

The following is an excerpt from

Landscape Architecture

A Novel

By

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In this chapter William Ross buries his son Bobby and deals with the aftermath of his suicide.

CHAPTER X: SYMPATHETIC MAGIC

In essence, we live two lives, one in the flesh and one in the mind; one in the natural, physical world, in which we are the rocks, the trees, the earth itself; and one in the twilight reality of our built environment, the one we fashion from custom, desire and know-how. The former grounds us in temporality, and we rest our salvation with God. In the landscape of our imagination, we survive amid entanglements of brio and fascination; confronting, on the mystic plane, all that we've made for ourselves and others. There hope rests with magic.

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There was a memorial service for Bobby Ross—for Robert Christopher Ross—at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. It was attended by four hundred people, many of whom had known

Bobby from birth. It was Ross—William Ross, Bill—whom they were there for, though. They had known him even longer, dating back to college and his early professional years; some even before, back to grade school, growing up with him on playgrounds in San Francisco. He had always been special, a person who gathered others to him, drew them by the power of his personality, his character, and held them together. People were energized by him. He made things happen, was a cynosure and a catalyst. He was fun. And now he was hurt and they wished to un-hurt him, to pat his shoulder, to grab and hug him and let him know, it wasn't his fault. There are things that just can't be explained or comprehended. Some things know no right. Maybe Bobby was one such. Maybe he was just a soul who never connected—to the people who loved him, to his neighborhood, his community. Maybe he just couldn't touch the world or be touched by it. Maybe all that and everything else—it was all guess work, there was no knowing. All that was left for any of them to do was to sit with Ross and talk about and around it. Christ, maybe this was something he hadn't done well. Maybe in this one area, Ross had not been up to his own high standard. Looking at him, seated in the front row—Donya dressed in black seated on one side, and Bobby's mother, Brenda, veiled and broken, on the other—he appeared like statuary. The blood had drained from his face and hands. He resembled a corpse waiting outside the makeup station for rouge and pancake, maybe even mortician's putty; sunken and drawn, he was almost unrecognizable. For many of those present, it was unsettling to see him looking so old, for he had been remarkable in his immunity to age; twenty years, it always seemed, ahead of time, running out in front of it like a brat who knew he couldn't be caught. He had, in fact, been beautiful, a natural work of art, blessed with a handsomeness that continued to blossom through the years, to grow in richness, until he seemed almost supernatural among his mortal retinue. But not this day, not anymore. Ross just looked like an old man, caught by inevitability in the night.

Kit Sidaharu spoke from the pulpit, delivering a eulogy:

“As I look out across this gathering I see so many familiar faces. I know so many of you, and so many of you know me, that introductions are hardly necessary. Let me just say that I am Kitara Sidaharu, and for forty-eight years I have been a business partner with Bill Ross. I can honestly say, that for even longer, Ross has been my closest friend. We went to school together—to college at UC-Berkeley—and we raised our families together. I want to say—while I am heartbroken that it comes under these circumstances—how wonderful it is to see Brenda, Bobby's mother, whom I have not seen for a long time. So many good times we all had together when we were young. Brenda, I always cherished our friendship, enjoyed your spirit and humor,

and I always admired you as a wife and mother. It was obvious that Bobby adored you. My wife Jean and I were just starting our own family, in those early years of the firm, and we used to look to you in admiration of the way you handled your role as a mother, particularly in the way you interacted with your child. Japanese families—at least ours—are not always demonstrative in the way that we relate to our children, and you taught us so much. I just wanted to say, publicly, how wonderful it is to see you once again, Brenda. As always, you are lovely. I can't begin to tell you how badly I hurt for you that this has happened.

“I recall a night, just over forty years ago, that I was sitting at home and the telephone rang. I don't recall what I was doing—reading the paper, some such thing. Maybe I was doing housework. Jean was pregnant with our first child at the time, so I may have been recruited for some chore or other. That type of thing was happening more and more back then in our home. But the phone rang and I picked it up, and Ross was on the other end. And he said, ‘Kit, I am calling from the hospital. I am a father.’ And I said, ‘Congratulations! Is it a boy?’ I asked the question because Ross had said that he hoped it would be a boy. He said—‘It's a boy! I have a son!’ His voice was filled with such happiness. All his hopes were coming true. And then we talked for awhile. I asked about Brenda and he said that she was doing fine. You can imagine how relieved we were to hear that. Of course, Jean and I cared so much about Brenda, but I think also, because we were soon to go through a birth ourselves, we were a little afraid of the process. And we were worried. Anyway, I asked Ross, ‘What name have you given him?’ And Ross said—‘Robert, I've named him Robert, after my father.’ Well, I thought that was wonderful, because I knew Bill's dad, and he was a wonderful man. He was like Bill—or Ross, as we've always called him. I don't know how that started, really. It was ‘Ross’ already in Berkeley, I remember that. I guess it just seemed to suit him. Thinking about it now, one wonders about how it was for Bobby to have a father—particularly one of Bill's magnitude—who owned so completely the family name. It was a pretty tall shadow to live in. I think Bobby probably had a lot of tall shadows in his life.

“My first-born was a daughter, just a few months younger than Bobby. Because of the gender difference, they didn't really spend a lot of time together, though our families were together a lot. I remember that Bobby was a handsome boy, with the features of his mother. He had dark hair and big brown eyes, which always seemed, to me, to look old for his years. I always got the feeling that he had been here before, that he was reincarnated. He was bright and energetic, and yet he always seemed a little distant to me, as if he was observing things. That

aspect of him was really quite stunning, and I think he always had that. He always seemed to me to be a little outside of whatever was happening, just watching.

“Bobby had a good hand, a fine natural ability to draw figures. I recall Ross hanging Bobby’s pictures around his desk at work. He said they inspired him. I remember once that Bobby won some sort of a contest at school, and how proud his father was. I had always assumed that Bobby would go into his father’s line-of-work, or some related field where he could put his natural talents to good use. But, for whatever reason, it didn’t work out that way. I really don’t know the extent to which Bobby developed his ability. You look for lessons, at these times, when these things happen. And you wonder why. Maybe, somewhere, there is some sort of lesson in that, in the gift that wasn’t understood and that went un-utilized. As I look out among the faces here today, I see that there are not too many young people. But maybe even for us older people it’s not too late to think about the gifts that God gives us, and to consider how well, or to what extent, we in our own lives recognize and appreciate them. That sort of reassessment probably continues to be valuable through all of life’s phases...”

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The interment ceremony was at Our Lady of Grace cemetery in San Bruno, south of The City. It was an odd place for Bobby to end up. He was a child of Marin County with scant connection to anything on the peninsula, other than San Francisco. He would be in San Bruno by mere circumstance. Ross’s parents were buried there, at Our Lady of Grace. At the time of his father’s death, Ross had purchased five adjoining plots, just because they were available and it seemed prudent. Room was made for family: for mom and four others to-be-determined. It was a quick decision, a no-brainer, and making it had meant that he wouldn’t have to think about it again. Not exactly engaged by methodical planning, Ross had always liked a done deal. He didn’t want to have to think of things while under pressure, especially not emotional pressure. Oddly, this had been one of the few areas in his life in which he had actually taken steps to prevent such an eventuality. He hadn’t yet gotten around to writing his own will before suddenly he was forced to determine the final disposition of his son. Thank God, is all Ross could think,

some of the decisions had been made. Bobby had a place to go. He would be with his grandparents.

