the moment of dying. He had died before he could tell anyone who could use it.

He thought about what it meant that the officer who filed the report shared his name.

He thought about Elsie.

He had been told she was recovering. He had not been told what she was recovering as. The hospital where they had taken her was in Indianapolis; his was here; there was no question of visits, not yet, perhaps not for a long time. He did not know whether she would want one. He did not know whether he deserved to want one.

The book was still in his hands. He set it on the nightstand, spine up. Outside, a car moved along the street below with its headlights sweeping the ceiling of the ward, and the ceiling was blank and pale, and then the dark came back.

Oren lay back on the pillow. He closed his eyes. He lay in the dark for a long time, not sleeping, holding very still, listening to the ward breathe around him.

In the morning he would ask Mrs. Aldrich if there were other books like this one.

CHAPTER THREE

ROOUM

For all I ever knew to the contrary, it was his own name; and something about him, name or man or both, always put me in mind of old and ungoverned things—of weather, of deep water, of the kind of darkness that predates electricity. I only know that after I learned that his name was Room, I could not for the life of me have thought of him as being called anything else.

The first impression you got of his head was that it was a patchwork of black and white—black bushy hair and short white beard, or else the other way about. As a matter of fact, both hair and beard were piebald, so that if you saw him in the gloom a pale patch showed down one side of his head and dark tufts cropped up here and there in his beard. His eyebrows alone were entirely black, with a little sprouting of hair almost joining them. His skin was very dark, of the dark brown that always seems to have more than a hint of something coppery behind it, and his forehead was low and scored across with deep horizontal furrows, so that at certain angles his face had the look of old carved wood.

I was in Gary that summer—the summer of 1954—doing a feature for Construction and Industry, a trade monthly out of Chicago that had hired me on a trial basis to write long-form pieces about major building projects. It was not the work I had imagined for myself, but after the months at the hospital and the careful

re-entry into ordinary life that the doctors recommended, it was work I could do, and it paid enough to keep me in a room and fed and moving forward. I was not yet ready to be still. Gary suited that: it was a city that never stopped making noise.

Room I first saw on a structural steel job near the lake, a warehouse expansion for one of the smaller mill companies. He appeared over the edge of a work platform one afternoon when I happened to be watching a gang struggle with a dropped beam—a thirty-foot section of I-beam that had slipped its rigging and landed athwart a pile of lumber and pipe in a way that looked, to my inexpert eye, entirely unresolvable without taking the whole stack apart. The foreman, a solid methodical man named Cruikshank, was standing with his hands on his hips contemplating the problem when the piebald head appeared at the platform rail above him.

"You've got it wrong," the head said, pleasantly enough.

Cruikshank looked up. So did I.

"Who in the hell are you?" Cruikshank said.

"Fellow who can get that beam out in an hour," the head said. "Give or take."

I watched from the side as Room came down the ladder and went to work. He was not a large man, but he moved around the problem with a physical ease that was striking—not athletic exactly, more the ease of someone who has simply never learned to doubt his body. He studied the tangle for perhaps three minutes, touching nothing, just looking; then he began to give quiet instructions, repositioning men and tackles with small precise

gestures. He was not certificated, as I later learned; had no formal training that anyone could discover; laughed openly at blueprints and scoffed at the engineers who could not see what he saw at a glance. But he could set rigging in a way that made the rest look silly. I had spent the better part of that afternoon trying to understand the problem well enough to describe it in my piece. Room solved it in fifty minutes.

Cruikshank, who was not a generous man, told me afterward that Room was the best rigger he had ever seen and that it was a waste and a nuisance that no one could pin him down to a regular job. He was one of those itinerants the industry ran on—appearing without warning at one site or another, doing things no one else could do, then moving on. He turned up in Detroit and Cincinnati, down in St. Louis, once apparently in a highway project in western Kansas; and wherever there was a problem beyond the ordinary, his piebald head was as likely as not to appear above the nearest platform rail.

He was offered good money to stay on with any number of firms, but he always shook his black-and-white head. He would never be able to keep the bargain if he were to make it, he said quite fairly. I know the type—men who cannot endure to punch a time-clock in the morning and be released by a whistle at five, and it is one of the things no employer ever fully understands. So Room came and went, and the sites he visited were glad of him and mildly relieved when he moved on.

He could also find water. I don't mean he claimed to—I mean he did it, reliably, walking a piece of ground and telling you

where the water was and roughly how deep. I saw him do it twice. I don't propose to explain it.

The way I got to know him beyond a nod was that he fell into step beside me one evening as I was leaving the site. We had knocked off for the day, and I was walking toward the bus stop on the main road when he came up alongside. We walked along together; and we had not gone far before it appeared that his reason for joining me was that he wanted to know what a molecule was.

I looked at him.

"What do you want to know that for?" I said. "A man who can do what you do with a piece of rigging—what does he need with molecules?"

Oh, he just wanted to know, he said.

So, walking along the canal road in the early evening, I gave it to him more or less from the book—molecular theory, the behavior of matter at small scales, surface tension, the rest of it. But from the questions he asked it was plain he was not getting the hang of it in the way I meant it. Did the molecular theory allow things to pass through one another, he wanted to know. Could things pass through one another? And other questions of that kind. I gave up.

"You're a genius in your own way, Rooum," I said finally. "You know these things without the books the rest of us depend on. If I had that, I think I should be content with it."

But he did not seem satisfied, though he dropped the matter for that time. He asked me, rather carefully, if I had any books

he might borrow. I lent him a couple—a general physics text I had bought secondhand, and a survey of engineering principles I used for the magazine work. He returned them within a week without remark. They did not appear to contain what he was looking for.

Now you would expect a man to be sensitive in unusual ways—one way or another—who can tell when there is water a hundred feet beneath him. But the thing that struck me more than the water-finding was that Rooum should be so extraordinarily, so helplessly sensitive to something far commoner: ordinary echoes. He could not stand them. He would go half a mile out of his way rather than pass a place he knew had an echo; and if he came upon one by chance, sometimes he would hurry through as fast as he could, and sometimes he would stop and listen very intently, with an expression I can only describe as braced. I joked about it at first, until I understood that it genuinely distressed him; then I stopped. We all have our particular terrors. I am not in a position to mock anyone else's.

For the remarkable thing that came upon Rooum—and I use the word came deliberately; I'll explain why in a moment—I cannot begin better than with the first time I clearly noticed this peculiarity about the echoes.

It was early November, a dismal wet evening, and we were on the south side of Gary, beyond the last of the proper streets, in one of those districts of muddy fields and storage lots and chain-link fence that exist at the ragged edge of every industrial city: not yet country, not entirely town, the kind of place where things are stored that nobody is quite ready to throw

away. It was raining. The rain shone on Room's black hand-bag, the battered satchel he carried everywhere; and I was nursing the dottle of a pipe too wet to relight. We were walking toward the bus line on the Ridge Road.

Someone was laying new water mains along one stretch of the road, and the surface had been torn up. They had put down the curbing on both sides first, as they do—narrow strips of new concrete with neither pavement nor roadway finished on either side, just raw clay and stacked pipe and the occasional red lantern marking a trench. You walked the curb as on a tightrope if you wanted to stay out of the mud.

I had noticed a few minutes earlier that as we had passed under a long steel railway overpass—the kind that rings and booms with every footstep—Room had gone suddenly quiet in the middle of a sentence. The echo had bothered him; I had seen it happen before. He had pushed through quickly and came out the other side looking as a man looks who has come in from cold wind.

On the unmade road, Room went ahead of me along the curbing. The red lanterns made small reflections in the puddles. I was watching my footing.

Then I heard him stop sharply and draw in his breath.

"Hurt yourself?" I said, thinking he had walked into one of the unlit lamp standards.

He moved on without answering; but a few yards farther he stopped again. He was listening. He waited for me to come up alongside.

"I say," he said, in an odd voice, "go on ahead a bit, would you?"

"What's the matter?" I asked, as I stepped past him. He did not answer.

I had not been in the lead a minute before he wanted to change positions again. I could hear that he was breathing fast.

"What ails you?" I said, stopping.

"It's all right.... You're not playing any tricks on me, are you?..."

I saw him pass his hand across his brow.

"Come on, let's move," I said shortly; and we did not speak again until we reached the Ridge Road and its proper lights. Then I glanced at him.

"Here," I said, taking his arm, "you're not well. Let's get a drink somewhere."

"Yes," he said, wiping his face again. "I say... did you hear?"

"Hear what?"

"Ah. You didn't.... And of course you didn't feel anything...."

"You're shaking, man."

When we found a diner a few blocks on, I could see he was shaking badly. The counterman watched us with the flat incurious attention of someone who has seen everything. I got Room onto a stool and ordered coffee and something stronger from a bottle the counterman produced without being asked.

"What was it?" I asked, as he got some of the brandy down.

But I could get nothing out of him except that it was all right, all right, with his head twitching back over his shoulder in a way that was not pleasant to watch. He was not the kind of man you pressed; and presently, when the color had come back somewhat, we went out and he walked with me as far as my rooming house, then lingered at the gate as if reluctant to leave. I watched him turn the corner in the rain.

We walked home together the following evening, but by a different route—nearly a mile longer. He had waited for me at the site gate with a certain pertinacity that suggested he had thought about this. He wanted to talk about molecules again.

When a man of his age—he would be near fifty—starts asking these questions, he is harder to deal with than a child asking where heaven is, because you cannot put him off the way you can the child. He is going to get an answer or know the reason why. Somewhere he had picked up the word osmosis, and appeared to have some partial understanding of it. He dropped the molecules and began on that instead.

"It means, doesn't it," he said, "that liquids will work their way into one another—through a membrane or something? Put a thick fluid and a thin one in contact and eventually you'll find some of the thick in the thin and the thin in the thick?"

"Something like that," I said. "The thinner works into the thicker more quickly—that's endosmosis. The reverse is exosmosis. But I'm no chemist."

"And does it take place with solids?"

I thought about it. "What's usually called adhesion may be something of the sort, under a different name."

"A lot of this bookwork seems to be inventing ten names for the same thing," he grunted, and went on with his questions.

But what he was actually trying to get at I could not determine, try as I might.

He was due to disappear again before long—he had already been on this one job for six weeks, which was about his limit—and he disappeared. I did not see or hear of him for perhaps two months.

It was a Sunday in January that I next encountered him—in the State Street subway, of all places. I had gone into Chicago for the day, my own company being more than I wanted after a week alone with my notes. I saw him twenty yards ahead of me in the tunnel, recognizable by his patched head and the black hand-bag. I ran along the tunnel after him.

It was peculiar. He had been walking close to the white-tiled wall, and I saw him suddenly stop; but he did not turn. He did not even turn when I drew up directly behind him; he put out one hand to the tiles, as if to steady himself. But the moment I put my hand on his shoulder, he simply dropped—went down on one knee against the wall as if his legs had given way. The face he turned up to me was rigid with terror.

There were fifty people about—a train had just come in—and it is not hard to draw a crowd in a subway for less cause than a man collapsed against the wall. I felt someone lay a hand on my own arm; they thought I had knocked him down.

The terror went slowly from his face. He got to his feet, pulling himself up by the wall. I shook free of the stranger who had grabbed me and stepped close to Rooum.

"What in the devil is this about?" I said.

"It's all right... it's all right..." he managed.

"You shouldn't pull things like that, man."

"No... no... but for the love of God don't do it again!..."

"Let's get out of here," I said, still annoyed; and the little crowd lost interest and moved off.

"Now," I said, when we were on the street in the cold January air, "you might tell me what all this is about. And what exactly it is that for the love of God I'm not to do again."

He was half apologetic and half indignant—the indignation of a man who feels that some line of decent behavior has been crossed. He muttered to himself.

"A stupid thing like that!... But there: you didn't know.... You don't know, do you?... I'm telling you, you're not to run when I'm about—do you hear that? I won't answer for myself if you run up on me in a place like that. Putting your hand on a man's shoulder from behind just when..."

"I could have spoken first," I agreed, a little stiffly.

"Yes, you could have! Just see that you do. It's monstrous."

I put a direct question.

"Are you all right in your head, Rooum?"

"Ah!" he cried. "Don't go thinking I fancy it, my friend! Nothing so easy! I thought you'd half guessed it that night on the road out past the mill... it's plain enough, if you watch..."

no, no! I'll be telling you something about molecules one of these days."

We walked for a time in silence.

"What are you doing now?" he asked suddenly. "Still the magazine?"

"Yes. There's a big building contract coming on downtown—a department store renovation on State Street. It's been gutted down to the steel frame. I've been promised a long piece on it."

"I'll come along."

"It doesn't start for another month."

"I don't mean that. I mean I'll come along now—wherever you're going today."

"I'm going back to Gary on the three o'clock train," I said.

"Fine. I'll come."

I cannot say I especially wanted the company. The man was wearing, in the particular way that people with secrets are wearing: you never know what they are about to require of you. But since it did not appear to occur to him that he might not be welcome, I said nothing. If he genuinely wanted to take the train to Gary and share a cold compartment and walk the three miles from the station to the rooming house, that was his business. I told him the time and left him.

He turned up at the station with ten minutes to spare. We went back on the train together, and afterward walked across the flat fields toward the rooming house under a sky the color of old tin. To my mild surprise we covered the whole distance without incident—no dodging, no sudden stops, no crouching against

anything. Our talk was about work, not molecules and osmosis. He was good company when he was not frightened.

My rooming house had only one spare bed, and Mrs. Poole the landlady put a cot in my room for him without visible curiosity. After she had brought us supper on a tray and gone back downstairs, I sat in the chair by the window reading while Room unpacked his hand-bag with the methodical care of a man long accustomed to living out of it: a brush, a folded nightshirt, a small framed photograph he set face-down on the nightstand, a rolled leather case of small tools. I remarked on the photograph being placed that way.

He said it was his habit.

We turned in. But I was not sleepy—I seldom was, those months—and after a while I propped a book against my knee and read by the bedside lamp. Room was asleep almost immediately, breathing with the steady deliberateness of a man who is out before his head is fully down.

Now I must be careful about what I tell you next, because it concerns something I had no right to know, and the way I came to know it was not one I am proud of. I am telling it because it is part of what happened, and because leaving it out would make the rest of it less than honest.

He had been asleep an hour, perhaps, and I had put the book down and was watching the bare wall where the bedside lamp threw a soft trapezoid of light, when suddenly, in a voice far clearer and louder than any he used when awake, Room said:

“What the devil is it prevents me seeing him, then?”

I sat up. He was asleep—the voice had come from a sleeping man; his eyes were closed, his breathing unchanged. I knew what was happening. I should have turned off the lamp and lain down and let it alone.

