

Brian Allan Skinner
8 Cresta de la Luna, Unit 2
El Prado, NM 87529

575-776-3338

brian@brianskinner.net

66,500 words

238 pages

AFTER THE FLOOD

or

THE CHILDREN OF NOAH

© 2013 by Brian Allan Skinner

AFTER THE FLOOD

CONTENTS

	Author's Note.....	
1.	The Eye of the Beholder	3
2.	A Beast of One's Own	13
3.	Getting Educated.....	25
4.	Dr. Love	44
5.	Fools of Fate.....	61
6.	An Accident of Birth	73
7.	Two-Spirit People	86
8.	The Revenge of the Innocents.....	116
9.	The Mysterious Walls.....	133
10.	Beaten to the Punch	148
11.	Five Minutes from Madness.....	166
12.	A Second Chance	179
13.	Coming Home	196
14.	The Children of Noah	216
15.	Epilogue	237

AFTER THE FLOOD

Author's Note

The work on the following pages grew out of a workshop on short story cycles in which I participated at the University of Iowa. I became aware of the continuity and loose relationship among a few of the stories I was then working on. I carried characters and their primary relation to one another forward into subsequent stories, written over several years, with the last completed just this year.

The short story cycle is in some respects a hybrid form combining elements from the novel as well as the looser construct of short story collections. The short stories included here may be read in any order. They are intended to stand on their own as works of short fiction.

The position these stories have in the completed cycle is not chronological, but is based rather on how I felt they best illuminated one another in terms of a loose plot and the cumulative impressions of who the characters were.

The fourteen tales comprising this short story cycle are imbedded in a fifteenth “over-story” which is divided into brief connecting narratives serving to pull the threads of all the separate stories together. The last phrase of each section of the over-story, indicated by an ellipsis, is completed by the title of the story immediately following. The texture of this interwoven narrative and cycle of stories is coarse. There is nothing to prevent their being read and understood as independent works in whatever order the reader feels inclined to approach them.

ONE

My niece and her boyfriend were coming for dinner. Melanie had moved out only two months before, but the apartment had already reverted to its primitive state in which a proliferation of clothing and stray objects, no longer fitting in the closets and drawers from which they had spewed, gobbled up space voraciously. I took a week off work to get things in order. I didn't want to embarrass Melanie.

There was no disguising the real reason for Melanie's and Rick's visit: Melanie sought my approval of her boyfriend according to the time-honored ritual by which children seek the parental blessing upon an immanent union. I didn't care for the role, but, after standing *in loco parentis* for Melanie for the last twelve years, I was the only one who could properly be called upon to give her away.

I forced my weight against the entry closet door to jam in the vacuum cleaner and ironing board. I wished Melanie had simply eloped. I'd have been more at ease entertaining a *fait accompli* than a prospective nephew-in-law.

Melanie's recent letters and phone calls, regardless of what initially prompted them, got around to discussing Rick. Thereafter, Melanie remained fixated on the subject with the devotion and fervor of a door-to-door Bible-thumper. Afraid my apostasy only encouraged her proselytizing,

After the Flood / One

I suggested I get to know Rick before converting. I'd long ago abandoned the notion another person could make you happy. I was as doubtful of Rick as I'd become of all messianic avatars.

The doorbell rang. I pulled off the old dress shirt I used as an apron and stuffed it under the sofa cushion. I swallowed a gulp of air and opened the front door.

Melanie hung her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek. I suspected she was embarrassed to kiss me on the lips in front of her boyfriend. It was already a bad sign, imputing jealous fits to Rick, who stood with his hand out like a wound-down mechanical toy.

Rick towered over Melanie. I assumed it was merely an analogy for his dominating her in every other aspect of their relationship. His handsomeness, firm handshake and wide smile all worked against him. I decided, if I couldn't dissuade Melanie, who was, after all, probably blinded by his glaring smile, that I'd work on Rick and make him hesitate to become enmeshed in a family as kooky as ours. I decided to pull out all the stops.

"God," Melanie said. "I'm so nervous. This is like the time I came to live here." She handed me her jacket, laughing skittishly. "You've kept the place in good shape. I was afraid that without me to keep after you, you'd become a sloppy bachelor again. You're looking fit, Uncle."

"Don't be fooled by appearances," I remarked. "Don't forget, everything's in..."

. . .The Eye of the Beholder

I'd always liked the story of the ugly duckling. I wanted to take my nine-year-old niece, Melanie, to the movies to see it. I figured having a kid along would make it seem like I was doing it for her.

"You must be kidding," she said. "I already know how it turns out. He turns into a swan and lives happily ever after. How about taking me to see *Mind Invaders* instead?"

"You mean the one about the virus that gets into people's brains through their ears or nasal passages and causes their heads to explode?" I asked, knowing perfectly well she knew all about it.

"Yeah, that one," she said. "Who wants to see a stupid cartoon?"

"Why not? I think it's a Disney picture. Even adults like to watch them. I remember my first Disney cartoon back when I was... well, a bit older than you are."

"Oh, come on. First of all, it's not even a Disney cartoon. It's one of those Grimm fairy tales or something. I already know what happens. I want to see something more like real life, OK? Let's just skip it then."

"No. All right, we'll go to the one you want to see. But how is an alien bug getting inside your head and blowing your brains all over the wallpaper more like real life, Melanie? Do you mind answering that one for me, huh?"

After the Flood / The Eye of the Beholder

“Think about it,” she said, grabbing her jacket and her pint-size red plastic purse. She had offered to buy the popcorn.

I got a different sort of stare taking her to the movies this time. Instead of, *My God, a grown man going to a Muppets movie*, it was, *Will you look at that. Taking a kid to see a picture like this. Where are some people’s brains?*

Well, I knew where they would be shortly.

I couldn’t watch the movie, even though I knew it was only synthetic goop and special effects. I didn’t want to be obvious about my squeamishness, so whenever the music clued me in that somebody’s cranium was about to go nova, I turned sideways, like the seat was really getting to my rear end. I watched Melanie instead. She didn’t flinch once, even when the light from the screen falling across her face turned blood-red and I knew what had happened. She asked me to please sit still, a couple of times.

As the adult, I knew I should have taken control of the situation and insisted on the Disney picture. But she’s just so much more... well, sophisticated, than I am. Melanie knows what she wants and how to go about getting it. Christ, at her age I hadn’t even been out in public for the first time yet. There was nothing better to do during the film than remember things: sort of watch my own movie.

Comparing us to our older cousins, our parents convinced themselves my sister and I were horribly ugly, disfigured at birth. They thought we were much too ugly to be seen by anyone, so they reported two miscarriages, two years apart, to the relatives. I suppose they thought it would reflect badly on them to have something murky in their genes. They never sent us to school, afraid the other

After the Flood / The Eye of the Beholder

kids would only pick on us, adding mental disfigurement to the physical burden we would already have to carry through life. They figured television could do just as good a job of preparing us for life as school could. We got to play in our yard, though, whenever the neighbors went on vacation or went away for the weekend.

Connie and I—Connie is Melanie’s mother—were watching the family festivities one Fourth of July from the basement window. The basement windows were all pretty well hidden from view by scrubby little bushes. Connie and I had put an old board from a shelf across the cement washtubs so we could see above the window-well and learn what barbecues were about.

There were some sticky, sappy knots near the middle of the board that even paint couldn’t hide. When we both stood on the board at the same time, the plank cracked in half and we fell into the washtubs. It made an awful racket.

We heard Uncle Ernie say, “What was that? Emma? Carl? Did you hear that? I think you’ve got rats down there. They’re chewing your house up.”

My sister and I knew who people were because our parents showed us their pictures in the family album. That’s how we know who said, “What was that?”

Whenever our parents had friends or family over—they never mixed the two—they talked them into doing little fix-it jobs. Uncle Phil was a carpenter, so they got him to hang pictures for them. Grandpa Linder had worked for the phone company, so they got him to put in a new front door bell when the old one shorted out. But they didn’t ever want to have to ask Uncle Ernie for a favor. They would be too ashamed. Uncle Ernie was an exterminator.

After the Flood / The Eye of the Beholder

“Sure sounded like something big to me,” he said. “Sure wasn’t no mouse, I can tell you that. I better go have a look.”

So Uncle Ernie handed his barbecue mitts and sauce-splattered apron over to our dad and started down the stairs. Mom couldn’t tell him not to, because it would look like they were trying to hide something in front of everybody.

Connie and I climbed inside an old wardrobe, but Uncle Ernie found us anyway. Exterminators have to be pretty thorough.

“Emma? Carl?” he hollered upstairs, calling our parents. “There’s two kids down here.”

“Goats?” our mother asked.

“No. Children,” Uncle Ernie said, leading us up the steps.

“Oh, *that*,” Mother remarked. “Well, no need to get upset. We were going to tell all of you, but it somehow never came up.”

“Well, whose are they anyway?” Grandma Linder asked.

“They’re ours, I guess,” Mother said.

“Natural?” Grandma asked.

“In a manner of speaking,” Father said.

“Well, whatever did you keep them hidden away for? Sakes, I’m a grandma again and didn’t even know it.”

“Can’t you tell?” Mother asked. “Can’t you see they’re not quite right? I mean, they’re so God-awful ugly.”

After the Flood / The Eye of the Beholder

“They look perfectly normal to me,” Grandma said. “I mean, they’re about as good as anyone in our family ever gets.”

“You want ’em?” Mother asked.

“Well, no, dear. Your father and me are up to our ears with taking care of the garden. We’re not as spry as we used to be, you know. You keep ’em. They’re yours. But there ain’t no need to be keeping ’em locked away like that.”

“We were afraid people would stare at them. Some people are offended by ugliness, you know,” our father said.

“Well, let ’em come out and enjoy the picnic, anyway, now that they’re here. What’s your name, little girl?”

“Connie. I’m nine years old, and I live at 540 Flaubert Lane. My phone number is. . .”

“How clever you are, Connie. Do you know who I am?”

“Yes, Grandma Linder. I saw your picture.”

Connie and Grandma Linder got to be fast friends. And my sister and I got treated to our first barbecue: burnt hot dogs, dried up hamburgers you couldn’t tell from the charcoal briquets, lots of pickle relish and German potato salad, and plenty of Neapolitan ice cream.

Connie and I got sick, and had to spend the night down in the basement anyway, over by the floor drain in case we got sick again. We missed the fireworks.

Connie died last year. She killed herself, which is why Melanie has come to live with me. Her father is a lawyer. He said he had enough problems and obligations already without taking on

After the Flood / The Eye of the Beholder

an underage brat. Melanie knows how her mother died, but never talks about it—except when something makes her think of it, like Christmas or her birthday.

My sister never quite got over the idea that she was ugly. Melanie's father always told Connie she was the most beautiful thing in his life. The trouble is, everything else he did conveyed the opposite message.

I always think of my sister Connie when I think of the ugly duckling. Not because she was ugly, but because Melanie's father's name is Charles Swan.

The movies ended, mine and Melanie's. I promised we'd go to a burger place. She likes lots of ketchup, even after a film like *Mind Invaders*. I lost my appetite 85 minutes ago.

"Do you think I'm ugly?" I asked Melanie. She finished chewing first and took a sip of soda. She always had good manners.

"No, not really," she said. "Maybe you could grow your hair a little longer. Kind of cover up your ears. Other than that, you look fine to me."

"Thanks," I told her. "Just checking."

"So, is this a celebration dinner, or what?" she asked.

"No, I haven't heard anything yet. I'll let you know as soon as I do. You can count on that. How could I become your father and not tell you, kid?"

"Just checking," she said.

I got a ream of stupid forms I had to fill out before the adoption could go through. They asked really dumb questions, like what was Melanie's profession/occupation.

After the Flood / The Eye of the Beholder

“Child,” I wrote down. That’s a full time job, questioning everything, trying everything, reveling in the wonder of it all. Somebody’s got to do it. May as well be a kid.

Then they wanted to know the name of her employer. Who hires a kid to do the wonderful things only a child is old enough to do? “God,” I wrote down. There was plenty of room for that.

Employer’s address? it wanted to know. Where else? I put down “Heaven.” But that sounded kind of smug. Fortunately, I always use a pencil when I fill out forms. I erased it and wrote in “Paradise.” Paradise can be anywhere. Heaven is always hanging over your head.

Then it asked for the employer’s phone number. I admit, that one had me stumped for a while. What is God’s phone number? Then it came to me. “Etcum Spiri 2-2-0.”

I got the form back in the mail last week, for being “improperly filled out.” I didn’t want to tell Melanie. It seems all those questions were supposed to be about me, not her. Luckily, they included a new form.

After the hamburgers, we went home and played a game of *Scrabble*. Melanie won.

She’s going to her friend’s house tomorrow, so I have to get up early to drive Melanie there.

I’m beginning to see what she meant about *Mind Invaders* being more like real life. I’ll have to tell her about that in the morning. She’s sleeping right now. It’s possible for somebody’s idea of you to get into your head and breed there, making copies of itself until there’s no more room. That’s what happened to Connie. Everybody told her, in one way or another, that she was ugly with a capital *Ugh!*

After the Flood / The Eye of the Beholder

And I got it into my head that all forms are stupid, so I filled it out like a smart-ass. I hope the court can take a little kidding. I wouldn't want Melanie to get shuffled off somewhere else. If it doesn't go through, we'll try it again. Or, maybe she could adopt me.

TWO

I was pleased to see that Rick was standing dumbfounded, his mouth agape. His silence was puzzling. I couldn't tell if he was shy or angry.

Melanie laughed. "I still remember that stupid movie!"

"So do I," I said.

"Remember the part where the old lady goes into her pantry and..."

"Yes, I remember it too well. Let's not ruin our appetites."

Rick was still holding his jacket. I'd hung Melanie's on the doorknob. Melanie took Rick's jacket from him and turned to put both their jackets in the hallway closet. I caught her hand before it reached the doorknob.

"Don't open that," I admonished. "The apartment's in order because I crammed all the stuff in there." I turned to Rick. "Family skeletons," I explained.

Melanie laughed. "Any I haven't met?"

"Quite possibly," I said, taking the jackets and hanging them on the doorknob. "I'm still uncovering them myself."

"Like that monster Grandma and Grandpa used to keep locked up in their cellar?"

"Worse," I told Melanie. "Worse than any special effects wizard could dream up, that's for sure."

After the Flood / Two

“You and Mom had a name for the monster: Charlie, or something like that, wasn’t it?”

“No,” I said, “that was your father. Our family pet’s name was Sam.”

“That’s right. Do you still have the picture of him, with you and Mom?”

“No doubt it’s around some place.”

“You ought to bring out the family album, Unc, for Rick to see. We keep talking about people he’s never met.”

“Not on an empty stomach,” I advised. “Come on. Let’s not stand here all evening. I’ve got to check on supper. You can tag along if you want.”

Melanie and her boyfriend followed me into the kitchen. “Smells good,” Melanie said.

“It better,” I remarked. “You’re the one who taught me how to make it. Either of you want a drink?”

“Yes,” Rick said. “Please.”

I wasn’t too surprised by his quick response. Any discussion of our family always made me reach for the bottle. “You better make the drinks,” I told Melanie. “I’ve got my hands full here. Better make Rick’s a strong one. Getting introduced to this family is like a hazing. He’ll need all the courage he can muster—even the false courage of the bottle—if he’s going to last halfway through dinner.”

Melanie laughed as though I’d been kidding her. As they sat on the stools at the kitchen counter and sipped their drinks, I conveyed to Rick the importance of having...

After the Flood / A Beast of One's Own

. . .A Beast of One's Own

Grandma and Uncle Ernie and Mother and Father were happy to leave the Mortons' house early. My sister Connie and I had provided them with an inconvenient excuse: we had gotten sick on the rich whipped-cream pastries and thrown up on the Mortons' Persian carpet. Mother didn't blame us. "You can never be sure about catered food," she said. "Anyway, to be a proper affair, they should have done the work themselves."

Connie and I leaned our heads out the rear windows on the drive home, swallowing air like a couple of cocker spaniels, just in case we got sick again. We arrived home too late for Uncle Ernie's favorite radio program and too early for bed. Everyone's disappointment with the evening was now complete.

The beast in the Mortons' cellar was not as unusual as we expected. The Mortons had talked it up for so long and had got all their friends and neighbors into such a fever of anticipation that we looked forward to nothing less than Beelzebub himself. But theirs was such an ordinary monster—so conventionally clawed and fanged and hairy and smelly—that there was almost no point in their turning out the lights. Of course we expected its eyes to glow like fierce red lanterns. It would have been remarkable only if they didn't.

Connie and I were nevertheless thrilled to see the creature, for we didn't yet have a beast of our own except in make-believe. Our opinions did not count for anything, though. The adults had

After the Flood / A Beast of One's Own

not been impressed with the Mortons' beast, and that was sufficient to declare the evening a great disappointment and a total waste of time. "Not to mention the waste of gasoline," Father added, pulling down the garage door.

My sister and I put on our pajamas and went down to the basement to have one last look before being marched off to bed. The cracks in the basement floor, like the branching fractures made by tree roots in the sidewalk, had grown longer and a little deeper. We knew this was so, and not just our imaginations, for we had marked the ends of the cracks with chalk. Whatever was down beneath the floor was getting bigger.

Grandma did not condone the current rage to excavate beasts and monsters from out of your cellar. In her day, she said, tracing the genealogical outlines of your family tree satisfied most people's urges to go digging up the dirt on their families.

Connie and I were naturally disappointed to learn that all these beasts and monsters and chimaeras and bogeymen belonged to the adults. As children, my sister and I had quite a complement of nocturnal bugbears and hobgoblins lurking in the shadowed recesses of our old, creaking house, but, as Mother had explained to us, they were only imaginary. "Nightmares can't really hurt you," she would tell us, smoothing back the matted hair from our sweaty foreheads. "Now get back in bed before I call your Father in here."

Our father was scarier than anything we could imagine, slipping off his black leather belt one loop at a time, slowly and deliberately. Connie and I never felt the smack of the leather on our bare bottoms, because we always made that happen to someone else. Still, we didn't want to be there to

After the Flood / A Beast of One's Own

see it. So we quickly climbed back into bed before Mother summoned up the monster we called Ralph. We called him that because he looked like Ralph Kramden and he was a bus driver, too. Ralph hung his chrome coin-changer from his wide leather belt and always counted the money in the morning to make sure we hadn't stolen any nickels.

Uncle Ernie was the most sympathetic to our disappointment at not being able to conjure up any beasts of our own. "You two are still too young for that. Monsters take a long time to grow. They have to come back to scare you many times before they take on their final shape, finding out what scares you the most. Be patient. There's plenty of time for growing up," he advised us. "Now run along, and don't let me catch you leaving food down in the cellar again. Monsters only eat children. The food scraps will just attract rats and cockroaches. Now, get, before I lock you in the coal bin again. Only this time I'll forget where I put the key."

Besides learning of the long gestation period required to bring monsters into the daylight world, Connie and I discovered some more rules governing these beasts. One was that they had to be born in the house where they had first been imagined. Most often they were born down in the cellars, but not always. A deep, dark closet or a cluttered attic full of old dolls and headless tailor's mannequins were also likely places for the conception of monsters. This led to the somewhat awkward situation faced by a lot of families who no longer lived in the houses where they grew up as children. The beasts that came up from the cellars and down from the dusty attics belonged to somebody else, often to complete strangers.

After the Flood / A Beast of One's Own

Whenever we could sneak in from outside, Connie and I slipped down to the cellar to see if the beast was ready yet. We picked away at the loosened gravel to help it along, but when we got a handful of pale, crusty scales we stopped digging.

Mother was getting excited about the coming of the beast. It would finally be our family's turn to show off. She began making tuna casseroles and putting them in the freezer. Grandma baked several loaves of sour-dough bread and wrapped them in aluminum foil and put them in the freezer, too. Mother started in on her famous cherry pie, borrowing several pie tins from the neighbors.

She came down to the basement for another container of lard and caught my sister and me picking away at the cracks in the floor. She said we had to be punished this time, for she'd used up all her warnings. Father was at work, so she couldn't conjure up Ralph. She made us kneel in the corner on the cherry pits. When Connie grew faint and passed out, we got to go to our rooms for the rest of the day.

We weren't allowed to come down for supper that night. Grandma must have felt sorry for us; she promised to smuggle something up later.

Grandma brought us slices of raw onion and a glass of milk gone sour. Then she stirred some chili pepper into the curdled milk.

"Now, I'm just going to stand here until you eat it all up, because, if you don't," she said, grinning, "I'm going to call your Father up here and tell him you tried bribing me to sneak you something with stolen nickels."

After the Flood / A Beast of One's Own

She jingled the coins in the pocket of her apron with the appliques of tomatoes and carrots and cucumbers on it. We looked at the pictures of those other vegetables, pretending the onion tasted like them. We also pretended that the clotted milk and chili powder was a strawberry shake.

“Care for seconds?” Grandma asked, cackling like a dry-throated witch. Our name for her was “Miss Gulch”.

“No, Grandma,” we said.

“I thought not.”

It hadn't made any difference, playing Grandma's game. Miss Gulch never replaced the nickels in Ralph's coin-changer. We got in trouble for that. And Mother got mad at us for throwing up again. She had to pit some more cherries, more than she needed.

The beast finally emerged from the floor of the cellar on Friday. Connie and I found him first. He wasn't very big, for a beast: about like Officer Matthew's police dog, except much broader at the shoulders and across his slowly heaving chest.

My sister and I named the beast before the others knew he had even come out of the ground. We called him Pop-up Sam, because he just popped up and because Sam was the name of Officer Matthew's dog.

Pop-up Sam looked like a big lizard. He didn't seem very strong, but he was very stubborn. Scales covered his body from head to tail, except for the patch where Connie and I had accidentally ripped them off. The scales were pale and translucent, like very thin seashells.

After the Flood / A Beast of One's Own

Father and Uncle Ernie struggled to get Pop-up Sam upstairs. Several times they got only handfuls of scales. The fresh wounds oozed a pale, viscous fluid. It was sticky like pancake syrup.

Uncle Ernie stepped on Sam's hind foot. We could hear the bones crunch. Poor Sam opened his wide mouth to let out a beastly bellow, but all that emerged was a pathetic squeal. They got him up the stairs and into the dining room, but they caught his barbed tail in the basement door. Pop-up Sam could not tell them what was wrong, that he wasn't just being stubborn again. They pulled him along by the ears and horns and ripped his tail right off. His second squeal was even less convincing than the first.

Mother began calling up the relatives and neighbors to come to Pop-up Sam's coming-out party, set for Sunday afternoon. Father tied the timid beast to one of the big carved legs of the mahogany dining room table.

Uncle Ernie strutted around the house for the next two days. Mother cooked him his favorite dish at every meal: liver and onions. Connie and I had to wait on him hand and foot: fetching him another bottle of beer, changing the radio station, and bringing in his newspaper. Mother even allowed him to smoke one of his big Havana cigars in the living room. When my sister and I weren't waiting on him he wanted us out of his sight.

The reason Uncle Ernie was afforded all these privileges hinged on the assumption that the beast was his. Father hadn't grown up in the house and Grandpa Linder was already married when he had the house built for him and Grandma. But the monster could as well have belonged to one of Uncle Ernie's two brothers or his sister. Yet no one questioned the beast's arising from the cellar

After the Flood / A Beast of One's Own

out of Uncle Ernie's childhood imagination. Someone had brought honor and status to the family with the arrival of the beast. It may as well have been Uncle Ernie.

At mealtime Father taunted Sam, holding out morsels on his fork and snatching them back at the last instant just as Sam was about to get his Jurassic maw around the tidbit. Sam made one attempt to singe Father's hand, but the fire had so little effort of lung power behind it that the small orange flame barely curled past his lips. Sam burnt his own nose, letting out another cry of pain that sounded more like a belch.

Father and Uncle Ernie got into an argument over Father's mistreatment of the beast. Mother and Grandma took their sides against Father. The shouting and banging of fists on the table went on until Father threw off his napkin and stormed out, tipping his chair over onto Sam's head.

That night, Connie and I whispered in our beds about how we could help Sam escape. When wheezes and snores came from each of the three bedrooms, I sneaked down to the basement and got a crescent wrench from Father's tool rack. I loosened the bolt on the table leg to which Sam had been tied. Sam lifted his head to watch me for a moment. He sighed and dropped his head back onto his clawed paws. I left the kitchen door open a crack and climbed back upstairs.

The next morning, Sam was still in his leather leash, though he had managed to wrap it twice around the table leg. After church, Mother and Grandma set out the buffet lunch on the sideboard. Aunt Edna came by early to lend a hand. The final cooking of the casseroles and the baking of the bread and pies made the house smell wonderful, all except for Pop-up Sam's corner of the dining room, which was suffused with his beastly stench.

After the Flood / A Beast of One's Own

Father and Uncle Ernie set aside their differences for the moment and assisted one another in getting the beast riled up, so that Sam would put on the best possible show for the company. They took my sling-shot and aimed cherry pits at his tender nose. They whacked his flanks and backside with a piece of radiator hose. Sam retreated further into the corner, making no effort to defend himself. Father and Uncle Ernie tired of their sport and went down to the basement to devise a contraption out of an old toaster with which they intended to deliver electric shocks to the sorely harassed beast at the appropriate moments.

Father discovered that I had used his wrench. It was not hanging on its customary hook. He did not want to punish us on such a special day, he said, but he warned us that we would get what was coming to us later—with interest.

The company began arriving, and Connie and I were instructed to help out in the kitchen. We had to admit that, under the glare of the dining room chandelier, Sam looked pretty impressive. His scales gleamed like polished metal. If only he weren't so cowering and hunched into himself, he might have managed to throw a scare or two into the elder aunts on Father's side.

Uncle Ernie sent an electric shock into Sam's hindquarters with the device they had rigged up. The switch was concealed on the back of the big old radio cabinet so it would look like he was just tinkering with a loose tube or finding another station. Sam lurched and jumped onto all fours, letting go one of his belching squeals. At that very moment—the timing was certainly no coincidence—Aunt Edna came into the dining room bearing a steaming cherry pie. She shrieked enough to satisfy both Father and Uncle Ernie. But she also dropped the hot cherry pie on the carpet.

After the Flood / A Beast of One's Own

There followed such a tumult of confusion and shouting that poor Sam was beside himself with fright and did not seem to know which way to turn to escape the uproar. He got himself wound up in the leash again and tugged at it frantically. Connie and I hoped this would be the perfect opportunity for his escape. But the massive table leg held fast and Sam managed only to get the leather cord wrapped around his neck. His face turned a sickly blue and he collapsed to the floor with a heavy thud.

“Sam’s choking,” I shouted.

“Sam?” Uncle Ernie asked. “Who the hell is Sam?”

Connie began crying. I pulled at the leash to loosen it from around Sam’s throat. Mother was wringing her hands, Father shouting, and Grandma directing a brigade of mops and scrubbing rags. Uncle Ernie found it all highly amusing and continued to deliver electric shocks to the unfortunate beast.

Sam remained still, even as the current crackled across the edges of his scales, and the metal fittings of his leash glowed with the charge. “Stupid beast!” Uncle Ernie hollered, kicking him in the ribs. “You two! You did something to him. I’ll get you. Come here!”

Father and Uncle Ernie dragged us down to the basement and locked us in the coal bin. Connie begged them not to turn the lights out, but they did anyway.

I found an old packing crate and a burlap sack and made a bench for us to sit on. Connie trembled. She didn’t like to be in the basement with the lights out. I told her I would protect her, though I had no idea how. She leaned against my shoulder and her crying subsided, though from

After the Flood / A Beast of One's Own

time to time she let out a gulping sob. I told her not to worry about anything in the basement now because the monsters were all upstairs. Connie laughed, and I was happy that I had made her laugh.

Once the commotion upstairs ebbed, we could hear the squeak of the floorboards as the company walked past the sideboard and marched around the table. We could imagine nothing else but their going back for slice after slice of cherry pie, until there was none left.

THREE

Melanie smiled at Rick, as if to say, “See what an endearing family I have?” Rick remained mute, swirling the melted ice cubes around the bottom of his glass. I told Melanie to make him another drink.

For one thing, Rick was a little too tight-assed. I wanted to know what he was like with all the burnished veneer peeled back. Getting him drunk might be a start in the process. I was sure he’d make a fool of himself in front of Melanie, possibly revealing a defect she wouldn’t be able to live with. On the other hand, if loosening up allowed his better side to sally forth, my scheme would have an effect opposite to my intentions.

I set the oven lower, so the booze’d have time to work before dinner. Taking out the largest knife in the rack, I began cutting tomatoes and celery for the salad.

“There’s an hors d’oeuvre tray in the fridge, Melanie. Why don’t you take it out to the living room? This won’t take me long.”

Rick followed her out of the kitchen, stepping on the heels of her shadow. He wasn’t going to spend a second alone with Melanie’s weird, knife-wielding uncle. His timidity disappointed me.

After I draped a wet towel over the salad and crammed the bowl into the fridge, I joined Melanie and Rick in the living room.

After the Flood / Three

Melanie was on a nostalgia trip, pointing out to Rick some of the artworks and arty mementos scattered about the room, things she herself probably hadn't looked at in a while because she'd lived with them. My reappearance startled Rick; he nearly dropped a fossil from my rock collection on the glass coffee table. I invited them to sit down.

Melanie plunged into the upholstered love-seat; Rick sat at the edge, hunching over the cheese-and-cracker tidbit on his paper napkin.

"Um, it's nice that you kept so many of Melanie's drawings up," Rick said.

"What was I going to do," I replied, "throw them down the stairs after her when she moved out? Besides, I never throw anything away. Ask Melanie."

Caught in the middle of a sip, Melanie gurgled. "It's true," she said. "This place would be crammed to the rafters with boxes and boxes of stuff. I guess I'm a tosser, of junk, anyway."

"I was happy she could tell the difference," I said. "It all looks the same to me. Where would the world be without tossers?"

"Up to our ears," Melanie said, laughing.

Rick asked, "Didn't you get into arguments over what was junk and what was a keepsake?"

"Only once," Melanie admitted. "Unc wanted to keep his old lesson books—from grade school. You still have them, don't you?"

I nodded, getting up to retrieve one of the notebooks from the shelf. "I used to write things in invisible ink, so the nuns wouldn't find out. It's the only record I have of what it was like..."

After the Flood / Getting Educated

...Getting Educated

My sister and I started first grade on the same day, even though Connie was a year older. She had spent three months in bed the winter before, from a rather shapeless ailment I never understood except that Uncle Ernie had somehow brought it on. With so much time lost, Mother Superior thought it best to let my sister recover fully and begin school the following September.

Connie and I entered upon the road to erudition at a distinct disadvantage. We'd been outfitted with brand new clothes and shoes and pint-sized leather briefcases our Grandma insisted on calling "satchels." We looked like a pair of very junior executives headed for the financial district of Munchkinland.

I was required to wear a white shirt, dark corduroy trousers, and a deep green necktie: the color assigned to first-graders. Connie wore a high-collared white blouse and a pleated skirt of Tartan plaid in which the dominant stripes were also a deep forest green, as though our status as saplings required pointing out.

We hated our new clothes. We went from wearing kneeless blue jeans and tee shirts and sneakers, that our little toes stuck out of, to putting on the starched, unforgiving uniforms of budding scholars. The transition occurred in the space of a single day, the last day of summer, with nothing intermediate to ease our transformation from children into pupils.