Winter had begun to show itself in California, in that slightly out-of-kilter way that it does along the coast, sketching long violet shadows across gold-colored hills, staying bright through Christmas, right-on-up to the January-February rainy season. It is a nether-time, the warm months lingering by inference of light and blue sky long beyond the autumnal equinox, an almost-warmth of perpetual summer sandwiched between the chill air of morning and late afternoon. It evokes long, thoughtful silences, recognition of underlying truths about seasons passing and people holding on, fighting change in ways peculiar to the Golden State. One could feel the cold press of winter and opt for an alternative reality, pretend that nothing's really over, that everything, while not dormant, is lying low only briefly, to present itself fully again with only the slightest degree of change in the elevation of the sun. At any moment it could happen, winter could hop-scotch right into spring, with full promise of rebirth and something better than renewal—a new landscape, malleable and defined by how one would have it, rather than by anything endemic to the what-is. There is something cruel, in that, about California; something hostile in the nature of the way the golden bear treats reality.

Ross rode along with Donya, chauffeured in a black town car behind the hearse and behind Brenda and Tom in their Buick Park Avenue, which Tom drove himself. Ross looked out the window at the revelatory light—sun too low on the horizon, hue too pale—and thought about the poison in his gut, the toxicity put there by his own collision with the time, the date, the year. He had never been able to accept Bobby's age. As long as Ross could feel that Bobby was still a boy he could pretend that all his son's mistakes were just growing pains and errors of youth. There was plenty of time for a turn-around, for him to get his head screwed-on-straight, time yet for him to "respond," as the hope went. What's more, as long as Bobby was young, Ross could feel that he, too, had youth left, or at least was not yet old. The two of them had been remarkable in their self-delusion, eternal *Candides*, blind to truth and relying on an untrustworthy internal cipher to interpret events. But all the while, actuality dripped biliously into their deeper beings and made them sick, giving off vapors that infiltrated their thought processes, haunted their inner dialogue, and eventually made them mad.

Tom and Brenda had taken three days to drive out from Ohio, because Brenda needed the time to think about what awaited them on the coast. They stayed in motels, started each day early

and took breakfasts in cold vinyl-covered booths at coffee shops, and they talked. Brenda could always talk to Tom—it was the thing that had brought them together in the first place. They put in long days on the road, stopping along the way at Stucky's and MacDonalds and Hardees, pulling in after sundown at any motel they could find showing a VACANCY sign.

Ross made arrangements for them at the Fairmount Hotel in San Francisco and for some reason insisted upon covering the expense. It was an odd gesture, particularly since Tom Bowles could buy Ross for twice what he was worth just to let him rust. The previous year, Tom had sold a manufacturing business that he had built-up over forty years, producing parts for heating and air conditioning systems for major manufacturers throughout the U.S. He made a cozy seven-million-dollar profit from the sale, and since then he and Brenda had been living a simple, quiet life, spending weeks at a time at their house on Lake Vesuvius in the southern part of Ohio. They were living out an extended honeymoon that had been deferred twenty-three years, until the last of Tom's four children were out-of-the-house, and while he managed his plant. His first wife, the mother of his children, died unexpectedly of breast cancer at thirty-two, leaving a three-year-old daughter and boys ages five, seven and nine. Brenda met Tom through a friend who had known him since his undergraduate days at Ohio State, and she and Tom were married in 1975, a year after they had met, two years following the death of Tom's first wife. Bobby Ross was seventeen years old at the time and no longer living at home.

Brenda became a devoted stepmother, but her own blood vexed. She was sick with estrangement — her love, her state, her son — but she didn't let it show. Brenda was stoic with pain. Bobby, on the other hand, wasn't. He was his father's son and he felt abandoned, first by his dad, later by his mom. There was marginal truth to the former, none to the latter, but either way Bobby "acted out," as they say of ritalin dependent children, his frustration. His attitude toward Brenda's remarrying was immature and he made her pay by withdrawing his affection. He shared an apartment with friends and lived a subterranean lifestyle of low-paid part-time jobs and late-night raids on bars. After Brenda and Tom were married, and Brenda moved to Ohio, months would pass during which she had no idea where Bobby was, no way to reach him. Then, out-of-the-blue, the phone would ring and he would be on the other end of the line. And he would sound fine, though Brenda had a mother's intuition about how things really were. Bobby never seemed to have a prospect he could talk at length about. He never seemed to have a girlfriend or personal news of any kind. He just drifted in place, one tick above the abyss. Once he showed up unannounced on his mother's doorstep in Columbus, and he stayed for two days,

before driving on toward the east coast. He didn't seem to have any real purpose for going, no real agenda. He hung around the house and made the Bowles children nervous. He was polite and deferential to Tom, but Brenda could sense that Bobby felt uncomfortable, and they parted sadly. It was as if he had tested the waters and discovered that his mother's new home was not his, and never could be. She had moved on to another life, and at any rate it was past time for him to have one of his own. When he drove off, Brenda wondered if she would ever see him again. In fact, over the next fifteen years she saw him only occasionally. Sometimes a year would pass between contacts, and little-by-little Bobby's distance eroded their sense of intimacy. By 1990, when the last of Tom's children left home for college, Brenda felt more connected to her adopted kids than to her own son. By understandable coincidence, Bobby's communications became more regular about that time. He began to reach out. In the years between his thirty-second and fortieth birthdays—his “recovery years”—he called her frequently from residential treatment centers.

“You don't look well, Ross,” Brenda said, when finally the two spoke at the cemetery. The walk to the grave site was the first time, since Brenda's arrival, that they were together for a semi-private moment. Donya and Tom held back, staying by the cars, chatting amiably, mostly giving Ross and Brenda some distance.

“My son is dead,” Ross answered, a voice of exhaustion, drained from the present.

“Our son,” Brenda said quietly.

“Our son.”

Gently she took his arm and the two walked together, negotiating the lawn as if they had selected a particularly unfortunate route.

Brenda had sat up much of the night, sitting in the window of her hotel room, staring out at the cathedral in the distance. Ross had thought only of the proximity of the hotel to the church, thinking it a convenience, but Brenda couldn't stop looking at the imposing stone structure. For years, when she was living in the Bay Area, she had driven by Grace Cathedral and marveled at its beauty. Now its austerity overwhelmed. It sat across from Huntington Park like a sepulcher

for the reposition of everything she could recall about her former life. Why had Ross put her here?

Ross and Donya were staying at the home of a friend in Mill Valley, who was away, vacationing in Hawaii, and had called when he heard the news to offer the house as a refuge. Ross wouldn't return to his own place, couldn't stand to be in that showcase home of his, where the shadow of his son, hanging lifeless from a tree, had left an indelible image on his living room wall. He couldn't go back and there was talk that he never would.