Instead I asked, very quietly: "Seeing whom?"

"Whom?..." His voice carried mild exasperation, as if the question were slightly foolish. "The fellow I'm telling you about. Who runs after me."

The room was very still. I could hear the wind against the window.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Who is he? The Runner?... Don't be absurd. Who else should it be?"

I tried once more.

"What happens when he catches you?"

His answer, if it was one, was this: "To hear him catching you up... and then going on ahead of you again. All right, all right... but it's weakening him a bit too, I think...."

Without realizing it I had gotten out of bed and crossed to the middle of the floor. I stood there in the cold room in my bare feet, looking at the piebald head on the pillow.

"What did you say his name was?" I breathed.

But that was too much. He muttered, gave a long troubled sigh, and began to snore. I stood there for another moment, then went and filled the washbasin and put my face in the water. I left the lamp burning and got back into bed.

In the morning, Room said nothing about it. He remarked that reading in bed was a fine way to ruin your eyes. I said he was probably right.

Well. What do you make of it? Somebody running after him always—through him—and then running on ahead. And in a place with plenty of room, on a wide sidewalk, there might be space enough for this Runner to get past; but on an eight-inch strip of curbing on an unmade road in the rain... you'd think he'd have to get past somehow, wouldn't you? I found myself wondering, in an idle way, whether the name of that Runner was Conscience; but Conscience is not a matter of molecules and osmosis. And I had my own reasons for not dismissing the possibility of things unseen that moved through a person—arrived, departed, left a mark. I had my own reasons, which I did not share with Room, for knowing exactly what it felt like to have been a place something passed through.

I told him what I'd learned. You cannot keep that kind of information; it does not belong to you. I told him the next morning as we walked back toward the bus stop.

He was not surprised. He seemed, if anything, faintly disappointed that I had taken this long to arrive at it.

"You're less observant than I took you for," he grunted.

"Good God, man—"

"Odd, yes. But you don't know the oddest part..."

He considered for a moment; then put his lips to my ear, there on the flat road with the steel mills on one horizon and the gray lake on the other.

"It gets harder every time," he whispered. "Every time. At first he just slipped through—a little catch, like when you doze in a chair and jerk awake; and off he went. But it's getting slower now, grinding, like something working through material it was never meant for. And the pain..." He passed his hand across his brow. "You noticed that night on the new road—that small hesitation. That's nothing now; that was a long time ago. Last night in the subway, just when I had myself braced up—and then you put your hand on my shoulder..." He did not finish the sentence.

"Listen," he continued after a moment. "End-osmosis becoming ex-osmosis—is that the right way to put it? He's getting stronger, and it's longer each time, and I—just let me tell you one more thing—"

"No," I said. "Stop there, please."

He looked at me.

"I know quite enough," I said. "And frankly, more than I wanted. See a doctor, Room."

"Doctors." He said it the way some men say a word they find mildly comic. "What would you do?"

"I'm not an engineer," I said. "I'm a man who writes about them. But I'd see a doctor."

He shook his head with something that was not quite a smile, and spat, and we walked on in silence.

I want to be honest about what I thought at that time. I thought: here is a man with something wrong with him, something that has been working at him for years and has gotten worse, and

he will not do the obvious thing because the obvious thing does not address what he knows to be the actual problem. I thought: Room's problem is not one a doctor can solve. And I thought: I know this not as an abstract observation but as a man who spent nine months in a ward while the obvious things were tried on him and found wanting.

I did not say any of this to Room.

Soon after that he disappeared again, as he always did. I was not sorry. His company was a disturbance in a way I could not entirely articulate—not the disturbance of danger, but the disturbance of recognition. To spend time with him was to spend time watching something I had been inside of. Elsie Bengough had sat in my rooms and watched that. I had not understood what I was asking of her. I understood it now.

The State Street contract came on in late February. It was a time-contract, with penalty clauses, and the company running it was under pressure I could see in every foreman's face. I had been given a press pass and told I could go anywhere on the site, and I went everywhere—partly because it made good copy, and partly because I had found that the noise and busyness of construction work did something useful for a mind that had recently been too much alone with itself. I was there three or four days a week, wearing a hard hat and staying out of the way of men who knew what they were doing.

It was a sight. The building had been gutted to the steel frame, and the work was going up in tiers—staging on staging,

level on level, with ladders running the whole height and a forest of temporary supports. At street level the excavation was enclosed behind hoarding, and people on the tops of buses could look over it as they passed. At night it was extraordinary: a dozen arc lights threw sharp violet shadows across the steel, and down below the watchmen's fire-barrels flickered orange, and above on the upper levels the riveters worked by the light of their own fire-baskets. The hammering echoed off the surrounding buildings, and the crane chains rang and clashed. It was the best thing I had seen in a year.

And across the full width of the excavation, running on its own skeleton track fifty feet above the floor, was a travelling crane: a compact platform with a small engine and a weathered wooden cab, the whole thing barely larger than a freight elevator, trailing its massive fall-blocks on a thirty-foot chain below.

I ought to say that it was on the third week of work on this contract that I noticed Rooum's piebald head among the upper-level riggers. I had heard his name mentioned, but it had not quite caught my attention. He had simply appeared, as he always appeared, where something complicated needed doing.

The foreman directly responsible for the crane work was a man named Hopkins, a competent and phlegmatic Minnesotan who had been running travelling cranes for twenty years. He and I had talked on a number of occasions; he was the kind of man who explains things carefully and clearly, a good source. It was

Hopkins I saw on the fourth-level platform one night, white-faced, when the trouble started.

But before I get to that: there was one afternoon, about a week before the trouble, when I happened to be watching the crane from below and noticed that it was traveling at a rather higher speed than usual. Not dangerously so—or so I thought at first—but with an urgency that seemed unnecessary. I could see the operator in the cab. I was too far below to make out his face, but there was something in the set of his shoulders, even at that distance, that I did not quite like. I watched for a while; the crane ran its length, decelerated, reversed, and came back. I watched for another minute, decided I was seeing things, and went back to my notes.

I was not seeing things.

On the night of the final incident I was on the third level, talking to one of the ironworkers, when a useless young auxiliary foreman the company had assigned to the job—a friend of someone in the office, never quite sure what was happening—came and found me with a question about the crane. He had been finding me with questions all night, each more answering than the last, and I had about reached the end of my patience with him.

“What’s wrong with the crane?” I said. “It’s working, isn’t it? Talk to Hopkins. Isn’t Hopkins up there?”

“I don’t know where Hopkins is,” he said.

“Then in that,” I said, “you and I are equally ignorant.”

But he grabbed my arm.

“Look at it,” he said; and I looked up.

Either Hopkins or someone was pushing the speed limit hard. The crane was flying along its thirty yards of track—fast as a streetcar, faster—and the heavy fall-blocks swung below it like a wrecking ball finding its arc. As I watched, the thing came to within a yard of the end of the track, the blocks swinging out and crashing into the exposed brickwork at the building's broken end, fetching down plaster and a section of old cornice; then the mechanism reversed and the crane tore back the other way.

"Who in hell—" I started; but there was no time for that. I went for a ladder.

The men on the lower levels had seen it too—there were shouts from all over the structure. By the time I was halfway up the second stage the crane had made another run: blocks crashing into the brickwork, reversal, the whole platform shuddering with the abruptness of it. Whoever was running it was skilled enough to stop the thing within inches; but how long that would hold was another question.

I found Hopkins on the fourth-level platform, at the end of the crane track. He was white, and appeared to be counting something on his fingers.

"What's happening?" I said.

"It's Room," he said. "I stepped out of the cab for two minutes, not more, and I heard the lever go. He says he's running somebody down. He'll take the whole scaffolding apart in another few minutes—look—"

The crane was coming back again. I could see Room in the cab, half out of the door—his mottled hair, his face streaming in

the arc-light, his brow ridged with effort. As it ripped past he was shouting something.

"Now... you!... Now, damn you!..."

"Get ready to board him when he reverses," I said to Hopkins.

How we got on I cannot tell you exactly. I caught a handhold on the lifting gear as the platform slowed, and heard Hopkins on the other footplate. Room threw the brakes and reversed; the blocks crashed again at the far end; and we went tearing back over the gulf of orange light with the upper platforms lined with men watching us.

"Ready?" I shouted; and we went in.

Hopkins hit Room's wrist with a wrench and took the lever. I came down on Room from behind and got an arm across his chest. The crane stopped somewhere near the middle of the run. I held him, or thought I held him.

He was stronger than I expected. Without warning he twisted and drove an elbow back into me, and I lost my grip. He stumbled to his knees and lurched toward the rear door of the cab, the door that opened onto nothing but fifty feet of open air and the work lights below. He got his hands on the door frame. I made a grab for his collar.

"Hold still!" I said. "Hopkins—"

Room screamed—a high, thin sound that cut through the hammering and the chain-rattle and the shouts from below.

"Run him down—run him down—now—down—Oh, God—Ha—"

He went out the door. I do not know whether he meant to jump or whether he fell going for the door frame. He landed on the right-hand rail of the crane track—the track itself, the narrow iron tightrope above the excavation—and he was running. Running along that rail, out over the light and the watching men, with perfect sure-footed balance, the black-and-white head turning as he ran.

Hopkins had started the crane gear—some reflex, some idea of pursuit or interception that made no practical sense. I stood in the door of the cab and watched.

He had gone ten or twelve yards on that rail when he turned his head. It was the same turn I had seen on the road, that night in the rain: the listening turn, the turn of a man who hears something coming.

He did not meet it this time. He leaped sideways to the other rail, as if to evade it—the way you step aside on a path for something you cannot see.

He missed.

He made no attempt to catch himself. From where I stood it seemed that he did not try with his hands or his feet or anything. He simply went down out of the field of my vision, between the cage and the drop, and was gone.

There was a silence. Then, from below, a sound I will not try to describe.

The men on the lower stages did not move first. It was the men above who went a little way down, and then they too stopped.

After a while two of them descended all the way, but by the most distant route available. They came back with brandy, and there was a brief consultation; two men drank most of it standing there on the platform, and then went down.

Hopkins tells me I was on my knees in the crane cab. He says I was talking to myself. I asked him once what I was saying, and he thought about it for a moment and then said he didn't think I would want to know, and I decided he was probably right.

What do you make of it?

I have thought about Rooum many times since that night. I have thought about the question he asked in his sleep—What the devil is it prevents me seeing him?—and the answer that came when I pressed further: Who else should it be? As if the answer were obvious. As if anyone paying attention would already have known.

I think I know, now, what his Runner was. I think it was himself—not a conscience, not a ghost, but a version of himself that had been running through him for years, each passage more difficult than the last, grinding through, finding the crossing harder as the channel thickened and the resistance grew. Osmosis. End becoming ex. The thin into the thick, until the pressure equalized, or until something gave way.

He made a nearish guess when he said that much of our knowledge was finding names for things we don't understand. That is true enough. You can call it what you like—Force, Fate, the accumulated weight of what a man is and what he is not. But things would fly apart, solid things of iron and wood and flesh, if something just as inexplicable were not holding them together;

and the question Room spent his last years asking—what prevents me seeing him?—is only another way of asking what it is that holds a thing together until it doesn't.

I was in the hospital for nine months. I know something about what it is that holds, and what it is that gives. I got out. Room didn't. I have no explanation for the difference. I had Elsie, perhaps—Elsie's voice through a door, Elsie's handwriting on a letter I was not allowed to answer for another four months. I am not sure that is enough of an explanation, but it is the only one I have.

I saw him fall. That is the whole of it.

CHAPTER FOUR

BENLIAN

It would be different if you had known Benlian. It would be different if you had had even that glimpse of him that I had the first time I saw him, standing on the landing outside my workroom door in the November dusk. I say "workroom"; it was really just a large room on the upper floor of an old warehouse building in the Pilsen neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, which I had rented cheaply that autumn for the sole purpose of getting Romilly Bishop written. I had a table, a lamp, a chair, and about thirty books, and nothing else, which suited me. The serious studio—large, ground-floor, with north light and room for large work—was Benlian's, at the far end of the building.

I had seen his name on the plate beside the big door at street level and had registered only that the building had another tenant. The owner of the building was a real estate firm downtown whose interest in the place appeared to extend no further than the collecting of rent; the stacks of old lumber in the yard between the two entrances had been there longer than anyone I asked could remember, and the iron gate that separated the building from the alley had rusted open and would not close. In cold weather the wind off Lake Michigan found every gap in the old brick. The place suited me: it was a building that had given up on trying to attract notice, and so had I, that autumn.

I was working one evening at my table—it was the chapter I had been attempting for two weeks, the one that had to do with Romilly's first understanding of what she was—when there was a knock at the door. I had not heard anyone come up the stairs.

When I opened the door, there he stood on the landing, and I felt an involuntary start. He was one of those very tall, gaunt men who make other men feel the inadequacy of their own frames; and I wondered for a moment where his eyes were, they were set so deep in the dark hollows on either side of his nose. His head was like a skull—I had that thought immediately and without drama, simply as a plain description. The cheekbones thrust up under the skin like ridgepoles, and his jaw was so prominent it seemed to cast its own shadow. A smear of gray plaster dust crossed one cheek. Behind him a brownish November sky showed above the yard, and one of his deep-set eyes caught the lamplight from my room and flashed like still water.

He spoke abruptly, in a deep voice with a slight rasp in it, as if it had been used too infrequently and too forcefully by turns.

"I want you to photograph me. Tomorrow morning."

I stared at him.

"I saw you had a camera," he said. "On your windowsill. I can see your window from the yard."

"I'm not a photographer," I said. "It's just a camera I use for research—landscapes, buildings, that kind of thing."

"That'll do. Ten o'clock."

He had a manner of saying things as if the question of whether you would comply was not one he considered worth raising. I had been in the company of forceful men before—editors, contractors, men who ran large things—but they communicated force in other ways: volume, impatience, money. Benlian simply spoke as if the outcome had been settled some time before either of you arrived.

“Come in,” I said, because it was dark and cold on the landing and he looked ill. “I can’t promise anything, but come in.”

He came in. He was wearing a heavy canvas work coat, gray with dust, that came nearly to his knees and made him look, if possible, even more skeletal than he already did. He glanced at my manuscript pages with a look of complete indifference. Then his eyes, moving in their deep pits, found the tall mirror I had leaned against the wall—I use it to observe posture when I’m trying to describe physical action, one of the several ways in which a writer’s working life resembles an actor’s rehearsal.

He stopped.

He was looking at something in the mirror. His back was to me and I could not see his face, but his body went through a change that was unmistakable—a slight rigid alertness, the stillness of a man who has seen something that confirms a fear.

“Get me a pair of gloves,” he said, quietly. “Have you a pair of gloves?”