After the Flood / Getting Educated

Connie's long skirt had more pleats than Uncle Ernie's accordion. The coarse fabric was so heavily starched and pressed the skirt stood out as rigidly as a lampshade. Connie ran her finger across the fabric, up and down the sharp peaks and valleys of the skirt, creating a noise that sounded like a stick skipping along a picket fence.

I hated my navy blue corduroy pants, especially the washboard *vwhup, vwhup, vwhup* they made as my inner thighs and the thick cuffs rubbed together. Our cheap shoes were worse. They had no suppleness; the soles were inflexible and gave every indication they'd remain so for as long as our feet could still be shoved into them. Our shoes slapped the sidewalk, *clap, clap, clap*, as though we wore Dutch swim fins carved from single blocks of wood. We made quite a sight and quite a racket, the rhythm of pleats and corduroy and wooden shoes measuring the beat of our steps: *brrrick, vwhup, clap, vwhup, clap, brrrick*.

A block from home, out of the line of sight of the upper windows where our mother and Grandma and Uncle Ernie watched us, Connie and I considered whether we might kick off our shoes and strip to our underwear and claim we were robbed on the way to school. We'd dance in the cool, dew-sprinkled grass along the parkway. The sight of a different sort of doo, however, made us abandon the idea. The thought of doggie doo squishing up between our toes was almost as distasteful to us as wearing the new shoes. We also knew that being robbed was hardly credible. Who'd want to steal *new* clothes?

Connie and I felt like showroom dummies: statues of school children immobile not because they'd been cast in plaster of Paris, but because of the starched, stiff, inflexible clothes that had been

After the Flood / Getting Educated

forced over their petrified limbs. We even walked like a couple of dummies, right out of Sears Roebuck's back-to-school flyer and down the long, straight, endless road to higher learning.

My sister and I wondered whether anyone would miss us at school if we didn't show up. Had Mom and Dad phoned ahead to say we were on our way and to watch out for us? Probably, we decided. Our parents were uncannily exhaustive when it came to managing the details of somebody else's life. They were as thorough as accountants with decimal points to four places.

As the gray limestone turrets of the grade school loomed up after we turned the next corner, Connie and I reached for one another's hand at the same instant. The only consolation we could imagine among the depressing thoughts of school was that whatever we'd have to endure we wouldn't have to bear alone. We would have each other.

Hand in hand, our gleaming leather bookbags held up at our sides like shields, we stepped into the freshly-waxed hallway of St. Mathilda's Elementary School. My sister and I were promptly parted at the front door and led by two Sisters of Mercy into separate classrooms across the wide corridor from each other.

We learned there were two first grade classes at St. Mathilda's. Mother Superior proclaimed that siblings were less likely to contrive mischief with walls of gray cinderblock and blackboard shielding between them.

I sat petrified, knees stiff, like a plaster dummy bent to conform to a school desk. I heard only the wordless buzz and senseless whirl of voices around me. Fear clotted my arteries and pounded in my ears. I would never get through school alive.

After the Flood / Getting Educated

At recess, however, the fresh air revived me. I immediately sought out Connie among the other girls in identical uniforms. We homed in on one another from across the asphalt playground.

We hugged, and I felt great relief. After being hunched over the wooden desk learning to scrawl the ideographs of the Roman alphabet with a fat crayon, standing erect lifted a burden from my shoulders. I was happy to realize I'd be able to get through the morning by looking forward to recess, through the late morning by looking eagerly to lunch. Ninety minutes after lunch there was another recess and, after that, the promised land of dismissal. We'd make it. I was sure. I knew I'd be able to survive an hour at a time.

I hugged Connie again. I felt light enough to float.

Looking around me, I saw I had upset the balance of the playground. All the boys were on the far side near the fence, playing catch, playing marbles, wrestling on the hard asphalt or just milling around in a sort of daze. The girls stood near the entrances, jumping rope, playing hopscotch, or gathering in small clusters to chat or go over their lessons. By staying with my sister, I had tipped the scales.

One of the boys swaggered over. He was a full head taller than me and my sister. I watched his approach with open-mouthed awe. By his dark blue tie, I knew he was a third-grader.

"Whatsa matter with you, playing with girls?" he asked me. "You a pansy or something?"

I cowered nearer my sister. The boy stepped forward, holding his arms out to push me down. Connie took my hand and we skittered sideways, like stones skipping across a pond. The boy fell to his hands and knees. His palms were bloody; specks of cinder and gravel had imbedded in the pillows of tender flesh. A bloody scrape showed through the torn knee of his dark blue trousers.

After the Flood / Getting Educated

He picked himself up, rubbing his palms on his thighs, but he didn't cry. He blubbered for a moment and then shouted, "No fair!" Every head turned in our direction. Marbles and jump ropes became as still as photographs. I couldn't quite figure out how Connie and I had escaped.

The boy's friends taunted him. "Whatsa matter, Chuckie? You let a stupid first-grader show you up?" they said, bursting into braying laughter. Enraged by their taunts, Chuckie lunged at me a second time. Again I skittered out of the way. I felt the soles of my hard shoes settle back to the ground with a mild jolt that made my head bob. The new leather slapped the pavement.

Chuckie teetered on the tips of his toes, flapping his arms to regain his balance.

The bell rang for the end of recess and the students lined up in single file at the entrances. Chuckie glowered at me, a glint of refined hatred darting from his squinty eyes. "I'll get you," he promised. "I'll fix you real good." I took his threat seriously. My stomach fluttered and my heart pounded even after he had disappeared among the line of third-graders filing into the building.

Back in class, we picked up our lessons with the letter D. *D for dead*, I thought. Since I could already draw all the letters of the alphabet—Connie had taught me—and could even read a little bit, I grew quite bored before very long. My mind wandered out the window. My stomach knotted up with fear every time I returned to the classroom. My hands were sweating so much the thick black crayon kept slipping out of my fingers. It rolled down the slanted desktop and fell to the floor, cracking in half. The whole room heard the noise.

Sister Mary Apollonia stood beside me and stared down her long, slender nose at me. "What seems to be the problem, young man?" she asked.

"It's slippery," I said, holding up the stub of crayon.

After the Flood / Getting Educated

Sister Mary Apollonia ignored the broken crayon and jabbed the end of her long, bony finger at my paper. “What’s the meaning of this? We’re on the letter D. I haven’t shown you how to do E and F yet. No one likes a show off, young man. You can just rip that sheet up and start over again.”

“Yes, Sister.” I crumpled up the sheet of lined newsprint and tore a fresh one from the pad in my bookbag.

“Over there,” the nun said, motioning to the wastebasket with her pointy finger and the full length of her arm.

I could barely stand. Every eye in the class was upon me, searing holes in my new clothes. A wave of muffled tittering splashed around the room.

“Mind your own work,” Sister Mary Apollonia admonished.

My knees turned to rubber. The wastebasket in the corner seemed a half-mile away. I pictured my legs buckling under me and landing me flat on my face with a dull splat, a roar of laughter crashing over my head and drowning me in shame.

Sister Mary Apollonia turned her back and went slowly up the narrow aisle between desks towards the front of the classroom, glancing left and right over the shoulder of each pupil along the way.

I saw that as my chance. I’d never be able to walk over to the wastebasket. I swallowed a gulp of stale air and held my breath.

Slowly, I floated up from the floor. I stretched my arms out before me and my legs behind and pushed off from the edge of my desk. Flying over the heads of the next two rows of students, I dropped the wad of paper into the empty metal basket and drifted back the way I had come. I

After the Flood / Getting Educated

nearly scraped the blackboard with my shoe. My new clothes hindered my efforts to fly almost as much as they restricted my walking and sitting.

Hearing the thunk of the wadded paper in the wastebasket, Sister Mary Apollonia turned around abruptly, her habit swirling around her, sweeping papers off the nearest desks. My classmates stifled their laughter with their hands over their mouths. A gasp of fright at being caught escaped my lips and with it hissed the lungs full of air that had held me aloft. I fell to the floor beside my desk, stinging my palms and knocking my chin on the hard tile.

Sister Mary Apollonia slapped her hand down on the desk of the nearest student and sucked in all the air in the room with a windy whoosh. The boy whose desk she whacked wet his pants. The pee trickled down the heavy wrought iron sides of the desk from loop to swirl, like melted snow dripping lazily down an ornamental handrail, and pooled under his desk.

I picked myself up from the floor. The black cloud of Sister Mary Apollonia's habit towered over me. Her face, rimmed in white, reflected the glare of the bare fluorescent bulbs. I could not look at her; it was like trying to stare into the sun.

"Do you know why you tripped, young man?" she asked. Not waiting for me to reply, she explained, "Because your guardian angel would not stand by you in mischief, that's why. He abandoned you and you fell. I asked you to *walk* over to the wastebasket and *place* the paper into it. I did not say to *run* and *drop* it in there like a load of bricks. You will do it over again, *quietly* this time, do you understand?"

"Yes, Sister."

"See that you do."

After the Flood / Getting Educated

Again she turned her back and bent over the work of the nearby students, tracing the proper shape of the letters with her bony finger. I dared not fly again. I swallowed a mouthful of air and stumbled down the aisle toward the wastebasket.

Sister Mary Apollonia stood still, swivelling her veiled head like an enormous owl listening for a mouse. I retrieved the wad of paper and gently replaced it at the bottom of the basket. Sister nodded her hood and moved on up the aisle, swooping down onto the next student who had got his small Bs and Ds mixed up. I sat as quietly as I could for the next hour, not letting out so much as a peep to give myself away. I shrank lower and lower into my desk, becoming nearly invisible.

The Great Owl circled the room two more times and returned to her big four-legged nest in front of the blackboard. She lifted her head from time to time. Her wide, dark eyes gazed out over the class for any sign of a disturbance.

At noon, the first-grade classes were led to separate sections of the lunchroom, each with their own row of long tables and backless benches. I couldn't find Connie right away and my heart raced faster and faster until I caught sight of her, moving down the line to get her carton of milk. I had lost my own nickel and had to eat my cheese sandwich without anything to wash it down. The bread stuck to the roof of my mouth like a lump of library paste.

The students talked and laughed all around me, but whenever one of the Sisters passed near, they fell to whispering. A bubble of silence followed the nuns around the room.

I caught Connie's eye again as she sat down at her table on the other side of the lunchroom. I asked her how she was doing. We talked with our eyes so no one would hear us.

After the Flood / Getting Educated

“It’s horrible,” she said, blinking. “One of the boys had to stand up in front of the class because he was playing with a booger instead of practicing his alphabet. Sister made him put it on the end of his nose. Everybody laughed at him, after they quick put their boogers under their seats. How’s your class?”

“About the same,” I said. “A kid in my class peed in his pants. I got in a little bit of trouble, too.”

“What for?” Connie asked.

“I did Es and Fs when we were only on D.”

“You should never do that,” Connie warned. “You know my friend Eileen, from the end of the block?”

I winked.

“Well, Eileen’s in the second grade and she says you should never ever know anything you haven’t been taught. The teachers get really mad. Why aren’t you drinking any milk?”

“Lost my nickel.”

“Want some of mine?”

“No, we’d just get in trouble. I got scolded for something else, too.”

“What?”

“Sister Mary Apollonia wanted me to throw my paper away and start over again, so I flew to the wastebasket and...”

“You flew?” my sister asked, blinking like mad. “In front of her?”

After the Flood / Getting Educated

“No, not in front of her,” I said. “But she almost caught me. I got in trouble for making noise when I dropped the paper into the basket.”

“Still,” Connie said, “you shouldn’t take the chance. It’s not a good idea to fly in front of the other kids, either, unless you know them.”

“Why not?”

“Because some of them can’t fly any more.”

“They can’t?”

“No, and it makes them feel bad. Some of the older kids might tattle, too. My friend Eileen can’t fly any more and she stutters when we talk with our eyes. I don’t do it when she’s around. There’s one boy in my class who can still fly, though. He’s from Puerto Rico. He has big brown eyes, too. That’s him at the end of the table.”

“Should I say something to him?”

“You can try it,” Connie said.

“What if he can’t hear me?”

“Then he won’t hear you. He’ll just think you’re looking at him. Go on, try it. His name’s Carlos.”

“Okay,” I said. “See you at recess.”

I folded up the rest of my sandwich in the waxpaper and put it into the front pocket of my bookbag. I sat still and folded my hands in my lap, staring at the boy with the brown eyes, hoping he would look up. He did.

“Hey, Carlos, can you hear me?”

After the Flood / Getting Educated

“How’d you know my name?” he asked, his thick eyebrows rising up like question marks.

“My sister told me. She’s in your class.”

“You have a very nice sister. I have a sister, too, but mostly just a lot of brothers.”

“I wish I had a brother,” I said.

The bell rang and we got up. It was hard to see what Carlos was saying sometimes as we got jostled in line.

“I could be your brother,” Carlos repeated.

“Would you? But how do we do that?”

“We just say we are, that’s all. You’re my brother. See?”

“You’re my brother,” I said. “But don’t we have to shake on it or something?” I asked.

“Later,” Carlos replied. “At recess.”

“Okay, at recess,” I said, but Carlos had already turned to file into his classroom. I caught my sister’s eye for a second and told her Carlos could still talk with his eyes. Then I turned to go into my own classroom. The butterflies churned in my stomach again as soon as I saw Sister Mary Apollonia, perched behind her big oak desk, licking green, red, blue or gold stars with the tip of her tongue and pasting them on the papers we had turned in at lunch. It was going to be as much fun as getting the mumps on your birthday.

The afternoon dragged on like one of Uncle Ernie’s accordion concerts in the living room. You had to listen, even if you’d heard it all before.

After the Flood / Getting Educated

Sister Mary Apollonia never got to E and F. She kept going over the first four letters until all of us got them all right. I almost fell asleep. I could feel myself drifting up out of my desk, but caught myself just in time.

By recess, my legs ached from trying to hold myself down. I met Connie and Carlos in the playground. Connie seemed to be limping, too. “How’s it going?” I asked.

“A little better,” Connie said. Carlos said something in Spanish. He’d only been in America for a couple of months and his English wasn’t very good. We went back to talking with our eyes. I reminded him about the handshake.

“Okay,” he said taking my hand. “We’re brothers.”

“What about me?” Connie asked.

“You’ve got a brother already,” Carlos told her. “He doesn’t.”

“Okay,” Connie said, but I could tell she felt left out. I’d make her my honorary brother after we got home.

“Shit,” Carlos said. “Here comes trouble: Chuck Swan and his pals.”

Connie and I watched where Carlos was looking and saw Chuck and three of his friends, each goonier than the others, coming toward us.

“Ah way rake tomb,” Chuck said, holding his palm up in salute.

“It’s Latin,” Carlos told me. “They learn some Latin in the third grade. It means ‘Hey, asshole.’”

“Same to you,” I told Chuck.

After the Flood / Getting Educated

“You getting smart with me, boy?” Chuck asked, grabbing hold of my dark green necktie. All by themselves, my feet lifted up off the ground until it must have looked like Chuck Swan was holding me level to the ground with a single hand. My head was bent back so I could look Chuck in the face. He didn’t seem to hear anything I said, though I was yelling at him. Except for the tie hitched around my neck, I would have flown away as fast as any bird. I was that scared.

Connie pushed on the back of my legs and tried to get me back onto my feet. Carlos looked at me. “Don’t fly away, man,” he said. “Whatever you do, don’t fly. They can’t do it any more. It makes them really mad. It’s okay if you try to *run* away, but don’t *fly*.”

I didn’t care what Carlos said, I wasn’t going to hang around waiting to get turned into a hamburger patty. I tried to fly backwards with all my might, flapping my arms wildly, grabbing handfuls of air, and taking in great gulps and blowing them out again. Slowly, I slid away from Chuck. He held only the tip of my necktie. All at once, he let go of it.

I crashed backwards into the brick wall of the school building, my feet striking the bricks first. My feet and knees took the jolt easily, as though I had merely jumped down off our front porch. I wasn’t expecting to hit the wall, however, and lost my balance. I fell to the ground on my hands and knees. The small stones and little pieces of broken Coke bottle dug into my hands like hornets’ stingers. My scraped knees hurt so much they felt like they were burning.

Connie and Carlos picked me up by my armpits. I was too shaky to stand, so they held me up. Chuck and his friends laughed like a pack of hyenas. “Let that be a lesson to you,” Chuck bragged. “Don’t you ever get smart with me again. Same goes for you two,” he told Connie and Carlos. “I’d just love to find an excuse to let you have it, too.”

After the Flood / Getting Educated

Chuck and his chums walked away as though nothing had happened. I don't know whether they even knew I'd been flying. Chuck probably thought he was really strong and had just pushed me really hard. I hoped he'd leave us alone.

Sister Mary Apollonia came out of the doorway. Her clothes billowing all around her, she sailed over and looked down her long nose at us. She didn't say a word, but kept staring at us, turning her head from one to the other.

"He fell, Sister," Connie offered.

"You must have given your guardian angel cause to forsake you again," she remarked to me, glancing down at the torn knees of my new trousers.

I nodded and shrugged at the same time.

"I thought so. One more such incident and you'll be sent to the Mother Superior's office, is that understood?"

I nodded again. Sister Mary Apollonia left us, her habit trailing after her like the wake of a ship in a black ocean, her rosary beads a clicking chain with a crucifix anchor.

"How come she's never around when Chuck and his pals are up to something?" I asked.

"They never are," Carlos said. "Grown-ups are like that. They only see what they want to see."

I didn't know how that was possible, but I tried to agree with Carlos. "Yeah," I said. "I know what you mean." Then I asked him, "How come you know so much about Chuck Swan and his friends?"

After the Flood / Getting Educated

“My older brothers and me came to the empty lot to play softball, but Chuck and those guys wouldn’t let us, even if they didn’t want to play there.”

“How’d they do that?” I asked. “I mean, couldn’t your brothers beat them up or something?”

“Sure. But Chuck always went and told the cops there was a Puerto Rican gang trying to take over their lot, so the cops came and chased us out. After a while, it wasn’t worth it. Who cares, you know?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But it’d be nice to see him get beat up just once.”

Connie started crying. It happened real quick, like a thunderstorm in summer.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“School,” my sister sobbed. “I hate absolutely everything about school.”

“Me, too,” I said. “But we have to go. If we don’t, Mom and Dad will kill us for sure.”

“I’d rather be dead then,” Connie said.

I put my hand on her shoulder and pulled her gently closer to me. Her eyes looked dark and sad, like they were so full of tears they’d burst. I took the end of my torn necktie and dried her eyes, streaking her cheeks with dirt. Carlos seemed a little embarrassed. He went to line up at the entrance. The bell for the end of recess rang out a minute later. There was an hour-and-a-half of school to go.

For the rest of the afternoon I drew the same four letters of the alphabet, but only as many as Sister Mary Apollonia wanted. I watched the pigeons swoop down onto the window ledge and dart into the sky again. I wanted to go with them. I wanted to fly and never return.

After the Flood / Getting Educated

All I could think about was soaring into the clouds, looking down on the little black boxes of the buildings far below. I floated up in my seat and I had to hold on tight to keep from drifting off up to the ceiling. I wanted to fly so bad it hurt to sit there. Every muscle ached trying to hold myself down.

I gripped the desk as firmly as I could with sweaty hands. The wood creaked. I heard the bolts in the sides of the desk ripping up out of the floorboards. I wanted to fly out of that classroom more than I had ever wanted anything before. I wanted it so bad it hurt like a punch in the stomach, way deep inside.

I thought of Connie and Carlos in the room across the hall wanting to fly away, too, but just as afraid to do it as I was.

The bolts strained to get free of the old floorboards. The wish to fly away burned hotter and brighter inside of me until, like a Fourth of July sparkler, it burned itself out, leaving a rough little cinder that scraped at the sides of my stomach. I must have slipped out of my desk and fallen to the floor, because I next saw the dusty hem of Sister Mary Apollonia's skirt and the puddle of pee beneath my own desk.

I never flew again. I couldn't. It hurt to even try. Carlos just sort of forgot how; he had no one to fly with. Connie stopped flying, too, but for a different reason. She didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings. She didn't want to fly when nobody else could. I've never seen her float again, either, not even in her sleep.

After the Flood / Getting Educated

We learned our lesson that first day. I discovered we hadn't been sent to school to learn anything at all. We'd been sent to get educated, and we had been. It happened more quickly than I ever imagined possible, though. They always told us you had to go to school for twenty years to get educated. Connie and I always were quick learners.

FOUR

“I don’t remember being able to fly,” Melanie announced, giggling and gurgling.

“Of course not,” I said. “You’re an educated woman. That’s one of the first things they drum out of you: all your natural abilities.”

Melanie giggled again. Her tittering refuted my story and she saw that I was getting annoyed with her. We had not lost our ability to talk with our eyes.

As though to make up for her slights, she asked Rick if he had been able to fly as a boy, putting the conversation back on track and involving her boyfriend.

“Not exactly,” he said. “I used to be able to fly in my dreams sometimes, but I haven’t had a flying dream in a long time.”

“Dreams are vestiges of memory,” I told him. “How could you dream about something you’ve never seen done or been able to do yourself?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, shrugging. “I’d have to think about that.”

“Sure,” I said. “That’s what our schooling has taught us to do: deny our intuitions, bind and gag them with logical arguments. You’ve swallowed it whole. It’s time you questioned things, Rick.”

Melanie was growing uncomfortable with the direction of our conversation. I knew I was grilling Rick, but if I didn’t put him on the hot seat, how would we know what dark residues coated

After the Flood / Four

his insides? If I couldn't get them to bubble up, Melanie would have to discover them the hard way. Rick wasn't cooperating; he remained in control.

She steered the conversation away from a confrontation and asked, "I didn't know you and Mom knew my Dad already in grade school. It's almost spooky."

"Why? Is it so strange that we were all children once?"

"No, but it's weird how you all seemed to be who you are way back then. And was that the same Carlos who was your and Mom's friend?"

"Yeah, it is. You've met him, Melanie. Don't you remember?"

"Sure, only I wasn't sure it was the same Carlos, that's all. It's so weird how everything seems fixed right from the beginning, like people don't change."

"They don't," I said. "At least not any I've met. You are who you were. Nothing changes. It just goes on with new actors playing the old roles." I asked Rick what he thought, offering him the last crackers on the tray.

"I like to think people *can* change."

"I used to believe that, too. But experience disabused me of the notion. At one time I still hoped I might meet the woman of my dreams and we'd be able to fly off and find paradise. Don't laugh. I was serious about it. And I thought everyone deserved to be happy. I was a regular matchmaker. People used to call me..."

. . .Dr. Love

According to our mother, all the misery and hardship in the world was a direct consequence of men trying to make the world a better place. Like the patriarchal Creator of tradition, men could not enjoy their day of rest until they had remade creation in their own image. As a result, she said, there was not a problem in existence which a man did not bring into being.

Our mother launched into these excoriating displays while flattening dough, flaying chickens, or scraping the scales from milky-eyed fish. The rhetoric imparted a manly strength to her kitchen butchery. The silvery scales flew in all directions like sparks from a grinding wheel. They stuck to her sweaty arms and forehead and dotted the kitchen window like evaporated raindrops.

When her fury abated, I peered over the edge of the table and asked meekly if she was mad at me too. She wiped her slimy hands on her stained apron and bent low to look me in the eye. “I suppose not,” she said. “You can’t help it you were born a boy. But boys turn into men, at least some of them do. So watch out. You don’t want to turn out like your father, do you?”

I shook my head. My mother smiled and handed me a fishy-smelling cookie. “Go find your sister. Supper’ll be ready soon.”

I found my twin under the basement stairs, mediating a noisy, brutal argument among her battered, tattered dolls. I remembered thinking it odd how even the dolls and toys in our house were unhappy. Connie’s dolls could play any roles she chose for them upon the boundless stage of her

After the Flood / Dr. Love

imagination. But they wound up acting just like the people we knew: none of them were happy unless everyone was miserable.

Grandpa Linder, our mother's father, sat at the head of the table, our father to his right and Uncle Ernie, Mom's brother, to his left. Mother referred to them as the Cursed Trinity. Connie and I called them the Three Stooges. They were always quarreling and smashing things and hitting people, but they never seemed to get hurt themselves.

The three men turned their noses into the draft wafting through the doorway as Mom carried in the platter of fried fish. Uncle Ernie threw his wadded-up napkin onto his empty plate.

"You know he doesn't like fish," our Dad said. "When are you going to get that through your thick skull? And what about Grandpa's ulcer? Those fish are fried, aren't they? What are you trying to do, kill us all? I'll bet you're just waiting for us to choke to death on those little fish bones. Get right back in there and make us a proper supper."

"This is what I made, and that's what you'll eat, or else you can go hungry. Anyway, they say you shouldn't eat so much meat. It's not good for you."

"Who are *they*?" our father asked. "And what do you know about what's good for us? But I'll tell you one thing: if you know what's good for *you*, you'll get in there and make us some pork chops or something with meat on the bones."

"No," our mother said.

Father stood up and leaned across the table to where mother sat. He flung his arm behind him, winding up for the pitch.

After the Flood / Dr. Love

“Don’t you lay a hand on my sister,” Uncle Ernie interrupted. “At least not without my permission.”

“You’re a fool,” Dad told him. “I’m doing this for you. Fine. You want to eat fish? Go ahead. Swallow bones until your wind pipe’s plugged with them. See if I care.”

“She’s my daughter,” Grandpa said, “and if anyone’s going to discipline her, it should be me. You two stay out of this. As long as there’s a breath of life in me...”

“Sit down, you old fart. I’m her husband. I’ve got first rights now.”

“Not with my sister, you don’t,” Uncle Ernie said, putting his arm across our father’s chest and pushing him back in his chair.

“Don’t you forget whose house this is,” Father said.

“And it was my house before that,” Grandpa added, slamming his fist on the table, rattling the glasses and silverware.

Connie and I sat watching the shouting and shoving match as though following a game of table tennis in which the centerpiece of dusty plastic flowers and wax fruit served as the net. Mother deflected most of the punches aimed at her, but Grandpa was not so fortunate. He caught someone’s elbow in his jaw during the tangle and tussle, knocking out his dentures. They broke in half.

Most of the food ended up on the dining room walls. The splatters of grease blended right in with the residue and stains of previous arguments. The fish-shaped splatters became camouflaged among the large flowers and long, tapered leaves of the wallpaper. The greasy imprints looked like spots where the leaves had come unglued and fluttered to the floor, leaving behind their foliate shapes of yellowish-brown paste. The wallpaper was witness to all that happened in our family.

After the Flood / Dr. Love

My sister and I left the adults to their struggle for dominance and fended for ourselves. We opened a can of ravioli, spreading the sauce and lining up the pasty little pouches on narrow slices of Melba toast. We were so hungry it tasted good, even cold. We hadn't much choice. Those were among the few items we could reach in the cabinets. On other nights we made tuna and pickle sandwiches.

Mother was fond of tossing bits of advice into every argument, like pepper into the stew. "Well, that's what they say." I think she knew how much it aggravated Father. "Who the hell are *they*?" he'd ask, infuriated that anyone would second-guess him. Mother never revealed who *they* were. Perhaps she didn't know.

I formed an early opinion of who *they* were. Of course *They* were men, experts in all matters. I never learned their names, but I discovered what *they* looked like. Uncle Ernie would send me to the corner drugstore whenever he ran out of cigars. The boxes of cigars, their lids propped open, filled the display case beneath the cash register. *They* were on one of the lids, the Dutch Masters: an august gathering of wise old patriarchs consulting with one another and dispensing judgment with unwavering firmness. *They* stared right at me, stroking their faultless beards, trying to determine whether I would one day join their venerable conclave.

It was *they*, I decided, who were responsible for all the misery in the world. *They* were tyrants and hypocrites, and arrogant fatheads all. In that same revelatory moment as I stood before the cigar counter, among the hand-wrapped symbols of the male gender, I determined I would be the one to right the wrongs *they* had committed. I would be especially devoted to amending the harm

After the Flood / Dr. Love

done to the women of the world, who suffered uncountable humiliations at their hands. I would thereby lessen the disgrace my own sex had brought upon all of us. No longer would I need to feel shame for the accident of birth that made me male.

I would become a Doctor of Love, taking to my tender heart all the lonely and abused women of the world, making up to them whatever they had suffered at the hands of my ignorant compatriots. It was a tall order, I realized. My abilities to compensate womankind were unproven, but my determination was unbounded. I had no firm plan in mind, but I knew exactly how *not* to treat women, for I had the examples of my father and grandfather and uncle always before me, burned into my retinas like the sharp afterimages of reckless lightning bolts.

By the age of fourteen I had begun to exude compassion and sensitivity from every pore not already clogged with testosterone. I was a great hit with all my female classmates; hardly a one had not befriended me by our senior year. But none were interested in me as a lover. I graduated a virgin.

In college I had a bit more success in my role as Dr. Love, but in no way was it proportional to my efforts on behalf of the women damaged by love. I hadn't a clue what I was doing wrong until my sister took me aside after one particularly disastrous date and shared her observations with me.

"You're *too* sensitive, *too* sympathetic," Connie said. "You can overdo a good thing, you know. Too much tenderness and compassion makes you come across as a wimp—or a queer. Most of the women I know would question the masculinity of any man who was too nice to them."

"That's horrible," I replied. "It's the very thing I'm working so hard against."

After the Flood / Dr. Love

“Maybe you better temper it a little bit,” she suggested. “Be a bit more aggressive and inconsiderate; more aloof, more inflexible. I’m sorry, but that’s how it is. Men have been so callous and unsympathetic to women for so long that if a man doesn’t display those qualities prominently, women figure he can’t be a real man. He’s too good to be true, know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I’m afraid I do. Thanks, Connie. So how’s your love life these days?”

“Don’t ask. I could stand to run into a man with just a few of your qualities. Where the hell are they?”

“Probably going out with women who don’t equate gentleness with weakness.”

“No doubt,” Connie said. “So where does that leave the rest of us?”

I shrugged, recognizing for the first time the tremendous weight I had shouldered. I felt as though I would be crushed beneath it.

I discovered, after taking most of Connie’s advice to heart, that there was no single formula, no precise mixture of caring and callousness, which proved effective with every lonely, frightened woman I encountered. It was all hit-or-miss, tedious trial-and-error. I was fumbling around in the dark in a manner not unlike my first attempts at making love with the lights out. For every woman I rescued at the precipice of despair there were a dozen more who plunged over the edge, often with my unwitting assistance. I certainly didn’t push them; instead they sort of stumbled over me, falling headlong into the abyss, never to be heard from again.

Dr. Love, my ass, I chided myself. You’re a quack, an impostor, a charlatan. I was turning into my father after all, only worse, for I didn’t have his obdurate convictions about a man’s place

After the Flood / Dr. Love

in the world. I stood at the helm of a sinking ship in uncharted waters. Dr. Love, my ass. I was more like nefarious Capt. Wreck, leading my battered passengers onto the shoals, foundering in the shark-infested waters of the Sea of Love and tossing them overboard to the predators.

I came very close to despairing of my mission. Clearly I needed help. I couldn't accomplish it all on my own. I needed a few allies. And, I was going to start closer to home. How could I be confident in my abilities to cure the lovelorn when my own sister, my twin, remained a virtual invalid from the malady? The last guy she went out with left her not only with a broken engagement; he also made off with most of her savings, through countless "small loans, just until payday," leaving her practically destitute as well as forsaken. I had to help Connie first if I was going to be at all convincing, to myself as well as to the lonely women of the world, as Dr. Love.