Ross managed funeral arrangements through the mortuary that prepared Bobby's body. There was a strange scene just two days before the funeral, when a woman whom Ross had never seen before showed up at the mortuary while he was there. She demanded to see Bobby, was irrational, out-of-control and said ghastly things. "Bobby said you would do this!" she screamed. "He said you would do everything the way you wanted it! That none of it would be what he wanted! Bobby wanted to be cremated! He wanted to have his ashes scattered from Golden Gate Bridge!" The woman, who Ross judged to be about Bobby's age, depleted, wan, was in an irrational state. The mortuary operator called for the police, who took her away in the back seat of a patrol car. Ross tried to have a sane conversation with her—maybe she knew something about why Bobby had come to Ross's house that night—but it was useless. She was utterly incomprehensible. Before they left, one of them told Ross that he thought she was on PCP. It was a distasteful, unsettling experience that Ross declined to report to Brenda. Bobby left no will or written statement indicating his wishes, so disposition of the remains had been left for Ross to determine, and he had done so without counsel.

"You were the last to see him," Brenda said. She offered the thought magnanimously, as if those last moments had been a privilege, but unintentionally reminding that they came burdened with palpable feelings of guilt.

Ross nodded unenthusiastically that it was true. "He came to the house. Donya and I were getting ready to go out to a party downtown. He just showed up at the door." Ross spoke in a flat monotone, as if he was pumped full of sedatives. Maybe he was, Brenda didn't know. "He wasn't well, I could see that. I told him that I was on my way out, but to make himself comfortable and I would see him later..." Ross swallowed with difficulty. He glanced furtively at Brenda—a quick scared check for judgment. His eyes welled.

“Why was he there, Ross?” Brenda asked. She sounded remote but gentle, relying on that device that had served her so well through all of her dark periods—her ability to delay emotional meltdown. First she would hold her ground, stabilize, manage the bare essentials so she could cocoon without distraction: pay the bills early, stock the shelves, do the laundry. She would read and smoke cigarettes. Little-by-little she would go underground, deep into her thoughts, but not her sadness. That she would postpone, maybe for months, until one afternoon it would hit her while she was watching Oprah Winfrey, and she would start to cry. She would lay on her bed and cry and then fall to sleep. And when she would get up an hour or so later, she would be tranquil, low-key but back in control. Temporarily purged. Then the episode would be repeated a few times in the ensuing weeks, and then it would be over. Brenda parceled out her heartbreak in that way, so that everything about it was gradual, for to do it any other way might be too much, might knock her down so hard that she might never get back up.

“He called me just a week ago and he sounded fine,” she said. It was just so good to hear his voice—I hadn’t heard from him in such a long time. He told me he was starting a new job and that he had seen you recently.”

“Bobby couldn’t ask for help,” Ross said, apropos of nothing, spoken not to Brenda or anyone else; just doggerel leaked to the sonic realm. “He could present himself and let you give help, but he just couldn’t reach out.” He was a thiopental sodium drip of divulgence, a conveyor of tragic summations.

“He loved you, Ross, I know that. It was very poor of Bobby to end it the way he did,” she said, a conclusion she had intended to offer eventually, though the appropriate time came sooner than expected. Ross seemed in immediate need. “You don’t deserve to carry around the burden of some implication that I don’t think Bobby even intended.”

Ross was aggressively self-convicting, bitter with submerged anger. “I was a piss-poor father to him, Bren. I didn’t teach him anything, didn’t help him learn the right things.”

“That’s not true, Ross,” Brenda said. “You were actually a pretty good father.” Something in her tone made certain the fact that she had been doing some deep reflecting. “I’ve got no reservations about either of us in that regard. For as experienced as we were as young parents, for as much as we knew, we did the best we could. And it was fine. The worst that can

be said of you were at the start of a great career, and you made some choices that meant you didn't have a lot of time to spend with him. That's the worst that can be said—that you were working, which is what daddys are supposed to do.”

Ross glanced nervously at her as they walked. She seemed to know him so intimately, and yet now seemed so much more like a stranger.

“I didn't stay with his mother—that's worse,” Ross said.

Brenda didn't give the thought any time to take flight. “A lot of it worked out, Ross,” she countered. There seemed to ring a note of victory in that. She had survived. It seemed to say *People can survive you, Ross—you are not everything in every other person's world.*

They walked on for a moment without saying a word, moving on toward the black canopy that had been positioned over the open grave. The pastor was there, the pall bearers waited in a row. Lightweight folding chairs, still empty, were arranged in a semi-circle around one side of the site. A grackle complained from a nearby tree. The subversive wind bit, sly in its icy way.

“Look Ross,” Brenda said firmly. “Maybe everyone should have done more, but some of the problems Bobby had were just his. He made them and they were his to fix. They bewildered me. At some point, I stopped knowing what to say. He was my child, Ross—I gave birth to him—and I stopped knowing. I think you did, too. We can drive ourselves to deep, deep sorrow making judgments against ourselves, and we can do the self-torture. That's not what I want to take away from this. There are precious days left.” Brenda stopped for a moment and looked squarely at him. He seemed almost to hang his head in shame. His eyes revealed panic, confusion and pain. His usual aura was so notably absent that Ross appeared diminished and vulnerable, even defenseless, and it didn't suit him. Some people are meant to be exemplar, and Ross was one. For things to be any other way was an abomination and against order.

“Nothing was all wrong, I know that. Some things about Bobby we're right, and if you take the blame you can take the credit, too. He wasn't a bad person. That's important to remember. For all his problems, Bobby never became a bad person.” Brenda stated Bobby's credential in the one area she deemed critical: he was kind. “When Bobby and I talked,

especially over the last few years, he was always so sweet and hopeful. He was always lost, it seemed to me. He didn't ever know what he was doing, or where he was going. What he did to you, I think it was just a mistake. I don't think he thought about the consequences of how it would seem."

"He hung himself outside my picture window, Brenda," Ross said bitterly. "Now what does that say to you?"

"I think he came to your house that night because that's the place he wanted to be—to be with you, Ross. I think his world was caving in and he just wanted to go home, so he went to his father."

Ross seemed to buckle at the knees a little, and Brenda squeezed his arm, supporting him. Their fifteen year age difference had never seemed more obvious. Transition. She had once been like an acolyte, the responsible party to his unbridled will-to-binge, but she was older then. Out from under his influence, she had rediscovered youth of her own.

"I feel bad for you, Ross," she said, as they reached the grave. She squared up and looked him in the eyes. "You are going to go through this time, now, mourning while trying to separate yourself from what happened. Thank God you've got Donya." She paused for a moment, then added—"It took me twenty-three years to say that."

A slight smile broke through Ross's pained features. "You are a hell of a woman, Bren," he said.

She cast her eyes downward for a moment, drawing her bottom lip. Brenda couldn't cry yet. That was coming, but it would be weeks, and she had Ross to thank for that. Damn his soul, she was strong. She looked back into his eyes. "It seems like I've been losing Bobby a little bit at a time for years and years. There is a part of me that is gone now. I'll be fine, but I've got all this time left too—and I can never really be whole again." She took hold of Ross's hand and squeezed it. "You be good to yourself, Ross," she said. Then she turned and walked to Tom.

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What becomes of the people with whom in innocence we define our joy? Brief dalliance makes roadmap of our souls, as they leave by imperceptible degree to further become the measure of our loss. Can we know the consequence? Just when it is time, we are borne by they to new plateaus, which later linger as shadows across our days. And yet, life happens too late. Before we understand its ephemeral nature, it is done.