I found a pair in the coat rack and handed them to him. His hands were shaking as he pulled them on. There was a faint

glitter of sweat on the back of his neck, just below the hairline, that caught the lamp.

Then I turned to look at what he was looking at in the mirror. I saw only the two of us—him with my gloves on, me standing behind him.

He stepped aside, and drew the gloves off slowly. Something had gone out of the rigid alertness in his posture; he seemed, if anything, slightly relieved.

"Did that look all right to you?" he asked.

"What in the world is wrong with you?" I said.

"I suppose," he went on, as if I had not spoken, "you couldn't photograph me tonight—now?"

I had film but no flash equipment. I told him so. He looked at my camera on the windowsill, crossed to it, removed the lens, and held it up to the lamp, peering through it with the absorbed thoroughness of a jeweler examining a stone. Then he replaced it, pulled his coat collar up, and turned back to me.

"Another night of it," he said to himself. Then, facing me directly for the first time: "Ten o'clock tomorrow morning. If you have another engagement, cancel it."

"All right," I said. It came out of me without resistance, which surprised me slightly. "Sit down. Have some coffee."

"I don't drink coffee," he replied, and went out the door and down the stairs without saying good night.

He was at my door at ten the next morning, and I photographed him. I made three exposures, but the film was a roll I had partly used in the summer and incompletely stored; two of

the three developed with a creeping fog across them, and the third was worse. I spread them on my worktable and told him I was sorry.

He held them up to the light one after another, studying each. Then he set them down in a careful row.

"Never mind," he said. "It doesn't matter. Thank you."

He left.

After that I did not see him for several weeks, though I was aware of him: the light from his roof window shining up through the fog on cold nights, and the muffled percussion of his hammer on stone.

He came to my door again on a November evening—the same hour, the same abruptness.

He had brought two books, thick ones, printed in German, which he set on my table and opened to pages he had marked. They were on physics, he said, and also on what he called psychics, making no distinction between the two. I looked at the pages he showed me: equations, diagrams, something about multidimensional geometry that was entirely beyond me.

But what he had come to ask about was something simpler, and within my experience. He wanted to know if I had ever noticed, in photography, the phenomenon of an image printing through—a subject showing something behind or beneath it that had not been visible to the eye. He used the phrase "photographing through."

As it happened, I had. I told him about a photograph I had taken of a building whose previous signage—a painted-over

business name—had resolved on the print more clearly than the new paint covering it. And I had once taken a photograph of a man outdoors in strong light in which the structure of his skull was faintly discernible beneath the face, the orbital ridges and the nasal bone, as if the camera had seen slightly past the surface of things.

“Yes,” said Benlian, nodding slowly. “Yes.”

“And,” I added, “there’s the reverse effect. Occasionally a photograph fails to register something that was plainly there.”

He looked up quickly.

“Yes,” he said. “That too.”

He asked a few more questions, then fell silent. I said, chiefly to fill the silence, that the camera was not art. He appeared not to hear this, then appeared to suddenly hear it very clearly.

“And what do you know about art?” he said, with a directness that was not quite rude and not quite civil, as if rudeness would have been beneath the effort.

I started to say that I had been writing for fifteen years, but something in his expression stopped me. He was already looking away.

“How is your work going?” I asked instead.

“Come and see it,” he said.

We went down to the ground floor and he let me into his studio.

It was enormous—the full ground floor of the building, which I had not realized was so large. A thin ground fog had worked in

from somewhere, and the far end was lost in it. There was a sleeping gallery up a narrow staircase at the back, where Benlian apparently lived as well as worked. In the center of the floor stood a scaffolding structure, two platforms high, and within it, jacked up on a heavy plinth, the marble figure.

Benlian lit the overhead lights with a long-handled switch and I placed myself in front of the statue to look at it.

It was an extraordinary thing. "Extraordinary" is the word I want, and I mean it in the original sense: outside ordinary categories. I could not have told you what the figure was—man or woman, mortal or divine, the anatomy was its own, following rules I could not name. One arm was outstretched at a scale that should have been wrong—too long, the proportions off—and yet the wrongness had a quality of absolute conviction to it, as if the disproportion were the point. The stone had been worked to a finish so fine it seemed to breathe.

I was aware of Benlian's eyes in their pits watching my face.

"It's a god," he said, after a moment.

I began to say something about the arm—some critical observation that rose up from the habit of having opinions about art—and he cut me short.

"I said it's a god," he repeated, with a quiet ferocity. "The gods men have made before this were half-gods—all good, or all evil, which is the same limitation seen from different sides. This is mine—the god of good and of evil both, undivided."

"I see," I said. I did not see, but I felt—which is not the same thing and which I mistrusted.

Then he turned me around by the shoulders, firmly.

"That'll do," he said. "I didn't want your opinion. I wanted to see how it struck you. I'll send for you again."

He thrust me out into the yard and closed the door.

Walking back up to my workroom, I told myself he was out of his mind and that I would have nothing more to do with him. I told myself this with the particular earnestness of a man who knows he is making a resolution that he will not keep. It had the quality—I recognized it—of a resolution not to drink, or not to think about something, or not to go back to a place you know is bad for you. The recognition did not help.

Within two weeks he had been in to see me three times, and I had been into his studio twice.

In six weeks I was in a state of mind about him that I cannot fully account for even now. I knew him no better—he offered nothing of himself, no history, no explanation—and yet when he was present I was restless and charged, the way a room is charged before a storm; and when he was absent I was something that I did not want to examine too closely. The word that came to me was jealous. Not of another person. Of the statue.

He knew it. He told me so one evening, directly.

"I've been taking something from you," he said. "You know that."

"Yes," I said.

"You don't mind."

It was not a question. I was quiet for a moment.

"No," I said at last. "I don't. And I don't know why."

He nodded, as if this confirmed something.

"What do you feel about me?" he asked, with the flat curiosity of a scientist.

What came out of my mouth surprised me more than it surprised him. I had not planned it and would not have planned it.

"I find you repellent," I heard myself say. "And I find you the most compelling person I have met in years."

He did not look at me. He only nodded, slowly, and muttered something to himself about good and evil being the same work seen from different angles. Then he rose and left without another word.

I did not sleep well that night.

Something had begun to come over me during my working hours—a sensation that had no precise name. It arrived without warning: a sudden awareness that Benlian was in his studio below me, thinking of me, doing something in the directed way a man does when he is training an attention on a particular object. I would know it the way you know when a room has changed temperature—not dramatically, but past the threshold of doubt. And twice I found myself halfway down the stairs before I had consciously decided to go.

The second time this happened he was waiting for me, a chair drawn up beside his own in front of the statue. He said nothing when I came in; just gestured at the chair. We sat together for a

long time in front of the figure, and I thought, slowly, about the arm I had initially found so wrong. It did not look wrong now. I could not see what I had seen before.

"I haven't touched it," Benlian said quietly.

"I know," I said.

But not every visit was like that. There were moments—and I was grateful for them—when something released in me, cleanly, like a window opened on a cold clear morning. In those moments I could look at my manuscript with something like affection; I remembered what I was trying to do with Romilly, why the book mattered; I thought clearly about Elsie. Then I would settle back and work well, and the work was good work.

Once, in the middle of one of these lucid intervals, when I was sitting in Benlian's studio looking at the statue with what suddenly felt like simple ordinary eyes—seeing it as it was, a large and idiosyncratic and genuinely impressive piece of sculpture with a badly proportioned arm—I said, without looking at him, "Don't, Benlian."

He stood up behind me. There was a pause.

"Get out of this place," he said, in a voice with something complicated in it—something that was not entirely without feeling. "Leave the building. Move your room. Don't tell me where."

"Benlian—"

"I mean it," he said. "I'm not good for you. And you may not be—" he stopped. "Go."

I went back upstairs and sat at my table for a long time. I did not leave the building.

This is the part I find most difficult to write, because the difficulty is not one of memory but of honesty. The events are clear enough. What is difficult is saying plainly what I was, during the weeks that followed, and what I was not.

I was not Paul Oren the novelist, working on a book that mattered to him, living in a city, receiving letters, expected places. I was those things on the surface, in the way that a room looks normal when you first open the door. I went through the motions: typed pages, ate meals, slept in my bed in the rooming house. But the center of gravity had shifted. Whatever I was at the center, it was oriented toward that studio on the ground floor, and toward the man in it, and toward the figure he was filling.

That is how I thought of it by then. Filling.

He had explained it to me one evening, when his voice was already growing quieter from what he was spending: Force and matter being—as modern physics had established—the same thing, expressed differently; a man being, at the level that mattered, a particular organization of force; and that force neither created nor destroyed but redirectable, by will and effort and abnegation, into a different form. Artists talked about putting their souls into their work, he said. He said they were charlatans who had no souls to speak of, and no work worthy of receiving them. What he was doing was not metaphor.

"You've heard of putting your soul into something," he said. "But if soul and body are the same force expressed at different densities, then a man with sufficient will could as easily put his body into it."

I had drawn close to him as he spoke. What I said next came from somewhere underneath deliberate thought.

"Not that, Benlian?" I whispered.

He nodded, several times, with the particular nod of a man confirming what you already knew.

"Really that," he said.

He showed me the photographs. He had kept them—all five, in order—in his sleeping gallery, in a flat case under the mattress. We bent over them together at the little table by his reading lamp.

The first was a plain print, clearly him. The second was slightly obscured, as if taken through gauze. The third was worse. The fourth showed a shape that might have been his but lacked definition in the way that a word lacks definition when you stare at it too long. The fifth showed a figure with gloved hands raised, face entirely gone.

I looked at them and heard myself saying "of course, of course" in a low voice, as if they confirmed something I had known for a long time.

"I'm making good progress," Benlian said.

"Yes," I said.

"Better than you know," he said. "You're not fully under yet. But you will be."

I want to pause here and acknowledge what that sentence should have done to me. I had been in this position before—not as the observer, but as the one being consumed. I had been in a room with something that was drawing me down, and I had not seen it until it was nearly too late. You would think that a man with that experience would recognize the pattern immediately, would recoil with something like physical revulsion at the phrase you will be.

He was right that I was not fully under. I can say now that I heard those words with a small cold part of myself that remained intact throughout everything that followed—the way, in a fire, a room at the far end of the house might not burn. But I did not act on what that part of me heard. I stayed. I said yes, I think. I stayed.

He grew weaker by degrees. He ate almost nothing—a little milk, sometimes crackers—and slept, he said, in intervals of an hour or two. He had money, apparently, and no commitments; no one seemed to expect him anywhere. His voice dropped to a level just above a whisper, and he moved through the studio with the economy of a man conserving something he could not afford to waste. But his eyes, in their caverns, were more alive as his body failed, not less—the inverse of ordinary dying, where the lights go out from the edges inward. In Benlian it seemed the light was moving from the body into something else.

I stopped working on Romilly. The pages sat on my table. Once a week I would look at them with a feeling that mixed guilt and distance—like looking at a photograph of someone you used to

know well. The book had been important to me. It would be important to me again, surely, at some point. Not now.

There was a letter from Elsie. I read it at the table one afternoon—it had come to the rooming house and I had brought it to the workroom without opening it, which I noted even at the time as strange. She was well. She was working again, slowly. She was in Indianapolis with a friend. She did not say much—Elsie had never said much in letters, even before—but there was a line near the end that said she thought about me and hoped I was writing.

I put the letter in my coat pocket, intending to answer it. Then I heard, or felt, something from below—that slight shift of atmosphere that meant Benlian was directing his attention upward—and I was out the door and down the stairs before I had finished the thought.

He wanted me to bring my camera. I had not brought it; I went back for it. He wanted to document his progress.

The sitting was brief. He had no strength to spare. I made the exposure in the magnesium flash—the studio leaping white for an instant, the shadows swinging—and developed the plate in the small darkroom he had set up in a back corner. The image showed a seated figure. The figure was present but its edges were not entirely there, as if it had been drawn with a line that the hand had not quite completed.

“There’s something more yet,” he said, looking at it. “The camera isn’t finding me completely. Something resists.”

“I could get a better camera,” I offered.

"No," he said. "I know what to do. Have a car here at nine tomorrow morning."

At half past nine the following morning we were in the basement of a hospital on the North Side—a large, clean room with fluoroscopy equipment, to which Benlian had apparently made arrangements in advance. Two technicians were present, and a physician who was introduced to me only as a colleague of Benlian's from some years back. The physician's expression throughout was one of controlled professional interest that did not quite conceal something else.

"We'll try the hand first," Benlian said.

He placed his hand under the fluoroscope frame. The technician activated the equipment. The room filled with its characteristic hum and the cold green light.

The two men at the equipment looked. One of them took a step back. The physician said nothing for a moment, then went to the wall telephone and asked for another physician by name.

Benlian, withdrawing his hand, turned to me with something that was not quite a smile.

"Put me on the table," he said.

I helped him onto the examination couch. The technician passed the fluoroscope frame over his body.

I will not describe in clinical detail what the images showed, or failed to show. I will only say that by the end of that morning there were four physicians in the room, that two of them were visibly unwell, and that Benlian, on the drive back to Pilsen in the hired car, laughed to himself with a soft

relentless pleasure that was the most frightening sound I heard during the whole of that time.

"They couldn't X-ray me," he said. "That frightened them. Did you see their faces, Writer?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good," he said, and closed his eyes for the rest of the drive.

"Writer" was what he had been calling me for several weeks. I had not liked it at first. I had come to accept it with the particular mix of resentment and gratitude that you feel about a name you did not choose but that is accurate.

He kept a journal—a large hardbound ledger he wrote in during the intervals when I was not present, recording measurements, dates, observations. He had told me he intended me to have it when he was finished. I had found this honor, if that was what it was, entirely natural.

The days that followed the hospital visit are not clear to me in sequence. They happened, but their order is difficult to reconstruct. I was in his studio most of the time. I slept on the daybed in the corner of my workroom and was down the stairs before I was fully awake, some mornings. The manuscript of *Romilly* was still on the table. The letter from Elsie was in my coat pocket. I was aware of both of these things the way you are aware, in a vivid dream, of the fact that somewhere a real room exists with a real bed in it. The awareness does not bring you back.

I was not frightened, which in retrospect frightens me more than anything else. In Chapter I of whatever account I might eventually give of my life, I had been frightened, toward the end—not enough and not soon enough, but frightened. Here I was not. The only explanation I have is that the experience in Chapter I had altered something in me—had opened a channel, as Room might have said, had made the osmosis faster. I was further gone, more quickly, than I had any right to be.

The thing that saved me was small and not heroic.