The first problem I encountered in this new scheme was who to enlist as allies in this struggle to rescue women from callous mistreatment while the rest of mankind was busy perpetrating it. I felt at times like a carpenter replacing rotted beams in a neglected house who barely managed to stay one step ahead of the industrious termites who were devouring it at the other end. I was so tired.

But I could at least rescue my sister.

I had been so busy working my way into the confidences and bedrooms of the hapless women I met that I all but ignored my male friends, and hadn't cultivated a single new friendship since my first year of college, more than a decade ago.

I'd known Carlos since grade school. I considered him a kindred spirit who shared my distaste for the meanness and violence men employed against the fair sex, as well as their own. His

After the Flood / Dr. Love

father had been as ill-tempered as mine, and also took it as his divine right to inflict punishment on the daughters of Eve for their weakness. I thought Carlos would be an ideal counterpart to my sister. He was as thoughtful, sensitive, and artistic as she, and yet he hadn't relinquished his smoldering Latin masculinity in favor of these more tender virtues. Carlos did not, however, seem at all eager to go out with Connie. Every careful arrangement I made to bring them together met with some unexpected event that caused either Carlos or Connie to cancel at the last minute. I was beginning to think he was going out of his way to avoid Connie.

"You're right, my friend. I can't lie to you, man," Carlos said. "I'm sure your sister is a very nice lady, so I don't want to disappoint her. I'm not interested in women, man, at least not sexually."

"You're full of it, Carlos. What're you trying to tell me?"

"That I'm as queer as a three-headed rooster."

"Get off it, Carlos. OK, so you don't want to meet Connie. Then just say so. Don't go into some screwball act to get out of it. Level with me and cut the bullshit, OK?"

"I *am* leveling with you, man. I can't make it any plainer, except you're too stupid to believe it. I like men, OK? I guess I always did. Now get off my case with your sister and let's talk about something else."

"Fine," I said, convincing no one. I felt terrible. I had been so caught up in my own plans that I didn't even know what my best friend was about. We'd known each other since first grade, but he had to come right out and tell me he was gay because I was too wrapped up in myself to see it.

"I'm a lousy friend," I said.

After the Flood / Dr. Love

“Don’t put yourself down, man. I could see you weren’t interested in me the same way I was in you, so I didn’t push it. No big deal, OK?”

“I’m sorry, Carlos. I let you down.”

“Forget it, man. We’re still friends, right?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said.

Carlos smiled. “Then d’you mind if I give you some friendly advice?”

“Go ahead, shoot.”

“You gotta stop killing yourself with this bringing love to all the wounded people in the world.”

“I realize that now,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s such a screwed up mess God himself couldn’t fix it with another flood. We’d be down to two people on a boat and they’d still be fighting. It’s power, man. Everybody wants to be boss. You can’t change it.”

“Maybe not, but it doesn’t have to be that way. I at least have to make it right for my sister. She deserves a good man. That’s why I thought of you.”

“OK, that’s good. Every brother wants to see his sister treated right. I worry about my own sister. But that’s where you gotta draw the line. You can’t fix the whole fucking world.”

“OK, Carlos. Thanks for the advice.”

“Anytime,” he said. “And let me know how it turns out with your sister. I still remember her like she was in the fourth grade: no front teeth and this big shiner from walking into a door or something. Hah! I bet she’s sure changed, huh?”

After the Flood / Dr. Love

“Not much, actually.”

Carlos laughed. He thought I was pulling his leg. I let it go at that. It was late and I didn't have the time or inclination to disillusion him. Connie's last lover, the one who, piecemeal, made off with her bank account, also knocked out her front teeth and gave her a black eye.

“Take care, man,” Carlos said.

“Yeah, good night,” I said, rather absently. My mind was already racing to the next order of business.

Carlos had no sooner left my apartment than I was calling up a co-worker, Chuck Swan, whom I'd only just got to know. It had come to that. Dr. Love had been reduced to the role of a matchmaker. I was like a surgeon no longer sure of his skills who hangs up his instruments and instead writes a lot of prescriptions, and makes a lot of referrals to those he regards as more competent. Yeah, it had come to that. Dr. Love, my ass.

Chuck Swan hadn't been at the office very long. We'd only begun speaking to one another during the last couple of weeks. We weren't friends. There was none of the closeness that comes from growing up together, as Carlos and I had, though even that didn't guarantee you knew everything about a person. As far as I could tell, Chuck seemed a decent enough guy.

After Connie's black eye and bruises had cleared up and her orthodontist had fitted her with a new appliance, I arranged for her and Chuck to meet one another and get acquainted. Carlos was having a showing of his bloody and dismembered life-sized fiberglass Ken and Barbie sculptures

After the Flood / Dr. Love

at a local shopping mall gallery. It was not the best venue for his style of work, perhaps, but Carlos was desperate. So was I. So was Connie. I wasn't sure about Chuck.

Connie and Chuck seemed smitten with one another from the outset. I felt I could relax a little. The rest was up to nature; the best I could do was let it run its inexorable course. I met a young woman there myself: Charlene, one of Carlos' fellow artists. She carried her bohemian affectations a bit too far for my tastes, but I was in no position to be picky. It was a successful evening on several counts. Carlos even managed to sell one of his works—to a retired couple from Indianapolis.

As the summer wore on I saw less and less of Connie. She had moved into Chuck's apartment and they spent a considerable sum on expensive oriental wallpapers and artwork. It was a loft sort of apartment and had plenty of room for Connie's accumulation of mismatched furniture.

I became a little concerned by the reappearance of dark bruises on Connie's face and upper arms. I thought her excuse of continually running into doors was getting pretty lame.

"But it's true," she said. "I know it sounds trite, but that's what happens. I've been doing aerobics and, once I get going, I forget how close I'm getting to things."

"Well, at least shut the damn doors," I admonished her.

"Yeah, OK, I will."

I knew she wasn't telling me something. Their apartment was huge. You could do military maneuvers in there without running into anything. The only doors in the place were for the bathroom and the bedroom. I knew she was being reticent, but I couldn't force it out of her. I wondered whether she wasn't having her fainting spells again. The alternative explanation—that Chuck was beating her—I didn't want to consider.

After the Flood / Dr. Love

It became apparent, however, that Chuck was mistreating her. One of the reddened marks on her arm had the imprint of fingers. I had to confront her about it. Dr. Love had made the match and Dr. Love would have to find the remedy for it.

“Yeah, his temper gets away from him sometimes,” Connie admitted.

“Fine. So some people have short fuses. And I know about all the silly crap that can lead to arguments. Just look at Mom and Dad. But why doesn’t he take it out on the walls or something?”

“We just redecorated. Anyway, he’s getting better,” she said.

“What? You mean his aim is improving?”

“I don’t know what you’ve got against Charles, but it’s really none of your business. He’s a wonderful person in other respects, and when he loses control he feels worse than I do. He makes it up to me, bringing me little gifts when he travels.”

“Like what? A first-aid kit?”

“Get off my case, OK? Maybe you’d better go. Charles doesn’t like it when there’s another man in the apartment and he’s not home.”

“I’m your brother for Christ’s sake.”

“It’s all the same to Charles. Please. We’ll talk later. I want to find out how you’re getting on with Charmaine.”

“Charlene,” I corrected, but found myself talking to the door.

That was the final disgrace. I couldn’t even save my own sister. I had increasingly narrowed my scope, but I proved inept and incompetent on every level. Dr. Love was an abysmal failure.

After the Flood / Dr. Love

Physician heal thyself!

I consoled myself in Charlene's arms. Maybe that was all I'd be able to accomplish of my grandiose plan. Maybe, if I was really lucky, I would at least find love for myself.

I made love to Charlene until I thought I'd have a heart attack. Charlene never smoked except during the more sedate interludes in our lovemaking. She'd already gone through half a pack.

"You seem awfully quiet tonight," I told her.

"Just thinking," she said, taking another long, slow drag on her cigarette. I thought she'd seen too many bad French films.

"I want to fill you with my love," I said, twirling the wisp of hair lying against her neck. "But it seems there's something I'm not doing."

"You're too hard on yourself," she said.

"I'd rather be hard with you," I joked.

Charlene smiled, and propped herself up on one elbow on the thick down pillow. Her collarbone stuck out and I wanted to lick it. "Well, maybe there is a little something you could do to make it more exciting for me," she said. "We all have our little fantasies, you know? I just didn't want to put you off or anything."

"Nothing human is alien to me. I always wanted to use that line. You're not an extraterrestrial, are you?"

After the Flood / Dr. Love

“No,” Charlene laughed, “nothing like that.” She sat up and rolled over across my stomach. Her breasts made a sucking noise against my skin. She opened a drawer beneath the bed. I turned my head to have a look.

The drawer was filled with all sorts of leather and wooden devices: whips and paddles and rubber clubs and a horrible looking cat-o’-nine-tails with knots in the woven leather lashes.

“No, not that,” I shouted, squirming out from under her. I rolled off the edge of the bed and scraped my butt on the sharp edge of the drawer. “Anything but that!”

“We could start out with just a spanking,” she said, “before we work ourselves up to bigger things. Just once. For me,” she pleaded.

I was scrambling to gather my clothes from the floor. Charlene came after me with the nine-tailed whip. I thought she was going to strike me as I bent over, but I saw that she had the handle end pointed towards me.

“Oh puhlease,” she cooed. “Do it for me. You asked if there was anything you could do to make it better for me.”

“Not that,” I said. “I can’t.”

I slipped and fell while trying to get my pants on. She continued her approach, holding out the handle of the whip to me. She pleaded with her eyes as much as with her voice. She looked like a little girl begging for candy.

“Beat me, Daddy. Oh, puhlease, Daddy. Beat me.”

After the Flood / Dr. Love

I ran down the hallway still clutching my shirt and jacket. I finished dressing in the elevator. A much older woman in a fur cape stood at the back of the elevator watching me. She picked up her fur-ball Pekingese and began stroking him. I got so nervous I buttoned my shirt up wrong.

“You must work out in a gym,” she said. “Why haven’t I seen you in the building before?”

“I don’t live here,” I said, punching the elevator buttons again.

“I have plenty of room in my apartment,” she said.

“Forget it, lady. I’m on my way to join a monastery.”

“What a shame,” she replied. “Such a waste.”

I flew out of the lobby so fast the revolving door probably spun for a week. Of course, I wasn’t serious about joining a monastery. With my luck, they’d be an order of flagellants.

FIVE

“I think it’s really nice how you stuck up for Mom all the time,” Melanie said, sucking on her last ice cube.

“She helped me out of a few jams, too,” I said. “I’m sorry it didn’t turn out better for her.”

“Look, Unc, you did all you could. We’ve been through this a thousand times. When are you gonna stop whipping yourself?”

I shrugged. “Come on. Let’s eat.”

Melanie snatched up the empty glasses and paper napkins, beating me out to the kitchen. Like a doting lap dog, Rick jumped up and followed her. “I’ll set the table,” Melanie offered.

Rick danced after her with the silverware, heeding her instructions on its proper placement. “What a wimp!” I thought. It worried me, though not for his sake. Lacking genuine masculinity, wimps have to resort to beating their wives or starting wars to overcome their weakness.

“Rick would like another drink,” Melanie called from the dining room. “I would, too.”

“What’s wrong with his asking for it?”

Melanie burst into the kitchen. “Don’t be so hard on him, Unc,” she said, lowering her voice. “He doesn’t want to be impolite,” she whispered.

“What’s so impolite about stating your needs?” I asked, shouting. “Anyway, forget the drinks. We’ll be having wine with dinner. Is he any good with a corkscrew?”

After the Flood / Five

“I don’t know. I’ll ask.”

I set the oven a little higher and worked on finishing the salad. I pointed Rick towards the junk drawer. I had it all figured out. If he couldn’t get the bottle open, he’d score low on general around-the-house usefulness. On the other hand, if he succeeded, he’d get demerits for his facility with liquor bottles.

He got the bottle open, though fumblingly, thereby satisfying both requirements.

Melanie dished out the salad and Rick poured the wine. I pointed out to him that the tablecloth was an heirloom. The neck of the bottle chattered against the lip of each glass, but he didn’t spill any. I should’ve made his drinks stronger.

Melanie offered to say our usual grace: “Thanks. It could be a lot worse.” Then she lifted her glass to me. “And thanks to you, Unc, for raising me.”

Her toast embarrassed me. “I think we raised each other,” I said, digging into my salad.

“Do you ever stop to think how much worse it would have been for me, and for my Mom, if we hadn’t had you to rely on, Unc?”

“You’d have probably made out fine. Instead, I wonder how I’d have gotten by if your Mom and I weren’t as close as we were. Suppose we were merely acquaintances. Can people mean that much to one another’s survival? Maybe we just think so, to feel important. I wonder if we’re not just...”

...Fools of Fate

Connie answered the door in her big old terry cloth bathrobe. Her wet hair was piled atop her head and wrapped in a bath towel, wound around like a turban. A wisp of already dry hair fluttered behind each ear. I got the notion into my head that I wanted to finger those two fly-away wisps. I imagined they felt downy, like the soft feathers that came floating out of my winter parka. I tried to imagine what they felt like against the smooth skin of her neck. I imagined licking her neck.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said, turning on her heels and walking down the hallway to the living room. I thought about how the carpet must have tickled her feet as she turned away. I imagined licking her feet, getting her to arch her back in the torture of ticklishness. I wanted to play This Little Piggy with her toes. Her toes were cute, and I had no trouble picturing porky little faces on each of the pinkish nails.

Connie sat down on the sofa, folding her legs beside her on the cushion. She pulled the voluminous robe tighter around her knees and, undoing the turban, began drying her hair, leaning her head far forward and rubbing vigorously. There were more of those delicate wisps all across the back of her neck. My spine tingled and I shivered at the thought of her lashing my bare back with her wet, glistening hair.

“What’s up?” she asked, whipping her hair to the side and rubbing it some more.

After the Flood / Fools of Fate

“I thought maybe I could interest you in going to dinner with me.”

“Is this a date?” she asked, suddenly stopping all her strenuous rubbing and flinging around of her hair.

“Uh, no,” I said. “I mean, I had to make reservations, but it’s not really a date exactly.”

“Oh no? Sure sounds like a date to me.” She resumed drying her hair. She produced a wide-toothed comb from the pocket of the bathrobe. “Look,” she said, drawing out each word like she did the strands of her long hair. “How many times do we have to go through this? Friends do spontaneous things for each other. You can’t sit down and make plans to be spontaneous.”

“Well, I just thought so we wouldn’t have to wait in line to get a table, you know?”

“It’s a date, in your mind, anyway, and I’m not going. You’re stretching this friendship to its breaking point. I told you way back in April that we couldn’t be lovers.”

“All because of some New Age mumbo-jumbo,” I remarked, wishing instantly I hadn’t said it.

“Look, friends don’t go trying to convert one another. They don’t have to believe in the same things to be comfortable.”

“I’m not trying to convert you,” I protested. “It’s just that I think you’re getting into this hocus-pocus a little deep, that’s all.”

“Oh, now it’s *hocus-pocus*. Just because it doesn’t fit your view of the world, I should give it up? Listen, maybe you should apply for the Pope’s job. I hear he’s ill again.”

I raised my hands to make a point of what I was about to say, but it struck me as a papal gesture. I couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t get us deeper into an argument.

After the Flood / Fools of Fate

“Look,” Connie said, softening her harsh tone. She managed a faint smile. “We have obviously known one another in a previous life. People tend to surround themselves with those they’ve known from before. I’ve been through a whole series of past life regressions with my analyst, and I’m telling you we were brother and sister in at least the last three. I’m not trying to put you off. I want us to remain friends. But anything more would just feel wrong to me—like incest or something. Can’t you just go along with that?”

“I’m trying,” I said, but it’s all I can handle just keeping track of what I’m doing in this life. I promise I’ll try harder, but it’s not easy for me. I’m in love with you, Connie.”

“I love you, too. Let’s keep it that way, OK?”

I nodded. I knew what she intended in loving me: discussing important books past midnight, playing and sipping white wine spritzers, and hugging one another. I felt like crying.

“I’m going to get dressed,” she announced. “You can help yourself to a drink if you want.”

I watched the trails of her shampoo-scented hair and the billows of her robe disappear down the hallway. I didn’t feel like having anything. I could only think about how foolish I’d sound cancelling the reservation I just made. Then she called me to come to the bedroom.

She’s had a change of heart! I stumbled over the coffee table and dashed down the hall. I pictured her lying naked on the bed, waiting for me. I would lean down to kiss her and she’d wrap her arms around my neck and topple me onto the bed.

“Could you fasten that top clasp for me?” she asked, turning her back to me and pulling her hair from her neck. She looked at me in the vanity mirror. “Be careful. Don’t catch my hair in it.”

After the Flood / Fools of Fate

“You going somewhere?” I asked. I saw she was wearing the silky white blouse Chuck had got her for her birthday.

“No, not necessarily,” she said. “I just wanted to look fresh for when Charles gets home. He’s been working so hard lately. All the tough clients seem to get passed on to the junior partners.”

“Yeah, that’s rough, especially at the meager six-figure salary he gets.”

“Just cut it out. Why don’t you try being nicer to him? You’d find out he’s not such a bad guy.”

“Yeah, maybe I should, so you don’t have to defend him all the time. What’s this thing?” I asked, pointing to the pulley mounted above the bed. “Exercise equipment? Chuckie doesn’t want to get fat and flabby, huh?”

“Something like that,” Connie said, shaking her hair back into place. She stood up and switched off the lights beside the mirror. I followed her back into the living room.

“Why don’t you come down later, after you’ve had your supper? Charles and I have nothing planned for the evening. Just a friendly game of . You two could get better acquainted. Besides, Charles wants to apologize to you for throwing you out last time.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Look. Charles is still from the old school. To him, there was only one reason a man and woman would get together. He’s learning that men and women can be just friends. I’m explaining the whole thing about platonic relationships to him.”

“Do you mind explaining it to me, too?”

After the Flood / Fools of Fate

Connie laughed. “I wish he had a little of your sense of humor. He’s so serious all the time. So, see you later?”

I nodded. We hugged one another in the doorway, her soft, cool hair brushing against my cheek. I rubbed the cool silk of her blouse against her warm back. I felt as though I were on fire. Hope burns eternal, I reminded myself. And so do the fires of hell.

I went back upstairs to my apartment. After a cold shower that left me prickling but no cooler, I remembered to call the restaurant and cancel the reservation.

“There’s been a death,” I explained.

The maître d’ cooed his sympathies. I wasn’t sure why I needed to concoct an excuse in the first place, except that I didn’t want anyone thinking I’d been stood up or turned down.

I heated a dinner of odds-and-ends leftovers and fell asleep on the sofa with the TV going.

When I awoke, my dream came flooding into my mind like swirling water through a cracked dam. It was similar to other recent dreams. I was swimming through narrow, rocky passages in an underwater cave. It was a claustrophobic dream, reminding me of reruns of “Sea Hunt”: murky and confining, with only scarce minutes of air remaining.

I hoped it wasn’t too late to drop in downstairs. Even though I’d have to put up with Chuckie boy for the evening, I couldn’t pass over a chance to spend time with Connie. I put on a clean shirt and walked down to her apartment.

Connie liked to have me tell her my dreams. She’d been through so much analysis that she could interpret them without a doubt or hesitation about what they meant. She said my underwater

After the Flood / Fools of Fate

dream was a memory of my going through the ordeal of squeezing down the birth canal in a salty sea of amniotic fluid.

I knocked on the door, but there was no answer. The stereo was going, playing Ravel's *Bolero* at chest-whumping volume. Maybe they didn't hear me. I knocked harder and waited.

In the recent dreams, I had been in a frantic sort of panic. I was searching for someone. Connie told me that was a memory of a womb-mate: a sibling who had preceded me into the world. Since I had neither brother nor sister, Connie said it was proof of a previous life's memories coming back to me.

I knocked again, the hallway reverberating with my pounding on the heavy door. I didn't want to tell Connie that the wavering figure I was trying to reach in my dream was my sister. I'm not even sure how I knew that, but I knew she would make a big deal about it, so I never told her.

I turned the doorknob finally; it was unlocked. I peered around the door and went in. Two wine glasses sat on the coffee table, an empty bottle beside them.

"Connie?" I called. Abruptly, an image flashed to me from my latest dream. The shimmering figure I had been pursuing down the narrow corridors of the submerged cave was Connie. I had watched her swimming gracefully on ahead, always out of reach, her arms at her side, her legs scissoring lithely up and down, her black hair flowing behind her like wave-stroked kelp. I imagined I was a fish, chasing those tender little toes into the light.

"Connie?" I called again. There was still no answer. I inched along the dim corridor. "Connie? Still up for that game of?" I nudged the door aside.

After the Flood / Fools of Fate

The music, which was approaching its rhythmic climax, should have tipped me off, but it didn't. My brain felt water-logged. I should've known better.

Connie and Chuck were making love; at least that's what it first looked like. Neither of them noticed me; I froze still.

Connie was suspended in a sort of leather harness, dangling in the pulley contraption I noted earlier. She was just inches above Chuck, her legs straight and her arms outstretched, hovering like a naughty angel.

Chuck lay flat on his back, his cock standing like a monolith on a barren plain. In his right hand he held the rope attached to the pulley. With swift, jerking motions of his wrist, he minutely raised and lowered Connie above him. Up and down, up and down she went; in and out, in and out went the prick's cock in 3/4 time, with the rhythm of his wrist. Chuck moaned. The bolero ground on like a runaway engine with a bent driveshaft.

I had to laugh. The jerk was just jerking off. Connie was his handy hand replacement, that's all.

Chuck heard my laugh and turned his head sideways. I couldn't see Connie's face for all the hair dangling down in front of it.

"You bastard!" Chuck hollered. He tumbled out of bed, letting go of the rope. Connie fell flat on her face onto the mattress. Chuck's erection collapsed like a felled tree. He stood up to confront me.

"You stupid little fucker," he said. "Come here."

"Don't worry," I said. "I'm going."

After the Flood / Fools of Fate

“Not before I throw you out, you dumb fuck.”

Connie followed us down the hallway, but she had reached the end of her tether. “Don’t you hurt him,” she said. I wasn’t sure which of us she was talking to. “Charles, let go of him. I invited him down. It’s my fault.”

Chuck let go of my belt, but retained his grip on my collar. He swung around to Connie. “You what? I knew there was something going on between you two. You whore,” he said, yanking back his arm and hauling off at her. He hit Connie so hard she fell against the wall and slumped to the floor. I wriggled loose.

A coiled spring of instinct released somewhere inside me. I pounced on Chuck’s bare back and brought him to the floor with a heavy, sack-of-potatoes thud. I thought I heard the cracking of ribs or floor boards. The wind was knocked out of him so forcefully he gasped for air, groaning with the painful effort of breathing. If he’d still had his hard-on, I would’ve nailed him to the floor.

I got up and, stepping over him, helped Connie to her feet. She was damp and she trembled with sobbing. Her cheekbone had already taken on the excited color of an impending bruise. I unbuckled the leather harness, my fingers tingling wherever they touched her skin. I got her robe and she quickly gathered a bundle of clothes in her arms. Connie stepped over Chuck on the way out; I stepped *on* him.

“Nobody treats my... my friend that way,” I said. I had almost said “my sister”, but caught myself in time. Connie’s mumbo-jumbo was beginning to invade my head, swirling around in my thoughts like the dark waters in a murky cave.

After the Flood / Fools of Fate

Connie and I sat in my living room, drinking coffee and talking until nearly two o'clock. "I should have seen how Charles was treating me," she said, "but maybe I just didn't want to know. It's too close. My father was contemptuous of women, too. I've come to expect it."

Her ideas twanged with the brutish accents of Victorian Vienna.

We decided Connie would take the bedroom and I would sleep on the sofa. Tomorrow we would get the rest of her things from Chuck's apartment.

She hugged me before turning in, adding a modest peck on the cheek. "I have to thank you for standing by me like that," she said. "You stuck up for me like a big brother would have. You're my big brother now, the one man I can always rely on."

"Thanks," I said, returning her kiss in a brotherly way. "See you in the morning."

At last I had got Connie in my bed; too bad I wasn't there to partake in the pleasure. When the lumpy sofa finally permitted me to drift off to sleep, I returned to the underwater cave where I encountered a barracuda with our father's smirking face.

SIX

“Did you ever want to fuck my Mom?” Melanie asked.

“Sure,” I said. “Our childhood wasn’t that abnormal.”

“Do you think Mom ever wanted to fuck you?”

“Yeah, at least she said she’d like to.”

“So, did you?”

“Uh... hold on a minute, Melanie. I think your boyfriend’s choking. He looks kind of purplish.”

“My God! Rick!” Melanie screamed. She tipped over her chair running to him.

Rick clutched his throat. Melanie tried to pull him up out of his chair, holding him beneath his arms, but she couldn’t lift him.

“Unc, do something!”

I pushed Melanie out of the way and hauled Rick out of his chair, holding him around the waist. I clamped both my fists over his abdomen and pulled him roughly against me, forcing my fists deep into his stomach. Nothing happened. I was having trouble holding him up. I again thrust my fists into his abdomen, harder.

After the Flood / Six

With a popping noise like a wine bottle being uncorked, a little cherry tomato shot out of Rick's mouth and bounced across the heirloom tablecloth. He coughed like a consumptive who smokes Camels. Melanie took his other arm and we set him down in his chair.

"Water," he gasped.

Melanie filled his goblet. I cautioned her to remove the ice cubes. "We've had enough theatrics for one evening," I said.

Melanie shot me a reproving look and fished the ice cubes out with her fingers. Rick swallowed noisily. His color was returning.

"How about a little brandy?" I asked him.

Rick nodded. I filled a small snifter and set the bottle in front of him.

"So, to answer your question, Melanie..."

"Are you OK, Rick?"

"Yeah, fine. Really."

"Maybe candor at a family dinner upsets him," I suggested. "Maybe we should discuss the weather. Politics? Gay marriage? There are all sorts of irrelevant things to discuss."

"Talk about whatever you want," Rick said.

"OK," I replied. I turned to face Melanie. "No, your mother and I never screwed one another."

I saw Melanie glance quickly at Rick, probably to make sure he didn't have something in his mouth, before asking her next question. "Why not? I mean, if it was something you both wanted?"

After the Flood / Six

“We wanted something deeper. We needed intimacy; we needed to get inside of and around one another more than a few measly inches. We each lacked something the other had. Maybe it’s a peculiarity of twins of the opposite sex. We wanted to be whole. We were sick of feeling like half-persons in search of our other halves, ruined in love because of...”

After the Flood / An Accident of Birth

. . .An Accident of Birth

Connie and I sat in the airport lounge watching the colorful swirl of people and fabrics all around us. Having time to kill at a busy terminal makes you feel like you're from another age or another planet. Everyone else seems so stern-browed in their determination, hauling baggage and pushing carts. It is easy to make fun of them.

"Do you remember the games we used to play as kids, going on summer vacation?" she asked.

"Of course I do," I replied, taking a sip of my martini and carefully setting the glass back on its paper napkin. "How about *Counting Crows*?" I asked. "Or *Adding License Plate Numbers*? Or *Objects of the Alphabet*?"

Connie smiled, but it was an abstract smile, faraway. I knew what she was thinking: that it would be kind of silly for two adults to be playing those games now, even as a means to assuage their nervousness about flying. She had moved up to games of a more philosophic bent, like *Why Am I Sad?*

"I know," she said. "Let's play *Why Am I Sad?* All right?"

"Fine. You first." I took another sip of my astringent martini. "The fifth white male with a knapsack," I suggested.

We counted.

After the Flood / An Accident of Birth

The young man strode past with an awkward gait: all motion with no grace of movement. He looked as though he would trip over his lower lip.

“He just had an argument with his rock band and he was outnumbered. They gave him the boot, and now he’s going to visit an old chum in hopes of starting up a new band.”

“Oh, come on,” Connie chided, wagging her head. “You’re so outmoded, you’re lucky it’s not painful. You’d be screaming in agony. Long hair and tattered jeans don’t make anyone a rock musician. Do you recall how lumbering his walk was? There’s not a musical bone in his body. Try again.”

“You’re right,” I admitted. “OK. His girlfriend, or boyfriend for all I know, has broken up with him. He’s going back home to lick his wounds and start over.”

“Better,” Connie said. “But he’s much too self-absorbed to have a lover who could disappoint him. You’re right about his going home, though. Mom and Dad want to see how he’s making out at the university before they fork over any more dough. This is an inspection visit, and that’s why he looks so glum. He wants to rebel, but he also knows you don’t bite the hand that’s feeding you unless you’re prepared to work your way through college at minimum wage. He’ll accede, of course, and be miserable for the rest of his life. If he’s lucky, the plane will crash.”

“You’re right,” I said, conceding the first round to her. We had never had a single argument over *Why Am I Sad?* We knew instantly which of us was right. I just didn’t like keeping score, having to admit Connie was right more often than I. Connie knew about my tender male ego and never kept the tally too strictly.

After the Flood / An Accident of Birth

“All right,” she said. “Round two: the fourth unaccompanied female with a flower on her person or somewhere in evidence among her things.”

“I’d like to order another drink first,” I said. “Are you having anything?”

“No, and I wish you’d refrain from having any more alcohol. We’re going to be twelve hours out of synch as it is. Do you really want to be even more disoriented? Didn’t you read any of the articles on jet-lag I clipped for you? Alcohol is the first taboo.”

“But you know how nervous flying makes me. Would you prefer me pliant or wound up in knots?”

“Pliant and sober,” she insisted. “Besides, the weather report said it would be over ninety degrees with high humidity in Bangkok. You’re begging to get sick, if you ask me.”

“Are you pulling rank on me, Sis?” I asked.

“If I have to, yes. And don’t call me that if you expect me to be in an agreeable humor during this trip. There she went, number four.”

“No fair. I didn’t know we’d started. How about a beer?”

“You may have one beer.”

I motioned the cocktail waitress with the swaying hips and long, slender legs over to our table. I ordered my beer. Connie asked for another glass of ice water. I watched the tied bow of the waitress’ lacy apron bounce from side to side as she returned to the bar.

“Forget it,” Connie said. “I know what you’re thinking. Don’t even bother getting her phone number. We won’t have the slightest interest in her upon our return from Thailand.”

“How do we know we won’t?” I asked.

After the Flood / An Accident of Birth

Connie smiled. It was not her vague, reminiscent smile, but rather the sly, omniscient variety, which she used sparingly to great effect. I feared she would be right.

I sipped my beer slowly, to make it last. We found our fourth woman; she had a bunch of roses sticking out of a brown paper shopping bag. We agreed she'd bought the flowers at a curbside concession to adorn her efficiency apartment as a reward for getting through the dental hygienists' convention without allowing herself to be seduced by a man with an imperfect smile.

Connie won this round, too.

We continued to play our game during the first hours of the long flight, but with lapsing interest. We started a game of *Who's That Cloud?* recognizing Sir John Gielgud and our old high school principal, Mrs. Doody, before heading into the sunrise and beyond, back into darkness. In the desperation of boredom, I eventually fell asleep over southern Africa.