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Donya walked in the front door to the sound of Ross's voice coming from the kitchen. He was yelling. "There must be something that can be done. For Christ sake, Luc, you've got other places. Move them! Tell them I'll pay a month's rent! I'll pay a damned bonus! What do you mean? No, I can't accept that! How much money have I paid to you over the years? Luc, are you there?"

"What are you yelling about?" she asked.

Ross turned around and looked at her, his face red with anger—a look Donya had rarely seen. He held the telephone receiver in his hand. Suddenly he went through a series of wild gyrations, as if he might be about to throw it through a window, then he thought better of it and slammed it back down on the hook instead. "They've rented the house," he said, his tone vitriolic, as if it somehow it was all part of a broad karmic retribution.

"The house in Provence?" Donya asked, surprised.

"The house in Provence—Luc rented it," Ross said peevishly.

"To whom? I thought it was going to be available until March."

“That’s what I thought, too,” Ross said, moving around the kitchen as if searching for something to strike, something that wouldn’t break. “He rented it to some son-of-a-bitch Russian, some privileged prick who offered him double rate.”

“Geez,” Donya said, matter-of-fact. “He must really need that vacation.”

“Well, whatever—he’s got our house,” Ross said, disgusted. “Now we got nowhere to stay. Jesus Christ!” he cursed, taking another karate chop at the air.

The plan had come together quickly, hatched on loose assumptions and arguable feasibility. Ross wanted out of Dodge. He wanted to split town so badly that his skin crawled. He absolutely couldn’t go back home; couldn’t get himself to walk through the door. Bobby was there. In every way that hurt and caused pain, Bobby’s ghost walked those halls. He hung in permanent effigy of a failure to rear, a silhouette of desiccated promise that lingered on the wall of the living room and insinuated guilt. And it was Ross’s guilt, and he didn’t want to face it and he wanted out.

For nearly a week Ross and Donya had been living out of a suitcase, she making occasional trips back to their house to pick up the additional items needed to maintain their satellite existence. Lee Steinman, an architect whose house they were staying in, was returning from vacation the next day, so they were having to make new accommodation plans. Donya had booked them into the Mission Inn in Sonoma for four nights, a century-old Spanish-colonial hotel that had been reopened as a health spa. She had gone there for facials, massage and herbal wraps and loved the place. Ross had never been, but he was happy for Donya’s decisiveness. She had paid extra to book them into one of the “wine country” rooms, which were located away from the main hotel, and offered greater privacy. They were large and comfortable, with a fireplace and a balcony that looked out over palms and well-manicured hedges and lawns. “We can relax there,” Donya told him. “No phones, no seeing people. We don’t even have to tell anyone where we are at.” That sounded good to Ross. He didn’t want to be intruded upon in any way, didn’t want to have to think about anything, not even the bed he would sleep in at night. He had moved from the shocked to the anger-and-frustration phase, and for now he just wanted to be left alone.

“What you need is birds,” Donya said.

“Birds?” Ross asked.

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The room at the Sonoma Mission Inn in which they did the herbal wraps had the sound of piped-in birds. They were a part of the ambient atmosphere, sounding their little quatern phrases, warbles and shrills in a part of the sonic dimension once removed from now. Rather, they called out from a hypnogogic space, more dream than reality, all a part of the ride. The idea was to build a brainslide down to a subterranean level of thought—something close to Alpha, soon to Beta—then to suck the toxins out of you while you were stupid. Hot towels, smelling of eucalyptus and rich blended vapors—cinnamon? rosemary? patchouli?—were carefully wrapped over the naked frame. It was a leaching process. Little openings were left over the eyes so the detoxifying person could see out, but everything else was in deep-bake. Ross lay there thinking about that movie The Naked Runner, in which the African natives slow-roast one of their white captives in a mud glaze, patiently rotating him over an open fire. Is this safe?

“So, do you like them?” Donya asked the question from her place in the mostly-dark, from over on the next slab.

“Who?” Ross asked in a half-whisper. He felt that by talking he was probably violating a house rule. The dedication to atmosphere was oppressive.

“The birds!”

“Oh, yes—very nice,” Ross said.

They had entered a little room, dimly lit, nicely appointed. Clean. A bathroom with a tiled showering area that could accommodate a dozen. Only one shower head, and a sign outside the stall said PRIVATE, as if. You go there before you go into the next room, where the slabs are, the hot towels and the birds. In the shower Donya had flicked Ross’s penis, something she did occasionally in a playful way when opportunity presented, just for orneriness sake. A middle finger spring-shot from under the thumb so that it created a little biting snap. It landed with a thump on the head of Ross’s pecker and made him jump, a brief loss of dignity which mildly irked.

“Hey! Careful with that thing,” he told her. He sounded grumpy but wasn’t. It was just that any aspect of sex-play surprised him these days. He hated that it showed.

“What thing, you or your penis?” Donya asked as she squeezed a soapy lotion onto her chest—a body wash—and let it stream slowly down her front before massaging it into her skin.

“I am my penis—old and flaccid,” Ross grumbled, the closest he’d come to making a joke in ten days.

“It must be looking with my eyes of love,” Donya said. “I see you young and flaccid.”

Two twenty-something girls—therapy girls—had been waiting for them when they came into the room. They had taken charge immediately, directing Ross and Donya to the proper place to undress and hang their clothes, and to shower with soap before going into the wrapping room. They then waited for them outside the shower, grinning at each other, grinning naughtily at the behavior of the two old people in the rinse. The girls were professionals, no audible tittering. Funny, though, the way couples of all ages acted in their presence. It was as if they somehow understood at a subconscious level that the girls were there to watch and listen, that voyeurism was part of the treatment. It was audio-voyeurism mostly, or maybe it was the other way around—audio-exhibitionism. People always acted-up in the semi-privacy of the shower before going in with the birds. Maybe it was nerves. They’d be getting the brief thrill of being naked in front of strangers, of twenty-somethings, girls. It was all in the head. The twenty-somethings were marvelously trained to provide just the right amount of time for all this. And they didn’t peek under the covers, either. Ross laid there and felt the bath towel come off, and at the very same moment had felt the hot towel come over. No time for a visual. Besides, it was dark in there, dim under-lighting doing little more than insinuating itself onto the blackened walls, flooding upward from little unseen lamps on dimmer switches. It was going to get even darker. Nary a peek at ol’ Old and Flaccid. Ross felt mildly disappointed.

“That’s the shame of it,” Ross said. “You never saw me young. I wasn’t always this way you know.”

“You had a very big penis,” Donya said, mocking reassurance.

“Not flaccid, either.”

“No, of course not,” Donya said.

The birds. They sounded as if they were next door, behind a wall. Ross closed his eyes as the two girls left the room. “Just relax,” they said. “If you need anything, we’ll be right outside.” They stroked the dimmer as they stepped out and the room went black with spaces of deep gray just within the visible spectrum. Nice ambient design, Ross thought. Feeling of security. He closed his eyes and the birds seemed to get louder. He felt walls receding into the floor. Open space, in his mind. Daylight out there, slowly enfolding him as he lay on the slab. Hot, really hot. The girls said they would come back in and check on them. “Are you there, Donya?”

“I’m here. Are you okay?”

“It’s hot.”