Benlian said one evening—his voice by now was barely above a breath—that it would not be much longer. He was almost passed, he said. He could feel it nearly complete. He was sorry, he added, that he had not been able to do without me; he had tried, once, for nearly two weeks, and it had very nearly killed him. Not me—him. He needed a witness, a consecrated witness; that was the word he used. He had tried to spare me. He had not been strong enough.

"I seal you mine, Writer," he said, looking at me. Then he looked at the statue and did not look away again.

I sat down in the chair beside his. I had brought the camera. I had brought the journal. Everything was prepared. The studio was very still, and the only sound was the distant rumble of trucks on Cermak Road and the ticking of the small clock on the worktable.

Benlian's breathing slowed. The intervals between breaths lengthened. His eyes were fixed on the statue with an intensity that was no longer precisely the intensity of a living person.

Twenty minutes passed. Thirty. My hand was in my coat pocket, holding—I realized slowly, as if surfacing from water—Elsie's letter. I had put my hand in my pocket and found it there. The paper was soft with being carried. I had not answered it. I had meant to answer it.

I thought about her handwriting. I thought about the line that said she hoped I was writing.

Something happened then that I find difficult to describe accurately. It was not a dramatic break—no sudden restoration of normal vision, no cold shock of recognition. It was more like the thing that happens when you have been staring at a pattern so long it loses its meaning, and then, by some small shift of attention, the meaning returns. I was sitting in a dying man's studio in the middle of the night, holding a letter in my pocket, and the letter was from a woman who had survived something I had done to her, who had come back to herself afterward and used some of what remained to wonder whether I was writing.

I thought: I should answer it.

It was not much. But it was mine, and it was ordinary, and it was enough.

I did not leave. I want to be honest about that. I stayed in that chair. What I had felt—that small, cool reattachment to ordinary things—did not compel me to action. I sat and held the letter in my pocket and waited, and Benlian's breathing grew more distant, and the clock ticked, and the trucks moved on Cermak Road.

Then it happened.

He moved forward in the chair—lurched forward, as if something had seized him by the sternum and pulled. His mouth came open. The sound that came from it was not a human sound in any register I had ever heard a human being use, a long tearing exhalation that became more than one note, that became something the body was not built to produce. He seemed to fight it—seemed to be pushing himself back into the chair, resisting—and then the resistance broke, and the sounds became louder and more terrible, and I pressed my hands over my ears and shut my eyes and held Elsie's letter in my coat pocket and tried to stay in the room that was a real room with a real bed in it, the ordinary room of an ordinary life.

The sounds stopped. The floor shook once, heavily, with a thud of weight.

Then silence.

I opened my eyes. Benlian's chair had overturned. He was on the floor beside it. His body had the specific stillness that is different from all other stillness.

I sat for a long time. Then I looked up at the statue.

I will not pretend I felt nothing. There was a moment—I will not lie about this—when what I saw in that figure made everything else in the room fall away, made the world outside the studio seem thin and provisional, made me understand, in a flash that was more physical than intellectual, exactly what Benlian had been building and why a man might spend himself entirely to build it. It was the most extraordinary thing I had ever seen. It was

complete. It contained everything he had said it would contain and a number of things he had not mentioned.

I sat with that for a moment. I let myself have it.

Then I put my hand in my coat pocket and held the letter and sat there until the flash faded, as flashes do, and the statue became again what it had always been: an enormous and idiosyncratic piece of marble with a badly proportioned arm, made by a dead man on the floor beside me.

I went out of the studio into the yard. It was very cold. I stood in the cold for a while, then walked to the gate and out into the alley and from the alley to the street and from the street to a coffee shop two blocks away that was open all night, and I sat in it for a long time and drank bad coffee and read Elsie's letter from the beginning and then took out a pen and began to answer it on the back of a paper napkin, because that was all I had.

I did not say much. I told her I was in Chicago and that I was working—which was almost true; I was going to be working—and that I thought of her often and hoped she was all right. I did not tell her about Benlian. I sealed the napkin in an envelope I bought from the cashier and mailed it on the walk back.

The police were called to the studio in the morning, by the building manager. I gave a statement: a man named Benlian, a sculptor, had died during the night, apparently of heart failure; I had been working late in the building and had found him. The statement was not entirely accurate, but it was not entirely

false, and it was the statement that fit the frame of things the police were able to work with.

Benlian's journal, it turned out, had gone to a parapsychological research society he had specified in a letter left with his papers; I never received it. The statue was eventually sold to a collector and is, as far as I know, somewhere in private hands. I do not know what the collector makes of it, looking at it alone in whatever room it lives in. I think about that sometimes.

I went back to my workroom that afternoon and sat down at the table and looked at the manuscript of *Romilly Bishop* for a long time. Then I made a pot of coffee on the hot plate and began to read it from the first page, as a man reads something he is returning to after a long absence, looking for where he left off and whether the trail is still there.

It was there. Thinly, but there.

I was back.

CHAPTER FIVE

IO

I had been in Champaign since January, doing reader's reports and copy-editing for a small academic press attached to the university there—the kind of work a writer with a half-finished novel and no income takes when it presents itself. The press published serious things: classical studies, philosophy, comparative literature. The pay was modest and the work left my mornings free, which was all I needed. I had a room near campus and knew very few people, which suited the winter and suited me.

I met Dale Vance at a faculty party in February, the kind of party that happens in university towns on cold Saturday evenings because there is nothing else to do and people have begun to go a little stale on each other's company. Dale was a graduate student in civil engineering, square-jawed, well-meaning, with the particular earnestness of a young man who has decided that improving himself is a serious project. He was going to evening lectures in literature—the survey kind, one a week—and spoke about them the way a man speaks about vitamins: good for you, useful, necessary to a complete program. I liked him well enough.

His fiancée was Irene Marsh.

She was a graduate student in classical literature, working on a thesis about the chorus in Sophocles. She was not beautiful in any way that announced itself; she was short and rather stocky, with a broad white throat and dark eyes that were steady

and a little remote, as if whatever she was looking at was always at some slight distance from what you could see. She had, I was told, been seriously ill the previous autumn—some infection that had taken hold badly and kept her in bed for six weeks—and she had not fully recovered her ordinary pace. She moved carefully, rested more than she wanted to, and had the quality of someone still reassembling themselves after a long disassembly.

I became friendly with her because she had books I needed. The press had given me a manuscript on the pre-Socratic philosophers, and I was out of my depth with certain references; Irene had the texts and the Greek, and she helped me with them without condescension, in the direct way of someone for whom a subject is simply a subject, without performance. I appreciated that. We talked sometimes in her apartment in the late afternoons—she was on the top floor of a narrow house near the campus—while Dale was at his evening lecture or his laboratory.

The apartment was cramped and overheated and cluttered with her work: books stacked on every surface, note-cards spread across the table, typed pages beside the typewriter she used on a board across her lap when the desk was full. On the hearth was a large fur throw, brown and spotted, a hand-me-down from some wealthier relative, which she used to cover her feet in the evenings when the draft came under the door.

She had told me about the dreams. She mentioned them matter-of-factly, without drama, the way you mention a symptom you cannot account for and have decided to simply report. During the fever of her illness she had had them, and they had not entirely

stopped when she recovered. They were not nightmares; they were the opposite. They carried a quality of extreme aliveness, of being at the center of something large and joyful and urgent, and the ordinary waking world felt, by comparison, slightly bleached. She could never quite recall their content, only their texture—light and sound and movement, something like a crowd in motion, something like music heard through distance.

“It sounds almost like a good thing,” I said once.

She thought about this.

“It would be,” she said, “if I didn’t feel like I was always about to tip into it. Like something is asking me to let go. And I can’t tell whether letting go would be the right thing or the most dangerous thing I could do.”

I said nothing. I knew that feeling. I knew it with a specificity I was not going to share with Irene Marsh on a February afternoon in her overheated apartment.

I had been watching her for several weeks by that point with a recognition that I did not fully articulate even to myself. She was being summoned. Whatever was building in her during the illness, whatever had been loosened by the fever and not fully refastened, was answering something. I had no name for the something. I had names for what had happened to me in the house in Millhaven, but those names were private and not transferable. What was happening to Irene was not the same thing—the material was different, the frequency was different—but the structure was the same. Something was calling her away from ordinary life. She could feel it approaching. She was simultaneously drawn and

warned. And the ordinary life she was being drawn away from—the cluttered apartment, the thesis on Sophocles, the earnest young man with his evening lectures—was not equipped to call her back.

I thought about this, and I did nothing. What could I have done? Told her: I know what you're feeling, I have been there, it ends badly, hold on? I was not capable of that conversation. I was not yet capable of much directness about what had happened to me. I told myself that the situations were not comparable; that Irene was a serious and educated woman who would navigate whatever this was with resources I had not had; that it was presumptuous to assume I understood her experience; that it was none of my business.

I told myself all of this and I went back to visit her, and I watched.

It was a Thursday evening in late February. Dale had finished his laboratory work early and come over, and I had arrived a few minutes after him with a book I was returning to Irene. The apartment was warmer than usual; the radiator was making its clanking effort. Outside, the last of the winter light had gone from the sky, leaving a blue-black cold.

Irene was sitting in the low wicker chair before the radiator, her feet on the fur throw, a book on her knees. She did not look up when we came in. Dale kissed the side of her head and she allowed it without turning; then he set about making tea in the kitchen corner, talking as he moved—about his lecture series, about the Indo-European migrations, about a gymnasium program he

was considering taking up on Wednesday evenings. He had a fund of cheerful, purposeful talk that cost him nothing and arrived at no particular destination. I had always liked it in him. It was the sound of a healthy man inhabiting his life without irony.

"How are you feeling today?" he called from the kitchen.

"Better," she said. She did not sound better. She sounded like someone who has given that answer so many times it has become the only available answer.

"Daisy at the museum?" he asked—meaning, I understood, had she gone out, been active, done the useful things.

"Yes. I went to the museum for a while and sat down."

He came back with three cups on a tray and the book she had left open on her knees caught his attention. He picked it up.

"Endymion," he read. "Keats. Good choice. He's quite all right. Not that I know him really well, but solid. Here, let me look—"

He found her page, cleared his throat, and read:

*"And as I sat, over the light blue hills
There came a noise of revellers; the rills
Into the wide stream came of purple hue—
'Twas Bacchus and his crew!
The earnest trumpet spake, and silver thrills
From kissing cymbals made a merry din—
'Twas Bacchus and his kin!
Like to a moving vintage down they came,
Crowned with green leaves, and faces all on flame,*

*All madly dancing through the pleasant valley
To scare thee, Melancholy!"*

He looked up. "Mythology," he said. "Made up of tales and myths—like Norse mythology, Odin and those, only Greek. I suppose you can see why people found it appealing. Though if you think about it clearly it's just glorifying drunkenness. I joined the temperance pledge at sixteen and I don't regret it. Still, it's— it's A1 as poetry. Shall I read on?"

Irene had closed her eyes while he read.

"Yes," she said quietly.

He read on, with the flat metronomic confidence of a man who has decided that reading literature is a skill like any other:

*"I saw Osirian Egypt kneel adown
Before the vine-wreath crown!
I saw parched Abyssinia rouse and sing
To the silver cymbals' ring!
I saw the whelming vintage hotly pierce
Old Tartary the fierce!
Great Brahma from his mystic heaven groans..."*

"Brahma—Hindu deity, mythology again. Lots of mythological systems, you see. The Hindus had their own entirely separate set. Quite interesting from the historical standpoint." He set the book down and picked up his teacup. "Better light the lamp, I think. Can hardly see."

He rose and crossed to the lamp on the desk. As he turned the switch the room changed: the cold window went black, the ceiling warmed, and in the corner the dressmaker's form—a red-painted wire torso on a stand that belonged to Irene's landlady and had never been moved—took on a sudden, slightly unnerving solidity in the new light.

Irene had not opened her eyes.

I watched her. She had the stillness of someone listening to something that was not in the room.

Dale was clearing the table, moving aside typed thesis pages and note-cards. He was talking about Irene's visit to the university museum—the antiquities collection, apparently, where she had spent part of the afternoon. "What did you look at?" he asked.

"Greek things," she said. "In the case near the window. Combs and hairpins. Small bronze things for everyday use. Safety pins, essentially."

"Civilized people," Dale said cheerfully. "It gives you an idea of continuity. Very interesting from the historical—"

"They had priests and priestesses," she said, not to him particularly. "Followers. People who served particular gods and went wherever the god went. Left everything else behind."

"Yes, yes, the mystery cults," Dale said, somewhat less certainly. "Though of course from a modern standpoint those were purely—I mean, it was symbolic, obviously. Nobody actually—"

She had opened her eyes and was looking into the grate.

"She's been having those dreams again," Dale said to me, dropping his voice slightly, as if she could not hear.

I looked at her.

"Only the same ones," she said. "It's all right, Ed—" then she stopped. She had called him by the wrong name. Not Ed—Dale. She turned her head and looked at him with a slight, confused frown, as if she were trying to recall something.

"That's all right," he said carefully. "You're tired."

"I'm not tired," she said. "I'm—I'm on the edge of something. I can't explain it."

"That's the illness," Dale said, gently but with the faint impatience of a man who has been hearing about an illness for months. "You're still getting over it. The brain does odd things after a high fever. You'll be yourself again soon."

She repeated the words slowly, as if testing them.

"Myself. Yes."

"All jolly, as you used to be. You know what would do you good? A week somewhere with proper air. The lake, maybe. I like the lake. Do you remember that afternoon on the dunes—you and me and your aunt? I did love you that afternoon, Irene."

She had turned back to the grate. He continued to talk, and she was not listening. I could see from where I sat that she was breathing somewhat more deeply than before. Her hands, folded in her lap, had gone still.

I knew what was happening. I am going to write that plainly: I knew. Not in the way that a doctor knows a diagnosis, not from theory. I knew the way a man knows the sound of a house settling—

because he has lived in that particular house, heard that particular sound in the dark, felt the floor move under his specific weight. She was hearing something. It was getting louder. The ordinary world of the apartment—the lamp, the tea, Dale’s cheerful voice cataloguing improvement—was becoming increasingly thin, increasingly provisional, a painted scrim over something very much larger.

I had sat in my own room in Millhaven and felt the ordinary world thinning exactly like that. I had felt it happening and had not tried to stop it. I had chosen, at some point that I could not now precisely locate, to stop trying to stop it.

She was approaching that point. It was close.

“The sea,” Dale was saying—he had gotten onto a fortnight away, the restorative properties of sea air. “That’s what you need—isn’t that right, Paul?—a week at the shore, proper rest, proper food—”

She drew a slow breath. Her lips parted slightly.