My sister had learned enough short Thai phrases to impress our cabbie and our porter at the hotel. The Thai were a naturally polite people and did not have to be shamed into civility, but Connie hoped to bridge their aloof wariness of strangers. She succeeded with them to a small degree, thereby increasing my feeling of uselessness. I was excess baggage.

Connie insisted we stay awake until local bedtime. She dragged me to an open-air market, even though I did not feel well. The air was oppressive. Within minutes I was soaked in perspiration down to my socks. The aroma of rich, seldom-encountered spices hung on the motionless air. I had begun to feel queasy. Somewhere in that jumble of cabbages and iPhones and black-market

After the Flood / An Accident of Birth

cigarettes, my dear sister found the familiar cobalt blue bottle. The Bromo-Seltzer settled my mind as well as my stomach, though I fretted the tiny bottle in my sweaty hands until the label wore off.

I was in a nasty disposition by the time we returned to our hotel room. I found the air conditioning not cold enough, the bath towels too small for Western bodies, and room service to be excruciatingly slow. All that waiting for a lukewarm bottle of Coke and a soggy fish sandwich.

“Must you complain constantly?” Connie remarked.

“I’m not complaining. But we wouldn’t have to be going through all this if our own government weren’t so backward about these things,” I said. “We could have been in our own beds instead of traveling halfway around the world. But that’s the good old U. S. of A. for you. We’re at the forefront of everything that doesn’t matter, a bunch of decadent Puritans running everything else.”

“Oh, cut it out, will you,” Connie said. “I didn’t come halfway around the planet to listen to your bitching.”

I slumped into the low-backed chair. Nothing was comfortable in this miserable little country. I watched Connie take out her full-color travel brochures again, playing with them like a deck of cards in solitaire, laying them out on the bedspread.

“You know,” she said, “according to the map, I don’t think Angkor Wat could be more than about two-hundred-and-fifty miles from here. It’s just over the border.”

“I doubt we’ll have time. Anyway, you can go if you want, but I’m staying put,” I said, sinking deeper into the chair.

“You’re forgetting, dear brother, that after the operation, we’ll be doing everything together.”

After the Flood / An Accident of Birth

“You’re right. I keep forgetting. But maybe we won’t want to go traipsing off. There’re plenty of local sites, the royal temple and all. What’s it called again?”

“Wat Phra Keo, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. But I still want to see Angkor Wat and I’m going to do my best to keep that part of me.”

“We’ll see,” I said. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

At last it was bedtime. We chatted with the lights out, just as we had as children. Connie fell asleep with the brochures still scattered across her bed. As I dozed off, I heard them fall softly to the floor, one by one. It had the sound of memories being discarded.

During the next two days, Connie got us out and around. I had to admit it was better than moping in the hotel room and entertaining second thoughts about the operation. We spent an entire afternoon at the Wat Arun, a modest temple in the city of Bangkok itself. We traveled there by way of the canals. It was definitely not Venice. The grass-thatched houses were all built up on stilts, like dainty women lifting their skirts to negotiate the muddy puddles of the Chao Phraya River.

I remarked to Connie that, for a country so enlightened about matters of sex, its architecture was predominantly phallic.

“Don’t you ever get tired of seeing penises everywhere?” she asked.

“Actually, yes,” I said. “But it’s not my idea. It’s Freud’s.”

“Freud is dead,” she said, and turned to chat with the boatman, a perpetually smiling gondolier in a conical straw hat, baggy pants held up with a length of rope, and rubber sandals.

After the Flood / An Accident of Birth

Connie and I checked into the Radha-Krishna Clinic on Thursday. I still found it curious that a Buddhist country would name its most famous clinic after Hindu deities. The name struck me as odd and anomalous, like calling a kindergarten *The King Herod Day Care Center*. Connie told me I was just fishing for excuses to get cold feet. She was probably right.

We were pestered for the next three days by doctors and technicians who subjected us to every test and analysis imaginable. In our spare moments, which were not many, we were invited to meet with three other patients who had undergone the sex-merge operation. All three were northern Europeans. Their English wasn't bad. A fourth patient joined us later, an American who had as yet to undergo his operation. He introduced himself as Charles Swan, from Terre Haute, Indiana. Since he had no female companion, I asked him what he was in for.

"*Diphallia terata*," he said, leaning back in his chair at the round table at which we had gathered. "PD...penile duplication. I have two penises," he explained.

"That's a problem?" I asked, looking around to the others to see if the joke had been understood. Connie kicked me under the table.

"Yes, it is," Charles Swan said solemnly. "I'm here to have one of them removed. The trouble is, I can't decide which one."

The others around the table nodded or wagged their heads sadly. What a terrible dilemma. I didn't have the slightest sympathy for him.

"Why don't you just play *Eenie Meenie Minie Moe*?" Connie suggested. I was ready to kick her. The Europeans simply looked baffled. I expected them to ask for an explanation. Charles Swan slapped his forehead and grinned stupidly.

After the Flood / An Accident of Birth

“Why didn’t *I* think of that?” he exclaimed. “It’s so simple, really. That’s probably why it didn’t occur to me. Thanks, Connie. God, what a relief! I’ve been going nuts over this dilemma. What a great idea!”

Connie blushed at the effusive compliments to her cleverness. Charles Swan flapped up out of his chair and scudded across the room, announcing to the attendants that he needed to see a doctor immediately.

After our fellow American’s great, honking outburst, it was difficult to resume our more demure conversation with the androgynous Europeans. Connie’s and my questions returned repeatedly, under one guise or another, to what it felt like to be a hermaphrodite, not in a physical sense, which we could pretty well imagine, but in the psychic sense: how one’s outlook would be altered by being able to see the entire spectrum. Did you still feel like yourself?

“Yes and no,” was the general response. The Europeans took us to the edge of the horizon, but what lay in the valley beyond was obscured in the fog of a language inadequate to the task of describing anything whole.

The doctors reached their decision regarding Connie and me over the weekend. They normally retained most of the male frame in such pairings because of its slightly greater strength and sturdiness, appending the female features: the breasts and vagina, uterus and ovaries. But the doctors did not care for the condition of my heart, and they took a positive dislike to the state of my liver. It was decided to employ Connie’s body as the basis of our union, rather than causing further stress and chancing greater risk in transplanting her heart and liver into my body.

After the Flood / An Accident of Birth

The thought of my penis leaving me, even if only for a brief time, caused me some distress, but the doctors assured me it was the right choice. I had to assume they knew what they were doing. We had the example of the three healthy, happy Europeans.

Oddly, the microscopic slicing and sandwiching of our brains, forming one brain out of the two, troubled me less. But I had gotten used to the idea that the penis and the vagina were the organs that defined gender. That couldn't have been further from the truth. The researchers at the Radha-Krishna Institute had concluded that it was all in the mind. Their brain-layering technique was the centerpiece of the sex-merge operation. Their expertise in this field, banned even as research in North America, was the sole reason we had traveled to Thailand.

The night before our scheduled operation, Connie and I sat in our little room playing poker, reassuring one another by enumerating our reasons for going through with it. We were trying to exorcize our doubts. After all, each of our best friends had told us we were completely nuts. It was hard to convince ourselves they could all be wrong.

“You just have to keep reminding yourself of what the alternative is,” Connie said, sounding very sure of herself. I supposed that was on account of her having won the last three hands.

“I'd have thought you'd be fed up with all these dead-end relationships by now,” she went on. “Face it, you don't really understand women any better than I understand men. Yet we get along perfectly with one another.”

“Being twins helps,” I said. “I mean, we don't even have to wonder most of the time what the other is thinking.”

After the Flood / An Accident of Birth

“So, don’t you think it’d be nice to get along that way with everybody? *I* sure do.”

“Yeah, I guess so. No more ‘gaping gender chasm filled with misunderstandings.’ Who said that anyway?”

“I did, little brother, remember? You had just split up with Charlene.”

“Don’t remind me. I hope that’s one of the slices of my brain they leave out.”

“Well, it’ll all be over with after tomorrow. Now get some sleep. We want to be fresh in the morning, don’t we?”

I turned out the light. Connie was already snoring. I fell asleep holding on to my penis, cradling it as tenderly as I once did my scruffy Teddy bear. Connie never could figure out why I’d hung on to Brownie as long as I did, until he had practically fallen apart from love.

The last thing I recalled before the anesthesiologist descended on us with the clear face masks and corrugated hoses was that I was lying on one of the side-by-side stainless steel operating tables and Connie was on the other, hyperventilating almost hysterically, gulping in the sleep-inducing gas. We were holding hands, my right and her left; I gave her hand a squeeze to reassure her, and that was the last thing I remembered of the monstrous deformity of being exiles in separate minds and bodies.

This is now the last week of my recovery. The psychologists have been testing my memory. Everything seems fine to me. If a certain memory was sliced out during the operation, it’s just not there, and it does not trouble me. Nor do I puzzle any longer over why I was once called a “fraternal

After the Flood / An Accident of Birth

twin”. Why not “sororal twins”? After all, my Connie half was born first. But it does not matter. I am one.

I have decided to travel to Angkor Wat next week. The young boatman who took me around Bangkok has agreed to be my tour guide. His wife is a nurse at the Clinic and would be coming along to look after me, though the doctors do not expect any late-developing complications. The boatman and his wife, Khuang and Doi Pia, are looking forward to the trip as a vacation.

I have no plans after that. I have no desire to return to America, the land of my exile, and live among the decadent Puritans. I shall stay here, for Siam is my ancient homeland, the place of my birth.

I shall place my hands on the profusely ornamented phallic spires of the temple of Angkor Wat and explore the cool, dark recesses of the inner chambers. We shall smile to myself, for I, too, am of singular architecture and unity of design. Like the half male, half female representation of Shiva guarding one of the portals, I am an emblem of the indissoluble unity of the creative force.

I will braid one of the jungle vines encrusting the ancient temple in my hair and dance Shiva’s dance to the end of the world, the world that has brought all separateness into being. It will be a new game to play: *Who Are We?*

SEVEN

Melanie set her fork down and collected the salad bowls. She gave Rick a nudge and took the fork out of his hand. “You all right?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. He looked at her strangely. I was beginning to worry I’d given him too much to drink. I hadn’t wanted to put him to sleep, after all.

Melanie and I reset the table for the main course. I found the little tomato that had popped out of Rick’s mouth, and set it beside his plate. “Maybe you’d like to keep it as a souvenir,” I suggested. Melanie laughed.

A glint of anger flashed in Rick’s eyes. “You’re really trying to stick it to me, aren’t you? Is this some kind of initiation?”

“He’s probably a little confused,” I told Melanie. “Let’s give him some time to digest it all. I could use a hand in the kitchen, if you don’t mind.”

“No problem, Unc. It sure smells good. What is it?”

“One of your favorites. Do you mind checking on the rice?”

As my niece and I puttered around in the kitchen, transferring the meal to serving bowls, Rick sat folding and refolding his napkin.

“I realize you want to find out what he’s like, but is this the right way, Unc?”

“Trust me,” I said.

After the Flood / Seven

We went out to the dining room with the steaming bowls and the glass baking dish. I refilled the wine glasses and Melanie served equal portions of rice and Chicken Vesuvio. Then we sat down. Seeing Melanie and me dig in, Rick lifted the first fork-full to his lips.

“I remember you and Mom taking a couple of vacations together—when I was about seven—and I got to stay with my Dad. They were the most boring summers of my life. I thought you and Mom went to Nevada, though; some place out West.”

“New Mexico,” I said. “You’re right, but that was the following year. We went to Thailand in secret. We knew your Dad would try to stop us if he found out what we were up to.”

“As you can see, we had the procedure reversed,” I explained to Rick. “The operation didn’t accomplish what we hoped it would. What was the use of being whole in a world of fragments?”

Rick was drinking too much wine. Maybe he found the Vesuvio a bit spicy. I moved the wine bottle to the other end of the table. I wanted him to lower his guard, not fall unconscious.

“I think you’re full of shit,” he snarled.

“Do you? Would you like to see the scars?” I got up and pulled my shirt out of my pants.

“Not now, Unc. Let’s finish dinner. This is really good, by the way. Why not tell Rick about Mom’s and your trip to New Mexico?”

“Yeah, all right. We *Belacani*—whites, that is—are regarded by some of the Navajo as...”

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

...Two-Spirit People

My sister and I spent the winter arguing about where to go for our vacation in early May. Neither of us wanted to repeat our separate disasters of the previous year, when Connie had dragged her husband through Europe and he managed to be abusive in four languages, and I took my girlfriend to Hawaii only to have her go off with some guy she met at our first luau. The guy was so fat and sloppy you couldn't tell him from the roast pig, except the pig wasn't offensive. It had an apple stuck in its mouth.

Connie and Charles separated after their vacation. The separation wasn't voluntary. Charles gave Connie a black eye and a split lip on the flight home. What wouldn't even have been a misdemeanor on the ground became a federal offense in the air. Charles met a few lawyers in prison and sued Connie for a divorce on the grounds of mental cruelty. Nothing is too improbable for aviators or lawyers.

I never saw Charlene again, though she did send me a nice thank-you note that arrived on April Fool's Day. Life is full of coincidences.

Connie and I looked forward to our coming vacation. Even if the plane crashed, we'd have a better time than the year before.

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

The arguments I had with my sister were never vicious. They involved wheedling and cajoling and pouting: skills we'd learned as children. We knew enough nasty people as it was and had no desire to add a spiteful sibling to our lists.

Connie wanted to vacation in Italy, to see whether the Florentines were friendlier without Chuck along. I opted for Hawaii again, to see if the Pacific were less salty without Charlene there to wound my self-esteem and invite the ocean to bathe the open sore.

After our third or fourth session, my sister and I realized what we were really up to. We hoped to relive the past, but with a more favorable outcome. By the time I decided to go along with her plan and said we'd go to Italy, she had already set her heart on Hawaii, a place as far from Florence as she could ever hope to get, and a place I never wanted to see again in my life. We had merely switched destinations, remaining as antipodal as ever.

It became clear that only a compromise could salvage our plans to vacation together. This required several more late night sessions over the board, around which stood our empty beer bottles, like discarded pieces from an earlier game. Once, when we were both a little drunk, we consulted her Ouija board. The Ouija gnomon selected a place for us called Mxqulpletz, a place which, even under equally improbable spelling variants, we couldn't find in any travel atlas or gazetteer, at least none treating of the geography of the third planet from the sun.

With only a week remaining in which to make our travel arrangements, Connie and I grew desperate to reach the elusive compromise. We didn't want to stay home and we didn't want to travel alone.

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

Aided in our intent by a bottle of wine, we drew lines across the fold-out center pages of her world atlas. We bisected, drew arcs and tangents, triangulated, and performed all manner of functions on *terra cognita*, executing whatever arcane principles we could recall from our high school geometry class. Every compromise thus attained put us in the middle of a large body of salt water. Her map looked like it had been annotated with the symbols of a secret sect of flat-world geographers.

In desperation, Connie tore out the map and taped it to her living room wall. She blindfolded me with her paisley scarf, put the corkscrew in my hand, and aimed me towards the wall. I was thankful she didn't spin me around. I was dizzy enough from the wine.

The corkscrew became stuck somewhere in the American Southwest. It was impossible to say exactly where.

"Shit," Connie groused. "I hate the desert."

"Have you ever been there?" I asked, knowing she hadn't. "How do you know you won't like it?"

"I have a feeling."

"You always have a feeling about things. I wouldn't trust them if I were you. You're last gut instinct told you Chuck was the man of your dreams."

"He was, in a way."

"Yeah," I said, "in the way that nightmares are dreams."

Connie frowned. "If I can't trust my feelings, what can I believe in?"

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

“Dumb luck,” I said. “That’s all we’ve got going for us.” I smoothed the hair back from her forehead. “Come on. We’ve still got to pick out a town or someplace. It’s your turn.”

I tore out the page depicting the southwestern quadrant of the U.S. and hung it up. I repeated the procedure with the scarf and the corkscrew and aimed my sister at the map. For a minute it looked as though she’d miss it altogether and jab the corkscrew into a blank stretch of wall. But she hit the map.

“Where the hell is Gypsum Falls, New Mexico?” she said, lifting the blindfold the rest of the way off. Her long hair fell back into her face.

“I guess we’ll find out, won’t we?” I replied, hoping I sounded more adventurous than I felt.

The following week, Connie and I flew to Phoenix. The metaphor wasn’t lost on us. We realized we were expecting a lot from the trip, but couldn’t stop our precipitous slide into hope. The next morning we’d take the Greyhound bus to Albuquerque, the only bus to pass through Gypsum Falls. Since the bus made that run only twice a week, we’d be stuck in our hotel room for four days if we didn’t get up in time. I set my travel alarm, compulsively checking it every ten minutes to make sure I’d flipped the little switch so it would beep at the appointed hour.

“Will you settle down,” Connie scolded. “You’re making me nervous.”

“I’m not nervous,” I said.

I set the tiny clock on the night table between our beds, after checking it one last time. I opened my suitcase and took out the clothes I was going to put on in the morning, draping them neatly over one of the hotel chairs you couldn’t sit straight in anyway. My jeans and jacket were

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

bought for the trip, and were as stiff as cardboard. The cowboy boots were about the same. I'd tried breaking them in by walking around my apartment after work each night, but they needed a little more time to shape themselves to my feet. I took out the red and white checked shirt which, after half a dozen washings, at least felt like cloth.

"You can't wear *that* shirt," Connie said, jumping off her bed.

"Why not?"

"Here's why not," she replied, taking the identical checked shirt from her suitcase and flinging it onto the bed.

I laughed. Connie grew furious.

"Wasn't it bad enough Mom and Dad dressed us like the Bobbsey Twins? Now you've got to do it yourself?"

"Come on, Connie. It's not my fault we're twins. I didn't set out to buy the same clothes as you. Anyway, how many variations of western clothes are there?"

"Plenty," she said. "But you've got the same kind of Levi's and jean jacket I do, the same color boots—Christ, they've got the identical stitching—and a gray Stetson, too, with the same narrow hatband. Now, to top it off, you've got the same shirt. It's too much. I mean, we look like identical twins, for Christ's sake."

"Well, who told you to go cut your hair short?"

"I figured it might be hot, even for spring. You know how miserable I get if I can't wash my hair every day. For all I know, they don't have running water in Gypsum Falls."

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I chided her. “I told you we should have gone shopping together. At least we could’ve been sure of not picking out matching outfits so that we look like a couple of trick monkeys. This is as much your fault as it is mine. I’m not taking the blame.”

“Where’s your other shirt?” she asked. “Didn’t you say you bought two shirts?”

“Yeah, I did. But that’s not going to help.” I took out my other shirt and held it up.

“Why’d you buy two of the same color?” Connie asked.

“I wanted blue checked—I don’t even like red—but they didn’t have it in my size, so I got two red ones. Where’s your other shirt?”

Connie took a second red checked shirt from her suitcase. She laughed so hard she fell down on the bed and held her stomach. “I can’t believe it,” she said, catching her breath in between fits of laughter. “We’ve got four shirts and they’re all the same. What color are your other blue jeans?” she asked.

“Blue,” I said, falling onto the other bed. I laughed until the tears rolled into my ears.

We had no trouble getting to sleep. Our excitement and our laughter had worn us out. I turned the lamp low and we talked quietly, the ends of our sentences left for the other to complete. We couldn’t remember ever laughing that hard, even as children—especially as children.

Connie and I managed to sleep through the alarm. We had no time to shower or have breakfast. We grabbed a couple of day-old donuts and two cups of bottom-of-the-pot coffee at the bus depot restaurant. We had only a couple of minutes to gulp it down before the bus to Gypsum Falls arrived.

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

The lurching Greyhound was as gritty and dusty as a desert caravan that had already limped across the Gobi and the Sahara, about to embark upon the final leg of its rainless, globe-traversing journey. The engine rattled as if choked with sand. The old bus seemed ready to expire at any moment. I suspected, however, it might endure a while longer, until, like an ornery desert beast, it would strand its passengers mid-way between their point of departure and their destination, at the furthest distance from help.

There were only four other people on board: an old couple, a nun in a Sister of Mercy habit gray with dust, and a young cowboy in wear-faded denim. The driver's uniform was gray by design. In our new clothes, Connie and I were the most colorful objects in view. We stuck out like butterflies on a dried mud puddle. Though we each could've had a whole seat to ourselves, we chose to sit together. I let Connie have the window. It wasn't much of a sacrifice. The dusty film coating the tinted glass painted the stop signs a washed-out shade of grayish-red. Only a hint of the world's customary colors tinged the pervasive haze of our window.

With so little to notice but our grimy outlook on a flat, dusty landscape, Connie and I soon fell asleep, she against the window and I against her bony shoulder. The driver had to wake us when, nearly four hours later, the bus lumbered into Gypsum Falls.

The sunlight was blinding; the air shimmering. The sky was too blue. I felt as though I hadn't fully emerged from my last dream. Each object appeared too real to be anything other than an image conjured in a dream.

Connie and I had expended all our efforts in choosing and arriving at our destination. We hadn't given the slightest thought to what we'd do when we got there. There simply wasn't any

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

mental energy left over for such considerations. We stood on the gravel shoulder of the highway in front of the bus depot greasy spoon, eating the dust of the departing Greyhound. We looked like we'd been set down in the middle of nowhere by an alien spacecraft beaming down free samples. Our clothing and unscuffed suitcases advertised what sort of product we were: city folk on vacation.

We decided to come in out of the sun, although it wasn't fiercely hot as we'd expected. Walking across the gravel parking lot, we stepped onto the weathered plank porch of the restaurant. We took our places on the bench beside the rusty Coke machine as though this were part of our daily routine upon coming into town.

“What do we do now?” Connie asked.

“I don't know. Let's just see what happens,” I said, slouching in the bench. I wasn't used to the dimensions of my Stetson. The brim hit the wall behind me and knocked the hat into my lap. It rolled down the incline of my crossed legs and tumbled off the end of porch. I retrieved it and walked back across the lot, staring up and down the highway for signs of life. There was only sky and dirt as far as I could see. I returned to my sister, kicking at the dusty gravel so my boots wouldn't look so God-awful brand new.

The town of Gypsum Falls extended for about three streets behind us. I told Connie we ought to go exploring, but she wanted to sit a while longer and wait for something to happen. I put my cowboy hat back on and squinted at the shimmering black band of highway.

A short way into a brief nap, I heard the crunch of gravel. An old Native American stood staring at us, blinking his eyes as though trying to clear them of a mirage. He wore his coarse gray hair tied in braids that hung down to the brass clasps of his baggy overalls. His pants had been

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

patched in so many places, over and over again, there didn't seem to be any of the original material left.

The old Indian walked a few paces across the lot to the other end of the porch, where he stared at us from a different angle. He retraced his steps, keeping us in view out of the corner of his eye. He backed away and squinted at us from a distance.

A much younger Native came around the corner from the side lot and stepped onto the porch. He took off his battered cowboy hat and asked us whether the old man was bothering us. Connie lied, saying, "No, not in the least."

The young man was fiercely handsome. His presence projected several feet all around him. Though I remained sitting, I knew he stood at least a head taller than me. He didn't wear his long black hair in braids, but rather let it spill around his shoulders and halfway down his back.

"Are you sure he's not a bother?" he asked Connie.

"Of course I'm sure," she said.

A sort of electric spark passed between them in that exchange of a few words. I felt it charge the air with a crackle. The spark was as blue as the sky. I saw my sister's glance run over every inch of him, down the front of his softly-faded flannel shirt, down each leg of his weatherbeaten Levi's, to his dusty boots. She glanced up into his face and began her perusal of him all over again. If it wouldn't have been so obvious, I'd have nudged her to cut it out. I felt like the third wheel on a bicycle.

"Well, you let me know if he bothers you," the young man said. "He's harmless, but sometimes he gets a pretty wild notion or two." He turned to call the old man, motioning to him to

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

come over. “You might as well come and meet them, Grandfather. At least be polite, after all your staring.”

The old man seemed painfully shy. He shifted from one foot to the other. He bowed at the waist and introduced himself. Connie and I stood up.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said, shaking our hands. His grip was firm and leathery. “My name’s Sam Chevrolet, yeah, like the car. Want to know how I got that name?”

“How?” Connie asked.

“My Mama had me in the back seat of an old Chevrolet, left by the side of the road. Didn’t run no more. That’s what they’ve always called me. I don’t run no more either,” he laughed.

“What color was it?” my sister asked him, as if that made the slightest difference.

“Black,” the old man said. “All the cars back then were black.” He pulled the young man closer to us, patting his arm. “This is my grandson, Lucas Proudfoot. We call him that ’cause he refuses to get into an automobile. He walks or gets up on his horse, but you’ll never see him driving a car.”

Connie smiled at Lucas again. The beam traveling between their pairs of eyes was strong enough to hang your winter coat on.

“You haven’t apologized to them for your rudeness, Grandfather,” Luke told the old man.

Sam Chevrolet waved his hands and, eyes downcast, shuffled from one moccasined foot to the other in the loose dirt. “I am not the only one here today to have forgotten his manners,” he said.

“Yes, Grandfather,” Luke replied, averting his glance from the old man, studying the same plot of loose dirt. I was amazed at how this tall, powerful Indian could be cowed by the old man

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

stooped at his side. Sam glanced at my sister and me and spoke in a torrent of what I suspected was Navajo. Luke waited until Sam had finished and then translated his remarks.

“My Grandfather apologizes for his behavior,” Luke said. “He can’t help himself sometimes. He’s got this thing about two-spirit people and forgets his manners.”

“This thing about what?” Connie asked.

“Two-spirit people,” Luke replied. “White people. Anglos. Grandfather believes white folk are divided in spirit and sees it as his personal mission to help them get over their separation and become one spirit. He also hasn’t seen many twins, and never man and woman twins before.”

“Intriguing,” I said. “How does Sam Chevrolet the Shaman unite white people’s spirits?”

“If they’ll stand still long enough, I perform the marriage ceremony for them,” the old man explained. “Otherwise I just say a prayer for them as they go by.”

“How can you marry us?” my sister asked. “It’s not legal, is it, even in New Mexico?”

“There are higher laws than the white man’s laws,” Sam Chevrolet said. “I must explain. Our language uses the word ‘marriage’ for many things. A warrior is married to his horse. You marry boards together to make a hogan.”

“I get it,” I said. “You mean ‘join.’”

“Yes. Thank you,” the old man said. “I will join your spirits.”

Connie and I drew aside and discussed what we should do.

“It sounds kind of kinky to me,” I said.

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

“Let loose a little, will you?” Connie remarked. “Your Indian name ought to be Stick-in-the-Mud. Don’t be so uptight. When in Rome, as they say. Our vacation hasn’t exactly been an adventure up to now, has it?”

“No,” I said, “but...”

“It’s probably just the local tourist thing. Besides, I wouldn’t mind getting to know Luke a little better,” she said.

I looked at the old man. His face was a contour map of crow’s-feet, wrinkles, lines, and furrows among which shone two clear beacons as crystalline as prisms filled with sunlight. I couldn’t tell what color his eyes were. They were all colors. I decided I didn’t want to disappoint the old shaman. “What harm could it do?” I told Connie. “How expensive could it be?”

I nodded to the old man. “Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

“It is good,” Sam replied.

Luke Proudfoot smiled. “Are you staying with someone?” he asked.

“Uh, probably just at the motel, I guess,” Connie said.

“You don’t want to stay at the Gypsum Falls Motel,” Luke remarked.

“Why not?” I asked. “Does Norman Bates run it?”

Luke caught the joke. A glint of his grandfather’s humor twinkled in his own dark eyes. “No,” he said, “but it’s filthy. I wouldn’t let my neighbor’s dog sleep there. Would you like to come meet my wife and children and share our meal?”

“Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

Connie remained mute. I nudged her, but she didn't stir. I looked at her. Her gaze was fixed on Luke's left hand. The silvery gleam of the ring on his finger was reflected in her eyes. I felt it sear a hole in her heart. Poor Connie, I thought. She had probably geared herself up for a vacation romance and figured Lucas Proudfoot was available for just such an adventure.

I had to admit Luke Proudfoot sure didn't act married, especially when looking at my sister. But I figured he'd just been flirting with her. Connie always read an entire book into a single word from any man who paid attention to her.

"Of course we'll come," I said, nudging Connie again. She nodded slowly. She was in a daze. I took her arm and led her to the old man's pick-up, steering her past obstacles as one would guide a sleepwalker out of harm's way. Luke slipped the hitch on the weathered post and mounted his horse in a seamlessly sure and graceful movement. He rode off along the side of the highway in a trail of dust before the old man even turned the ignition key.

"We'll give my grandson a head start," Sam said. "I don't want to wound his pride."

We drove out of the gravel parking lot many minutes later. Sam Chevrolet shifted inexpertly. The pick-up stopped and lurched and bolted, amid much grinding of gears, before careening out of the lot onto the dust-gray blacktop.

Unless she was asked a direct question, Connie remained silent for the entire trip. She seemed sullen rather than stunned.

Luke Proudfoot's hogan was a yellow and brown mobile home with stacks of firewood serving as the skirt around its perimeter. A dilapidated metal shed leaned against the single tree in

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

the yard. A kitchen garden sprouted promisingly in the other half of the front yard. A pale blue Honda, crinkled with dents and scrapes, was parked in the rutted roadway.

“I thought you said Luke doesn’t drive,” I remarked.

“That’s his wife’s car,” Sam said. “Theresa isn’t so eager to go native as her husband.”

Connie came back to life in a sudden spurt. I tried to enter her frame of mind, puzzling over what had re-animated her dashed hopes. I decided it must have been Sam’s remark that Luke and his wife didn’t see eye-to-eye on how many up-to-date conveniences they wanted to live without. I knew I’d have to keep an eye on Connie to make sure she didn’t try to insinuate herself into these impossibly tiny openings. She’d make a fool of herself—and me. I whispered to her, reminding her we were guests.

Luke came out onto the unpainted stairway and waved us inside. “Come in, Grandfather. Come meet my family,” he told me and Connie.

Luke’s mobile home hogan was very steamy inside. Laundry hung across a section of the living room and Theresa was washing a stack of dishes with extremely hot water. She was listening to a scratchy Edith Piaf record, swaying and bobbing along to the music. Through the rear window above the sink I saw Luke’s horse, tethered to a post and munching on an opened bale of hay, or maybe they were oats.

Theresa wiped her hands on the apron covering her beaded Native dress. She was a beautiful woman. Her skin glowed, reminding me of the patina on the lovingly maintained dining tables in an antique shop. You could not help rubbing your hand over each one as you passed. They had, after all, been polished with such caresses.

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

Theresa untied her apron and put on a short-waisted white denim jacket. “I’m sorry to run out on you like this,” she said. “Tonight is my women’s quilting meeting. We’re working on a group quilt depicting Coyote stories. Maybe you’d like to come along next time,” she told Connie. “We’ve got two Anglo women in our group. They’re very good workers. I’ve got to run now. I just wanted to meet you before I left. Good-bye, Luke, Grandfather.”

She and Luke put their arms around one another and kissed—for a long time, I thought, for someone who said she was in a hurry. I felt a twinge of the jealousy Connie had felt.

Theresa rushed out the door. I heard the engine of the old Honda sputter and die twice before it caught.