“Ooooo—feels good.”

Is this safe? Ross felt there and not, here and gone. He was not really in the middle of a wooded area. The landscape surrounded him. He floated. Birds sat on gnarled branches, artfully formed on aged, burlled trees that reached with personality over shrubberies and groundcovers. Ross could smell rich earth. A blue bird hopped across the ground, something on its mind, a scent of seed or ripe fruit. A cardinal balanced overhead on the unstable twig of a bush. An oriole, a robin. Strange birds, too, higher up. Large, brightly colored, with draping plume. They sat nonchalant, uninterested, glancing around and issuing sharp trumpeted squawks that reverberated and echoed and caused rustling sounds in the leaves. Cheeps. Little sparrows, cheeping.

Man, it was humid. The air was fresh—first day air, no chemical residue. Each breath was easy. The rich effluvium-blend of plant-life and earth and living things infiltrated his lungs and coursed into his arteries and spread throughout the colonies of his being. He felt washed by tides that rose and fell with each cycle of breath. He wanted to say something to Donya—he thought she must still be right there—but he couldn’t speak. He wondered how he would call for the therapy girls if he needed help. Why would he need help?

Humid and hot. Christ, Ross could only take so much time in the steam bath or the hot tub. He was English at his core, a northern boy. He was baking.

Out past the near stand of trees and brush there was a meadow. A hawk dived on something, some small thing out there in the cushion of grass. A forest of elm and oak and poplar stood beyond, a sea of shimmering leaves flickering in the distance, turning further on to a solid emerald mass that swayed seductively as it carpeted a far rise. Lovers under covers. On the horizon a huge mountain could be seen through a haze, its peak breaking through a low shelf of white cloud.

A group of black birds rose suddenly up out of the tall grass. Startled by what? Ross watched out-of-frame. He watched something move out there, a movement big and quick. Something in the tall grass, some barely concealed violence. The birds sang. Songbirds. Ross opened his eyes and looked around. He couldn't see Donya on the next slab, the towels were wrapped too high around his face. He wanted to reach out and touch her. Man it was hot. "Are you still there?" he asked.

"I'm right here," Donya answered. "Are you enjoying it?"

"It's hot. These towels feel like they are getting tighter."

"They are drawing out your poisons."

"The Indians used to shrink-bind captives in leather."

"Do you feel like a prisoner?"

"I feel like these wraps are getting tighter."

"They are drawing all the poisons out of you. Doesn't it feel good?"

"What if I don't have any? What do they take then?"

"Don't have any what?"

“Poisons. My luck, I don’t have any and I’ll leach stuff I need.”

“Don’t be silly. Everybody’s poisoned.”

“I’ll probably lose something good.”

Donya didn’t say anything more and Ross went quiet. He wondered how one called the twenty-somethings, the therapy girls. He wondered why one would. Is this safe? He felt the depletion in his limbs, a state of relaxation that melded him to the cushioned slab. It looked like a sacrificial alter, but was soft. He thought of Donya snapping his pecker. He thought of Donya in the shower. Ross felt himself slipping back into his dream. The birds, the smell. It seemed to be getting cooler. A slight breeze rippled the tall grass so that a wave of golden iridescence flashed under the blue sky. A break in the swell. Something out there, something big. Ross thought he caught a glimpse. Then another, then all that could be seen was that wave of tall grass. It beckoned. Lightning flashed across blue clouds over the mountain in the far distance and a faint smell of ozone scented the air. Behind the cleansing, eucalyptus, jasmine, sandalwood. The birds sang. The world breathed. Ross felt the weight leave his body and he began to float. His hair moved with the breeze, tickling his neck and ears. A red and green parrot, sitting in a tree, watched him with deadpan. Ross went higher. A near-flying bald eagle seemed surprised by him and ducked away. A cloud of dust filtered up into the air from the far side of the meadow. The birds sang. Ross looked down upon himself, lying naked below on the pillowy grass of a little open space in a glen. He looked young, in the prime of his virgin boyhood. Nothing had begun as of yet. His eyes were blue and unclouded. His skin was white. Ross the boy looked up into the eyes of the old man. He just stared expressionless. Then for a moment their attention was diverted, back out to the meadow, to something in the distance. They turned and looked. Something slowly turning in the tall grass, lolling relaxed, waiting for the next movement, the next act. Boy and man looked again at one another. The boy smiled because the man would know. The man was up above it all and floating there, seeing, knowing. The boy could only wonder.

What was out there?

\* \* \* \* \*

“How do you feel?”

“Like a limp rag,” Ross said.

“Relaxed?” Donya asked.

“Very relaxed.” Ross was surprised by the effect of the herbal wrap, which had been followed by a massage. Alone, while Donya took extra time in the hot tub, he had floated back to their hotel room, weightless over pillowed walks. There was a girl—a really young girl, who Ross judged to be eighteen or so, probably there with her mother and father—whom he had seen in the spa and again on the walk home. He had seen her the previous day, as well, as he sat out on his balcony, sipping wine in the late afternoon. She was pretty and tan and so alarmingly forward that Ross had wondered if she wasn’t retarded. She had beamed each time she had seen him, beamed with recognition. She seemed on the verge of saying something familiar, as if familiarities had passed between them before. Ross determined that either she had mistaken him for somebody’s grandfather, or possibly for someone famous, or finally that she was just a nut. Either way, she was sure gorgeous, no lie in that. And sure young.

What was going on with him? Since arriving at the Mission Inn—following his usual half-day adjustment period—he had been diverted by odd feelings. There was something carnal about the atmosphere, something sexed. (Imagine that, it said to Ross. Imagine having a hard pecker.)

It was nothing to do with the place itself; nothing overt, anyway, nothing obvious. It wasn’t like people were walking around nude, or looking for opportunities to wife-swap. They were walking around a lot, though: walking to the spa, to play tennis, to spend time in the heated pool, to work-out in the weight room, to lie in the tanning booths, to go to the restaurant and the brunch bar, or just to be in the sun. Something about the way they did all this moving about seemed to Ross to indicate that they were interested in being seen. It was like a vanity parade or a catwalk. They were looking good, even in mid-December, and they felt it. Christmas was

week-after-next and yet they were brown, decked out in their L.L. Bean and J. Crew outfits, with their sweaters shoulder-wrapped for later, when the temperature would drop and the layered-look would make sense. It was a healthy and wealthy-looking group: men with runner's legs, weight-trained arms and free time; women without visible cellulite, hair fixed up off their necks or in pony tails, with that regal-relaxed look that said this pampered life was theirs by right and please-stay-back-at-least-ten-feet. The long oval drive in front of the main part of the hotel, which enclosed a manicured lawn with palms and neat, low shrubs, was lined with Mercedes, BMWs, Jaguars, Lincoln Town Cars and the odd Sports Utility Vehicle (Range Rover, Jeep Grand Cherokee). It was an adult crowd, too, save for that one girl, that eighteen-year-old kid who kept giving Ross the rush. The Mission Inn wasn't the poshest spa around, not the most expensive, but still it smelled of money—money that was either somebody else's, or that had been aging for some time in interest-bearing accounts, stock options and trusts, and was now ripe. Ross didn't mind. He had worked for his, that was all. These people weren't workers. Ross could see it in their skin, the lack of tension, the utter acceptance of easy times. Workers never get that, never lose the tightness. Workers get two weeks off once a year and ruin the first of those by worrying about the work they just left and will be getting back to soon. Then the second week they start to wind down a little, until by the end of the vacation they've got themselves convinced that they've achieved their native state of meditation, the calm transcendent Zen feeling they will maintain through the rest of the days of their lives. By Monday afternoon, first day back on the job, that's all gone. They are back in internal trauma-land, too depressed to be buoyed by the soul comfort of the next respite, which may be a year away. It's the December 26 blues that usually come in late-summer, just before school starts. Santa came dressed in a thong, left some stuff that didn't fit, and now it's a short week and payroll's still not done. These people at the Mission Inn didn't look like they knew anything about any of that. They were the smart ones, the easy breaks. They got money from their families and high-toned degrees and sweetheart jobs if they worked at all, then they retired young, so they'd have plenty of time for sailing on the bay. Earth belongs to them.