The word sea had done something. I saw it do it. Her whole posture altered—barely, but altered—as if some interior compass had swung to a new bearing. I thought of Room listening for something no one else could hear. I thought of my own room in the last months, the tap dripping its small music, the way the sound had gathered meaning until it became a tune, until the tune became a name.

Dale had gone to the kitchen for more hot water. He was still talking—something about Margate, a windmill, an afternoon he had loved her. She was not listening.

"Is tea ready?" she asked suddenly, without looking up.

"Nearly," he called.

She picked up the Keats again. She was not reading it; she was holding it the way you hold something that still has warmth in it. Her head was slightly tilted—the listening posture. I had seen it before. I had worn it myself.

I wanted to say something. What I wanted to say was: I know what you're hearing. I know what it's offering you. I know the precise quality of its promise—it is the most beautiful promise anything has ever made, and it is true, and it will cost you everything you have, and you will lose yourself, and I cannot tell you it wasn't worth it because I don't know yet, I am still finding out.

I said nothing.

"What's the matter?" Dale asked from the kitchen doorway.

"Nothing," I said.

He set the kettle back on its ring, pulled on his coat. "I'll run out for something from the bakery—five minutes," he said. "Keep her talking, would you?"

He went out. His steps went down the stairs and the outer door closed.

She and I were alone in the apartment.

For a few minutes nothing happened, or nothing visible. The lamp burned; the radiator knocked; outside a car passed on the street below. She sat with the book in her lap and her eyes slightly unfocused and her breathing slow and regular, like a

person in the lightest possible sleep. I sat and watched her and did not speak.

She said, very quietly and not quite to me: "It's like being warm. Getting warmer."

Then she opened the book.

"Whence came ye, merry Damsels! Whence came ye

So many, and so many, and such glee?

Why have ye left your bowers desolate,

Your lutes, and gentler fate?

'We follow Bacchus, Bacchus on the wing,

A-conquering!

Bacchus, young Bacchus! Good or ill betide

We dance before him thorough kingdoms wide:

Come hither, Lady fair, and joined be

To our wild minstrelsy!'"

She had spoken the words aloud. Her voice reading them was entirely unlike her voice in conversation: it was lower, and it came from some deeper register, the way a note from a cello is not louder than a violin but proceeds from further in.

Something in her face changed. It was not dramatic; it was a change like light changing when a cloud passes—an alteration of quality rather than quantity. Her eyes moved, and for a moment she looked the way the women in Greek vase paintings look: not wild, not possessed, but knowing. As if something that had been sleeping in the shape of her face had opened its eyes.

One of the pins in her hair came loose and fell against the radiator with a small metallic tick. She did not notice.

She put the book down on the floor. She rose from the chair. She stood in the center of the room between the lamp and the radiator, and she lifted her head back and to one side in the gesture of someone straining to hear a sound at the very edge of perception.

"Louder," she said, softly. "I almost—once more—"

Her hand went to her throat. Then she saw herself in the mirror above the desk—her hair half down, her plain housedress, the wire-and-wood dressmaker's form looming over her shoulder in the lamplight.

She looked at herself for a long moment.

There was a warning in her face—I saw it, a last flicker of ordinary selfhood, the part that knew the apartment and the thesis and the man who had gone for bread and the life that was being assembled. It was there and it was real. Then it went under.

She reached up and pulled the remaining pins from her hair. It fell around her shoulders. She seized the ribbon at her collar and broke it; her hands moved quickly down the buttons of her blouse. I should have looked away. I did not look away.

She bent and caught up the fur throw from before the radiator. She wrapped it around her shoulders, its spotted brown-and-black against her bare white neck and arms. She picked up the bag of grapes Dale had left on the table. She turned her face up

and to one side as though following a sound that was moving now across the ceiling and toward the window.

"Tell me my name," she said, to the window. "Once only. Tell me my name."

Her voice was unrecognizable. Not mad—I want to be accurate about this. Not hysterical, not disordered. It was the voice of someone speaking from a great depth of conviction, the way a person speaks in the moment of the most important thing they have ever said. She was entirely present. She was more present than I had ever seen a person be.

The grapes burst in her hand. The juice ran down her wrist and into her loosened hair and she did not notice, she was listening, she was so close—

"Io," she said. Then again, on a rising note: "Io—"

She turned.

I was still in my chair. I had not moved. She looked at me for a moment—through me, perhaps—with the eyes of someone who has just come out of darkness into very bright light. Then her face changed again. In it I saw the crossing happen—saw the Dream become the Reality and the Reality the Dream, in an instant that was like watching a bridge give way.

"Io! Io, Io!" she cried.

The door opened. Dale was on the threshold with a paper bag in his hand, and his face went through four or five expressions in the space of a second before settling on a kind of horrified blankness. He looked from her to me and back.

"What—what the hell—"

She did not hear him. She had turned to the window, her arms lifted, the fur at her shoulders. She was calling toward the cold black glass and the lights of the town beyond it.

Dale dropped the bag and went down the stairs two at a time and I heard him in the entry below calling for the landlady. I did not move.

I sat in my chair and watched Irene Marsh stand in the lamplight in her transformed room and call out in a language older than the apartment, older than the university, older than the country around us, for her true companions and her true name.

I thought: *I know this. I know exactly what this is.*

I thought: *It is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.*

I thought: *God help her.*

The landlady came. Then a doctor, and then Dale's frantic telephoning of her family. She was taken somewhere—a hospital, then a rest facility. Dale came back to the apartment the following afternoon looking as though something had been surgically removed from him.

"Did you know?" he asked me. He did not say know what. He did not need to.

"I thought something was building in her," I said. "I didn't know what it was."

That was true, as far as it went. I knew what it was. I did not know this particular shape of it, this Bacchic, mythic version. But I knew the structure. I had lived inside it.

I did not say this to Dale.

Irene was in the rest facility for three months. I heard afterward, from someone at the press, that she recovered well—that she went back to her thesis, that she and Dale eventually married and moved to Columbus, Ohio, where he had taken an engineering position. I do not know what she remembered. I hope she remembered all of it, and I hope she was able to carry it lightly. I hope whatever crossed over in her that February evening did not stay crossed. I hope she recovered herself completely, and was ordinary, and was safe.

I also hope that somewhere in her, in some place she does not examine too often, she can still hear it: the cymbals, and the feet on the shore, and the voice calling her name.

I am not going to pretend otherwise. I know what it is to be called. I know what it costs to go, and I know what it costs to refuse. Both costs are real. I am still paying mine.

CHAPTER SIX

THE ACCIDENT

The block had not changed so much but that, little by little, as I walked it, its old influence had come over me again. The linden trees were putting out their first leaves—it was late April, a mild afternoon—and their pale green made the familiar row of housefronts look younger than they were, or possibly older. I was not sure which. I had not been back to Millhaven since the morning they drove me away in the police car, and I had not intended to stay more than a few hours now.

The bank holding my mortgage had sent a letter to my last address asking me to come in and sign the transfer documents in person, as a formality of the foreclosure. My attorney had suggested I do it quickly and cleanly and not dwell. He had been kind enough not to say *and not go near the house*, but it was implied.

I had come in on the morning train, signed the papers at ten o'clock, and should have been on the afternoon train at two. Instead I was walking the block.

I told myself it was simply the walk that is always necessary before departure—the final accounting, the mind's method of closing a door by touching all the objects in the room one last time. I had lived on this block for the better part of a year, however that year had ended; I had rights to a last look. I told myself this and kept walking.

The doorknocker on Number Nine was still there. I had noticed it in my first week, being an unusual piece—cast iron in the shape of a spread-winged bird—and I noticed it again now, with the particular feeling of encountering something you had expected to find changed and find unchanged. The crack in the sidewalk two houses down was still there. The elm at the corner that had been half-dead when I arrived was entirely dead now, its bark gray and beginning to separate from the wood beneath.

New things had appeared. A hardware shop had gone in where there used to be a vacant lot; there was a new car in the Murphys' driveway; someone had painted their porch railing a deep green that looked wrong against the brick. These new things I noted and set aside. The old things drew me.

I was standing outside my house before I had quite decided to stand there.

I use the possessive out of habit. The bank owned it. The bank had owned it since December, when I had missed the third consecutive payment and the letter had arrived with its careful legal language and its finality. It stood as it had always stood—the picket fence, the narrow entry passage, the carved railing just visible through the front window glass. Someone had relettered the For Rent signs in the yard. The privet bushes were showing new growth at their tips, bright and incongruously cheerful. The windows of the upper floors—my old rooms—were dark.

I stood for some minutes with my hands in my coat pockets. The afternoon light fell at an angle across the front of the house, catching the glass panels of the front door and making

them opaque, the way old eyes go opaque. Nothing moved inside. Nothing showed at the windows. The house simply stood there with its boards and its brick and its old carved railing and its signs still tilted at their hatchet angles, as it had stood before I came, patient and indifferent and empty.

Or not empty. That was the thing I could not settle.

I was aware—it is the only word I have for it—of something in the house that was aware of me. Not a presence, not a sound, not a movement behind the glass. An awareness. As if the house recognized the particular weight of my footsteps on the sidewalk in front of it and noted my return with a quality of attention that was beneath interest and above indifference.

I looked at the For Rent signs for a long time.

They had never found a tenant. The attorney had told me this—had mentioned it, I think, as a mitigating factor in the bank's decision on the terms. No one had rented the upper floors in the time I owned the house, and no one had inquired since the bank had taken it over. The signs stood in the yard and leaned at their angles as they had always leaned, since before I came, and they were not going to stop.

I turned away.

At the far end of the block, past the elm and the corner, was the house where Barrett lived. Barrett and his wife Ruby, who had prepared my breakfasts until the morning his unsigned letter arrived in my mail slot and I had crossed the street in a fury I still did not entirely understand and exchanged words with him on his own doorstep in front of his neighbors.

I had thought about Barrett, in the months since. Not often, and not with the intensity I had once spent on the house, but with a specific and unresolved feeling that I had no precise name for. Not quite rage—that had burned itself out. Something cooler. The feeling of a sentence that has not been finished. He had watched my windows. He had written his letter with its sour scripture. He had told people things about me—about Elsie—that he had no standing to tell, filtered through the mesh of his particular moral vision until what remained bore almost no relation to whatever he thought he had observed. And he was still there, at the far end of the block, behind his lace curtains.

I began to walk in that direction.

I was not entirely sure what I intended. To say something. To have him understand—what? That his letter had been an act of cheap cruelty dressed in scripture? He knew that and did not consider it cruelty. That I had not done what he imagined? He would not believe me. That Elsie had nearly died in my house and that whatever happened there was far larger than his account of it and not the business of a man who noted which windows were lit from across the street? He would pray over me.

None of this was a reason to go. I continued walking.

I had reached the middle of the block when a delivery truck turned in from the corner. A wide truck, moving slowly, the kind that takes the full width of a narrow residential street and makes the world briefly smaller. It drew up alongside me and blocked the view ahead—the houses, the far corner, Barrett's end of the block. The driver was looking at numbers on doors; he

stopped the truck, leaned out, looked again, pulled forward five feet, stopped again.

In that minute of obstruction—the truck's white side blocking everything beyond it, the driver occupied with his numbers, the engine running—something happened.

If I were to give it arbitrary terms, it would be this: I saw the rest of the afternoon.

I saw myself walking to Barrett's gate and lifting the latch, which had a particular sound I remembered. I heard my own knock at his door and the pause before the door opened. I saw his face—that long nose, those moral eyes that had always regarded me as a problem to be managed—and I watched what happened when it registered my presence. The slight stiffening of the posture. The way he would pull the door no further than halfway, not inviting me in, standing in the gap.

I saw the conversation. I cannot tell you I heard specific words; it was more like reading than listening, the way you read a scene you know is coming in a book you have read before. His tone of patient injury. His scripture, deployed as always with the accuracy of someone who has spent forty years selecting weapons from a well-stocked armory. The name Miss Bengough spoken by him in that particular register—careful, just, compassionless—which was the register that would undo me. The specific quiet he would produce with that name, and what I would do with it.

I saw what I would do with it.

Not physical violence. Not quite. But something that would accomplish all the things violence accomplishes: would leave him

confirmed in everything he believed about me, would give the neighborhood six months of renewed talk, would close permanently whatever small door still stood open between the life I had had before the house and the life I might construct after it. Would make it impossible to be, in Millhaven, anything other than the man those windows had always thought I was.

And would give me nothing. Nothing returned, nothing resolved, nothing released. The locked-up feeling would still be locked up. Barrett would close his door and be satisfied, and I would stand on his porch with my hands shaking and the afternoon light going flat around me, having discharged myself of something that had no business being discharged in Barrett's direction.

I saw all of this in the time it took the delivery truck's driver to find his number and write something on his clipboard.

The truck pulled forward another three feet and the view opened up. Barrett's end of the block appeared again, the houses, the corner, the familiar geometry of the street I had walked so many hundred times. Barrett's house sat at its proper distance with its lace curtains drawn, quiet, giving nothing away.

I stopped walking.

I stood in the middle of the block with the afternoon light on my shoulders and let the moment pass. It passed the way moments do when you are fully inside them: slowly, and then all at once, and then it was gone.

The truck finished its business and moved on. The block was quiet. I was standing still.

I turned around.

There was a drugstore on the main road at the end of the block, which I had used occasionally for newspapers and aspirin. I went in and sat at the counter and ordered coffee, more to have somewhere to sit than from any desire for coffee. The man behind the counter was new—his predecessor had known me by sight, and I was glad of the replacement. I sat with my cup and watched the street through the window.

The woman who came in after me I did not recognize at first. She was about fifty, well-dressed, carrying a small bag, and she glanced at me with the frank appraisal of someone who thinks they may know a face. Then she placed me and said, "Mr. Oren. I thought that was you."

Her name, it came to me after a moment, was Mrs. Corcoran. She had lived three houses from me; we had nodded at each other on the street. A pleasant woman, nothing more.

She asked how I was—I said fine—she asked whether I was back to stay—I said no, just for the day, some paperwork. She said she understood, and then said, without particular emphasis, as if passing along a piece of neutral news: "I suppose you've heard that Miss Bengough is all right?"

I set my cup down.

"I had heard she was recovering," I said.

"Oh, she's well past that now. A friend of mine saw her in Indianapolis last month, at some kind of lecture. Said she looked very well, though perhaps a little quieter than—but that's to be expected, isn't it. After what she went through." She paused.

Then, with the directness of someone who has decided to say the difficult thing and get it over with: "I'm glad. I always thought she was a fine woman."

"She is," I said.

Mrs. Corcoran bought her aspirin and left. The counterman refilled my cup without being asked. I sat for a while longer looking at the street, which was doing nothing in particular, just going about the ordinary business of a spring afternoon: a woman with a shopping bag, a boy on a bicycle, two men talking on a corner, a dog.