Sam asked us to sit down at the wooden dining room table. The space was nothing more than an alcove off the kitchen. The other rooms were only sparsely occupied by furniture, most of it homemade like the table and chairs at which we sat. Every square foot of the walls, however, was covered with quilts, rugs, or woven wall hangings. Luke’s home seemed like the Native American Arts equivalent of a bookmobile, a travelling museum of Native and folk crafts.

Luke rolled up his sleeves and continued washing and rinsing the dishes his wife had left. He put on a pot of coffee and went into one of the tiny bedrooms to awake the kids from their nap.

Both children were astonishingly beautiful, even in their ruffled, bleary state of just awakening. The girl, about nine years old, nodded to us and kissed her great-grandfather. She went to the corner of the living room beneath the hanging wash and began matching socks together from a tangle at the bottom of a decorated basket. The boy, however, awoke on the wrong side of the bed. He was a few years younger than his sister and eyed Connie and me suspiciously, alternating

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

between quiet shyness and whining crankiness. The boy clung to his father's thigh and sat in his lap, arms around his neck, when Luke joined us at the table.

Connie smiled. "It's nice when a woman can pursue her own interests," she said. "Her husband, of course, can't mind being saddled with some of the housework and taking care of the kids."

She spoke as though from personal experience. I reached for Connie's foot under the table and gently stepped on it.

Luke looked up from the boy. He slowly rolled his shirt sleeves down. "I don't feel saddled," he said. "This is my house and these are my children. They are mine even when they're dirty. It's my duty as much as Theresa's to keep things in order, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, sure," Connie said.

"Theresa is involved with her circle of artists. Her work is very good. She's done everything you see here. And I have my own friends in the men's lodge. A man and woman can't be everything to one another."

"No, of course not. I didn't mean anything by what I said, Luke. It's just that you looked a little out of place with soap suds up to your elbows. My ex-husband was only good at making things dirty. You're an exceptional husband. Theresa is very fortunate."

Luke nodded modestly, as though there were no point in gainsaying the obvious. He set his son on the floor and got up to prepare supper. The boy ran to his sister and dipped into the sock basket, retrieving the mate of whichever sock she held up to him.

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

Connie seemed uncomfortable under the glare of the old man's unflinching gaze and went to help Luke. She peeled potatoes, shelled peas, and diced onions for a stew, speaking with Luke in a low conversational drone from which I could extract no whole words. They laughed frequently.

The old man fell asleep, his coarse gray braids dipping forward to the edge of the table, his chin resting on his chest. I watched the kids folding the laundry. When Luke's daughter, Anita, had all the dry wash loaded in the woven baskets, she set the table, smiling at me bashfully.

The stew had very little meat in it, and what there was seemed to have been left from several previous stews, boiled to insipidness and with only slightly more texture than the thick gravy.

Sam awoke when a round loaf of Theresa's pan bread was set beside him. He ladled more juice than substance out of the pot, either out of courtesy to the younger ones with more of an appetite or, as I suspected, so that he'd be required to cut several slices from the fresh loaf in order to sop it all up.

Anita and her little brother, Justin, ate quickly and left the table. They amused themselves with more of their peculiar combination of work and play. Anita was making something of beads and Justin handed her the color, size, and number she asked him to count out for her from the shallow cardboard trays.

I grew very sleepy after supper. I could see Connie wasn't far behind. We hadn't got much rest in the past three days. After the children went to bed, Luke hauled out a bundle of blankets and spare pillows and rolled them out on the living room floor.

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

“I’ve got to get up early for work,” he said, “so I’m heading off to bed. You two can stay up as long as you like. Theresa gets home about ten. She knows you’ll be staying over. Good night, Grandfather,” he told Sam.

In a somnambulistic shuffle, Sam weaved his way to the front door. He wished Connie and me not pleasant dreams, but useful ones.

Connie and I straightened the blankets and quilts and stretched out on the floor, staring up at the ceiling as though trying to make out the constellations. It felt so much like a camp-out to me I was reminded of our sleeping in the back yard as children, cocooned in our dew-damp blankets.

I heard one of Luke’s boots hit the floor, muffled only slightly by the thin walls of the mobile hogan. His other boot thudded against the wall. A short while later I heard the bedsprings creak over and over again until Luke settled down. Connie sighed each time the springs squeaked and grated. I knew where she’d rather be sleeping. Her sighing became a lusty nightnoise of its own, as rhythmic and lulling as the rasping of the crickets. I fell asleep in spite of the children’s errant beads, as hard as dried peas, jabbing me through the blanket and the rear pockets of my jeans.

I awoke with the room ablaze in desert sunlight. The walls seemed translucent. Justin sat beside me on the floor. I felt it was his staring that had awakened me. I sat up stiffly, as though my vertebrae had fused into a single inflexible bone. Connie and Theresa sat at the dining table, chatting and giggling like old school chums.

“Did you sleep well?” Justin asked me. I found his seriousness amusing. He behaved liked the old shaman’s apprentice. He’d learned the morning incantation without understanding how difficult it could be to form a sensible reply.

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

“I’ll let you know in a minute,” I said.

The boy handed me a large blue bead: a polished turquoise with an off-center hole drilled in it.

“For me?” I asked.

Justin nodded solemnly.

“Won’t your sister miss that one when she gets home from school? It looks like a very special bead to me.”

“It’s mine,” he said. “I can give you what’s mine.”

“Thank you.” I stuffed the bead into the riveted pocket of my jeans.

Theresa and Connie saw I had stirred and invited me to join them. Connie looked a trifle ruffled, but Theresa was radiant in the morning light. She set a mug of coffee before me. The rising curls of vapor were sufficient to bring me to the edge of wakefulness before I’d taken my first sip.

“Did you want some breakfast before you leave?” Theresa asked me. “Connie and I have already eaten.”

“Leave?” I asked. “Where are we going?”

“Luke’s grandfather is coming for you. He should be here in a little while. He’s going to prepare you and Connie for the joining ceremony.”

“Oh,” I said, realizing I had nothing to contribute to the discussion of the arrangements. I took a sip of the strong, gritty coffee. “Why are you all being so nice to us?” I asked. “I mean, we’re just strangers to you.”

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

“Grandfather doesn’t believe in strangers,” Theresa explained. “He says people always meet one another for a reason. He thinks his part is to help you become whole people, like us. Sam Chevrolet’s married every white man and woman who’ve passed through Gypsum Falls in the last fifty years, whether they were aware of it or not.” She laughed as though recalling a specific episode. “It’s his way of bringing balance to the world.”

“We could be psychos or something,” I said. “He found us at the bus stop.”

Theresa shook her head. “Grandfather is never wrong about people. Do you want to eat? I hear his pick-up.”

“No,” I said. “Coffee’s all I ever have in the morning.”

Sam’s hogan looked like a weatherbeaten moonshiner’s shack. Scrubby bushes, in the first stages of sprouting and blooming, littered the front yard. A dense stand of what looked like cottonwood trees crouched near the back, obscuring the view of the distant hills. A large thatched hut squatted beside his shack, looking like an igloo woven of sticks.

“Welcome to my hogan,” Sam said. His place was even more sparsely furnished than Luke’s and Theresa’s mobile home. There was only a single room. One of Theresa’s rugs covered the warped floorboards and other artwork hung on each of the four walls, between the windows on the two side walls.

The old man began preparing something on the table in the kitchen quarter of his hogan. I thought he intended to feed us. “You must first have a vision before I can join you,” he said, as

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

though stating the obvious. “You must meet the other part of you that is hiding inside, so you can be whole people. You must not be afraid.”

Sam chopped and poured and grated, sprinkling yet other herbs into the concoction. He handed me and Connie the heavy ceramic bowl and bade us drink. I put the bowl to my lips and hesitated, the earthy, musty aroma of its contents stinging my nostrils. “Drink,” he said, gesturing as though to help me tip the bowl.

It wasn’t bad: a little like cold mushroom soup, a little heavy on the spice. I took three swallows and Sam motioned me to hand the bowl to Connie. Seeing that I had tried it and found it palatable, she didn’t waver. She wiped her mouth with a long swipe of her checkered sleeve.

“Now you must be alone,” Sam said. “You will stay here,” he told Connie. “Be comfortable in my home. But you must not leave until I come for you. Don’t worry. I will watch over you. Come,” he told me.

Sam led me to the thatched hut he called the men’s lodge. He pulled the stiff leather curtain aside, tied it to remain open, and waved me inside. “You must stay,” he said. “You must meet the one who will make you complete. I will be just outside, praying for you and your sister.”

The dirt floor of the lodge had been swept meticulously. A circle of blackened stones stood at the center, beneath a smoke hole. I sat down inside the circle and pulled my boots off. A loose string dangled annoyingly above my head. I pulled at it, thinking too late that it might be what was holding the lodge together. It wasn’t a string; it was a narrow strip of leather. It broke off at the knot. I toyed with it a while. Then I took Justin’s bead and threaded the leather thong through it and tied it around my neck like an amulet. I was starting to get into this.

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

The lodge grew uncomfortably warm before long. I stripped off my jacket and shirt. Time dragged while I waited for something to happen. I hoped this wouldn't take all day. I'd roast. I wondered whether Sam hadn't merely given us a placebo, counting on the suggestion he'd planted in us for the effect of his magic.

On and off, as clouds passed overhead, the sunlight filtered down through the smoke hole. A shaft of dancing motes illuminated my hands. My hands! I was seeing them for the first time. Ancient runic messages seemed written in the creases and whorls. The inscriptions changed as I curled or stretched my fingers. More remarkable still was the impression that my hands weren't merely the shackled slaves that did my bidding. I no longer had parts like my bossy brain and minimum-wage appendages. I was my hands!

I hadn't forgotten about the potion I'd drunk, in spite of these astounding revelations that swirled through me. The effect seemed to wear off very quickly. The beam of sunlight was gone. It was growing dark outside. Someone was coming.

Connie crouched down and stepped through the doorway of the lodge. She wore Theresa's beaded dress of white doeskin.

"What're you doing here?" I asked. "Sam told us to wait until he came for us. You're going to screw the whole thing up."

"I'm sorry," Connie said. "I couldn't stand being alone any longer. I missed you."

I couldn't decide whether her admission was irritating or touching. She came and sat with me inside the circle, folding her legs beneath her. "I missed you, too," I said. "Did you meet someone yet?" I asked.

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

Connie nodded. Thinking of the counterpoint to my own expectations, I asked her whether it had been Luke.

“No,” she said. “It’s you.”

“Me?”

Connie cradled my face in her cool hands. “Yes,” she replied. “You. I realized I could never have Luke, any more than you’d be able to lure Theresa away from him. It’s a nice fantasy, but it’d never happen in a million years.”

“What makes you think I’ve been lusting after Theresa?”

“Oh, come on. Who do you think you’re kidding? Your face lights up when she looks at you like somebody plugged in a Christmas tree. Do you think I’m blind? You’ve started to strut, too.”

“Strut?”

“Yeah, strut. You should see yourself. And don’t tell me it’s hard to walk straight in cowboy boots and tight jeans.”

I couldn’t admit that’s just what I was going to tell her.

“Once I put the fantasy to rest,” Connie continued, “I asked myself what I found so attractive about Luke, besides the terrific body and the hundred-watt smile. It’s his strength: quiet, gentle strength: the confidence he has in himself.”

Connie took my hands in hers and looked at me intently. “I know I’ve given you a pretty hard time. Maybe that’s what brothers and sisters are good at. But I look up to you. I admire your quiet strength. What I’d hope is to find a man like you. I mean that. I need to find a man who’s a person first.”

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

I smiled. “What a coincidence,” I said. “I wouldn’t mind meeting a woman with some backbone, either: a woman who doesn’t expect me to take over her life and make everything bad disappear forever: you know, as you said, someone who’s her own person: a woman something like you, Connie.”

“That’s so sweet of you, even if you’re just trying to make me feel good.” She kissed me and quickly turned her head away, startled by a rustling noise outside.

“You’d better go,” I told her. “We don’t want to ruin it for the old man.” I realized the rustling sound, like dried leaves in a whirl of wind, was the rain from a sudden cloudburst pelting against the thatched hut. Connie ducked out the doorway. She’d be soaked before she took two steps. I left the circle beneath the smoke hole, now filling with water, and got dressed again. Just as quickly, the torrent subsided to a trickle and a sunbeam of water shimmered on the muddy puddle in the hearth. As I tugged on my second boot, Sam bowed in the doorway and called me outside.

Connie stood in the clearing between Sam’s house and the lodge. Theresa and Luke stood alongside her. The borrowed dress Connie wore wasn’t even damp. Her hair was perfectly dry.

The air seemed to bloom from the sudden shower. The buds and leaves on the scrubby bushes had burst into full flower. Their fragrance hung in the air like a mist too fine to see, yet I could feel it tickling my skin.

I joined the others, putting one arm around Luke and the other around Connie, facing Theresa across the circle. The old man, chanting almost subvocally, as though answering the humming insects, wove a garland of waxy leaves and pale flowers around us. The smoke from his pile of smoldering sticks smelled as sweet as incense.

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

“You have joined our family,” Sam said, carefully unwinding the braided stalks. “Luke is your brother and Theresa is your sister. Welcome to our family.”

He kissed Connie and me. There was no scratchy stubble on his chin. He looked me in the eye. I understood in his gaze he’d known all along whom Connie and I would meet in our visions. He had prayed for it.

After the ceremony, we drove back to Luke’s and Theresa’s house. The entire desert had come to life in a single explosive burst. Sam told us the earth wanted to give us each a gift: a sign for us from the man and woman with whom Connie and I would one day share our lives. He told us we must go out and look for this present from our future lifemates for ourselves.

Connie and I went out after supper, following the horse trail behind the Proudfoots’ mobile hogan. We decided it wouldn’t be a good idea to search for our lovers’ gifts together. We took divergent paths after reaching Milagro Creek.

There were flowers I could have collected by the basketful, but I didn’t want the woman I’d be meeting symbolized by a bloom that would wither too quickly, exchanging its fabulous colors for a permanent dull ocher. I wanted something more substantial for her, something that would last.

The many gullies leading into Milagro Creek had been scoured by the recent rain. The trickle of muddy water gurgled over the stones loosened by the brief flood. I wanted to look past the colorful ones. After my recent vision, and a history of meeting the wrong women, I hoped I’d learned to look past appearances.

I found a potato-sized stone banded and speckled with black and tan. Its shape was like a large peanut, suggesting two smaller stones in the process of merging into one. I speculated on a

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

prehistoric volcano in the area. The stone had once been soft and semi-liquid, and seemed to have been extruded.

I wiped the stone on my shirt and walked back to the hogan, in a hurry to get there before the sun set. It was nothing new to Connie and me, but Sam and Luke were surprised my sister and I had found exactly the same kind of stones. The old shaman and his grandson looked strangely at one another and said they didn't know what kind of rocks they were, though they'd seen them at the bottom of the washes.

Connie and I packed our bags, figuring we'd be leaving in the morning. Theresa asked us about our destination. Connie and I shrugged.

"Why don't you stay with us?" Luke suggested. "You can spend the rest of your vacation here if you like."

My sister and I didn't have to consult one another to know what we both wanted. The Proudfoots were not the kind of people who offered invitations they hoped you'd decline. We agreed at once and unpacked our bags again.

The remaining week-and-a-half was the most pleasant Connie and I had ever spent with anyone. She went with Theresa to her quilting meetings and even made a pathetic attempt at a woven placemat. I told her it was beautiful. She helped Theresa around the hogan and made some of the Italian dishes Chuck had insisted she cook for him.

I helped Luke repair the leaning shed and twice accompanied him to the men's lodge at Sam's place, where I'd had my vision. We and the other men walked down to the creek and stripped,

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

scrubbing one another with the coarse wet sand before plunging in. Our clothes hung on the bushes outside the thatched lodge as we sat around naked and traded stories and jokes. Absent was all the pretension and unsubtle bragging men usually evoke from one another. The stories were true and heartfelt, even during their purely fanciful episodes. I had to admit it was the most enjoyment I'd had in the company of other men since grade school when, of course, none of us were yet men. I saw the group assembled in Sam's woven hut as a Cub Scout troop for those who came rather late to childhood. I told Sam that made him the den mother. He took it in good humor.

Theresa and I gathered different plants for the dyeing of her wool yarns. She told me their names in both English and Navajo, both of which I quickly forgot. Luke taught me to ride his horse, Cheveyo, though I usually stopped the stallion short of any urge to gallop. Cheveyo was a name Luke admitted he borrowed from the Hopi language. He said it meant *Spirit Warrior*.

Anita and Justin took turns playing with Connie and me. At times a little jealousy was fomented, but I didn't want to tell my sister I thought she was monopolizing the children.

On the day before we were to leave, the whole family went to the creek for a picnic, Sam included. The old man swam like a dolphin.

I knew parting would be difficult, but I hadn't expected such a wash of tears at the bus stop. Even Luke's face was wet. I could hardly talk, and what I did get out didn't always make much sense. I had tried to tell them I'd never known a family could make you want to stay with them. My legs didn't want to climb the steps of the bus.

We watched our family grow smaller and smaller until it was pointless to continue squinting through the dirty glass. Connie leaned her seat back and I took out the little rock-hound's guide I'd

After the Flood / Two-Spirit People

bought from the paperback rack at the bus depot. I was still curious about the stones Connie and I had found in the desert. Fortunately, the guide had color pictures and I quickly identified the mementos from our future lovers.

“What’s it say?” Connie asked, popping her seat forward.

“It’s called ‘coprolite,’” I said. Scanning the page, I did a quick editing job. “Uh...‘sedimentary... sand, phosphate, calcium carbonate... concretionary... light brown to black... hardness 2.0 to 4.0... found in riverbeds...’ Sounds kind of ordinary,” I remarked.

“That’s all right,” Connie said, moving her seat back again and tipping her cowboy hat over her eyes. “Ordinary’s all right. I wouldn’t mind feeling settled for once. I’m getting too old for passionate flashes in the pan. So are you.”

“Yeah,” I said. I tucked the book in a pocket of my knapsack and stared out the window, seeing nothing. I’d spared Connie a glimpse into our futures. I’d left out the important details concerning our stone talismans. Coprolite was nothing more than fossilized excrement, from dinosaurs and other animals. The book said the stones ranged from pea-sized to weights over a ton.

The future looked as bleak to me as it had when we set out on our adventure. Even in the midst of them, vacations felt as unreal to me as the photographic images by which I hoped to capture and hold them. I couldn’t bring myself to tell Connie the truth. I just didn’t have the heart to tell her that all we had to look forward to was a load of the same old shit.

EIGHT

Rick laughed. I supposed it was the punch line of my story he found so amusing, but I felt he was laughing at the whole story, at my entire life.

“I’m glad you find it so humorous,” I said. “But, then, your kind always does.”

“What kind is that?” Rick challenged.

“White Anglo males, *Belacani*,” I said. “You think the world is your plaything, that misery exists solely to provide you entertainment. If you’re a little humbler, you might think the suffering of others is put there as a lesson to you: don’t abdicate your responsibility or you may wind up an unfortunate yourself. Don’t forget, God left you in charge when he stepped out to lunch. You keep reminding the rest of us about the burden of your responsibility. You’re so self-absorbed you don’t even...”

“Can I say something?” Rick interrupted. “Maybe you better check your mirror. You look like a white male to me.”

“It’s a disguise,” I said. “Camouflage. It lets me travel among the powerful elite and see what they’re up to. Inside, I’m a little African goatherd who just found her last kid at the bottom of the wadi, the vultures picking out its eyes.”

“That’s really touching, but I think you put on an act to gain sympathy,” Rick said, swirling his wine glass. “We’ve all suffered,” he announced.

After the Flood / Eight

“And what great misery have you borne? Daddy wouldn’t let you have the red Porsche until you maintained a C grade average?”

“Rick’s suffered, too, Unc,” Melanie said.

“Then let him tell me about it. Just sit down, Melanie. I’ll clear the table. Maybe this blond Neanderthal here expects a woman to wait on him hand and foot, but I don’t.”

“I don’t either,” Rick said. “But what can I say or do that’ll change your mind anyway? You don’t think I’m good enough for Melanie.”

“That’s probably true, but I don’t know that yet. Unlike you, I like to defer my judgment until all the evidence is in. So what did you suffer, Rick? You can tell me.”

Rick resumed playing with his napkin, folding it up tighter than an origami alligator.

“My dad yelled at me a lot. And my mom was drunk most of the time, so she never knew what was going on. Dad knocked her around. I’d find her out cold, and she’d tell me she’d fallen down the stairs. I sort of liked school, but I couldn’t make friends. We were always getting kicked out of the apartment; all the noise and hollering. My dad locked me out a lot, too, sometimes for a week.”

“Did you ever think of getting back at them?”

“What?” Rick asked.

“You heard me. Did you ever want to pay them back for all the damage they did to you?”

“No. I guess I probably deserved most of it.”

“Ah, spoken like a true victim. Then let me tell you about getting even, about plotting...”

. . .The Revenge of the Innocents

In our third decade, when it became painfully obvious our lives were not turning out as we had planned, my sister and I held a late-night marathon playing *Scrabble* and drinking red, white, and Chablis wine while we fixed the blame on the obvious culprits responsible for our directionless lives: our parents.

“Yeah, who else but them?” Connie said, flinging down a fistful of unused *Xs* and *Ws* and *Qs* without *Us*. “No doubt about it. They fucked us up real good. If a man treats me decent—not up on a pedestal, just decent, like I was a real person—then I can’t figure him out, or what he’s after. And you! Jeeze, I don’t mean to laugh, but you’re so shy around women you’re like the crust on a delicate soufflé: a little vibration and you collapse into this doughy, half-baked mess. Really. It’s painful to watch you around women.”

I couldn’t hide my displeasure at the accuracy of her observation. I knew she hadn’t said it to get back at me for pithy remarks I’d made about the curse of her own life: men who gave her black eyes and bruised cheekbones, but it hurt all the same.

Connie and I were close enough to one another to see what was wrong in the other’s life, but too close to our own similar problems to do other than stay awake until two in the morning complaining and getting drunk on wine that comes in four-liter bottles.

After the Flood / The Revenge of the Innocents

“We’ve got to get even with them,” Connie said, finally. “We’re not going to feel better about ourselves and get on with our lives until we have our revenge on Mom and Dad: until we put them out of our misery.”

I stared blankly at Connie. She was right of course, but I was astounded that she had put into words what I rarely allowed myself to even think. We each had libraries full of self-help books we were continually loaning one another, all of them reaching the same useless conclusion that we were really OK after all. We were not OK. My sister and I traded analysts and therapists and groups like kids trading baseball cards, so taken up with collecting and trading that the bubblegum got to be beside the point. I decided she was right. The time had come to do something a step beyond the endlessly redundant and recursive introspection that had tangled our lives in hopeless knots.

“Murder?” I asked. The mixing of different kinds of wines had formed clots in my loopy thinking. I couldn’t be sure I wasn’t serious about the suggestion.

“No, not murder,” Connie said, compulsively sorting the wooden tiles alphabetically before dumping them all in the dilapidated *Scrabble* box. “Murder would put them out of *their* misery, not ours. No, we have to get back at them, and we wasted so much time already. Statistically, we’ve got about fifty to sixty years of misery left to us. The most we can inflict on them is ten to fifteen, if we’re lucky. We’re going to have to cram a lot of pain into so short a span to even come close to repaying them. We better get started right away.”

“You know, you’re right, Connie. You’re absolutely right,” I said, tapping down the taped-up lid of the game with the precise, affirmative gesture of Oliver Hardy.

Connie scratched the crown of her head. “Any ideas?”

After the Flood / The Revenge of the Innocents

“Well, it’s got to involve internal bleeding,” I said. “Slow, silent, and unseen until it’s too late. They still hope we’ll turn out OK. It’s got to involve their hope. We’ve got to smash it.”

“...and stomp on it...”

“...and break up the pieces...”

“...and scatter the dust,” Connie added with finality.

We began a primeval, heavy-footed dance around the coffee table, like natives beseeching the flat, arid sky for rain. It was our rain dance. No, it was our Pain Dance, to appease and placate our inner tormentors. We picked up the pace of our frenzied dance until the empty glasses tottered on the edge of the table. She and I raced in circles like caged beasts chasing our own tails, prancing and stomping until our limbs felt too heavy to move, as though restrained by the weight of shackles.

Connie and I collapsed on opposite love-seats like the final two scrambling participants in a game of musical chairs. We sipped the rest of the Chablis to make it last and began our scheming. We schemed until dawn, when I covered Connie with one of Grandma’s crooked afghans and crawled off to bed to continue scheming in my dreams. It was such a sweet sleep, the best I’d enjoyed in years.

Connie and I met again after work on Monday to begin implementing our plan. The amber and russet leaves spiralled around us as we sat on the park bench. Neither of us had succumbed to our usual autumn melancholy, brought on by watching yet another year spinning down the drain. We were elated. It felt like springtime.

After the Flood / The Revenge of the Innocents

“It’s funny none of our therapists suggested getting even with those who fucked us up,” Connie said. “It’s so basic. I feel a hundred percent better already. How about you?”

I nodded, though a plague of rodent-like doubts had begun gnawing at my internal woodwork. I hoped it had been decorated with lead-based paint, for I knew doubt and hesitation would wear down my resolve. I had begun to believe that, plot and scheme as we liked, our parents would be impervious to pain.

Connie and I arrived at our parents’ house for the long Thanksgiving weekend, finding such a setting ominously ironic. Our mother, desperate for grandchildren, had encouraged us to bring along the “significant other” in each of our lives. My sister and I saw this as the opportunity we had been waiting for. That detestable phrase would have provoked us to go out on a limb even if we hadn’t had a score to settle.

I arrived first with Connie’s and my mutual friend, Carlos. He had been coached and knew what to expect. My mother’s expression was priceless. Her lower jaw hung open, unable to assist her in shaping even the rudiments of speech. Her bright red lips formed a perfect O filled with shocked silence.

Carlos, usually thought to be straight by those who didn’t know him better, had jumped at the chance to play to others’ expectations as a blatant and unmistakable queer, especially since it coincided with the progeny-crushing impression I wanted to leave with my parents. He wore several earrings in each lobe, thoroughly garbling any message such adornment might have conveyed. He

After the Flood / The Revenge of the Innocents

was dressed in a tattered, oversized cable-knit sweater; his long hair was tied back with a beaded Indian headband. His faded jeans were so tight they were nearly subcutaneous.

My mother stood in the doorway like a piece of furniture abandoned for the moment until help could be enlisted to move it where it belonged. Carlos was effusive, kissing my mother warmly and greeting her with his carefully rehearsed lisp and whiny twang. I don't know how I kept from laughing.

When the cool air finally roused my mother to take cognizance of the still open front door, she led Carlos and me to the kitchen. My father sat at the table, hunched over his newspaper. He didn't look at me longer than a moment. His eyes darted immediately to Carlos, taking in every aspect of his clothes and every nuance of his exaggerated mannerisms. He became aware that he had been staring in the same fish-eyed, fish-mouthed manner as my mother and quickly dropped his gaze. He shifted in his seat. The old wooden chair creaked with his discomfort.

My mother put on a pot of coffee and buttered some English muffins. Everything she touched made a clattering or clanging noise, knocking into whatever else was close at hand. My father cleared his throat so often without ever managing to say anything that I gave up on preparing myself for any pronouncement.

My parents spread marmalade on their muffins in abject silence; even Carlos' silly chattering and insincere compliments on everything from the cream for the coffee to the kitchen curtains could not penetrate it. When the doorbell rang, my mother and father nearly ran one another down in their hurry to answer it. It was Connie, their last hope.

After the Flood / The Revenge of the Innocents

She arrived with her friend, Charles Swan, whom I knew only very slightly. He seemed sullen, giving the impression that this was the last place on the planet he ever hoped to visit. That was, of course, how Connie and I had rehearsed it, but I wondered whether Charles might merely be making use of a natural taciturnity in perfecting his role.

I thought Connie's make-up was a bit overdone, though. She had applied her bluish eye-shadow to her lower eyelid and cheekbone with edges too clearly defined to be altogether convincing, to me anyway, as a black-eye and a bruise. The wounds should have appeared as the smudges of abuse, but instead looked like something confined within the borders of a paint-by-number outline, utterly lacking in subtlety. But subtlety had never been one of our parents' strong suits, and I was counting on their being fooled by the garish caricatures Connie and I had brought home with us.

Charles quickly made himself comfortable in the living room, in Dad's very own chair. He turned on one of the many football games at a deafening volume and bellowed to Connie to hurry up and bring him his six-pack from their car. Connie dashed out without her coat and fetched the beer, setting it before him on the coffee table. Charles took a sip and then held the can up, rotating it slowly as he read the label. Connie took a step back and asked, "Is it all right? Is it the kind you like? I keep forgetting," as she wrung and kneaded her hands. I thought that was a nice touch.

"Yeah, it's fine," Charles said. "Now get out of the way and shut up."

The rest of our stilted conversation had to compete for air-time with the blaring TV set. It was perfect. Dad couldn't even watch his game in peace. He kept getting distracted each time Carlos and I set down the bowl of popcorn and held each other's hands.

After the Flood / The Revenge of the Innocents

Mom was so flustered she ruined nearly every item and trapping of our traditional Thanksgiving fare. The turkey was thoroughly tasteless and as dry as a week-old biscuit, while the stuffing was soggy. The glazing on the yams had burned to an unappetizing black crust. Dad couldn't even deliver his customary Thanksgiving prayer without stumbling over every other word. The sentiment seemed to get caught in his throat, like a splinter of bone from the desiccated fowl, as though being thankful in the presence of this family was a lie even he couldn't quite pull off.

Connie and I were ecstatic. Everything was just too perfect.

During the long evening after Thanksgiving supper, Charles passed out in the easy chair, but not before delivering a blow to the side of Connie's head for bending down and kissing him right in the middle of a touchdown pass.

Carlos and I raided the liquor cabinet, filled mostly with sherry and brandy, and imbibed to the point of getting the giggles, timing our outbursts to coincide with important plays in the game. Carlos kept remarking on the quarterback's ass and I promptly feigned jealousy. We kissed and made up, causing Dad to miss the outcome of the play.

Connie sat in one of the overstuffed armchairs away in a corner, huddled into herself and sobbing softly. She seemed to sink ever deeper into the cushion.

Mom worked beneath the light of the bridge lamp on one of her many uncompleted afghans. She must have been in a trance because she kept crocheting a single row. The crooked, diamond-shaped afghan acquired a long tail. It looked like she was knitting a kite.

After the Flood / The Revenge of the Innocents

Charles was left to growl and snuffle in his stuporous sleep on the sofa. Mom brought out two of her half-afghans and covered him. Connie crawled upstairs to her old room. Dad sat mesmerized by the flickering light of the TV.

“I’ll go up and get one of the extra rooms ready for your *friend*,” Mom said, laying aside her crocheted kite.

“Nah, that’s OK, Mom,” I told her. “We sleep together.”

Mom shushed me so Dad wouldn’t overhear. Not having the extra room to prepare, she had nothing to occupy her hands. She kept knitting her fingers together and twisting them apart. “Well, good-night, then,” she said, leaning forward to kiss me. “I’ll be sitting up with your father for a while yet.” She kissed Carlos’ stubbly cheek and made a great effort to smile, but her insincerity twisted it into a grimace.