Ross looked across the candle-lit restaurant and saw the young girl who had been on his mind all day. He guessed that she was with her family. There was a lady who looked old enough to be her mother—a really pretty lady, blonde hair pulled-up to reveal high cheekbones and a long neck, deeply tanned, with blue flashing eyes that seemed full—and a virile-looking older man, handsome with thick silver hair, who looked like a second husband. The girl was animated, gesturing with her hands as she talked, radiating excitement—a kid's excitement. The older

woman beamed back, while the man sat with chin resting on clasped hands, settled on an amused smile. He seemed charmed. The kid was completely in her moment, not another thought on her mind—not another restaurant patron, not another joy—and Ross felt his heart break just a little. That’s just who she was, he thought. She was a kid being a kid at all times, everything important happening at this very moment. It was a condition that would continue with her for a few years yet, until finally the aggregation of such moments would amount to some whole pattern of made-choices, of weighted attentiveness and inattentiveness, that would set-off an endless subtotaling self-assessment that would become her life and intercede on her enthusiasm and focus. There are no pure moments later on, kid. Ross took a sip of his cabernet. Stay sweet, he wished.

The late evenings had been hard. The days, with their diversions—the parade of people, of events, of changing landscape—had not been easy, but they had passed quickly. The nights, though... Ross got to thinking. The thing he thought more than anything else was that he was on the wrong side of the grave. What was Bobby doing over there before him? How wrong was that?

Ross had been hearing a ringing in his ears ever since the moment Bobby showed up at his front door. He thought about his blood pressure. He thought about the silent killer. (“I’ve been wondering about this feeling I’ve had in my chest of late,” he had once complained to a nurse. “Would that be elevated blood pressure? Would you feel it in your chest?” “No,” the nurse had said. “You wouldn’t feel a thing. That’s why they call it the silent killer.”) You never know, not until it hits you, and if you’re lucky you don’t even know then. You don’t want people beating on your chest. You don’t want the electric paddles and the conductive jell. This ringing though, that was something else. It wasn’t his chest, it was his brain. (“What about a stroke? Would you feel a stroke coming?” he had asked.) This was one of those aspirin rings that fade in gradually, a background tone at first, like the low tone you identify (one finger up) in a hearing test. It built in intensity until finally it was so loud that Ross wondered if others could hear it. Am I ringing? He asked Donya—“Do you hear a ringing sound?”—not half doubting that it was coming from him. “Have you been taking aspirin?” she asked. Probably, he didn’t remember. Some things had become automatic. Maybe he had started swallowing ibuprofen caps at the sound of the doorbell the night Bobby showed up, just to be ahead. It would be like him to do so and not remember. Now it was a ringing that made it impossible for him to just stop thinking, for as much as being a distraction it provided an unfortunate continuum, a bridge from then-to-now, that made it clear that all new moments were at once old, aged by virtue of their provenance.

They were suffering. The moments were suffering and all Ross wanted was to take the Bobby stuff and set it aside, but it wouldn't go. Every moment was suicide. Every mechanical, inconsequential exchange was a little chore separated from the real task at hand, which was to carry the weight of moments.

It was midnight and Ross sat out on the little balcony outside their room, sipping a glass of wine, the collar of his suede bomber pulled high up on his neck. Cool, clear. The Pleiades twinkled against the black mat of space. The moon, Venus, the whole damned Milky Way. Ursa Major, Ursa Minor. Ross thought about the bear. He thought of Brenda, riding back to Ohio with Tom, leaving her only child in the ground in California. El Niño was on its way. Back in '84 an El Niño season destroyed the pristine coastline at Carmel-by-the-Sea. It was going to be a miserable winter and it was going to go on-and-on. Ross had lived through them before. What about this?

The headlights of a car illuminated the winding drive and a coffee-colored Mercedes pulled into view. It passed on the road beyond Ross's balcony then drove on up to the front of the hotel, where it stopped. Two ladies got out, a tall blonde and a smaller, darker one. He recognized the latter to be the girl from the restaurant, the one that earlier had been giving him the big-eye. An unadulterated laugh filtered through the night air, a girl's laugh. The two ladies skittered inside as the Mercedes crawled slowly away from the curb and moved on down the drive.

Ross thought of Donya inside, lying on the bed in front of The Late Show with David Letterman, reading Margaret Rosenthal's The Honest Courtesan. He thought of her at the spa, in the shower, letting the soap drip down her torso. Pretty brash for an old broad. Donya.

She was completely gray now at fifty-eight, only faint hints remaining of the black hair she had in her youth. Steel was a color that suited her, accentuating her blue-gray eyes and her freckled alabaster skin. Over the years, she had taken on an increasingly exotic look. Pretty to begin with, nothing extraordinary. Long, narrow nose. High cheek bones. Exquisite lines in chin and jaw, that became more defined as she settled out, lost the pudge of anxiety, the agitation swell. Nerves are bruising. Time paid her the odd compliment and in advance of age she found accompanying grace and elegance. She relaxed, became straight and elongated, gained a full two inches, from a knotted five-seven to a lissome five-nine. By her fiftieth birthday the

transformation was complete and she was virtual-new. Gone was the mousy eastern European girl who seemed spooked at parties, who stood with crossed arms as if fearing a smite. Vanished was the insecurity that flashed in crude outbursts of defensiveness at inappropriate times and in unfortunate circumstances. At first Ross's friends could not understand. What was he doing with her? Everyone had liked Brenda. No one could comprehend Donya. What does he see? But Ross had seen something, something late in his own life that he never felt a need to defend. He stayed with Donya, stood beside her, and now they all knew why. Something Ross tried but couldn't quite articulate, something about space and time. The two of them had set their battlements and made their fort, and from that point on as a couple they were impregnable. No one got in, no one got out. They were loyal friends, not only to one another but to everyone frozen within their circle. They didn't ask questions and they didn't make judgments. They went interior and in that space they found their ultimate strengths. Ross was fifty-two when he married Donya. She was thirty-two. He did the best work of his life during the last twenty-five years of his career, when Donya was there. The award-winning kitsch of his early years—the rococo plazas and gardens, the kidney-shaped pools—were replaced by a naturalism that mirrored Ross's own emerging self. "We are working in space and time." Ross began to speak in vague syllogism: nature is beauty, beauty is designed, in design we are natural. And to teach—"The paint on our canvas will not immediately appear but rather will emerge slowly, in time through the seasons of nature. Lines and edges will be ragged and wild, with an underlying order, which again will not be immediately apparent. Accent will be random. As artists, we will envision internal landscapes based on observation and experience, we will plant the seeds that set the working processes into motion, and we will stand back and let it grow." Timelessness transpired. Something whole, deeper than before. Harmony with nature, acceptance. Ross fought it and bought it. It ran counter to his ego, but something was happening in him as surely as it was happening within Donya. Ross was confronting his own vanity, and Donya was blossoming full-flower. There was sagacity about her now, a hard-fought hard-won clarity. She was the emerging Taurus to Ross's tagged Libra, the flip-side of his universe, and she had the coign of vantage in all things Bill. She read his mind and knew his thoughts. Interpreted his pleasures. She recognized his patterns and had precognitive skill. She gave him ideas. Nothing surprised her, not where he was concerned, and it actuated her calm. As one, she and Bill were solid. What is more solid than one?