A little quieter than she used to be.

I turned that phrase over several times. I thought about what it meant to know a person well enough that quietness was noticeable. I thought about all the ways a person becomes quieter—the ordinary ones, age and sorrow and the accumulation of ordinary loss—and the particular way, which was its own category, that a person becomes quieter after having been inside something that very few people have been inside.

I knew that quietness. It had been pointed out to me by doctors, by the careful language of discharge paperwork, by the expressions of the people who had known me before and came to visit after. *A little quieter.* It was the sound of someone who has heard things that do not un-hear themselves.

I had put her there. I was not going to rehearse that. It was a fact, and I had been rehearsing it for nearly two years, and the rehearsal had not improved it. But I sat for a moment with it, as I sometimes did, in the particular way you sit with

something that cannot be changed: not punishing yourself, just acknowledging. She had survived. She was quieter. She had gone to a lecture in Indianapolis and someone had seen her and thought she looked well.

That was enough for now. It was not nothing.

I took the five o'clock train out of Millhaven.

From the window, as the train pulled through the edge of town and out into the flat fields, I watched the rooflines pass—the water tower, the grain elevator, the church steeple, the scatter of houses at the town's margin. The block was somewhere behind me, invisible now, the house standing in its particular stillness with its signs in the yard.

I had not gone back to the gate. I want to record that plainly. The flash of that afternoon—whatever it was, precognition or clarity or simply the accumulated knowledge of how scenes like that one end—had been sufficient. I had seen the shape of the thing I had been about to do, and I had let it alone. That was not heroism; it was barely even sense. But it was a choice, made in a moment when a different choice had been entirely available, and I had made the right one.

The fields opened up around the train. Corn stubble and new-turned earth, a line of trees along a creek, a farmhouse with smoke coming from its chimney. The ordinary Midwest in late April, indifferent to everything and good to look at.

In my coat pocket was the carbon copy of the transfer document, my signature at the bottom. The house was the bank's.

Whatever lived in it was the bank's problem now, though I suspected it would give the bank no more trouble than it had given any other owner: none that could be recorded in a ledger, nothing that showed up in an inspection, nothing actionable.

The For Rent signs would stand in the yard. Someone would come, eventually, drawn by the low price and the good bones and the afternoon light that fell into the second-floor rooms in a particular pale and beautiful way. They would move their things in. The old furniture would suit it perfectly. They would find the window seats and spend a pleasant afternoon opening them.

I sat with this for a moment and then I put it away.

Indianapolis was three hours. I had the carbon copy and a book I had bought at the station and the flat spring fields going past the window and the remainder of an afternoon. Elsie was in Indianapolis.

I was not going to show up unannounced at whatever address a letter might have found her. That was not something a man with my history had the right to do. She had written to me; I had written back; there had been two more letters from each of us, growing slightly less careful with each exchange, saying slightly more, the way correspondence does when it is going somewhere. There would be a right time, and it was not the day I had signed foreclosure papers and walked away from Barrett's gate and sat in a drugstore being told she was quieter now.

But she was there. Same city, same afternoon.

I looked at the fields and thought about that for a while. It was not nothing either.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CIGARETTE CASE

It was a rooftop gathering in Lincoln Park, on a humid Saturday evening in late July, and I had been persuaded to attend it by a man named Aldous Fenwick who edited a small literary quarterly and who operated on the theory that writers should get out of their rooms occasionally and make contact with other people in the field. I did not share his theory—I had been in my room in Chicago for five months by that point and was making the most sustained progress on Romilly Bishop that I had made in three years—but Fenwick was an enthusiast, and his enthusiasm had a quality of patient inevitability that wore you down. I went.

There were perhaps twenty people on the roof. The city lay around us in its July haze, amber and orange, the lake black beyond the buildings to the east. Someone had brought a portable phonograph and it played at a low volume in the background, something cool and unhurried. I knew several people there, including Fenwick and his wife, and I knew several others by reputation; and I stood with a drink and did what people do at gatherings of this kind: I talked about work.

Loder I had met once before, briefly, at a reading. He was in his late thirties, a former journalist who had recently published a novel that had been well reviewed and not widely read, which is the usual fate. He was a quiet man of the type that sometimes says surprising things: careful, spare, with a

habit of looking at whatever he held in his hands as if it contained more information than it appeared to. I found myself standing next to him when dinner, such as it was, had been cleared away and people had settled into the longer portion of the evening.

I offered him a cigarette from my case.

"Thanks," he said. He took the cigarette and the case both, the way people do when something gives them permission to hold it. The others around us went on talking. Loder looked at the case—a plain silver one I had bought at a pawnshop in Gary and used for years—with an attention that had nothing to do with its design.

After a moment I caught his eye.

"Nice case," he said, setting it on the railing beside him. "I had one just like it once."

I said they were common enough.

"Oh, yes," he said, putting aside the question of rarity. "I lost mine. In France."

"Before or after the war?"

"After," he said. He turned the case over once in his hand. "Summer of forty-seven. I was just kicking around Europe on savings and a GI Bill fellowship that didn't ask too many questions. I got it back, the case. But the way it happened—" he laughed slightly—"I've never been able to explain it. And I've tried."

I said I couldn't explain it either, until I'd heard it.

So Loder, holding my cigarette case, told his story.

"I was in Provence," he said, "with a man named Carroll—you wouldn't know him, he died a few years ago, a very good man—a poet, more than I was even then, and absolutely in love with the whole region: the light, the smell of it, the language, the Romans. We'd been walking south for six weeks with packs, Orange, Avignon, Arles, Les Baux, the whole circuit, Carroll with his Provençal dictionary and his Vercingetorix and me trying to keep up. Then we got to a village called Darbisson, where a young vigneron named Rangon had vaguely invited us to stop in if we passed through, so we did.

"Rangon was a decent fellow, hospitable, but lonely in the way young men get lonely in those closed provincial places. He couldn't know the local girls—position, appearances, all that—and he was full of questions about American women, their freedom, the whole business. We had dinner in the village—his mother was away, the house had no cook—and after dinner we left him to a meeting with his agent and Carroll and I took a walk.

"It was getting dark, that particular slow Provençal dusk that seems to take half the night. We walked maybe a mile out of the village, along a road between cypress windbreaks, and it was as we came around a bend in one of those hedges—the cypresses were sixty feet high and the road was black under them—that we nearly walked into two women coming the other way.

"They were English. The older one, older by a good twenty years than her companion, spoke first, and the English was cultivated, unhurried, the kind you don't hear much anymore. We'd

stumbled and almost knocked the younger one down, and Carroll was apologizing in his Provençal-inflected French when the old lady said, in English, that it was quite all right, and laughed.

"She had a handkerchief she'd dropped, which I'd nearly stepped on, and when I gave it back she thanked me and—there's no other way to put it—they invited us in. They lived, apparently, very nearby, and had few callers, and would we like to come in and smoke a cigarette and rest before walking back to the village.

"Well, of course we would. Carroll was already practically through the gate.

"The house was a good-sized old place, a porte-cochère with an iron grille, a vestibule with old painted tubs of aloes and palms, a staircase of pale stone with a beautiful wrought-iron rail. The younger woman—niece, I gathered, though no names stuck—took a candle from a bracket and led us up. Carroll lit sconces as we went around the salon, and the candles glimmered in the polished floor and in a large oval mirror on the far wall, the clearest, brightest glass I have ever seen.

"I cannot tell you much about that hour except that it was one of those hours. You know the kind I mean. They happen occasionally, when everything falls into an arrangement that is simply right—the people, the light, the thing being said or sung, the quality of the air—and you know while you're inside it that you are inside something that will not come again. Carroll sang—he had a remarkable voice, very low, a sort of murmuring—and the younger woman sang with him, an old air, *Oft in the Stilly Night*,

of all things; and I sat with the elder lady and we talked, I no longer remember about what, nothing important, the kind of talk that matters by not mattering. The wind outside had dropped. The candles were steady.

"We stayed perhaps an hour. When we left there was nothing said about calling again in the morning, no addresses exchanged, no arrangement made. It was understood by all four of us, I think, that the thing was complete as it was and that to attach anything to it—a plan, an expectation, a continuation—would be to spoil it. We went out and walked back to the village without speaking much.

"The next morning I reached for my cigarette case and it wasn't there."

He paused, looking at the case on the railing. The phonograph had moved on to something with a brushed-snare rhythm, barely audible. Around us the conversations continued in their ordinary register.

"You'd left it at the house," said a woman across from us.

"That was the obvious conclusion," Loder said. "Though I could have sworn I'd had it after we left the restaurant. Still. Rangon, when we told him, thought we were pulling his leg—no English ladies in Darbisson, he said, nobody with a house matching that description, how much wine had we had, et cetera. But we insisted, and eventually he took us to look. We went through the village twice. No house. Rangon's amusement was becoming offensive. Finally he took us down an alley—a dead end,

really, two broken rooflines and a gap between them—and showed us a porte-cochère with a half-unhinged iron grille.

“It was the wrong house, obviously. Derelict. Hadn’t been lived in for years, you could see that from the street. But it had a double door with a grille, and Carroll and I looked at each other, and we got the key from the baker nearby—Rangon told us where it was, still smiling—and we went in.

“The vestibule was right. Same proportions, same staircase, same wrought-iron rail. But everything was dead. The tubs against the walls had plants that had been dead so long they were only stalks, and the hoops had rusted off and the wood had collapsed. The staircase was an inch deep in dust, unbroken by a footprint. The cobwebs on the rail were so thick and old they were like cloth. Not a spider in them; nothing alive anywhere in the place.

“We went upstairs. The salon was there—same room, same oval mirror, though you couldn’t see a reflection in it for the dust and the dark. Same broken chairs. Same round table.

“On the table was my cigarette case.”

He stopped. For a moment nobody said anything.

“Were there ever English ladies found to have lived there?” someone asked. “I mean, bodies, records—”

“We asked,” Loder said. “We looked into it as much as we could. Nothing. Nobody knew who had last lived there. Rangon stopped smiling. He didn’t have an explanation either. He said, as graciously as he could manage: perhaps my wine was not so good as I thought.”

He laughed once, briefly, and picked up the cigarette case and set it down in front of me. He had finished his story.

Fenwick, across the table, was saying something about collective hallucination, the unreliability of memory, the way a vivid experience can generate objects that seem to confirm it after the fact. He was not wrong exactly; he was not right either. Loder did not respond to any of it. He refilled his glass and looked out at the city.

When the gathering broke up a little while later I walked down to the street with Loder, and as we waited for cabs I heard him humming softly to himself—I did not recognize the melody at first, and then I did. Oft in the Stilly Night. He did not seem aware he was doing it. I did not mention it.

I walked back to my room in the late July heat. The city was still awake, still lit; couples on stoops, a bar with its door standing open, the music spilling out into the empty street. I had my hands in my pockets and I was thinking about the cigarette case.

Not about the explanation. Loder had been right not to offer one, and Fenwick had been right that his explanation was insufficient; it was the usual result, where the thing itself is clear and all the accounts of it are wrong. I was not thinking about what it meant. I was thinking about what it did.

It had appeared in the dead room. The case had been in the living house—in the evening that was complete and would not come again—and then, the next morning, it was in the ruin. As if the

object had been unable to stay in the world it had briefly entered. As if it had been returned to the only place it could actually belong: the dust and the dark, the broken chairs, the ancient cobwebs. The evening had accepted it for an hour and then let it go.

But the case had been there. That was the thing. In the room where the candles burned and the women sang and the hour was held, suspended, outside of ordinary time—the case had been there. It had been present in something that had ended. And when the ending came, it bore the mark of having been present. The house, the room, the dust could not erase that. It turned up in the ruins to be found.

I was on my own block now. The buildings were dark and close. I thought about Romilly Bishop waiting on my table upstairs—two hundred and forty pages of manuscript, the first chapter through the fifteenth and then a gap and then scattered scenes from the latter half, everything I had written and rewritten over the past seven years, carrying seven years of Paul Oren in its pages. Seven years of a man who had been inside a house and come out different and still did not entirely know what he had been inside.

The manuscript had been in that time. It had been present in the worst of it, in the year before the house and the year inside it and the two years since. It contained the person I had been when I thought I knew what I was writing, and the person I had become when I had stopped knowing, and the person I was now, who was something else again, still not entirely legible to me.

Objects carry us, Loder's story said. Not the grand things—not monuments or formal portraits or the works we intend as legacies. The small objects: the case in the pocket, the thing you did not know you had left behind. Those are what appear in the dust of abandoned rooms, because they were actually present when the living hour happened. They were there.

Romilly had been there.

I went upstairs and turned on the lamp and sat down at the table. I did not tell myself I was going to write; I had learned to be careful about what I told myself. I only sat down and pulled the manuscript toward me and turned to the first page, and read the first line, and kept reading.

For the first time in three years I was not reading to assess or to judge or to find the place where it had gone wrong. I was reading the way you read something in which you recognize yourself—not comfortably, not with pleasure exactly, but with the recognition that the thing is yours, that it carries your particular weight, that no one else could have made this specific arrangement of words at this specific cost.

Whatever was in it was mine. It had been there, in the living hour. And it had been returned, like the case, to the only place it could belong: the page, the lamp, the table, the night.

I read until the city was quiet and the lamp was the only light I could see and the manuscript was spread across the table in its entirety. Then I found a pencil and I began to write.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ROCKER

I had been at the Spence farm since the second week of September, and by October I had stopped noticing most of it: the smell of the place, the sound of the furnace in the morning, the particular creak of the third step on the back stairs. These things had passed through the membrane that separates what a man notices from what a man simply inhabits, and I was grateful. It meant I was working. The book was moving through me in the way that books move when everything else recedes and the thing itself becomes the only foreground.

What I did not stop noticing was Cora Spence.

She was in her middle seventies, a small woman with white hair worn in the old style, and she always dressed in the same washed-out grey-grey housedress, grey cardigan, grey stockings—as if she had made one decision about color long ago and found no reason to revisit it. Her niece Dora ran the household and cooked the meals and managed the two other boarders, a retired schoolteacher and a man who worked at the grain elevator in town; Cora sat. She sat in the large kitchen during the days, near the old iron radiator, in a rocking chair of black walnut that was clearly not of a piece with the rest of the farmhouse furniture but had come from somewhere older and finer.

The rocking was what I noticed.