Carlos and I stumbled up the stairs to my old room. The single bed had been replaced some time ago with a queen-size mattress and frame for the times I would visit with my new bride. I could now check off another dashed hope on my parents’ long list.

With our audience out of earshot, we could now revert to our normal roles. The gaming had gone fine up to that point, but now I faced having to actually sleep with Carlos. I should have accepted some of the extra blankets my mother offered. I could have cocooned myself in them and slept on the floor.

Carlos was undressed and beneath the covers before I even sat down on the edge of the bed. I got entangled in my sweater for a while, and I didn’t know how to get my shoes off. Every time

After the Flood / The Revenge of the Innocents

I bent forward to untie them my alcohol-saturated blood squirted into the top of my head and the room spun around. I finally just kicked them off and peeled my pants and socks off inside out.

I lay back and tried to steady the spinning bed. My hand grabbed Carlos' thigh. "Sorry," I said. I began slipping and spiraling ever downward into a dark thought I didn't want to consider. I wondered whether I hadn't planned this elaborately orchestrated weekend with the subconscious goal of winding up exactly where I was: in bed with Carlos. Maybe my difficulty with women meant I really had no use for them: that I much preferred the company of men.

Accustomed to the flash of insight that all my therapists regarded as the rearing of truth's ugly head, I accepted the unpleasant conclusion that I was homosexual, and worse off than Carlos because I had chosen to ignore my natural inclinations. I shook Carlos and told him of this revelation into the true nature of my sexuality.

Carlos rolled on his side and propped himself up on one elbow. "You know what, man?" he said. "You're drunk. Now get to sleep so I can sleep."

"No, Carlos, listen. I want you. I'm in love with you," I confessed, resting my hand on his shoulder. My hand tingled and I took that as further evidence.

Carlos laughed. "You don't know what you're talking about, man. You think I don't see what's going on here? Your family's got you feeling so worthless and lonely you'd cozy up to a stinking billygoat right now, just so you wouldn't have to sleep alone. Besides that, you're drunk. Get to sleep and we'll see how queer you are in the morning," he said, removing my hand from his shoulder.

After the Flood / The Revenge of the Innocents

I grabbed him around the waist and he shoved me away. I entwined my legs around him; he jabbed me in the ribs.

We wrestled, Carlos trying to regain his half of the bed while I tried to occupy that same half with him. He found my ticklish spot just below the ribs and weakened me with laughter. We rolled around and jostled until I thought the bed would collapse. Twice I knocked him out of bed.

At last I conceded the match to him. My head was in no condition to suffer further buffeting. I lay back on my side of the bed, panting.

“Shsh, do you hear that?” Carlos asked.

I listened carefully, in between the pulses of low throbbing in my head. I heard the indistinct murmuring of my parents’ voices wafting up through the heat register. Their room was directly below mine.

“Do you know what that’s gonna sound like to them, man, all this bouncing around in the bed?”

“How many guesses do I get?” I asked.

“Man, I’m not gonna be able to look at them in the morning. They’re gonna kill me with those icy stares of theirs. Shit.”

“Relax, Carlos. It’s not like they weren’t expecting something like this. Let’s get some sleep now, OK?”

“That was my idea all along. This is like the longest weekend of my life. I thought *my* folks were hard to take.”

After the Flood / The Revenge of the Innocents

Carlos flopped back onto his pillow, letting out a long, slow sigh. I smiled until my face hurt, lulling myself to sleep with the thought of the racket and rumbling that must have cascaded down into my parents' bedroom. I wondered if they'd ever be able to get to sleep.

We all spent the Friday after Thanksgiving in much the same way except that now we had leftovers at every meal. Mom seemed a little less cheerful and Dad didn't hitch even two words together. Charles got an earlier start on his drinking and Carlos swished and wiggled a little less, probably figuring no one would notice his diminished efforts now that his identity was fixed.

Connie went out to get more beer for Charles. I decided to go with her, leaving Mom and Dad to entertain our significant others. It was a cruel trick to play on our friends, but Connie and I needed to work out a few details for the next evening's performance.

We wandered around the supermarket as though trying to recall what had brought us there, hoping the sight of the object would jog our memory.

"Charles really hates beer, you know," Connie said. "Think Mom and Dad will notice if I bring him near-beer?"

"They might," I said. "You're the one who's always fetching his beer from the kitchen, right? Why not just pour most of it out?"

"Good idea. How are things going with you and Carlos?"

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"What should I mean? A gay and a straight sharing the same bed has got to be a little uncomfortable for somebody."

After the Flood / The Revenge of the Innocents

“We’re doing just fine. Sorry, I didn’t mean to get so defensive. It’s just that I made a pass at Carlos last night.”

Connie laughed aloud, turning heads up and down the aisle. “You were pretty blitzed last night. God, I’m beginning to wonder if this is worth it. Wait. Over here. I’ve got to pick up more eye-shadow.”

“You wonder if what’s worth it?” I asked.

“Oh, just if getting back at Mom and Dad is worth losing our friends. We’re expecting a lot from Charles and Carlos. Maybe we better cut it a day short and have the big blow-out tonight.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right. Come on, we better not leave them with Mom and Dad too long. We don’t want our friends as screwed up as we are.”

Connie purposely brought back the wrong brand of beer for Charles. That was two strikes against her right there, one to each side of the head. As she wept and Charles bellowed, I ran to Connie’s defense, knocking Charles out cold on the kitchen floor just as Mom was trying to re-heat leftovers for lunch. I ministered to Connie’s wounds with a washcloth caked with eye-shadow. My soothing and petting of my dear sister became indecent and highly eroticized, causing Carlos to spin into a rage of whimpering jealousy. Amid all the crying and hollering, Mom dropped her favorite casserole dish, and Dad was obliged to look up from his paper and take notice of the commotion swirling around him and rattling the coffee cups.

After the Flood / The Revenge of the Innocents

Charles was sent packing the minute he came to and Carlos left in a huff, during which he accused me of being a closet heterosexual.

Connie and I decided to pull out all the stops at supper. Mom became overconfident, thinking that her family had settled into its normal routine, and Dad had reclaimed his patriarchal chair at the head of the table. It was perfect. They left themselves wide open for the assault to follow.

My sister and I began stroking and caressing and feeding one another like newlyweds oblivious to the world around them. We kissed between each mouthful. I fondled her pert little breasts and she massaged my crotch. We soon wound up on the floor.

“For Christ’s sake, cut it out,” Dad hollered. “She’s your sister.”

We brushed one another off and returned to our chairs. Connie soon jumped into my lap and we began our routine all over again.

“Maybe you two better go up to your rooms,” Dad said. Mom hadn’t uttered a sound since our first outburst of passion; she continued to stir her empty coffee cup.

“My room’s so drafty,” Connie said. “Mind if I sleep with you?” she asked me, coyly fluttering her eyelids.

“I was hoping you’d say that. Oh, Connie,” I sighed, “you’re the only woman I’d ever be able to make love to. I guess I’ve always known that.”

“And you’re the only man I’ve ever known who treats me like I’m not just a piece of meat. We’re made for each other.”

After the Flood / The Revenge of the Innocents

Arm in arm, Connie and I started out of the kitchen. When we reached the doorway we wheeled around and I said to Mom and Dad, “You two might be getting your wish for grandchildren after all. We’d be embracing *real* family values. You couldn’t get any closer as a family than that.”

When we reached my room, we wasted no time in pouncing on the bed. We bounced up and down as we had when we were kids, only this time we did it simultaneously and more slowly, in order to suggest a certain rhythm. We laughed and giggled and moaned with the ache in our sides.

I told Connie of a new insight I was getting: that maybe we had really engineered all this just for the chance to crawl into bed with one another.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You think too much, you know that? You swallowed all that psychological gobbledygook and now it’s coming up on you. I think our shrinks should be the next ones we get even with. Christ, we can’t make a move without suspecting that everything serves some other purpose.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I said. “Got any ideas?”

“We’ll think of something. How about a game of *Scrabble*?”

Connie returned with the battered box she had packed in her luggage. We set the board up in the center of the mattress and sat cross-legged at the head and foot, scheming to the detriment of our therapists. Connie got extra points and won the first game by adding “t-h-e” to the beginning of “rapist,” already on the board, to form “therapist.” We enjoyed another round of side-aching laughter.

At dawn, Connie went off to her own room. I fell asleep easily and deeply.

After the Flood / The Revenge of the Innocents

We discovered at breakfast that Mom and Dad had never stirred from their places at the dining room table. They stared straight ahead, neither blinking nor flinching as we pretended to throw things at them. We had breakfast out in the dining room, amusing ourselves by hurling horrible insults at the wooden blocks who were our parents. As I cleared away the dishes, Connie went scouting around for one of her old psychology texts.

“What are you going to look up?” I asked.

“Catatonia.”

Before we left, we asked a neighbor to look in on Mom and Dad later, explaining that something hadn't agreed with them and voicing our concern. We drove home in the jolliest of moods. Connie and I realized we had lost our innocence as victims, but considered it a small sacrifice to a greater good.

NINE

“That was cruel,” Melanie said, her last word stretched out to cover a giggle. “Did you and Mom really do that to Grandma and Grandpa?”

“Do you think I’m making up a bunch of stories?” I asked, sounding offended.

Melanie and Rick looked at one another. They seemed afraid to signal what they thought with any gesture more active than the movement of their eyes, as though, scratching their noses at an auction, they might wind up buying something. They were afraid of buying my stories.

“Everything I’ve told you is the truth. I may not have it exactly right in the picayune details, but it’s all true, even the fabrications.”

Rick laughed, quickly losing his grin when he saw his easy dismissal had piqued me.

“Ask Melanie,” I told him. “Melanie, have I portrayed anyone in a way that grates against your memory of them?”

“No.”

“Have I suggested anything they might have done that would go against the grain of their characters?”

“No, Unc.”

“Have I said anything you know to be untrue?”

“No, Unc, but...”

After the Flood / Nine

“Are you worried Rick might be getting a wrong impression of our family?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Kind of. I think you’ve made them out to be a whole lot nicer than they actually are.”

Melanie and I had a good laugh. Rick, who had been following our verbal tennis match, seemed startled by the upset victory.

“Let’s play a game,” Melanie suggested. “How about *Scrabble*?”

“It figures you’d say that. You always win,” I complained. “I think you got it from your mother.”

“She never let’s me win, either,” Rick grouched.

“I’d better soak these dishes,” I said. “You go get the board set up. Put on some music, too.”

I cleared the table and set the dishes in hot, soapy water. The tomato sauce had begun to congeal like dried blood. When I went out to the living room, Melanie had the *Scrabble* board and letter racks set up on the coffee table. She and Rick sat on the floor on pillows.

I opened another bottle of Chianti and brought out fresh glasses. Melanie had lit a stick of incense and turned on a lamp. There was just enough light to make out the letters on the little wooden tiles. She’d put on one of my favorite records of Baroque harpsichord music. It was one of Connie’s favorites, too. The shadows crowded in like ghosts.

Rick bobbed and swayed to one of the livelier pieces, playing the edge of the coffee table with slightly inebriate panache. “I really like that one,” he said. “Who’s the composer?”

“Francois Couperin,” I replied. “It’s called *Les Barricades Mysterieuses*, or...”

. . .The Mysterious Walls

Although we lived less than two miles apart along a bus route, I hadn't heard from my sister all summer. She'd dissolved from the daily-traveled paths of my consciousness during that lapse, so I was expecting anyone on the other end of the phone but Connie. She didn't usually call me at work. As was her style, she didn't waste a minute getting to the point.

"Charles is going out of town for the next three or four days so I was wondering..."

"If I would come over and spend the next three or four nights with you."

"Yeah," she said.

"You could have given me a little more notice."

"I only found out myself; you know Charles. We had an argument, so I don't know if he's really got business in Atlanta and just forgot to tell me until the last minute, or whether he's got something else up his sleeve."

"More likely it's squirming around in his pants," I said.

"Stop it. When are you two ever going to get along? Do you realize what an uncomfortable position that puts me in, always playing referee to a couple of scrappy boys?"

"Hey, I'm not the one that told *him* never to set foot in the house when I was around."

"Look, let's not go into that again. Are you coming over or aren't you?"

Her voice shook. Still, I hadn't outgrown a brother's habit of taunting his sister.

After the Flood / The Mysterious Walls

“What if I had plans?” I asked.

“You? What plans could you possibly have on a weekend?”

“I like that. What if I had a date or something?”

“That’d be great. I’d tell you to bring her along and let me meet her. Do you really have a date?”

“No.”

“Then what’s all this ‘what if’ crap? Get your butt over here.”

“When does Chuck’s flight leave?”

“Five o’clock. Don’t forget how early it gets dark this time of year.”

“I’ll be there. Just get a bottle of wine and dust off the board games. I’ll be over right after work.”

I wasn’t pleased with myself for giving in to her so readily again, but at least I’d suggested I might have something else to do than play nursemaid. I’ve been accommodating myself to her fear of being alone in the house after dark for so long that I hardly question it anymore. All these adjustments everyone else has to make to her problem seem so extravagant. It would be more frugal if she just got over her fear.

I guess I shouldn’t be so hard on Connie. It’s not as though she hasn’t tried. She’s been in therapy of one sort or another since we were in our early teens. And yet every recent scourge that’s raised welts on her psyche—her best friend’s dying in a fiery car crash last winter and Charles’ beating her up, for instance—only appear to heal. I’m no shrink, but it seems to me all her other

After the Flood / The Mysterious Walls

problems just get swallowed up by her fear of being alone in the house after dark. Everything else goes away after a while, but that one keeps getting bigger and more outrageous.

I'm just her little brother, but only by about five minutes. We're twins. And maybe I can't help her, but I still want to protect her from whatever scares her. I can't help it. That's the other part of a brother's shtick. But every so often I get wigged out when I think of how close we are; we even finish sentences for one another. If Connie's really as nutty as she seems sometimes, can I be that far behind? —only five minutes from madness.

I was dredging up all this stuff when I should've finished up at my desk before the weekend, so I wasn't able to knock off early like I'd hoped. I had just enough time to get to my apartment and pack a change of clothes and make it to Connie's house before the sun went down.

I didn't even get my finger poised to ring the doorbell before Connie swung the door open and I nearly fell inside. Her reddened face was streaked with the half-dried trails of tears. I also noticed a couple of fresh purplish bruises on her cheekbone.

"I thought you weren't coming," she said, gulping the final deep sob of what must have been a long, hard cry. I took her in my arms and let her rest her head against my chest. She trembled.

"You know I'm coming if I said I was, silly. I'd never do that to you. Friday evening traffic's a bitch. Got that drink ready for me?"

Connie nodded, which in our positions meant she rubbed her ear against my collarbone.

"I like listening to your voice come from deep inside," she said. "I don't care about the words; I just like the sound of it."

After the Flood / The Mysterious Walls

She went to the kitchen while I went in the bedroom to change. I couldn't stand to be in a suit and tie a minute longer than I had to. I got into a favorite pair of jeans and an old gray sweatshirt and chucked the black dress shoes for a beat-up pair of moose-hide moccasins. I felt like myself again.

I always felt like myself around Connie. What I needed was to find another woman I could hang loose around besides my sister.

Connie set two chilled glasses of Chablis on the coffee table. With her legs tucked beneath her in her favorite old chair—the one Charles kept threatening to call the Salvation Army about—she leaned forward and set up the board, picking out seven letters for each of us.

“What’s got you this time?” I asked. “I thought you’d gotten used to the new house.”

“It’s the wallpaper,” she said. “It really gives me the willies.”

“Is that the new paper Charles ordered all the way from Cambodia or some place?”

“Thailand.”

“I kind of like it,” I said, twisting my neck around to look at the other three walls, even though, on first glance, its pattern seemed unvarying and repetitive. It was very expensive rice paper. Vertical, evenly-spaced pale green stripes were superimposed upon the primary pattern of bamboo stalks. The curved stalks—sometimes clustered, sometimes standing alone—varied in height and thickness. Some leaves were seen broadside; others, as though stirred by the wind, were in profile and shadow. Nowhere could I discern any repeating of the bamboo motif. It must have been a real bitch to hang. “It’s an OK pattern. What bothers you about it?”

“Nothing, right now. It’s your turn. But just wait till after dark.”

After the Flood / The Mysterious Walls

neighborhood. The whole house has Chuck imprinted on it. Everywhere you go, he's in the room with you. Don't *you* ever get to decide about the decor or the furniture—or anything?"

Connie shrugged, and went to the kitchen to refill our glasses. She gave up serving each glass of wine politely, as she would to company, and brought out the four-liter jug instead.

The bruise on her cheekbone kept getting in the way of our conversation. I kept focusing on it the way I do when someone has a physical defect. I can't concentrate on anything but the defect. It glares at me. I want to look away, I don't want to be rude, but I can't help staring.

"How'd you get the black-and-blue mark?" I asked. "Run into a door again?"

Connie said, simultaneously, "I ran into a door again," so that it sounded like we were echoing one another.

"I'll bet you did," I said, unwilling to mask the sarcasm. "Maybe you better go to Dr. Lenz and get your vision checked. What I want to know is why you put up with it. Or does liberation only mean chucking your bra, but not chucking Chuck?"

"Lay off, will you? Charles can be really sweet. You're just never around for those times. I'm sure he feels bad about hitting me. His emotions are very close to the surface. He loses his temper before he's had a chance to think about what he's doing. I'm sure he'll make it up to me. He always brings me a nice silky dress or something as a peace offering."

"Oh, you mean for a piece of ass? You come pretty cheap. What're you going to do with the dress, wear it over your head and peek out through a sleeve so no one sees the black-and-blue marks?"

After the Flood / The Mysterious Walls

“Just stop it! I don’t want to hear all this again. You’ve got your mind made up about Charles and nothing’s going to change it,” she said, turning away in a pout and glowering at the wall. “Uh oh. It’s started already.”

“What has?”

“The wallpaper.”

Darkness had crept surreptitiously into the living room. The single table lamp that was lit could not dispel the murky shadows. The ethereal glow of flashing green neon from the hipster restaurant across the street washed past the security bars on the windows, creating an undulating pattern of stripes and shadows and casting it upon the wallpaper. The streetlamps and headlights from passing cars formed enlarged shadows of the house plants. The lights at the window made the serrated, lobed, and palmate patterns of the plants tangle and waver among the broad bamboo leaves imprinted on the paper. It was as though a breeze had stirred in the sultry jungle.

I had to admit it was an eerie effect. Foreground and background were continually trading places; the room seemed to expand and contract with the breathing in and out of the cool night air through the open window.

“It’s kind of soothing,” I remarked to Connie. “What are you so shook up about?”

Before she could reply, a dark, vaguely canine shape darted across the wallpaper, weaving in and out among the fronds and shadows of fronds. I turned to see whether an animal hadn’t raced past the window, but of course it hadn’t. The ledge and sill were not wide enough for a big dog. Maybe the light played all these tricks. Maybe I’d had too much wine.

After the Flood / The Mysterious Walls

Connie stepped around the coffee table and jumped down beside me on the sofa. She forcefully took my hand in both of hers, squeezing hard enough to make me wince.

“He’s coming! He’s coming!” she shrieked, bouncing up and down on the cushion. “That’s his dog. He’s coming now.”

“Who’s coming?”

“Daddy is. That’s his dog Sam. Don’t you remember anything? Daddy’s carrying his suitcase, too.”

She grabbed me around the waist and buried her face in the crook of my neck and shoulder, blubbing. She looked up at the wall and then nestled against me again.

The shadowed figure of a stout man in profile appeared from behind a cluster of bamboo stalks. A large rectangular shape hovered at his knee, obscuring the rest of his legs. He set the object down and stepped forward.

“Don’t let him take me,” Connie whimpered.

“Daddy’s dead,” I assured her. “Besides, why would he be here?”

“He always comes when Charles is away. He comes to make sure I’m being a good girl. He comes to watch out for me.”

“I’m here now,” I said.

“But you don’t hit me. How can I be a good girl if you don’t hit me?”

Connie pulled away from me vehemently, jerking my arm at the shoulder. She disappeared into the wallpaper. I stood facing the wall, looking down at my right arm, which was missing below

After the Flood / The Mysterious Walls

the elbow. My hand and forearm had gone into the wall, following whatever had dragged Connie inside it.

I felt Connie's strong tugging, even though she was only a shadow on the wall. She overcame my dumbfounded resistance and pulled me inside. Struggling free of the shadowed figure, we shrank to the ground and crept along on our hands and knees. We'd got away.

"What does he carry a suitcase for?" I asked.

"Not so loud," Connie admonished. "He comes from the after-life, I guess. Or maybe it's just from somewhere in my memory. He carries his traveling things in it. Now keep quiet."

I noticed first the change in atmosphere. It was tropically humid and it became an effort of will to breathe. The sounds were also different. The lulling swish of the traffic sweeping past the window could not be heard inside the wallpaper; only the occasional high-pitched wail of a police or ambulance siren penetrated the thick rice paper. It was a world with its own sounds: the most horrible keening and sobbing and moaning, punctuated by the too-solid walloping of fists against tender flesh.

I realized at once what was happening. The wallpaper—everything in the house—were witnesses to all the events that had taken place. Each episode permeated the paper like the strong odor of fish and onions. A residue remained. I was hearing the beatings Connie got from Chuck. These were events strong enough to penetrate the walls. But I could not explain the screams of children I heard in the distance, off in the encroaching, leafy background.

"This way," Connie said, dragging me by the hand. We crouched behind a silhouetted cluster of tall ferns and watched noiselessly as the shadows gathered.

After the Flood / The Mysterious Walls

“What’re you doing down there?” our father asked. “You’ve got to come out and face the music, Connie.”

As we stood up, I could see we weren’t as tall as we had been. We had become children. In my child’s eye I recalled the similar leafy pattern of the wallpaper we’d had in the living room at home. The shadow figure came out of the silhouettes of foliage and loomed above us. The anger stood out on his flesh in the pattern of blood-colored veins. We had never seen anything else printed upon our father’s features, no tenderness, no humor. His anger was the only emotion strong enough to penetrate the wallpaper of his skin and register on his face.

Our father took hold of Connie’s upper arm and dragged her roughly from behind the ferns. “What’s this? What’d you bring *him* along for? No matter, I’ve got something in here for him too.”

Stooping over his suitcase, he undid the latches with two sharp, flapping clicks. I remembered he used to keep the locked suitcase out in the garage. Inside was an array of things. Topmost was his wide black leather belt and a short piece of radiator hose.

“No,” I said. “No more.” I pulled Connie away and we ran off into the dense cover of jungle growth.

“We’ll never get away from him,” my sister panted. “He was a colonel in Vietnam for three years, when we were babies. He’s used to the jungle. He’ll find us in here anyway and it’ll only be worse for running away.”

“We have to try,” I said.

We ran until I thought my burning lungs would burst. We stumbled over the tendrils and thick tangle of roots. I fell once and smashed my forehead into the base of a moss-encrusted tree.

After the Flood / The Mysterious Walls

I didn't pass out, but my legs were getting wobbly. We heard a noise behind us and crouched down, thankful for the opportunity to rest.

Things were too indistinct to be real. I realized we weren't inside the wallpaper. Our twins' closeness had let me enter Connie's state of mind. Her bruises had not come from ghosts in the wallpaper. The shadowy figures could not touch her. But the memories they stirred up still had power to harm her. I lay down beside her and covered her with my child's body. The dry, papery leaves rustled. I felt Connie shudder.

Chuck crept up from behind. He was dressed in muddy, sweaty fatigues and carried a rifle unstrapped from his shoulder. He was one of the many grunts in our father's platoon. I recognized a few of them: Connie's former boyfriends, Uncle Ernie, and the ghost of Grandpa Linder in his doughboy's outfit that smelled like the attic trunk it was stored in. They thrust their bayonets into the clusters of low foliage. Connie squeezed my hand each time one of them passed, but she refrained from letting out so much as a whimper. They withdrew without ever finding us, though the tip of Chuck's probing bayonet once came within inches of Connie's ear.

We got up and moved on. I could not be certain we weren't going around in circles. Alike as my sister and I were, I was in unfamiliar territory.

The mossy ground became soggy, but the atmosphere grew lighter. In the center of a small clearing in the jungle allowing light through the defoliated trees above, we saw Connie's living room furniture. We made a mad, heedless dash for it.

We passed through the membrane of memory with a great, papery tearing sound, tumbling into her living room. Connie landed softly on the sofa, but I had stumbled to the floor, hitting my

After the Flood / The Mysterious Walls

head on a corner of the coffee table. We again wore the adult bodies we had lately been presenting to the world.

I would have thought the entire episode a result of the knock to my head—maybe I had simply passed out after one glass of wine too many—except that our shoes were muddy and the wallpaper was torn where we had burst through. The shreds hung in leaf-shaped tatters. I wondered whether I hadn't entered her madness as well. But Connie wasn't the one who was crazy.

We immediately got to our feet and tore frantically at the bamboo wallpaper. I jumped atop an end table and ripped at the corners of the long strips. Connie tore outward from the center of the hole we had made. The bare plaster beneath remained untouched except for the scrapes and gouges of our fingernails.

One by one the shadowed figures approached the boundary of the wallpaper. We rushed to where each tormentor appeared and ripped him from the wall. Connie mopped her forehead.

There appeared to be no end of them. As Chuck's lumbering shadow came into view, she grabbed two tattered edges of the rice paper and slashed him in half, from his forehead to his crotch, in one long, rending, dry, papery rip.

In an hour we had defoliated the entire living room. We shoved the sofa across the muddy carpet to the fireplace. Sobered by our recent exertions, we brought over the coffee table as well, and Connie put on a pot of coffee. She bandaged my forehead, making the wound look worse than it was with several layers of gauze and a half-mile of tape.

After the Flood / The Mysterious Walls

As she filled our cups, I started the fire with one of Chuck's girlie magazines from the pile beneath the coffee table. I hoped he wouldn't miss it, but realized it didn't matter. Connie had already decided she wouldn't be staying with him. She understood who he really was.

We gathered the shreds of wallpaper into rustling balls that resembled tumbleweeds. I fed them one by one into the fire.

We watched them burst into flame. The large scraps of ash floated in the heated air of the hearth, hovering like the last leaves of a dry autumn, before they were sucked into the updraft and swept up the flue, disappearing at last from our lives, if not our memories.

Connie raised her cup. "To the future," she toasted.

We clinked our cups together. Smiling, I proposed my own toast. "To Thailand," I said. "They've toppled their dictators, too."

TEN

Melanie shivered. Rick put his arm around her and they nuzzled against one another. I was pleased to see that his affection for Melanie approached tenderness. But I just couldn't make my mind up about him. Melanie wanted to marry him. For her sake, I needed to make up my mind quickly. How does one get to know somebody in the course of an evening? I decided I'd better shut up and let Rick do some more talking. I refilled his wine glass.

"Your father didn't hit you, did he?" Rick asked Melanie.

"No," she said, "but that's only because my Mom stepped in and took it herself, like one of those birds who pretends to have a broken wing to lure predators away from the nest."

"A killdeer," I said.

"Unc took some heat, too," she said. "Dad beat you up a couple of times, didn't he?"

I didn't like having to admit in front of Rick that I'd gotten a pretty good thrashing from Melanie's father. I didn't want him to doubt my resolve to take care of her. But I couldn't lie.

"Didn't he ever get what was coming to him?"

"Not really," I said. "That's what makes me despair of justice in this world. We're on our own. Maybe things are better in an afterlife, but I doubt it. God's a patriarch with a long white beard and a long history of taking the man's side."

After the Flood / Ten

“Yeah, I have trouble with that concept, too,” Rick admitted. “It’s a regular good ol’ boy network, isn’t it? Everyone but them is an outsider or a heathen.”

“You see yourself as an outsider?” I asked.

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

“That’s a hopeful sign,” I said. “Then why’d you give me a hard time about my pointing out the brutality involved in male dominance?”

“I just wanted to find out what you were like. I couldn’t swallow everything Melanie said about you without tasting it for myself.”

“Let’s not forget who’s on trial here,” I reminded him. Fortunately, I kept a straight face.

“Is that what this is all about?”

“What do you think?” I said, tossing it back. I’d learned something from analysis after all.

“Yeah, I suppose you’ve gotta find out if I’m right for Melanie.”

“Are you?”

The bluntness of my question surprised Rick. “Why not ask Melanie?” he sputtered.

“She’s prejudiced. I can tell she loves you.”

“And I love her,” he declared, defiantly.

“Just simmer down, Rick. I want to be sure there isn’t something like a Dorian Gray lurking beneath that handsome shell. If I find you’ve been lying to her... well, you don’t want to know what I have in store for you. I decided I had to mete out some justice to Chuck for his mistreatment of my sister and Melanie. But it didn’t come close to what he deserved and, unfortunately, I was...”

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

. . .Beaten to the Punch

The minister officiating at my sister's wedding reached the part of the ceremony where he asked whether anyone had reason to feel the couple should not be joined in holy matrimony. But he mumbled through the passage in such perfunctory and sing-song fashion he was like a conductor calling out subway stops. The couple wanted to climb aboard, saying, "I do! I do!" The train pulled away and Connie was married before I knew what hit her.

I didn't have any strong objections to her marrying Charles Swan for her own sake. My reasons were mostly selfish: I had no use for a brother-in-law. I was accustomed to confiding in Connie and calling her up at all hours and dropping by whenever I was in the neighborhood. I didn't want to have to temper the closeness we had shared since childhood with anything smacking of good judgment and common sense. That's not what being brother and sister was all about, at least not to me. Here was the one lasting relationship where a man and woman could be good friends on an equal footing.

Then, along came Charles Swan stirring up the waters of our comfortable little pond, turning it turbid and murky with his lawyer's sense of propriety and decorum. I could no longer drop over whenever I got the notion. He said it might look like a kinky *menage a trois* to the neighbors.

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

Chuck had already displayed enough of the characteristics of the typical asshole brother-in-law to satisfy me that the only way I'd be able to continue seeing my sister was if I watched every move I made and weighed every word.

Connie doted on him. He had sufficient leverage to make her defer to him in all matters both important and inconsequential. She now shunned bright colors because Chuck found them hurtful to his eyes. He liked her hair cut short and so she had it styled according to his wishes. When he thought she was putting on a little weight, she began having only a glass of orange juice for breakfast and carrot juice for lunch.

Since Chuck didn't care for any of Connie's friends, they dropped out of her life, and eventually stopped calling. He thought her taste in books and movies too egghead and her favorite music too longhair. Connie hunched herself over to attain his level, so they would have something in common to discuss over the one solid meal she was permitted a day.

Connie and I were born only two years apart, but now it was as though a whole generation separated us. The next time I visited she put on a Sinatra record. I hardly knew who she was.

There wasn't much I could say against any of these changes because it was Connie herself, after all, who had allowed Chuck to tie the marionette strings to her joints and limbs. But I didn't have to sit through their interminable Ken and Barbie Punch and Judy shows and like it.

I wanted, however, to remain on Connie's better side. One day she would need me again. I'd be the keeper of our history and, when the revisionists fell out of favor, I would be there to reassemble the pieces of truth and help her put herself back together as the person she had once been.