\* \* \* \* \*

“I don’t get what you see in that guy.”

Donya, stretched out on the bed, her head and shoulders propped on a stack of pillows, angled her open book down flat on her chest and looked at Ross. “Who?”

“Letterman,” Ross said, looking thoughtfully at the television screen. David Letterman was indulging himself in his favorite character, the yokel who says something stupid and then stares dumb-set into the camera. Ross wished Johnny Carson was still around.

“Oh. You can turn it off if you like,” Donya said. “I’m not really watching.”

Ross picked up the remote control and executed a break. “Goodnight Dave,” he said, a little ruefully, shutting the set down.

Donya looked at Ross and frowned. “How are you feeling?”

“Just a little drunk. How about you?”

Donya stretched luxuriantly. “I feel...relaxed, soft...stretchy.”

“Stretchy,” Ross repeated.

“Yes, stretchy.”

Who would believe that this woman was fifty-eight years old? Donya lay there in a tight, thin strap-top undershirt and light cotton pajama pants, egg-shell white. She wore no bra. Her fine long feet reached gracefully toward the foot of the bed, the heel of one posed artfully along the top of the other. Her toenails were lacquered blue.

“I wish I felt stretchy,” Ross said.

“Lay down here next to me and try,” Donya said. “Try to be stretchy.”

Ross thought about it for a moment, then said, “Well, okay.” He started to sit down on the edge of the bed, but Donya stopped him.

“Not with all your clothes on!” she said. “You are too bound up.”

Ross quickly straightened up from his half-sit as if he had been caught in a gauche act. “You want me to take my clothes off?” he said, as if he had never heard of the practice.

“Take something off—so you can be comfortable stretching,” Donya said.

A frown appeared on Ross’s face. He started unbuttoning the top buttons of his shirt. “I guess I can take off my shirt and...”—he looked at her circumspect—“my pants.”

“Go ahead,” Donya said, motioning with a quick back-wave of her hands, as if shoosing children. Get ‘em off! Get ‘em off!

“You do remember that I’m an old man, don’t you?” Ross said, as he pulled his shirt off and started working on his belt and trousers.

“No, I don’t remember that,” Donya said with an ornery smile, eyes flashing. She looked impish. Her open book still lay flat across her chest.

“Well, I am,” Ross said, sitting on the edge of the bed, struggling to tug his pants off. “I’m a hundred-and-seventy-eight years old. I hope you don’t have any big plans.”

“Stretching,” Donya said. “We start by stretching.”

Ross got his shirt and pants off and started to lean back into a reclining position.

“Socks too,” Donya said.

“Oh, for God’s sake!” Ross said. “Not the socks!”

“Socks for sure,” Donya said. “Your poor feet! They must breathe!”

Ross struggled to right himself once again. “Geez, do we have to do this?” he complained, sitting again on the side of the bed, reaching down with some difficulty to pull at his socks. They were the awfulest argyle, deep brown and gray diamonds, the kind that appeared to him, as he looked at them on the store rack, to be not overly tricky. Ross’s stylistic eccentricities did not extend to his feet. There he was strictly K-Mart.

“Where do you get those awful things,” Donya said, not half-serious. “You should let me buy your socks.”

Ross pulled off the argyles and, for a moment, just stared at his feet. They sat atop the carpet like old yard shoes, slouched out of shape, tired but with that sturdy rubber soul that refuses to die. You would throw them away, but they slip on easy and you don’t mind getting them wet or dirty. You can clean them by banging them on hard surfaces. “God I hate my feet,” Ross said, glancing sheepishly at Donya.

She scooted over to the edge of the bed to peer down and see what Ross was seeing. “What’s wrong with them?”

“I don’t know, they’ve always been that way,” Ross said pathetically.

Donya looked at him with an enthused smile. She reached up and gave him a quick whack on the head. “I mean what is it you see that’s wrong with them? They look fine to me, like feet.”

“Geez, I don’t know. Look at them,” said Ross. “They are all white and bony, veins all sticking out. And they’ve got these calluses and hair growing out of the tops of the toes, like I’m some sort of an ape man...”

“A monkey-boy,” deviled Donya.

“...and these toenails look like old ivory piano keys, striated, yellowed...”

Donya frowned, mock-serious. “Did you always hate your feet?” she asked.

“Always,” Ross said. “Ugliest part of me.”

“I don’t think they are that bad,” Donya said. “I think they are just feet.” She propped an elbow on the bed and leaned her head on the palm of her hand, semi-wrapped around Ross, still sitting there looking down. “They have a hard time of it, you know. Feet do. They carry you around when you are very heavy...”

“That’s another thing,” Ross said, automatically touching one hand to his protruding stomach.

“...and they get bumped into all the time. Their living conditions are awful, locked up all the time in hot, sweaty places. In awful argyle socks.”

“I don’t know what you’ve got against my socks.”

“They don’t make your feet happy, I can smell it.” Donya made a little show of grabbing her nose.

“Oh—for Christ’s sake.”

“These feet are crying. They are crying for big, thick white cotton socks that will protect them and keep them safe. I’ll buy you some. Now lay back with me.”

Donya scooted back across the queen-sized bed and made room for Ross. She laid flat on her back, her hands clasped atop her tummy.

Ross pushed himself a little farther onto the bed then stopped for a moment, turned and took another look at her long frame, stretched out next to him. Donya was wisp of a figure, delicate as a ballerina. The small breasts she used to agonize over when she was young were an asset now. Her nipples stood upright beneath her thin top, like sentinels guarding sacred mounds. He looked into her eyes and saw the girl within. She smiled at him sweetly, warmly. There was depth, eyes that had seen everything the world had to offer, both good and bad, and were un-

dimmed. Rather, Donya's eyes, her face, her entire being had taken on a radiance that could only be brought-on by time. She was a survivor. More than that, a conqueror. There was a strength in her now, where long ago there had been none. Ross had felt its presence, felt her growing for some time. The immigrant girl had disappeared to be replaced by an American wife. The wife had morphed slowly into a mature woman, then finally to something beyond, until now there she was, stretched before him, a full-out queen. There was no thought about her being his equal. She was already better.

"Lay down," instructed Donya.

Ross arranged himself so that he lay beside her, flat on his back, head on his pillow.