I am trying to describe it precisely, because precision is the only tool available when you want to communicate something that does not fit ordinary categories. It was not the rocking of restlessness or habit, the absent-minded motion of a woman who has simply sat in a rocking chair for so long that stillness would feel strange. It was deliberate, slow, and inward-directed—the rocking of a woman who is rocking something. Her hands, folded in her lap, had a quality of cradling. Her head tilted at a particular angle. And her face, when it happened, wore an expression that I have no adequate word for: peaceful is not right, happy is not right, suffused is closer but still insufficient. It was the expression of someone in the presence of something they love past all measure and past all reason.

She was not asleep. Her eyes were sometimes open, sometimes closed, but whether they were open or closed she was not with us in the kitchen. She was somewhere else, with something else, and she was rocking it.

The first few times I saw this I attributed it to age and let it alone. The third or fourth time I looked longer, and was less certain of my attribution. There was nothing confused or absent in that face. Whatever she was attending to, her attention was entire.

I went back to my room and sat down at my desk and tried to write, and found that for the rest of the afternoon I was listening, even from the floor above, for the quiet rhythm of the rocker on the kitchen floor.

Dora Spence was fifty-two, a practical, clear-eyed woman with no mystical tendencies that I could detect. She had run the farmhouse since her husband died and her children had grown and gone, and she managed it with the particular pragmatic competence of someone who has learned not to wait for help that is not coming. She was kind to Cora in the matter-of-fact way of someone for whom kindness is simply good management, and she did not discuss Cora's private life with the boarders.

I did not ask her about the rocking for several weeks. When I finally did, one evening in November after Cora had gone upstairs and the kitchen was quiet, Dora set down her mending and looked at me for a moment with the appraising look of someone deciding how much to tell.

"You've noticed," she said. It was not a question.

"I have."

She picked up her mending again. "Most people do, eventually. The ones who don't, I think they just decide not to see it."

"What is she rocking?"

Dora was quiet for a moment. The furnace ticked. Outside, the November wind moved against the house with a low sound.

"When Aunt Cora was twenty-four," she said at last, "she was engaged to a man named Will Garrett. He died of a ruptured appendix, three days before the wedding. The dress was made, the church was reserved, everything was ready. His family came and told her in the afternoon, and she went upstairs and she stayed up there for three days, and when she came down she was wearing

grey, and she has worn grey every day of her life since." Dora paused. "That was in 1905."

I waited.

"She never married. Never courted again, as far as anyone knows. She's lived here with us—with my mother before me, and now me—her whole life, and she's been—she's been entirely herself, entirely Aunt Cora, all that time. Nothing wrong with her mind, nothing wrong with her heart. She's just been—carrying something."

"The chair was his?"

Dora glanced toward it. "His family sent it over after the funeral. It had been in his mother's family. I don't know why they sent it. Cora accepted it and put it in the kitchen and she has sat in it every day since and she will die in it. I believe that to be the simple truth."

I looked at the chair. It sat empty by the radiator, the walnut dark and smooth with decades of use, the rocker worn at its ends to a curve finer than it had been made.

"What is she rocking?" I asked again.

Dora did not answer immediately. She hemmed a seam and bit the thread.

"I think," she said carefully, "that it's the baby."

"The baby."

"The one there never was. The one that—well." She folded the mended hem. "I only know what I've observed over forty years. She sits in that chair and she rocks, and when she does there is something about her that has never been in her any other time."

Something that isn't grief and isn't happiness and isn't anything I can name exactly. And I think she is holding the child she would have had if Will Garrett had lived to marry her."

I said nothing. There was nothing to say that would improve on what Dora had just told me.

"I've never spoken of it to her," Dora added. "It's hers. I think if I spoke of it she would stop, and I don't want to be the one who takes it from her."

She put the mending away and said good night and went upstairs, and I sat in the kitchen alone for a while with the empty chair.

The thing it had contained—the small thing, the gentle thing, the thing that never took a breath or had a name—was not there now. The chair was only a chair. But I was aware, sitting in that kitchen, of something I can only describe as a residue: the warm impression a body leaves in a cold room after it has been there a long time. Not a presence. The evidence of one.

I went upstairs and sat at my desk. I did not write. I sat and thought about loss that has no object—grief that persists not because the wound is fresh but because the love has nowhere to go. Cora Spence had loved something for fifty years. That something had never existed in any form that the world could confirm. She had held it in a chair, in the rocking, in the grey she wore and the betrothal ring she had not taken off in half a century, and the holding had been sufficient. Not happy. Not unhappy. Sufficient.

I thought about what it means to carry a thing that has no weight in the world. I thought about *Romilly Bishop*, whom I had been carrying for seven years, and what she was to me: not the woman in the manuscript, but the idea of the woman, the possibility I had been working toward. She had never existed either. She was the woman I believed I could make if I found the right words. I had not found them yet. I was still looking. Perhaps I would find them. Perhaps I would carry her for the rest of my working life and she would remain just beyond reach, small and warm and not entirely there, rocking in some interior chair.

It seemed to me that evening that this was not entirely a bad thing. A man could do worse than to spend his life reaching toward something that refused to be finished.

December came. The schoolteacher went home for the holidays and the man from the grain elevator went to his sister's in Columbus, and for ten days it was just Dora and Cora and me in the farmhouse. Dora's daughter and her husband were coming for Christmas, and her son might come if he could manage it; but until Christmas Eve the house was quiet and snow-muffled and suited to work, and I worked.

Romilly was in her final third. I could feel the shape of the ending—not in the way that endings announce themselves when you are being lazy, all sudden clarity and false confidence, but in the way they arrive when you have earned them: slowly, partially, with doubts intact. I knew approximately where I was going. I did not yet know all of it.

On the afternoon of the twenty-third, I came downstairs for coffee and found Cora in the kitchen alone, rocking.

I had seen it many times by now. I had stopped being startled by it, had passed through the stage of watching with uncomfortable fascination, and arrived at something quieter: a simple recognition of what it was. I poured my coffee and sat down at the kitchen table and opened my notebook, and for a while we existed in the same room without difficulty, Cora rocking and me pretending to work.

But I was not working. I was watching her. In the December light from the kitchen window—low, grey, the farmyard beyond it brown and bare with the first dusting of snow on the frozen ground—her face had that expression again. The one I had no word for. Her head was tilted at its particular angle, her hands folded in their particular shape, and she rocked in slow steady arcs, and whatever she held was being held with perfect attention.

I had not lost anyone. I want to say that clearly, because what happened next was not grief on my own behalf. I have lost things—I have lost time, I have lost years, I have lost a version of myself I cannot recover—but I have not lost a child or a lover to death, and I do not want to claim an equivalence I do not have. But watching Cora that afternoon I felt something that had been locked down for a long time move slightly, the way a frozen pipe moves when the temperature changes by one degree—not thawing, not breaking free, but registering the shift.

It was tenderness. Simple, uncomplicated, human tenderness: for this small grey woman in her old chair, for the invisible weight she carried, for the fifty years of it. For the fact that it had not embittered her or diminished her or made her less than she was. For the fact that grief, when it is carried long enough and gently enough, becomes something else—not happiness, not peace, but a kind of authority, a knowledge, a quality of attention to the world.

She had been attending to that world for fifty years from her chair, rocking her unfounded love, and she knew things about it that I did not know.

I sat at the table and felt the locked thing move and did not fight it. I had been fighting it for two years—fighting everything that resembled feeling, because feeling had, in the house in Millhaven, become indistinguishable from danger. But here in Dora Spence's kitchen it was simply feeling, small and ordinary and specifically mine, and I let it be.

I thought about Elsie.

Not the Elsie of the letters, the careful correspondence that had been growing slowly less careful over eighteen months. Not the Elsie of the hospital, the one on the stretcher, the one I had pressed my hand to the glass toward. I thought about the Elsie I had known for ten years before any of it—the warm, emphatic, generous woman with the scarves and the opinions and the laugh, the woman who had read my work and argued with me and come back to help me when I was past helping. I thought about the afternoon she had sat across from me in my old workroom, her hand

hurt and her eyes full, and said you and a few like you hold everything upon your shoulders, which was the most generous false thing anyone had ever said to me. I thought about her saying if you are in need of me, I shall come at no matter what cost.

She had come. I had been in need and she had come. She had crossed the street and gone through my gate and gone up my stairs and entered my rooms, and the house had taken something from her that I could not give back. She had recovered. She was quieter now.

I loved her.

I had known this, of course. I had known it in the way you know things you are not ready to know: imprecisely, with a wall around it, handling it with care so as not to find out how solid it actually was. But sitting in the kitchen while Cora rocked her fifty-year-old invisible child, I knew it precisely, without the wall, and it was solid.

I loved Elsie Bengough. I had loved her, probably, for years, in the useless and obstructed way that men who cannot see themselves clearly love women who can see them very well. And I had not seen it, or had not admitted it, and the house had opened me and ruined the timing and ruined Elsie's safety, and here we were, two years later, exchanging careful letters across the distance between what happened and what might yet happen.

Cora rocked. The kitchen was warm. Outside the window a little more snow had come, covering the brown yard in a thin white cloth.

I picked up my pen and opened my notebook to a fresh page. The thing I wrote was not for the novel. It was four lines, a note to myself, the kind of thing you write when you need to put something outside your head so you can look at it clearly:

She is in Indianapolis. The letters are growing less careful. There is no right time; there is only time. The book will be done in the spring.

I read it over once, and then I closed the notebook.

The novel was in my room upstairs. I would go back to it in a little while and it would move, as it had been moving for months now, with the particular incremental patience of work that is being done rightly. It would be done in the spring. And then I would go to Indianapolis.

The rocking stopped. Cora's eyes opened, and she looked at me with the clarity she always had after those intervals—seeing me directly, present, perfectly herself.

"You've been writing," she said. It was what she always said when I sat at the kitchen table.

"A little," I said.

She smiled—with her cheeks, the way she smiled, that expression which owed nothing to performance.

"Good," she said. "You should always be writing."

On Christmas Eve, Dora's daughter arrived with her husband and their two small children, and the house filled up with the noise and furniture-rearrangement and overlapping conversations that children bring to a house that has been quiet for months. I

was glad of it. The children took to Cora immediately, climbed onto her chair while she was in it, accepted being rocked with the pure animal pleasure of children who have not yet learned that rocking is supposed to be for babies.

I ate Christmas dinner with the family and sat with them in the evening. Around ten o'clock, the children—well past ordinary bedtimes, flushed with the importance of the occasion—were settled near the fireplace in their nightclothes. The carol-singers came across the fields from the Methodist church in town, a dozen of them with lanterns, their breath making white clouds in the cold air outside the kitchen window.

Dora went to the door and they filled the kitchen with cold air and sound:

*I wonder as I wander out under the sky
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die
For poor ornery people like you and like I—
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.*

The children were wide-eyed and solemn with it. The youngest, a girl of about four, was in her mother's arms; the older one, a boy of six or seven, stood very still by the fireplace watching the singers through the window.

I was watching Cora.

She had settled back in her chair when the singing began. Her daughter-in-law had tried to put one of the children in her lap, but Cora had shaken her head very slightly, and the child

had been taken away, and now she sat alone in the walnut chair with her hands folded and her head tilted at its particular angle, and the rocking had begun again.

Her face was the face I had no word for. But I understood it now, or understood it better than I had in September: it was not the face of a woman imagining. It was the face of a woman in the presence of what she loves. Whether or not what she loved was there in any form the world could verify—whether the thing in her arms was a ghost, a dream, a projection of grief, or something genuinely other—she was holding it, and it was held, and the holding was real.

The carol-singers finished and left. The family stirred, spoke, began gathering the children for bed. Cora sat still.

Dora caught my eye across the room and I saw in her face what I had seen before: not alarm, not grief, but a quiet acceptance, the acceptance of someone who has watched this for forty years and knows it for what it is.

The boy at the fireplace tugged at his mother's sleeve.

"Mom. Is Grandma Cora asleep?"

"She's resting, sweetheart."

"She's smiling."

"Yes."

"What is she holding?"

A pause. The fire crackled. Outside, the carol-singers' lanterns were small points of light moving away across the field.

"Something very dear to her," the boy's mother said.

"Something she has loved for a very long time."

He accepted this with the simple gravity of a child receiving information about the adult world and finding it insufficient but temporarily adequate.

"Okay," he said, and went to be put to bed.

I stayed in the kitchen after the others had gone upstairs. The fire burned down. Cora rocked, very slowly, making almost no sound. I sat and watched and did not disturb her.

After a while the expression on her face changed: the smile remained, but there came across it the look of someone straining after something that is receding—a dream at the moment of waking, a note of music as it fades. Her hands shifted slightly.

Then her face was simply her face again: Cora Spence's face, an old woman's face, at rest.

"It's gone," she said quietly. She did not seem to be speaking to me particularly, but I answered anyway.

"Yes."

"It comes and goes," she said. "It always comes back."

"I believe you," I said.

She looked at me then, the direct look.

"Are you all right, Mr. Oren?"

It was not a question anyone had asked me with that quality of attention in a long time.

"I think so," I said. "I think I'm getting there."

She nodded, as if this were the right answer, and resumed her knitting. The fire was nearly out. I stayed a little while longer, and then I went upstairs to bed and lay in the dark listening to the farmhouse settle around me and thinking about a

woman in Indianapolis who was quieter now than she used to be, and about a book that would be done in the spring, and about how much there is in the world that has no name but is nonetheless real, that persists beyond all reason, that is held and rocked in the small hours of the night by people we do not always see clearly enough.

CHAPTER NINE

HIC JACET

A TALE OF ARTISTIC CONSCIENCE

I have said that the book would be done in the spring, and I was wrong by exactly four months. It was January of 1957 when I finished it, on a night that was neither remarkable nor ceremonial—a Tuesday, I believe—when I typed the last page of Romilly Bishop and set it on the stack with its predecessors and sat back and looked at what seven years had produced.

Or rather, what ten years had produced; three of writing and seven of carrying. The book I had finished was not the book I had begun. I was not the man who had begun it. The woman at its center was not the character I had first conceived—that first Romilly, the one I had discarded and thrown on the fire in the house in Millhaven, had been a different creature entirely, and looking back I could see that she had been a reflection of someone I knew, transposed into fiction with the naive confidence of a writer who thinks he understands a person because he has spent time in their company. The second Romilly—the one in the manuscript before me—was not based on anyone. She had assembled herself from the inside, the way real characters do, in the years I had been carrying her: through the ward in Millhaven, the hospital corridors, the industrial site in Gary, the studio in Chicago, the small-town apartments and rented rooms from

Champaign to Indianapolis. She had been present through all of it, at the back of my mind, the way a responsibility that cannot be discharged is present. She had waited for me to be ready to write her.