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

There was only one way for me to keep from disliking the superficial, twittering air-head who had taken over my sister's personality and invaded her body. I had to make the distinction between Connie and the disease consuming her, maintaining my love for the patient while passionately hating the disease. I detested even more the charlatan who had recommended the damaging cure when there was nothing the matter with her in the first place. I allowed the full measure of my intense dislike for the new Connie to transfer undiminished to my brother-in-law, who had caused her revolting transformation from a woman into a house-bound wife.

Charles Swan was not going to get away with killing my sister.

I developed such a thorough dislike of Chuck and all his manipulations that I viewed his personal slights to me as quite beside the point of my hatred of him. I laughed off his insults and parried the punches he delivered at me whenever Connie left the room. Nothing would make me abandon guardianship of the sister I loved so much, but especially not Charles Swan.

Connie tried tirelessly to make peace between Chuck and me, hoping to reconcile, I suppose, the two halves of her life fighting for one existence. I did everything Connie wanted me to do, short of liking her husband. I decided that any disagreeableness would have to come from Chuck. He did not disappoint me.

I planned to tolerate Chuck as long as Connie could. After all, I didn't have to live with him. I could put up with his put-downs and lawyerly pontifications for the duration of my short visits to their apartment. He grated sorely on my nerves, however, especially once Connie brought out the board games, thereby obviating all genuine conversation.

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

My brother-in-law was always right. He insisted that Mars was the second planet from the sun and Venus the fourth. I would have liked to send him on a mission to explore the region in question so he could discover firsthand his mistake. On my next visit I brought along the encyclopedia volume treating of the solar system.

“It’s a misprint,” Chuck said. “There’s probably a lot of them in there. Mars is definitely the second planet from the sun, shithead. Any ordinary fool knows that.”

“Then you must be an extraordinary one,” I replied.

Connie quickly intervened, clearing away the board game and bringing in chips and dip and a six-pack of imported beer. I was astonished that, by her silence, she was agreeing with Chuck. I had built a telescope as a kid and we spent uncounted moonless nights watching the planets in their celestial dance around our back yard. She could not have forgotten. The universe was constrained to spin differently around their apartment than it did for the rest of the world. Connie agreed to these preposterous falsehoods merely to maintain a tenuous peace.

I could overlook this episode as merely further evidence of Chuck’s jerkhood. Other episodes were not so easy to ignore. I accompanied Connie to the dentist, where she had her wisdom teeth pulled, all four of them at once. Her cheeks and face were so swollen she looked like a hamster. The Novocaine was wearing off. Chuck did not even ask how she was feeling. He simply slumped in his chair and demanded his supper. He had worked hard and he was hungry and that was all that mattered. I kept my temper because I was convinced Connie would lose hers, but she didn’t. She acquiesced and fawned and gave in to his every wish until I lost my appetite and left early.

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

In comparison to all that followed, Connie's first year with Chuck was like a long, leisurely vacation. Soon after their first anniversary, bruises appeared on Connie's face and upper arms. She tried to conceal the dark splotches with make-up and long-sleeved blouses, but it was these attempts that drew my attention to her mistreatment. The honeymoon was over. That's the end, I told myself. Connie will finally be leaving the creep.

But nothing of the sort happened. Each time Chuck abused her, Connie doubled her efforts to soothe and placate him. She convinced herself, but not me, that he would outgrow his volatile temper and make up for all his abusiveness. When he knocked her front teeth out, she told me she ended up apologizing to him for contradicting him and inciting him to wrath. I knew then she would never leave him of her own accord, till death did them part, most likely her own.

All my pleading with her fell on deaf ears. I felt like an inexperienced counselor trying to talk her out of a destructive addiction from which she still derived too much comfort and security to forsake, and stand on her own.

I decided I needed to accumulate evidence against Chuck that I could bring to the police or other authorities, hoping they'd comprehend the seriousness of my sister's situation and rescue her while she still had some teeth left.

I called several detective agencies listed in the yellow pages and chose the one offering the most detection for the least money. The evidence against Charles Swan seemed so clear and overwhelming to me that it didn't make sense to spend a lot to gather the evidence. I figured I'd save most of my money to get counseling for Connie once she was out of the bastard's reach.

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

The entire transaction with the Hermalinda Detective Agency was conducted over the phone. I sent my retainer check in the mail. I had no idea I might be making a big mistake.

Meanwhile, the evidence of Connie's mistreatment was accumulating before my very eyes. She looked like she'd been in a car wreck and the paramedics had dropped her stretcher while loading her into the ambulance.

The detective agency cashed my checks but did not return my calls. In desperation I went over to the Hermalinda Detective Agency one day after work and demanded to see the file on Charles and Constance Swan.

"I assure you he's been working most diligently on your case," the receptionist said, smiling for punctuation. "Mr. Forepaugh usually checks in around this time to update his reports. Why don't you have a seat?"

She asked the question as though it were a riddle: "Why don't you have a seat?" I felt like saying, "Because I've been running my ass off over this stupid thing and no one tells me anything."

I waited in the dusty, cobwebby reception room, sliding out of the cheap vinyl chairs every few minutes and paging through two-year-old magazines with the second halves of the articles torn out.

Clement Forepaugh arrived about fifteen minutes later, pushing a volume of air before him into the tiny reception room. He was built like Grover Cleveland and wore a gray suit and vest. He created his own atmosphere and occupied most of the tiny room in a single step. Over one eye he wore a black patch. My doubts surfaced at once. What had I gotten into? Who would hire a one-eyed private eye?

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

After introducing myself I demanded to know what evidence he had gathered against my abusive brother-in-law.

“It’s all on video,” he said. “We can watch it in my office. The notes are rather tedious,” he added.

I was sucked into the vacuum created when he left the room.

Mr. Forepaugh closed the blinds in his office, pointing to the leather wing-back chair in which he wanted me to sit. He inserted a DVD into the video player, slumped behind his huge, untidy desk, and dimmed the lights.

I held my breath. My heart raced as though I had sneaked into the Saturday horror matinee and was waiting for the ushers to find me and throw me out.

Slowly, my eyes became accustomed to the fuzzy, grainy quality of the picture. The view through Connie’s and Chuck’s apartment windows heaved slowly up and down. I suspected Mr. Forepaugh had held the camera on his generous paunch to steady it.

The lights in the apartment were dim and the focus softly blurred. I heard music in the background. At first I thought the microphone had picked it up from the stereo in their living room. But, as the music grew in volume, depth and clarity, I realized I was listening to a dubbed soundtrack Mr. Forepaugh had overlaid on the video. The picture developed shimmering star-points at the edges of every bright or reflective object in the apartment. The image slowly crystallized and Connie and Chuck came into sharp focus, just as the music reached a climax.

Pretty arty, I thought, for a one-eyed private eye.

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

Without their conversation on the soundtrack, Connie and Chuck appeared to be doing a dance: first an argumentative minuet, back and forth, and around the sofa; then a tango, clutching, more sensual, more physical; then a sort of jitterbug, more violent, more heated; merging, finally, into a free-form frenzy, a brutal apache dance in which Connie was knocked to the floor and dragged by the collar of her blouse into the bedroom.

Chuck threw her onto the carefully made bed and ripped off the rest of her clothes. My sister struggled futilely, as though fighting off a swarm of bees with wildly flailing arms. Chuck unzipped his pants and pounced on top of her. The music had transformed to a deep, throbbing bolero that matched the angry pounding of blood in my ears.

The camera zoomed in on them and lingered caressingly on long shots up and down Connie's slender legs and thighs. The action lapsed into a slow-motion poem. I had to turn away. My fingernails had cut into my palms.

"Stop it!" I yelled. "Turn it off. I can't watch any more."

Forepaugh was startled. He hit the pause button and switched on the lights. Connie and Chuck were frozen in mid-stroke, the silent, open-mouthed scream carved on Connie's face as she awaited the next brutal thrust from Chuck.

"I said turn it off," I hollered. Forepaugh reached for the remote control. He had a puzzled, slightly annoyed look on his face.

"You got your second installment," I said, "and that's all you're gonna get. Now get out!"

"This is *my* office," Forepaugh replied.

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

My anger had blinded me. I'd forgotten where I was and why I was there. I reached the door to the reception room and flung it open so violently it swung all the way back and crashed into the wall.

I didn't dare drive home. I would have rammed my car up the side of a street pole or rolled it down an embankment. My hands trembled so spasmodically I couldn't even separate the car key from my house keys. I realized I'd been hasty in storming out of Forepaugh's office. I should've snatched the DVD. Now I'd have to pay him the rest of the money I owed him if I wanted to get the video out of his filthy paws. But I vowed to get it, one way or another.

I left my car in the lot and started walking. My shoes slapped the concrete. I couldn't decide whether I was more furious with Forepaugh or Chuck. My brother-in-law *and* the detective had violated Connie. I could have murdered them both.

Having the impression that someone was following me, I stopped and looked around. The back of my head bristled. I realized, however, that it was merely the sensation of the blood engorging the primitive areas of my brain stem, soaking them in adrenaline and other volatile chemicals.

I half expected to see the imprints my furious stomping had left in the sidewalk, like the round-walled craters left by footsteps in the gray slush of a first snowfall. I remained alone on the street. There was only the raging beast inside of me for company, clawing at my stomach in its effort to get out.

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

I tossed my clothes off along a trail that wound through my apartment to the bathroom. I stood under the shower until the water had turned lukewarm and then cold. The beast had been soothed but he had not been cast out.

My anger left me drained and my muscles ached with tension. I couldn't sleep. I sat wrapped in a towel at my desk, drawing up a list of the ways in which I might murder Charles Swan, giving each a probability of success. I gripped the pen so firmly it sputtered ink across the page.

I almost wept at the thought of what my sister had endured—and was undoubtedly still enduring—at the hands of her husband. The episode filmed so artily by Mr. Forepaugh recorded events from nearly two months before. The trees outside the apartment still wore the deep green of mid-summer. How many times since that incident had Connie talked to me without so much as hinting at what had happened to her? How many times since then had I looked in her eyes and not seen her rape etched in them?

Wearily, I decided she was never going to do anything about how Chuck mistreated her. I was the only other person who knew what was happening to her and who would do anything about it. It was all up to me.

Time did not blunt my rage, but it did afford me opportunity to consider every aspect of the murder of my brother-in-law. I understood my own weakness and aversion to violence and knew I would never be able to twist the knife beneath his breastbone unless I were incensed and white-hot

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

from actually witnessing one of his attacks on Connie. There was no chance of that. Charles Swan was a very politic and decorous bastard.

I thought first of hiring someone to do the job, a hit man, but I was not a very shrewd consumer. I'd likely end up with a blackmailer who intended to extort more money from me to keep quiet about the murder of my brother-in-law. I would have to hire another hit man to silence the first and a third to silence the second, and so on, forced at last to sacrifice the whole of humanity to the swirling black hole of Charles Swan's vicious soul.

I'd have to undertake his murder myself or it would never be accomplished. If I had to sacrifice myself or my freedom to the venture, it would not levy as great a price against my inner peace as continuing to witness, helplessly, the mistreatment of my sister at his hands.

Although I didn't rule out the other variety, my natural inclinations led me to consider a bloodless murder: a strangulation, a poisoning, a fatal fall over a strategically placed wrinkle in the carpet or a slippery spot on the floor near an open window. I decided to visit Connie and see whether I might not have an ally in her. I doubted it, but I also wanted to look over the apartment for anything that might assist my efforts, or provide an escape route in the event I only injured the bastard.

Connie did not expect me to visit without calling first to make sure the coast was clear. She answered the door in a long-sleeved ruffled blouse I suspected was intended to conceal her latest bruises.

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

“I’m in the middle of something,” she said. “Just come on out to the kitchen. I’ll put on a pot of coffee.”

I followed her. My heart leapt at the sight of every implement from the wooden knife-rack laid out in increasing order of size along the kitchen counter. Connie started up the grinding wheel and set the edge of a long butcher knife against the guide. Amid the pleasantly metallic grating buzz, the sparks flew. I imagined a Forepaugh film of her cutting Chuck’s balls off with it. The tune in my head was the “Anvil Chorus.”

“They’re all so dull,” Connie explained. “I’m almost done,” she said. “I couldn’t even cut an overripe tomato with them. Charles has a taste for Chicken Vesuvio. Would you like to stay for dinner? I’ll just take another chicken out of the freezer.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I’d only get into another argument with Chuck. Unless maybe you’d like some help.”

“Help with what?” Connie asked.

“Cutting apart the chuckens, uh... the chickens, I mean.”

“I can handle that myself. Don’t you worry about me,” she said, laughing. “I’m stronger than you think. Boy, Charles is in for a big surprise,” she added, testing the edge of the butcher knife with her thumb.

I couldn’t be sure what she meant: a surprise at getting his favorite dish, or at something else not on the menu? I didn’t want to risk revealing my intentions if murder wasn’t what she was alluding to. I didn’t want her to be an accessory if I could avoid her involvement.

“You’re awfully quiet,” she said.

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

“Just thinking,” I replied. “I guess I’d better be going.”

“You won’t change your mind?”

“No. I’ll let myself out.”

“Don’t be such a stranger,” Connie said. “Just make sure you call first, that’s all. Oh, and guess who I heard from?”

I shrugged.

“Eileen. Yeah. She finally got through when Charles wasn’t around to hang up on her. She says to tell you ‘Hi.’”

“That’s nice. I hope you two had a good long talk.”

“No time,” Connie said. “I had to get Charles’ dinner ready. See you later, OK? Charles has to fly to Atlanta next week. Maybe we can get together.”

I let myself out, sinking immediately into a depression over what a housewife Connie had become. Her vivacity had shriveled up to the size of a dried pea. She hadn’t cracked a single joke or teased me about anything. She hadn’t even kissed me hello or goodbye.

As I replayed our sparse conversation, a notion struck me. Why hadn’t I thought to enlist my sister’s friend Eileen in the cause against Chuck? I knew she hated his guts; she had told me as much at the wedding. I’m sure she knew the part Chuck played in destroying all Connie’s old friendships. A likelier ally I would never find.

I looked up Eileen’s phone number when I got home. I hesitated calling, though. I doubted she would believe everything I knew about how Chuck abused Connie. Eileen knew he was a jerk

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

and a creep and a self-righteous, smug little bastard, but would she believe the rest of it? If only I had Forepaugh's video tape!

As desperate as I was to enlist an ally, I couldn't stomach going back to Forepaugh's office. I couldn't be altogether sure my anger wouldn't spill over onto him, and I wanted to reserve every last drop of it, undiluted and undiminished, for Charles Swan.

Time slipped away as I vacillated among the various methods for murdering my brother-in-law. My resolve ebbed and flowed as though according to an ephemeris.

At last I got up the nerve to call Eileen. I was surprised to learn that she suspected Charles was an abuser. She lamented not being able to help Connie. She couldn't get near enough to have a long conversation with her on any topic deeper than oregano and organically grown tomatoes. Eileen did, however, assert that Chuck would one day get what was coming to him. But I couldn't be sure what role she might be suggesting for herself. Would she consent to murdering him, or was she only voicing the desperate hope of those trying to maintain their belief in a just and orderly universe, a universe that did not revolve around Charles Swan?

Chuck went on his trip to Atlanta and Connie and I got together for dinner. I wanted to take her out, but she insisted on cooking for me. "I don't want to get rusty," she said.

"He'll only be gone for a week," I reminded her. "You won't forget how to make Chicken Vesuvio in a week."

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

Connie seemed distracted. I wound up finishing most of her sentences for her. She flitted and fidgeted with the dinner and the place settings as though for the master himself. It made me uncomfortable.

The phone rang and Connie jumped up as though her seat had received an electric charge. She tossed her napkin beside her plate. “He should have called hours ago,” she said, dashing to the phone in the kitchen. I wasn’t surprised Chuck wanted to keep close tabs on her.

I stared at Connie’s nervously-folded napkin, a neurotic approximation of an origami bird. It was the most creative thing I’d seen her do in months. There was a crash of glass in the kitchen, and I went to see what happened.

Connie had slumped to the floor, leaning her back against the cabinets, her knees pulled up to her chin. The shattered baking dish lay in scattered pieces. The phone dangled at the end of its twisted cord. Someone was still talking on the other end. I picked it up, bracing myself for the detested sound of Chuck’s voice.

The man on the other end was a police sergeant from Atlanta. Charles Swan had been murdered in his hotel room.

I identified myself as the victim’s brother-in-law.

According to the preliminary evidence, the sergeant said Chuck apparently had a girlfriend in Atlanta. From the bellhop’s and maid’s testimony, he frequently beat her. This time, however, the woman defended herself, picking up the magnum of champagne beside the bed and bashing his head in with it. Then she drank a little of the murder weapon. When the police arrived she drank a toast to them. The sergeant found that amusing.

After the Flood / Beaten to the Punch

After making arrangements for the body to be flown back home, I went over to Connie, now barely sobbing, and lifted her to her feet. We sidestepped the shattered baking dish and the splatters of tomato paste and chunks of Chicken Vesuvio.

I sat her down at the dining room table and poured her a glass of brandy. I tried my best to console her, but my heart wasn't in it. I rubbed her shoulders, but she flinched. I had touched one of her fresh bruises.

She took hold of my hand and looked up at me. She smiled. "I'll be all right," she said. "But that poor woman in Atlanta. I can't help thinking of what she must have gone through. She didn't know Charles as I did."

I wasn't going to get into it with my sister. It was enough that her tormentor had been eliminated. Without his domination of her, I was confident she would return to herself, and to the rest of the world. And, there'd be one less lawyer to worry about.

I had to admit I felt cheated by not witnessing Chuck's murder, or wielding the weapon against him myself. I was concerned about the Atlanta woman, too, although I suspected she wouldn't be charged with anything more serious than manslaughter, if that.

My sister owed her life to the brave woman of Atlanta who, with a single blow, had restored a modicum of order to the universe.

ELEVEN

“I didn’t know your father was dead,” Rick said to Melanie.

“He isn’t... not exactly. I guess he is dead, though his influence over me isn’t. He never wanted to be saddled with a kid. I think I’m the main reason he and my Mom split up.”

“That’s not true, Melanie,” I protested. “Your father was a jerk. The world’s full of ’em. It was a power question. He didn’t like things he couldn’t control. When your mother began challenging his authority—and sometimes getting away with it—Chuck drifted away because the situation was beyond the rule of his fist. Beating her didn’t bring her back in line like it once did. And you... who can control a kid once she’s seen authority’s tarnish?”

“Was I such a brat?” Melanie asked.

“No, but you got into things. Every kid does. Chuck couldn’t handle it. He liked his briefcase and his closet and the rest of his world orderly and predictable. You threw a wrench into his mechanical routine. You did for your mother what I hadn’t been able to do: drove your father far enough away for Connie to be safe again.”

“Yeah, but she still loved him. And it drove her over the edge when he left her.”

“Chuck didn’t just go away,” I said. “That would have been too chivalrous. He’d have had to admit defeat. Instead, he let Connie find out he was having all these affairs in every city his law

After the Flood / Eleven

firm sent him. He could have been discreet. Your Mom needn't have found out. But he couldn't just walk away; he had to hurt her one last time."

"Are we inviting him to the wedding?" Rick asked. Melanie looked at him incredulously

"Haven't you been listening?" I chided him. "Did your craft just beam you down or something? Melanie's father is dead."

"My father is dead," Melanie repeated.

"But not *really* dead," Rick said.

"No, he's dead all right, Rick. In fact, my father is so dead he exudes death. Everything he comes in contact with shrivels up and dies. He'd wilt the flowers and curdle the cake. Believe me, you're lucky you never met him."

"In a way, I did. He sounds so much like my own father, they could've been brothers."

"Are you inviting *him*?" I asked. "Assuming there's going to be a wedding, that is."

"No. I don't want him anywhere near us."

"Then accept it that Melanie feels the same way about her father and just drop it, OK?"

"Sure," Rick said. "I don't like big weddings anyway. I'd have liked to meet your Mom, though, Melanie."

"Just look at Unc. They were a lot alike."

"Almost too much alike," I said. "It was hard to have separate thoughts and feelings sometimes. It was scary. After Chuck died, my sister had to be committed. And, sometimes, I was afraid I might be only..."

...Five Minutes from Madness

When I went to visit my sister in the asylum, mine was the only car in the parking lot. I was afraid to leave it alone, although I wasn't sure why I felt that way. It stood battered and lonely, afloat in a sea of shimmering asphalt and glaring sunlight. I felt I was abandoning it, but walked on, deriving some comfort from the jingling of the car keys in my pocket, reminding me that I would return to it.

Eddie waved me through the sliding wrought iron gates. They clanged shut behind me and I hunched my head lower, bracing for impact as one does when alarmed by a loud sound. I'd heard that noise of metallic finality often enough, but it never failed to startle me.

Jim awaited me at the front door of the enormous U-shaped edifice. A stickler for detail, he insisted on seeing my pass, as though I had slipped past Eddie or leaped over the twenty-foot high fence. I thought he said something, but he hadn't. I must have been thinking too intently.

The smell of fresh basil greeted me in the wide, two-storey foyer of the asylum. The kitchen lay just off to my left at the beginning of the north wing, but such a refreshing, earthy aroma struck me as anomalous. I knew it would be the last time I would want to breathe deeply.

As I passed the other checkpoints into the south wing and ascended the high Victorian stairwell with its paint-encrusted iron handrails, and heard behind me the shutting of metal doors and

After the Flood / Five Minutes from Madness

the clicking of old locks, I felt increasingly shut off from the world outside. Though climbing upwards toward the sun-kindled skylight, I sensed I was really descending into darkness.

On the third floor a white-clad matron with a hair net and starched nurse's cap led me down the corridor to my sister's room. The sounds emanating from the first rooms to our right and left were beast-like howls and tortured screams that I could in no way identify as issuing from human throats and mouths, though I knew they had. The hair at the back of my head bristled. The ammonia stench assaulted my nostrils and eradicated the last traces of the sweet basil that hung languidly in the stairwell.

As the matron and I moved down the hallway, the screams turned more guttural. The acrid smell of urine merged with the slippery, oily smell of floor wax. The howls subsided to whimpers as we progressed and, finally, the whimpers gave way to absolute silence, a silence as bleak as the gray painted walls of the corridor.

We had passed through the degrees of madness. The howls and demonic laughter were still recognizably human, but the silence was inhuman, devoid of all reference to the world and my experiences in it. The silence was less than the sound of a whisper in a fathomless void, quieter still than a solitary gasp in an infinite universe.

I did not want to be there. I could not anchor myself in that silence.

The matron jangled her ring of keys and it was as though a beacon had penetrated that shroud of gray fog. I jingled the keys in my own pocket as though to answer the other sound, reassured of my connection and my moorings.

After the Flood / Five Minutes from Madness

“How is she?” I asked, before the matron had unlatched the door. I did not want my sister to hear people talking about her.

“She’s getting weaker, I think,” the woman said. “There’s only so much nourishment a person can get intravenously.”

“Could the medication be causing her to lose her appetite?”

The matron’s mouth curled up at one corner, suggesting her disgust at having to answer yet another stupid question from a dunder-headed layman.

“Your sister was taken off all medication after your last visit,” she said, implying by her tone of voice that I should have known this. “It wasn’t doing any good anyway. She sometimes eats for you. Would you like me to send something up?”

“If you don’t mind,” I said, though I knew she minded. “Maybe a little of whatever they’re making in the kitchen. I smelled it on my way up.”

“I’ll see,” she said. “You have one hour, starting... now.” She clicked a tiny button on her large black wristwatch. It looked like the kind worn by skin divers.

I stepped into Connie’s cell, felt the swirl of fetid air as the door was closed behind me, and heard the tumbler twirl in the lock and settle down to immovable silence.

Connie sat at a small white enameled table, her back to me. She gazed out the window opaque with grime, her view distorted by the little hexagons of wire enmeshed in the panes of glass. She couldn’t possibly be seeing anything but shadows and reflections. I put my hands on her shoulders. She had gotten so much thinner. Her collarbones stuck out like bicycle handlebars.

After the Flood / Five Minutes from Madness

“It’s you,” she said, turning sideways in the chair and looking up at me. My heart squeezed up into my throat so that I couldn’t speak at first. It had been months since anyone had heard her utter a syllable.

“Connie,” I said, taking her sunken cheeks in the palms of my hands. She was cold.

Her voice was deep and raspy. “No, Connie’s gone away, I’m afraid.”

I almost laughed. She always made witty remarks you had to puzzle over before you got the reference. I thought she must be feeling self-conscious about all the weight she’d lost. Not the slightest shadow of a smile crossed her face, however. She stared at me.

“I’ll tell her you were here,” she said, and turned back to the window.

My hands fell to my sides. A key turned in the lock and the heavy door squealed open. An orderly in a gray maintenance uniform handed me a tray with a bowl and a spoon on it. Steam rose from the bowl in the cool air of her room. The aroma of tomatoes, basil, and other spices curled upward with the tendrils of vapor. The contents of the bowl were chunky, like a stew.

I took some in the spoon and offered it to Connie. “Here,” I said, “try some of this. Smell that sweet basil. Remember all those Italian dishes you used to cook for Chuck?” I immediately regretted my eagerness to make conversation. It was thoughtless of me. Connie’s breakdown had occurred right after Chuck was killed. Stupidly, I had opened the wound again.

Holding the bowl under her chin, I waved the laden spoon under her nose. “I’m not hungry,” she said, pushing the bowl away. It slipped out of my hands and crashed to the floor.

Startled by the sharp noise, Connie turned and leaned forward in the chair, her eyes fixed on the fragments of broken pottery and the splatter of stewed tomatoes. I saw instantly what she saw.

After the Flood / Five Minutes from Madness

I relived the moment in her kitchen when she got word of Chuck's death and the baking dish of Chicken Vesuvio tumbled out of her hands and splashed across the kitchen floor. I was no longer in the asylum. I was in her kitchen and, for a moment, I glimpsed her madness. I slipped over the edge of it with her.

Connie placed her hands over her ears. A look of fear shadowed her face and glinted in her eyes. She pierced the silence with an ear-splitting scream drawn forth all the way up from the soles of her bare feet. Then she slumped back in the chair.

I expected the matron or one of the guards to respond to the crash of the bowl and the scream, but they didn't. Perhaps it wasn't as loud as I imagined. Maybe the event had been amplified by the echoes of the past.

I lifted Connie out of the chair and carried her across the crunching pieces of the broken bowl, setting her down on the small bed. She looked at me as though not comprehending what was happening, nor even where she was. I covered her with the thin blanket and dragged the chair across the floor to sit beside her.

"I wish you had got some of that in you," I said, rubbing her hand through the blanket. "Connie, what's happening to you? Won't you let me in? Maybe I can help."

She sat bolt upright, the blanket falling from her bony shoulders, and turned to me.

"I told you before, Connie's gone. I will be soon, too."

I had to play along. I couldn't let the chance to get through to her slip away. "If you're not Connie," I said, "then who are you?"

After the Flood / Five Minutes from Madness

She looked at me intently, as though trying to figure me out. Her face remained expressionless.

“Perhaps you and she should not have been born twins. You would have been viable as one individual. As it is, you are spread too thin. And you’ve never been able to figure it out, have you?”

“Figure what out?” I asked.

“Where you leave off and Connie begins. You wouldn’t have to ask me who I was if you understood that.” She lifted the gray blanket to cover her shoulders. She sighed as though obliged to explain something to a child for the umpteenth time. “I am the part of you that resides in Connie. When she dies, that part of you will die with her, but she will live on in the part of her that dwells in you.”

“Sounds kind of mystic,” I remarked, laughing nervously. Connie, as she had throughout, remained humorless. I groped for a way to draw her out of the dark cavern into which she had retreated. I took her hand in both of mine. “Come on, Connie,” I said. “I miss you. Please come back.”

“She’s not here,” came the tired reply. I almost believed it.

“I’ll never make it without you,” I said.

“Yes, you will,” the person borrowing my sister’s form replied. “Connie learned to be strong from you,” she said, “and strong *for* you, but it was never her strength. She is tired; she’s given up. You must go on without her.”

“I can’t,” I said.

“But you will, because you have to.”

After the Flood / Five Minutes from Madness

“Why, Connie? Why must I? Chuck is dead. Uncle Ernie’s dead. There’s no one to hurt you anymore.”

“You never understood that, either, did you?” the woman said.

“What?” I asked.

“About Charles. It wasn’t his death that tore her up and scattered her to the winds of madness. It was how he died: in a prostitute’s arms a thousand miles from home. He betrayed her. Connie withstood his beating her, his breaking off her friendships, and his ripping up her favorite dress only because she thought in some way he must need her as desperately as she needed him. But he didn’t. She was a useless piece of shit, to everyone else as well as to herself.”

“Not to me,” I protested.

“No, she knows you tried. But she turned you away. It’s not your fault. Now it’s too late.”

“It’s not too late,” I said. “Connie! Come out, Connie!” I shouted. “I know you’re there.”

“She’s not. She’s nowhere. If Connie were here, do you think she would have left that mess on the floor? No, she wouldn’t. She’d have ripped up her flannel gown to mop it up because a good girl, a good woman, cleans up all the messes in the world, whether she’s made them herself or not. You know Connie would have done that. But Connie isn’t here.”

“You can’t leave me like this,” I pleaded. “We are too close. If you won’t do it for yourself, Connie, do it for me. You’re the older one, five minutes older. I need you. If you retreat into madness, I’ll fall in after you. I can’t help it. I’m only five minutes from madness.”

Connie stared at me so intently I shivered. Her gray eyes sparkled with an otherworldly charge. “You’ve always been five minutes from madness,” she said. “That’s what keeps you sane.”

After the Flood / Five Minutes from Madness

“But I’ll lose it if you leave me. I don’t want to go on without you, Connie. I don’t want to be alone. I don’t want to lose my only friend.”

I tried to put my arms around her and hug her, tried to pull her out of herself and closer to me. But she remained limp and uncooperative. I felt as though I were hugging someone already lifeless, already far beyond the concerns of this world. But I had one more ploy. There was no time to lose.

“Think of Melanie,” I said. “Your daughter needs you more than I do.”

The strange light rekindled in my sister’s pale gray eyes. She leaned forward and, for the first time, picked up and held my own hands.

“Connie needs you to promise her something,” she said, still in that distant, unnerving third person.

“Anything,” I said. “Anything you can name, I’ll do it.”

“Connie wants you to raise Melanie.”

“What? Me? I can’t do that. What do I know about raising a kid? I’m not even married.”

A scornful smile played at the corners of Connie’s mouth, as ethereal and mocking as the Mona Lisa’s. I had just said I would do anything, and then turned down her very first request. I was betraying her, too.

“She says you’ll do fine. Melanie already likes you.”

“But...”

“She couldn’t bear to think of Melanie being raised by strangers. There’s no one on Charles’ side. And it would be worse if your mother and father got hold of Melanie.”

After the Flood / Five Minutes from Madness

“I agree,” I said. “Mom and Dad would be ecstatic at the chance to fuck somebody else up. They’ve gotten a little out of practice, but I’m sure they’d manage it. I could promise that Melanie wouldn’t fall into their reptilian clutches, but I don’t know about trying to raise her myself.”

“Connie says the only way to be sure they won’t get hold of Melanie is to take her in yourself, adopt her if you can.”

“What? Adopt her? I can’t,” I said. I saw the accusing smile forming on Connie’s lips again. Her request made sense to me only because I was the last alternative. But I doubted my qualifications. I knew, thanks to the example of our own family, how not to raise a child, but I didn’t know a thing on the positive side.