"Okay, so now go like this." Donya raised her arms straight into the air, pushing the palms of her hands upward, using her back and shoulders to move imaginary weight from above.

Ross watched her and mimicked her actions. "What's this supposed to do?" he asked.

"It's supposed to feel good, stupid!" Donya said. "Now, put your arms up above your head. No, toward the headboard! And point your toes. And then pull yourself in both directions, toward your head and your ugly feet..."

"Hey!"

"...like you were being tortured on a rack."

The two of them writhed there like enrollees in an acting class, like frying bacon.

"Okay, I'm getting it," Ross said. "This feels good."

"Does it feel good?"

"This feels good."

Ross and Donya wriggled for awhile on the bed, then Donya called the next step. “Okay, now roll over on your tummy.”

Ross didn’t ask, he rolled.

Donya crawled on top of him and then sat up on his lower back, straddling him. “Okay, now I’m going to massage your shoulders.” Ross, lying face down, mumbled something into his pillow. Donya retrieved a small vile from the reading table next to the bed, uncorked it and dribbled a viscous, honey-colored oil onto Ross’s back.

Ross raised his head up out of his pillow. “What’s that?”

“Just something I bought at the spa today,” Donya said, smoothing the stuff out onto his shoulder blades. “It’s supposed to have certain effects.”

“Any I’d want?” Ross asked.

“It’s to make you big and powerful—and relaxed.” Donya massaged the oil into his skin, which was easy. The dry skin on Ross’s back drank like a parched tourist. “Oh, this is going to do you a lot of good,” Donya said.

Ross just laid there. The oil felt warm and soothing and carried an aroma that he found rich and sensuous, even calming. He closed his eyes and saw images from the afternoon: the herbal wrap, the birds, the iridescent grass. He saw the boy below, looking up.

“You aren’t going to sleep on me now, are you?” Donya asked.

“I don’t know. I might be,” Ross said.

Donya, still a-straddle, reached over and flicked the light switch by the bed and the reading lights went off leaving only the soft glow of recessed lights in the room’s built-in planter boxes. In the quiet of midnight the sounds of occasional laughter filtered in through the screen door to the balcony. The curtain sheers swayed suggestively in the light breeze. The sound of a single bird, on some dark branch in the night, up wrong and lonely, rode the amplified air. Donya

leaned over, closed her eyes, and kissed the back of Ross's neck. "I love you, sweet man," she whispered. Another gentle kiss beneath his ear. Another at the nape of his neck. "I love you."

\* \* \* \* \*

That night, in his dreams, Ross saw The White Horse of Uffington on the Berkshire Downs. It stretched beneath him in odd elongated form, racing the rim of a steep canyon, racing to Dragon's Hill where the legend of St. George was made. Ross rode the wind above, uncertain in the ether, watching the horse's stride and measuring its gait. Leg and shoulder muscles rippling, beckoning, it charged on, walleyed, regarding Ross, a gull ferrying the undertow of the jet stream overhead. Eyes of blue-gray steel. Fearless, determined. Donya's eyes. Ross felt himself dip in the current, felt himself being swept quickly down toward the plain on which the revenant stormed; felt himself alight effortlessly onto the equine's back, his legs enfolding its churning power, the engine of load and muscle and iron will. Past the ruins of Uffington Castle and over the Roman graves, Ross with arms around the surging neck, holding as they went, holding on for dear life, silky mane trailing in the wake of the horse's own forward motion, slapping at Ross's forehead and cheeks. "I'm falling!" he cried, thrashing in his dream. "I can't keep hold!" The horse heard his words and lurched on, ever harder, ever faster, until in huge, extended movements the two of them were locked in an undulating gallop. Over the outline of the Giant of Cerne they rode, where Celtic women in ancient dress clutched the ground, prostrate in the giant's form, hoping for life, for gifts of life, for progenitive expectation. They hugged the earth and waled within the geometry of his sex, scoured in beds of chalk for generations to come.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ross bolted upright in bed and in panic clutched the covers around him. He looked around the room, slowly dissipating dream images washing in his mind's eye.

Donya awoke and sat up in bed next to him. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Ross seemed confused and was breathing hard. He looked at Donya but didn't seem to see her.

"Ross?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm okay," he said, coaxing himself to consciousness. "A dream..."

"You scared me," Donya said. She hadn't appreciated. Something about being awakened by a panicking bed partner.

"I dreamed that I was falling...falling from a horse," Ross said, recalling through a haze a moment that seconds earlier had been so vivid. "A white horse..."

Donya, eyelids losing their starch, watched him for a moment and then rolled over and pulled a pillow up over her head. "Go back to sleep, Ross. Just stay away from the horses."

Ross remained in his half-righted position, leaning against the headboard, staring wild-eyed into the murky, surrounding night. Not awake, not asleep. Just stay away from the horses. Donya thought she was funny. He was in hypnogogic hell. A dread field of blackness enfolded his bed, a liquid dimension that lapped up onto the covers like bony fingers, seductively reaching, extending toward him. He wondered is this happening? They receded in dark rivulets, pulling back only to probe once again, growing closer each time.

Holy Christ. Ross felt rising fear. Panic. Something else. A rush of physical self-awareness, not muscle stuff, but electrical. He tingled and smelled like old lamp cord. He felt nauseated by the operations-level activity in his brain: a scramble-for-reason enacted by clerks unable to find the standard slots for their traffic. The commotion within had been felt but not consciously known before. There was melting solder right where the new reality was to be absorbed. He could feel it all happening. Then bright flashes, and Ross was jolted out of his state

of micro-awareness. His eyes wouldn't focus. There was ringing in his ears. He could hardly breathe. His mouth was dry with the taste of cardboard. Fear cleaved to mortal dread and Ross didn't like rides, things that moved. He wanted to go slow, at least now, at this age, but he was losing it. Fears were piling on in ways unimagined, weighing him down. Am I dying? he wondered. Three levels down already, down to the terrors of death?

Donya lay there a moment, nagged by her awareness that Ross was not going back to sleep. She pulled the pillow away from her face and rolled back over to look at him. "Ross, can't you go back to sleep?" she asked softly.

Ross felt vertigo, still not certain where the dream had ended, and where it had not. He saw a flash image of the young boy in the meadow, the odd residue from his experience in Donya's "bird room."

Donya saw only a moonlight reflection in his eyes, but something there didn't seem right. She reached for the switch that turned on the small reading lamp over the bed. "Ross, are you okay?" she asked, a little anxiously.

Ross looked at her as if from miles away. She reached over and turned another lamp on over his side of the bed, so she could get a better look at him. "Ross, do you need help?"

He suddenly slumped forward and then bolted upright, as if a trance had lifted. "I never said I didn't," he said, reassuring her with an unexpected attempt at humor.

Donya reached over and grabbed his face, rough style. She moved his head so that she could look directly into his eyes. They seemed to be gaining focus.

Ross pulled his head out of her grip and said—"What are you doing?"

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," Ross said. A little less invasive, please. "I had this dream, I just couldn't come out of it. I haven't been so scared..." There were no words.

“How do you feel?”

“Tired. I think I just need to...” He rolled over and turned away from her and stopped talking.

“Ross, are you going back to sleep? Are you okay?”