I was not sure I had been entirely ready. But the book was done, and it was hers, and it was the best work I had ever done. I believed this without vanity, in the way a man believes something that has cost him enough to know. It was not a perfect book—I had passed the point of believing in perfect books—but it was a true one. She was true. She was in it completely, this woman who had never existed, who I had been reaching toward for a decade. And in the reaching there was something of everything I had been through, worked into the fabric of the thing without being stated, the way an experience works into a person: not as content but as tone, as quality, as a particular kind of weight.

I sat for a while at my desk, in the apartment I had taken in Indianapolis in the fall, and let the fact of it settle. The lamp burned. The radiator knocked in the corner. Outside, January made its customary case for itself against the windows, pressing cold and dark against the glass. I was forty-six years old. I had a completed novel in front of me and no idea whether anyone would publish it. I had a room in a city I had come to because a woman I loved was in it, though I had not yet allowed myself to act on that knowledge, and she did not know that it had anything to do with why I was here.

I ought to have been satisfied. And I was—or I would be, I told myself, once I had slept. The work was done. Everything else could wait.

I put the manuscript in a box and set the box on the shelf above my desk, and I went to bed.

I was not, in fact, done.

I knew this the following morning when I sat down at my desk, intending to begin the business of revisions, and found that I could not read the manuscript with the eyes of a reviser. I had spent the night in a deep and dreamless sleep and woken with a feeling I did not immediately identify: a flat, suspended quality, like the air before weather. I made coffee, sat down, opened the box, and took out the first page. I read the first paragraph and stopped.

It was good. It was honestly good. But it was not finished.

Not in the technical sense—I had said everything Romilly's story required. Not in the sense of structure or arc or character—those were complete. Something else was not finished, and I could not yet name what it was. I sat at my desk with the first page in my hand and looked at it and knew that I was not done with the book, or rather that the book was not done with me.

I have been in enough rooms with enough dark things to know when something is present that wants to be attended to. The house had taught me that, in the worst possible way; and afterward, in the years of wandering, I had learned to read the subtler versions—the arrested hand, the redirected thought, the sentence

that keeps insisting on going somewhere the writer did not plan. They are not all malign. Most of them are simply the work making its own demands, as work does when it is being done rightly.

I put the page down and picked up a pencil. I opened a fresh notebook. And I began, without intending to, to write something else.

I did not know at first what it was. For a long time I simply wrote, the pencil moving with the particular unselfconsciousness that comes when the deliberate mind has stepped aside and something quieter has taken over. I was not planning. I was not revising. I was finding out what needed to be said that had not yet been said.

An hour passed. The coffee went cold. Outside, the January light changed from grey to a thin pale gold as the sun found a gap in the cloud, and then went grey again.

I stopped and read what I had written.

The first sentence was: The three or four "For Rent" signs had stood within the low picket fence as long as the people of that quiet little dead-end block could remember.

I set the notebook down. I sat for a while looking at the wall. Then I picked it up again and kept reading.

What I had written was not a revision of Romilly Bishop. It was not an addition to Romilly Bishop. It was something else entirely: a beginning—the beginning of a different book, the book that Romilly Bishop had been circling for seven years without being able to say directly. The story of a man and a house in a small Midwestern town, and what the house did to him, and what

happened after. A book about all the things I had been carrying since Millhaven, which Romilly had been carrying on my behalf without my asking her to.

I had been writing about it, in other words, all along. But I had been writing around it—displacing it, filtering it through a character who was not me but who was made of what I had experienced. And now something in the process had reached the point where displacement was no longer possible or necessary. The thing wanted to be told directly. Not from inside the experience—I had lived that long enough—but from the outside, in retrospect, with the clarity that only comes when you are finally far enough from a thing to see its shape.

Hic jacet: here lies. The title of the Onions story I had read as a young man and never forgotten: *A Tale of Artistic Conscience*. The story of a man whose artistic conscience finally exacted from him the only work it would accept, which was not the work he had planned but the work he was.

I was going to have to write this book.

I understood, sitting there in my Indianapolis apartment with the cold coffee and the flat January light, what that meant. It meant writing directly about the house—not as fiction, but as fact, as clearly and honestly as I could manage it. It meant writing about what happened to Elsie. It meant writing about Room, and Benlian, and the woman in Champaign, and Cora Spence in her chair. It meant writing the book that was true instead of the book that was safe.

Romilly Bishop was a fine novel. I had no regret about it. But it was the book I had written *before* I was ready to write the true book, and I had needed to write it in order to find out what the true book was. That is how it usually works, in my experience: you write the displacement first, and the displacement shows you the way to the source.

The source was the house in Millhaven, and everything it opened in me, and everything that had happened in the years since.

I opened the notebook to a fresh page. I wrote: *Widdershins*.

The word was not an ornament. It was the name of a direction: contrary to the sun, contrary to the healthy course of things, contrary to love, labor, and daylight. Only then did I see that every step I had taken in the house had been a step that way.

And then I kept writing.

I was still writing when I heard the knock.

It was late afternoon—I had lost track of the time, which is the usual evidence that the work is going well. The knock was careful, measured, the knock of someone who is not certain of their welcome but has decided to come anyway.

I knew that knock. I had been hearing it, in memory, for three years.

I set down the pencil. I sat still for a moment. Then I went to the door and opened it.

She was in a dark coat, her hair cut shorter than I remembered, her face—my God, her face. She looked at me with the steady dark eyes that had always had a quality of watching from a slight distance, and now that quality was different: not remoteness but attention, a quality of attention that I recognized because I had heard it described. A little quieter than she used to be. Yes. And the quietness was not diminishment. It was what remained after the noise of certain kinds of suffering has passed through you and taken everything expendable with it.

She was more herself than I had ever seen her.

"I got your address from Aldous Fenwick," she said. "I wrote to you last week. Did you—oh." She had seen the stack of unopened letters on the hall table. Letters had been accumulating there for two weeks while I wrote.

"Come in," I said.

She came in. She looked around the apartment with the frank appraisal that had always been characteristic of her—taking inventory, noting the state of things, the stacked notebooks and manuscript pages, the cold coffee cups, the unmade evidence of someone who has been living entirely inside his work. She sat down in the one comfortable chair without being invited and looked at me.

"You finished it," she said.

"Romilly? Yes. Three days ago."

"And now you're writing something else."

I sat down across from her. "Yes."

"What is it?"

I told her. I told her plainly, without the hedge or the qualification or the careful management of her reaction that I would have employed two years ago—three years ago—five years ago. I told her what the new book was and why I was writing it. She listened the way she had always listened to things that mattered to her: entirely, without interruption, without preparing her response while I was still talking. This quality had been, I now thought, one of the best things about her, and the house had not touched it. Whatever it had taken from her, it had not taken that.

When I finished there was a silence. She was looking at me.

"You're going to write about the house," she said.

"Yes."

"And about everything after."

"Yes."

Another pause. She looked at the notebook on the desk.

"May I?"

I brought it to her. She read, with the same still attention. I watched her and did not speak. Outside the window the January afternoon was settling into early dark, the sky the color of pewter, the streets below beginning to show their lights.

She read for several minutes. Then she set the notebook in her lap and looked up.

"It's very good," she said.

"It's a beginning."

"Yes." She turned a page, read another paragraph. "You got the signs right. I always thought about those signs."

"The For Rent signs."

"They were still there when I—they were still there." She did not elaborate and I did not press her. There were things she had been inside that I did not have the right to ask about. I had put her there; I would spend a long time learning what that had cost.

She set the notebook on the arm of the chair.

"Are you going to be in Indianapolis?" she asked.

"For a while." I looked at her directly. "I came here because you were here. I want you to know that."

She accepted this without performing any of the things a lesser woman might have performed: not surprise, not gratified modesty, not the alarm of someone who fears a claim being made on her. She simply received it, the way she received everything true.

"I know," she said.

"You know."

"Paul. I've known for a long time."

There was a quality in the silence that followed this. Not tension—we had been through enough together that simple tension was no longer available to us. Something else: the quality of two people who have arrived, each by a long and damaging route, at a point where they are finally close enough to the same territory to see each other clearly. We were not young. We had not arrived

here lightly. The history between us was complicated in ways that would take years to work through, and we both knew it.

But we were here. That was the beginning.

"Tell me about your work," I said. "I've been terrible about reading your letters. Tell me what you've been doing."

And she told me. She had gone back to journalism—different work from before, quieter, less driven; she was writing long pieces now, considered things, pieces that took their time. She had written a piece about memory and place that had run in a magazine I respected. She was, she said, figuring out what kind of writer she was now, which was apparently different from what kind of writer she had been, and she was finding the difference interesting rather than alarming.

I listened. I made fresh coffee and brought it and sat across from her, and we talked as we had always talked at our best: without pretense, without performance, without the management of distance. The apartment was warm. The city made its quiet winter sounds below us. The notebook with its first pages was on the arm of her chair, and the box containing *Romilly Bishop* was on the shelf above my desk, and on the desk itself was a fresh sheet of paper with a pencil laid across it.

At some point I got up and turned on the other lamp, and the room shifted into its evening arrangement, warmer and more particular, the shadows at the edges and the lamplight in the middle where we were.

I could have said many things. There was a great deal to say, and we would have time to say it, or most of it; some things

do not get said until they cannot be avoided, and that is as it should be. What I did say was not important in itself but true in the way that the things you say at the beginning of things tend to be: a little more naked than usual, a little less defended, because the importance of the moment makes careful management feel like the wrong kind of effort.

"I'm glad you came," I said.

She looked at me with those steady eyes. The quietness in her was real, and it was hers; I had put it there, in the worst way, but she had made something of it that was her own. I did not allow myself to use this as absolution. There was no absolution, and she was not offering it. What she was offering was something harder and more real: the possibility of going forward, from here, as the people we actually were.

"I said I'd come if you needed me," she said. "And I said I'd know if you did."

"Yes. You said that on a bus."

"You remember."

"I remember everything."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, very simply: "I know."

And what was in that—what she had forgiven without calling it forgiveness, what she had survived without calling it survival, what she had been carrying as she had always carried things, with the particular directness and clarity that had made her the best person I had ever known—was in the room between us, acknowledged, real, and something we would build from.

I am writing this now, in the spring.

The book is nearly done. Not *Romilly Bishop*, which went to a publisher in February and which I will leave for someone else to judge, but this book, the one I began the night Elsie arrived. *Widdershins*: meaning contrary to the course of the sun, against the natural order, in the direction of what should not have been and was anyway.

I have written it in the mornings, in the apartment I have taken for the year near the university, while the city does what spring does to Midwestern cities: the trees budding in the parks, the lake-cold giving way to something warmer, the students filling the sidewalks and cafes with their necessary and exhausting certainty that everything is still possible.

Elsie and I have dinner twice a week. Sometimes three times. We walk. We disagree about things and agree about other things and talk about our work and do not talk about certain things and understand each other, I think, better than most people are permitted to understand anyone. What is between us is not simple. Nothing earned at this cost is simple. But it is real, which is better than simple, and it is ours.

I have written about the house, and about Room, who was pursued by the shape of his own terror, and about Benlian, who tried to pass himself into the work that consumed him, and about the woman in the Champaign apartment who cried out her true name in a lamplight room. I have written about Abel Keeling dying to his own voice and about Loder's cigarette case, which returned to

him bearing the shape of the life he had not known he was carrying. I have written about Cora Spence rocking in her dead lover's chair until grief and fidelity became indistinguishable.

I have written about Elsie.

Not about everything—some things are not mine alone to write about, and I have not written them. What I have written is what I can honestly say from where I stand, which is this: that she survived what I exposed her to, and came back for me anyway, not as a victim and not as a saint but as herself, as the particular woman she has always been, clear-eyed and warm and entirely without sentimentality about either of us. That is the whole of it. Whatever she carries from the house in Millhaven is hers; she has made it hers; and I am not going to presume to name it for her.

I have tried, in writing this book, to be as honest as I know how to be. Andriaovsky—not Onions' Andriaovsky, but the principle of him, the artistic conscience that operates like a supernatural force because it is one—has been present throughout. He does not allow the soft version, the self-serving account, the careful management of the reader's sympathy. When I have tried those things the hand has stalled. The only sentences that come freely are the true ones.

I was widdershins for a long time. Moving contrary to the natural order of things: against the sun, against love, against ordinary life, drawn by something in the house and in me that fed on the distance between myself and everything ordinary and good. I went that way willingly, or at least I failed to go the other

way. I am not entirely done paying for it. I may not be done for a long time.

But here is the thing Cora Spence knew, rocking in her black walnut chair: that what you carry, if you carry it honestly and for long enough, becomes something that cannot be taken from you, and cannot be taken away from the world, and is in some sense immortal. She carried her love for fifty years in a chair, and it was there at her death, and it was real. Abel Keeling carried his vision of the ship that did not yet exist to the bottom of Lake Superior, and it became the ship. Loder carried his evening in Provence in a cigarette case, and the case turned up in the ruins.

And Romilly Bishop is in a box at a publisher's office in New York. Whether she becomes a book that anyone reads, I do not know. But she is real, and she carries something of what I was and what I did and what happened to me and what I came through, and that is what books do: they carry you forward into time you will not live to see, into hands you will never touch, and they say: this was real, this mattered, this happened to someone, this is what it cost.

The For Rent signs are still in the yard of the house in Millhaven. I know this because I know that kind of house, and that kind of sign, and that kind of patience. It will find another tenant. It will always find another tenant. And whatever lives in it—whatever shifted from the previous Madley to me and from me to whoever comes next—will do what it does: the tap music, the slow drift of a certain quality of attention away from

ordinary life and toward something that promises everything and requires you entirely.

I know what it offers. I know its terms. I went all the way in and came most of the way back. Most of the way is enough. Most of the way is what I have.

Elsie read the first several chapters of this book last month. She did not say much about them for several days, which is how she is with things that matter to her. Then one evening at dinner she said: "You got it right." I asked what she meant. She said: "The house. The way it felt. You got it right."

I do not know what she remembers of the hours she spent in the powder closet. I do not know what she heard or felt or was in contact with, in the dark, inside the harp bag, while whatever lived in those rooms had its last chance at us both. I know only that she came to save me, that the house answered by making an instrument of the oldest thing it had hidden, and that she survived what I had invited. She has told me very little, and I have not asked. There are things to which even love has no right.

That is the sentence I will carry.

This book began with a sentence. I wrote it on the night Elsie came to my door, in January, without intending to write it, in the way that the important sentences announce themselves: not planned, not constructed, simply arriving, the way Cora's invisible child arrived in her arms.

The sentence is the first sentence of this book. It is also the last sentence of this chapter, and of this account, because a

book about widdershins movement should end where it began, which is somewhere in the middle of everything, circling back.

Here it is:

The three or four "For Rent" signs had stood within the low picket fence as long as the people of that quiet little dead-end block could remember.