Connie remained rigid and expressionless. Her very silence was an accusation. I decided to agree, only because I thought it might help Connie to know I, too, hadn’t betrayed her trust. It might ease her worrying over Melanie and, as soon as my sister got better and went home again, Melanie would go back to live with her.

“OK,” I said. “I promise I’ll do my best.”

Connie leaned back against the wall behind her bed and shut her eyes. I touched her cheek. Her eyes opened slowly again, and a gentle smile came to her lips.

“Good-bye,” she said. “The nurse is coming back. I’ll tell Connie you were here.”

I lifted the sleeve of my sweater to look at my watch. She was right. The hour was almost gone. I heard voices in the hallway and the sound of the key grating in the lock.

The matron and the orderly took one step into the room and zeroed in on the broken bowl and the splatters of vegetable stew on the floor.

After the Flood / Five Minutes from Madness

“Aw, Christ,” the orderly moaned. “That stuff stains. I just waxed this floor.” He stooped down and poked his finger into the mess. “Shit.”

“Time’s about up,” the matron announced, pointing to her huge watch. I stood up and bent to kiss Connie’s cheek.

The orderly chatted with the nurse. “Might as well wait till he leaves,” he told her, “though, if you ask me, they ought to be finding a room for him, too. As if I didn’t have enough work already.”

I felt a hot blush come to my ears. The orderly didn’t have the smallest notion about what it meant to be discreet. It was unsettling nevertheless. Everybody in the place, staff and patients alike, had this odd way of speaking remotely about everyone.

I held Connie’s hands, determined to enjoy every last second of our visit. The orderly’s chatter annoyed me.

“Yeah, I stood outside the door the whole time. I couldn’t figure out who the hell he was talking to, since you never hear a peep out of her. I put my ear to the door. He was answering his own questions in another voice, like they were carrying on a regular conversation. Yeah. It spooked me. I thought somebody else got in here.”

A bristling panic crept up my spine and exploded inside my head like a burst of spraying fireworks. The five minutes were up. I was at the threshold of madness. I had stumbled over it!

I bumped past the nurse just as she tapped her watch and said, “Time’s up.” I ran and skidded down the hallway, my feet unable to get a grip on the heavily waxed floor. It was as though I was

After the Flood / Five Minutes from Madness

being pursued by the demons of madness in a slippery, quagmire dream in which I could never outrun them. They clawed at my back and grabbed my collar.

Racing down the stairwell, I took two and three steps at a time, careening into the wall at each turn. I rushed past the guard in the lobby, but was slowed by the guard at the gate who took his time sliding it open.

I collapsed on the rusty hood of my car, panting for breath. I hugged it like a shipwrecked seaman clings to a rock. My knees buckled and I slid to the pavement. The vision of madness blurred and then dispersed in the shimmering sunlight.

I knew I had begun answering for Connie earlier in the summer. It started as a game: a way to avoid her stony stare and endure the stony silence. I also had the notion it might bring her out of her utter lethargy by engaging her mind, especially if I put words in her mouth she disagreed with. I had been doing it so long I forgot. Our conversations became real because I needed them to be real. I worried, however, about the deception that had enabled me to forget so easily I was only talking to myself.

When I returned to the asylum the next Saturday, I was eager to let Connie know I had talked to a lawyer about taking Melanie in as a foster child. I hoped that might bring her around.

Eddie waved me through the front gate more quickly than usual. At the door, Jim checked my tattered pass, but he didn't stop me to talk. The matron and one of the directors of the asylum were waiting for me in the lobby. Before they even spoke I knew what they would tell me. Connie was gone.

TWELVE

Melanie sobbed softly into her cocktail napkin. Rick stroked her long neck with the back of his hand, making clicking noises with his lips near her ear that weren't quite kisses.

"She feels bad about beating the pants off us, Rick," I said.

They both laughed. Melanie dried her face with the corner of the crooked afghan draped over an arm of the sofa.

"She really won with all those extra points for *exudes*," I said. "We should have given up then, and spared ourselves the humiliation."

Rick nodded. "She's got a little ink pad in her purse, and a bag full of blank tiles. She just prints up whatever letters she needs."

"No I don't," Melanie protested, shoving Rick's arm away and wrinkling her lips in a pout. "What is it with men? A woman outdoes you in something and you guys will band together, even if you can't stand one another, just to bring her down. Am I such a threat?"

"I was only kidding," Rick said, extending his hand to her again, like a mailman warily approaching a dog with its hackles bristling.

Melanie rebuffed his conciliatory maneuver.

"You're right," I said. "I can't stand Rick."

"You're not men at all," Melanie huffed. "You're like two boys fighting over me."

After the Flood / Twelve

“I’m sorry,” I said. “You’re right, Melanie. But I’m not really fighting *over* you, I’m fighting *for* you. It’s a mode I get into and can’t *extricate* myself from. *There’s* a word for the next game.”

“I’m tired, Unc. I feel like I’ve been playing referee all night. Why don’t we have dessert now?”

“You just want to quit while you’re ahead.”

“I’m always ahead,” she announced, picking herself up from the cushions. Rick followed her like a mutt charged to protect his mistress. I put away the board game and refilled the wine glasses.

They returned with slices of pie on small plates. Melanie had a wad of fresh napkins under her arm.

Melanie ate her pie in sulky silence. Rick watched her, his eyes following each forkful from the plate to her mouth, like a hungry mutt waiting at the table for a hand-out.

She set her fork on the empty plate and looked at us watching her. “I didn’t mean to be so crabby with you. I can take care of myself. I don’t need either of you to protect me. And certainly not from one another. I love you both, OK?”

Rick nodded irresolutely and resumed chewing.

“It’s such a long-standing habit of mine,” I said. “It’ll be hard to overcome. There was a time when I *did* have to fight for you, Melanie. I took on the role because your mother asked me to. Yeah, I know I have to shift gears now. But it’s going to be a bumpy ride. I haven’t used the clutch in a while. There’ll probably be a hundred times you’ll have to give me...”

...A Second Chance

Judge Morgenstern leaned on his elbows and peered over the edge of his high bench. There was a glare of light from the polished mahogany, from the tight skin of the judge's bald head, and from the thick eyeglasses sitting on the end of his nose.

"You haven't explained to the court's satisfaction, I'm afraid, just why you think you ought to be granted permanent legal custody of your niece. Don't you dare interrupt me again," he warned.

"The evidence is not compelling that Melanie's grandparents would make unfit guardians based solely on the example of having raised you and your sister.

"I have taken into consideration that your sister expressed a wish *in extremis* for you to become her daughter's legal guardian. However, in light of the fact that your sister had been remanded to a state facility for the insane at the time of making her wishes explicit, the court cannot grant that request full significance.

"On the other hand, it is none of the court's business, as your parents would have it, to delve into the matter of your personal associations. I can recall quite clearly that my own parents never approved of a single friend of mine and withheld their blessing upon my marriage because they didn't believe it would last. Mrs. Morgenstern and I have been married thirty years and my parents still regard the arrangement as a shooting star of passion that will soon burn itself out.

After the Flood / A Second Chance

“But that’s neither here nor there,” the judge remarked, waving his hand as though shooping an impertinent fly. “It only proves to illustrate that in fairness I do not attach great significance to your parents’ estimate of your friends.

“I would like a closing statement from each of you before reaching my decision. Melanie’s grandparents will go first.”

My parents, seated on the other side of the aisle, stood up. I could hardly keep from laughing. My father was dressed like an organ grinder’s monkey; that is, he looked unnatural in a suit and tie. He was stiff and formal. I remembered when he bought that suit and tie back in 1983. It went through a couple of expansive alterations, but he still looked as out of place in it as when it was new and still vaguely fashionable.

My mother looked like the organ grinder, barrel-shaped and dressed in a loud floral print dress that only exaggerated her bulging contours. She wore a wide-brimmed hat with enough fruit on it for a hipster salad bar.

They were a matched pair. I knew my mother would do all the talking, grinding away on her little agenda. I started humming “Roll Out the Barrel,” until the judge shot me a stern glance. The music continued playing in my head.

My mother cleared her throat. “Your Honor,” she said, and then paused. “As you know, we have just lost our daughter. It grieves me to think we could lose our granddaughter as well. That’s what handing her over to our son would mean. He has gay and lesbian friends. He eats with his fingers. He listens to music loud enough to curl your hair. All he wears is blue jeans and sweatshirts. He talks back to his elders. And, he’s not even married. We doubt he ever will be. He is certainly

After the Flood / A Second Chance

not the kind of influence you would wish for your own granddaughter, is he? Of course not. So we hope the court comes to its senses and grants us custody of this sweet child. Thank you, Your Honor.”

My parents sat down and the long bench creaked with the sudden burden. The judge nodded to me and I got up.

“This isn’t a power thing with me, Your Honor. I don’t like how it feels as though we’re fighting over property here. Melanie is a person. Let’s not forget that. OK, so I’d have to become a little more responsible with a kid in the house. No problem. But it’s not my job, as I see it, to be shaping her and forming her and turning her into somebody. She’s somebody already.

“Your Honor, I promised my sister to take care of Melanie. Maybe that doesn’t mean much to you because you figure my sister was a fruit-loop anyhow. But I took it seriously.

“I don’t like bad-mouthing my parents in public, but I feel like I’m fighting for Melanie’s life here. Letting my parents get control of her is just like... uh... you might as well put her in *The King Herod’s Day Care Center*. They’ll kill her inside, just like they did my sister and me. OK, Connie’s husband didn’t help the situation. But why do you think she settled for such a creep in the first place? Because our parents taught her not to expect too much from life.

“In closing, I’d like to ask the court to put itself in Melanie’s shoes. Moving in with my parents, you’d be coming into a house where the Holy Bible and shelves bowed with *National Geographics* constitute the world’s great literature; where Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole provide the world’s greatest music; and where Norman Rockwell fills the walls along with sad clowns and teary little girls with eyes as big as billiard balls. Hey, they know what life is like there, don’t they?

After the Flood / A Second Chance

“OK, so everything is a matter of taste. But we’re talking 1950s style denial here. Gee, wasn’t life great? If only we could go back to the 1950s. Daddy could beat Mama, Uncle Ernie could fuck the kids, supper’d be on the table when Daddy got home, and Billy and Susie would think the whole world was like that. Gee, wasn’t life great back then?”

“Well, life in my parents’ house hasn’t moved an inch since 1957. To them, everything is OK as long as everyone agrees to say it is. Is that any way to raise a kid, Your Honor? Besides, my parents, with the rigid devotion of the functionally impaired, have voted for every Republican since Eisenhower. What more can I say?”

Judge Morgenstern leaned back in his chair with the little gilded bald eagle finials. “I think you’ve said enough, young man. The court will recess for thirty minutes while I ponder the choices. If you leave the courtroom, see that you are back by then.”

I was counting on the court’s left-of-center tilt. If it leaned the other way, I’d really blown it.

My mother caught my eye and quickly turned away. A frigid draft spilled through the courtroom. My father just stared at me. I would never have delivered such a spiel at home unless I’d wanted my face readjusted. Twice had been enough.

I leaned back, slouching in the wooden bench, my arms hanging over the back and my feet up on the table in front of me. Inside, though, I was a wreck. I was scared to death they’d get custody of Melanie. I started humming again, just to let Mom and Dad know I didn’t have a thing to worry about. I could tell my posture riled them.

After the Flood / A Second Chance

I made sure I sat up before the judge returned. I didn't want to antagonize him. I wished I had a tape recording of all the vicious things my father had said against Jews over the years. That would have cinched it for them—like a noose. But a recording could never have captured all the frothing and fuming of his unpunctuated delivery.

Judge Morgenstern came back in with his black robe unzipped a little at the neck, revealing a white shirt and striped tie. I imagined he must have really sweated over what he was about to say to us. My family could make an embalmed corpse break out in a cold sweat.

Solemnly, we took our seats. The wooden benches felt like church pews. As at a funeral, the guest of honor was absent.

“It is the well-considered opinion of this court that no final decision can be reached without consulting the minor, Melanie Swan, herself. I intend to advise her at another time in my chambers. I am glad she wasn't here in this courtroom today to witness the rancor that festers in this family.

“To ensure that her judgments are based on some better idea of what life will be like with each of you, I am designating that each of the parties will have temporary foster guardianship of her for a period of one month, beginning with the grandparents.

“At the end of that time, I will base my decision on what Melanie tells me. This court is adjourned until November the twentieth.”

“Your Honor,” my mother protested, waving her handkerchief at him. “You can't be serious about letting a *child* decide what's best for her.”

“That is my intention exactly, madam. Good day.”

After the Flood / A Second Chance

My mother stood stupefied by the judge's hasty dismissal of her. It was my first indication they might be worried. I couldn't be sure he heard it, but if Judge Morgenstern caught my mother's intonation of the word *child*, he would've had distilled for him every volume of our family history into a single syllable. A *child*. It had the same inflection as when my father spoke of kikes and niggers, of *them*.

The month Melanie stayed with my parents was the longest of my life. I didn't sleep a single night through. I kept awaking with the bedroom curtains fluttering over the bed, as though my sister floated above me in her shroud, lifting her draped arm to point an accusing finger of betrayal.

In spite of my promise to Connie before she killed herself, I couldn't just abduct Melanie. It had to be legal and by the book, and Melanie had to want to stay with me. I was reasonably sure Melanie liked me, but I knew the affections of a ten-year-old ran hot and cold.

The time I spent with my niece had always been at the circus or the zoo or the ballpark. To me, that constituted a kind of affectionate bribery. Who wouldn't like an uncle who always took her to the greatest shows on earth?

Melanie's father had never taken her anywhere except to the dentist. Connie spent more time with her, but when she got into her winter-long depressive funks, it fell to me to get Melanie out of the house and insure she didn't succumb to cabin fever like her mother. I was a regular Uncle Fun.

But all those thrilling excursions had taken place while Melanie's parents were alive. Every kid needs an adult who lets her be a kid. But if I got the job as her guardian, I was afraid I'd soon

After the Flood / A Second Chance

be regarded as the parental proxy: the mean old uncle who took all the fun *out* of life. I wanted Melanie to like me.

I had a whole month to fret over this. But nothing gave me greater worry than what I should make for Melanie's first supper with me. I ate, but I never cooked, at least not consciously. When I got hungry I picked through the refrigerator and found a couple of things. I put them in a pot on the stove or in a bowl in the microwave and, *Voila!* —supper happened.

But this time I had to give it some thought. The only thing I knew how to make that didn't come pre-cooked and pre-digested was the tuna casserole my Grandma made. It wasn't a recipe. I had just watched her make tuna casserole every Friday for eighteen years, and it sort of sunk in.

Since I hadn't yet unpacked my Pyrex baking dishes, I put the ingredients in a large plastic bowl. It didn't fit in the microwave because mine was a small, personal-sized microwave, so I put it in the regular oven on the lowest setting, "Warm."

It was time to pick Melanie up at my parents' house. I figured the tuna casserole would be done by the time I got back.

Melanie had her things packed and waiting at the front door. It would never occur to my parents to question anyone in authority, so they abided by the judge's decision to the letter: six o'clock on October nineteenth, ready and waiting.

My parents strove to ignore me as best they could. They said not a word to me as Melanie went to get her coat. Their farewell to her was so tearful you'd have thought I was some nameless functionary who'd come to escort their granddaughter to the scaffold for the sins of her father.

After the Flood / A Second Chance

Melanie had two small, battered suitcases and an enormous stuffed tiger that was still so new its synthetic fur gave me a jolt of static electricity when I picked it up to load in the car. I didn't doubt for a minute that "Tony" was a bribe my parents had got for Melanie to ingratiate themselves to her.

My niece remained silent during the entire drive to my apartment. She seemed on the verge of sullenness and I wondered whether she wasn't dreading the month she'd be spending with me. No doubt my parents had said all sorts of wonderful things about me.

The minute we got to my apartment, however, Melanie broke her vow of silence with a series of non-stop questions, barely waiting for me to answer before she fired the next one at me.

"Did you just move in or something?" she asked. "What's in all those boxes anyway? Can I see?"

I answered in reverse order just to slow her down a little. "No, you can't. It's only my stuff in them: extra pots and pans, my Pyrex cooking dishes, most of my books, and some extra clothes I don't wear too often."

"Why is it all packed away? You moving?"

"No. I just figured I'd be meeting the love of my life and we'd probably be moving to a bigger apartment, maybe even buy a house together. It seemed silly to unpack everything if I'd only be moving again."

"What's your girlfriend's name?"

"I haven't got a girlfriend at the moment. Actually, I haven't dated anyone in about a year. I've kind of been trying to get my life together first."

After the Flood / A Second Chance

“Then why don’t you unpack everything?”

“Good question.”

“Hey, that’s a really cool picture. Why don’t you hang it up some place?”

“Same reason as with the other stuff,” I explained. “I figured I’d be moving soon.”

“When’d you move in?”

“Three years ago.”

“Oh. Should I take my jacket off or are we going out to dinner?”

“No, I made dinner. Thanks for reminding me. Just hang your jacket on the doorknob for now. We’ll get you set up in your room after we eat, OK?”

“We’re not going to McDonald’s?”

“No. I told you I made dinner.”

“Grandma and Grandpa took me to McDonald’s every night.”

“Then you’ve had enough for the rest of your life,” I said.

“Then we went to a Baskin-Robbin’s after that, every night. Chocolate chip is my favorite, just in case you’re wondering.”

“I wasn’t,” I said. “And if you’re planning on making me feel guilty, you can forget it. Number one, I don’t earn enough for us to eat out every night. Eating out is for special occasions. Second, I’m not into bribing you. You either like me and want to live here or you don’t. And third, you’re going to clog your arteries with all that fatty food.”

After the Flood / A Second Chance

“Oh, God!” Melanie shrieked. “You’re right. Look at me!” she said, twisting and turning in front of the mirror on the hall closet door. “I look like a blimp. I must have put on ten pounds in the last month.”

“You don’t need to worry about your weight at your age, Melanie. You look fine. Very Rubenesque.”

“Huh?”

“Peter Paul Rubens,” I said. “He was a Dutch painter who...”

“I know who you mean. My class went on a field trip to The Museum. Nice cut. All those fat women and chubby cherubs lying around on sofas.”

“It wasn’t a cut,” I explained. “You should watch what you eat for the sake of your health, not your appearance.”

“Sure,” she said, stomping over to the sofa and plopping down into it. She folded her arms across her chest and pouted. “Rubens was Flemish, by the way,” she added.

“Thank you,” I replied. “I’ve got to go check on our dinner. You can set the table, all right?”

“Fine,” she said. I couldn’t tell if she was genuinely eager to have something to do or was just humoring me. She got the plates and silverware from the kitchen and set to arranging everything on the dining room table just so. She wanted a tablecloth and napkins, too. I’d expected her to give me a hard time, quoting child labor law statutes or something. I realized I didn’t know her very well.

The tuna casserole appeared done. The noodles were cooked and there was a nice brown crust on top. The plastic bowl was soft, but it hadn’t melted.

After the Flood / A Second Chance

Since Melanie had set the table so nicely, I decided to dress up the tuna dish a little. I sprinkled some dried parsley flakes on top, just like the better restaurants do. Now I could call it something special, something fancy.

We sat down and Melanie unfolded her napkin and laid it across her lap. I followed her example. I scooped out two spoonfuls onto her plate and then three onto my own. The casserole was a bit gloppy.

Melanie daintily took a little of it on the end of her fork. She hesitated, the fork just inches from her mouth. “What is it?” she asked.

“Tuna Tetrizzini,” I replied, confident in the impression created by the sprinkle of parsley.

“Oh,” she said, and slipped the first steaming forkful onto her tongue. I watched as she chewed and swallowed. Her expression said it all, collapsing like a souffle. She set her fork down at the edge of the plate and took a drink of water.

“How’s the Tuna Tetrizzini?” I asked.

“Honestly?”

“Of course, honestly.”

She set her napkin down beside the plate. “Tastes more like Tuna Tetrachloride,” she said. “What’s in it anyway?”

I recited the list of ingredients. Melanie shrugged. I decided to try some of the tuna casserole myself. I was not as brave as my niece. I couldn’t swallow it. Remembering my manners, I got up from the table to spit it out. The stuff was vile. It tasted like plastic and a mixture of unpronounceable chemicals from a can of underarm deodorant.

After the Flood / A Second Chance

When I got back to the table, Melanie was scraping the tetrazzini back into the plastic bowl.

“You didn’t cook it in this thing, did you?” she asked.

I nodded. Melanie laughed. I admit it stung, but it was pretty stupid of me.

“Don’t you have a glass baking dish?” she asked.

“In one of the boxes,” I replied.

“Maybe I could help you start unpacking some of them,” she suggested.

“Not now,” I said. “Get your jacket, Melanie. We’re going to McDonald’s.”

Her smile was not a smirk of triumph. It seemed more like a grin of satisfaction that, at the age of ten, she had actually lived long enough to witness an adult admitting to his mistakes.

“Are we going for dessert, too?” she asked. “How about Baskin-Robbins?”

“Don’t push your luck,” I told her.

We got along fine after that, even though we ate all our meals at home. It was beginning to look more like home, too. We unpacked every last one of the boxes and hung the pictures. Melanie had a good sense of where to put them. The apartment was shaping up nicely.

It did, however, distress me to bring the empty cardboard cartons down to the trash dumpster. I was burning all my bridges. There was no longer this comfortingly nebulous future stretching out before me. I was settled. I lived here. I had a niece to take of.

Melanie didn’t give me much trouble. As long as I took the time to explain why I wanted her to do something, or not do it, she accepted what I told her. She didn’t always agree with me, but we

After the Flood / A Second Chance

talked it out. Sometimes I found her arguments more reasonable than my own and had to give in to her. We were both amazed at how flexible we could be.

We spent the last week of Melanie's stay cleaning the apartment. It was her idea. The social worker appointed by the court was coming at the end of the week to check out the living conditions and home environment. Melanie said it would be smart to make a good impression, but not to overdo it. "These social workers can spot a phony set-up in five seconds," she warned. Having had no previous experience with them, I accepted her opinion.

My niece and I had not once spoken of whether or not she intended to stay with me. She reminded me so much of my sister. Connie and I had always got along with most things understood between us without ever needing to say them. Melanie was not my sister, but in a way it was like being ten years old again and having Connie back before everything started going wrong.

Melanie broached the topic in a roundabout way. "Where can I store my suitcase?" she asked one night after dinner.

"Won't you be needing it again soon?"

"For what? I thought you only get two weeks of vacation a year."

"Well, yeah, so what's that got to do with anything?"

"I'd like to live here," she said, "at least till I get married or something."

"Are you sure?" I asked, trembling inside and out.

"Yeah, I'm sure. I know you're not putting on an act for me. I know you're at your best right now, so, the way I look at it, things can only get better, right? Wait. I didn't mean it like it sounds. You're OK, Unc."

After the Flood / A Second Chance

I smiled as though I had just been proposed to.

“Grandma and Grandpa I’m not so sure about, though,” she said. “I never figured out what they’re really like, know what I mean? Big Macs and ice cream and teddy bears and letting me get away with murder can’t go on forever. So then what are they gonna do with me? If they couldn’t be honest with me in the first place, I don’t think I wanna know what they’re really like. *They* probably don’t even know. Everything is just putting on a good show, know what I mean?”

I nodded. “Your mother and I lived with them for twenty years, remember?”

“How’d you stand it?” she asked. “They’re always talking about how good it was in the old days. I mean, what’ve I got to look forward to? Poodle skirts and guys with greasy hair? Forget it. I want to stay here. It’s OK, isn’t it?”

I was too choked up to say anything. I hugged her.

We cleared away and washed the dishes.

“Did you finish your homework?” I asked her.

“Yeah,” she replied. “Honest, I did. Why? What’s up?”

“Remember? You were going to show me how to make Jell-O.”

“Oh, yeah. OK. So what’s your favorite flavor?”

“Whatever you like,” I said. “You’ve got excellent taste.”

“So do you,” she said, taking out the Pyrex mixing bowl.

THIRTEEN

Melanie and Rick laughed throughout my story, at times holding one another to keep from toppling over. I suspected they'd had enough wine, maybe too much, but I let them finish the little bit left.

"I'd forgotten all about that horrible casserole you made," Melanie said, bursting into a new fit of giggling.

"What did *you* find so funny?" I asked Rick.

"The whole thing," he said. "A bachelor uncle taking charge of his niece. And your family, your parents; they sound like a real scream."

"From fright or hysterics?"

"Both, I guess. Please, don't take it personally."

"How else can you take your family? They do such personal things to you. Their fucking you up is so personalized, so customized, all it's missing is the little brass plaque: 'Prepared especially for...'"

"I meant I wasn't laughing *at* you," Rick explained. "I see so many shades of my own parents in them, you'd think the same artist drew them."

After the Flood / Thirteen

“He did. The artist is our culture. We’re just little stick figures, Saturday morning cartoons and prime time sitcoms. It’s hard to break out of the outline they’ve sketched for you. It’s scary, too. You’re suddenly living on a blank page and have to draw yourself. Everything becomes possible.”

“Yeah,” Melanie said. “There are so many ways things *could* have turned out. What if I had gone to live with Grandma and Grandpa instead?”

“I know *I* wouldn’t have made it,” I said. “You turned my life around. I had to stop trying to fix the past and get on with my life. You taught me to be responsible for myself, Melanie.”

“You helped me, too, Unc. And Rick should be grateful you did. I don’t think he’d want to know me if Grandma and Grandpa had raised me — or, worse yet, my Dad. We helped each other, Unc.”

“OK, I’ll go along with that,” I said. “But I still think about how things might have been, especially if your mother had lived, Melanie.”

“Stop it, Unc. It’s not your fault. And who knows? Maybe it would have been worse. At least living with my Dad taught her to be strong.”

“Not strong enough,” I said. “She still relied on him for her happiness. But you’re right, Melanie. Even if your mother and I had never met Charles Swan, we would’ve met someone else, someone even worse. We still had so much to overcome.”

“Like what?” Rick asked. “It sounds like Melanie’s father was the worst single influence on all your lives.”

After the Flood / Thirteen

“Not by a long shot,” I said. “I admit he didn’t help the situation, but everything was already in place for unhappiness, all our weaknesses and vulnerabilities still intact. A worse fate than encountering Charles Swan, worse even than Connie’s dying, might have been our...”

. . .Coming Home

My sister and I watched as our parents' caskets descended into their grave. The lowering of the ornamented bronze boxes marked the simultaneous lifting of a great weight from our shoulders. I was sorry I hadn't taken Connie's suggestion to wrap a slice of onion in my handkerchief. She gushed great geysers of grief and honked her nose like a swan, while I stood dry-eyed, swaying slightly in the breeze, as unmoved as the nearby trees. Everybody was watching me.

We prepared ourselves for the funeral by recounting sad events from our lives—like when the family beast, Sam, had died—to put us in the proper funereal mood, but it wasn't working for me. I was far too elated to get even moist-eyed. This was the last we'd see of them, thank God, though I doubted we'd ever be truly rid of them.

Connie and I saw it as a stroke of luck that Mom and Dad had packed their bags for Beulah Land at the same time, thereby sparing us the hassle of nursing the surviving partner through an inconsolable grief.

The coroner was still not certain exactly what'd happened to them, other than that they'd taken the wrong medication. My sister and I understood perfectly how it happened. Mom and Dad had a habit of taking up the pair of eyeglasses closest at hand rather than pull themselves up out of their chairs during a commercial to go look for their own. We'd frequently find Dad watching the football game through Mom's rhinestone cat-eye glasses; Mom knitting a misshapen afghan with

After the Flood / Coming Home

Dad's heavy horn-rimmed glasses sliding down her nose as she leaned forward to untangle the skein. They often spoke to one another during commercials, asking, "Did you remember to take your pill, dear?"

Neither eyeglass prescription was right for their own eyes, much less for their spouse's. Connie and I suspected they reached for their pill bottles while wearing the borrowed spectacles, each getting the other's medication. As a result, Mom got Dad's heart attack and he got her stroke. Their neighbor found them two days later sitting in front of the TV, milky eyes frozen wide, staring at "One Life To Live."

Now they'd been lowered into their single grave, a steep-sided hole about the same dimensions as their marriage bed. The minister Uncle Ernie hired said a few perfunctory prayers and remarked how each time an old person died it was like a little library burning down, all the rich experiences of a lifetime destroyed with their passing. He clearly hadn't known our parents. With them, it was more like some *Cliff Notes* getting singed.

The undertaker handed my sister and me the ceremonial shovel so we could toss in the first spadefuls of clumpy dirt. He tapped my shoulder a few minutes later, saying, "You can leave something for the cemetery crew to do. Their time's already figured into the bill." I set the spade back against the mound of red dirt. I'd filled in more than half the grave.

Connie and I walked back to our car, slowly enough to be considered solemn. They'd fixed the flat on the hearse. The rest of the small gathering stood around the graveside like they might be waiting for the Second Coming.

"Why aren't they going home?" I asked my sister.

After the Flood / Coming Home

“They’re probably waiting for us to announce where we’ll be having the funeral luncheon.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I forgot about that,” I said, pulling out my wallet. “How much you got?”

“About twenty bucks,” Connie said. “Didn’t you get the cost of a second grave taken off the funeral bill?”

“No,” I said. “Believe me, I tried. But the director said they didn’t give two-for-one discounts. The crew that digs the graves gets paid by the hour.”

“What’re we going to do? Nobody’s going back to their cars.”

I thumbed through my wallet. “Wait here,” I said, taking Connie’s twenty dollars and stuffing it between the other bills. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. Just get them all rounded up over there by that nice shade tree. I’ll be back in a flash.”

I ran down the grassy incline to the cemetery drive where I’d parked my car. I’d left the keys in the ignition, not expecting anyone around there to steal it. The engine cranked without catching a few times. I sped down the tree-lined drive and out through the wrought-iron gates.

My upbeat mood had begun to fizzle out. Our parents were dead and they were still causing us problems. First it was the flat tire on the hearse just as it pulled into the cemetery, requiring the pallbearers, of which I was one, to lug the friggin’ caskets a quarter of a mile to the grave site. Now it was all our stupid relatives standing around like orphans, waiting to be fed. Mom and Dad were gone, but we still weren’t rid of them.

When I got back to the cemetery, nearly taking a corner off a mausoleum at one of the sharp turns in Valhalla Drive, Connie had the relatives gathered beneath the linden tree. I grabbed the

After the Flood / Coming Home

blanket I used to hide the worn upholstery and protruding springs on the back seat of my car, rolling it up and tucking it under my arm.

Connie shot me a dirty look. I knew she thought I'd taken too long, leaving her stranded with Uncle Ernie and Aunt Edna for a stretch of time that must've felt like eternity to her. She took the blanket from me and spread it on the plush, springy lawn.

"Who wants the extra crispy?" I asked, setting the boxes of fried chicken and plastic containers of potato salad and cole slaw on the picnic blanket. "I'll be right back with the six-packs. Make yourselves right at home."

When I returned, half the assembly had left and gone back to their cars. The rest, in high-heels and long black skirts or suitcoats and dress slacks a size or two too small, refused to risk sitting down to the funeral luncheon.

Aunt Edna's lips trembled and she burst into tears. She tottered away on Uncle Ernie's arm, the points of her high-heels kicking up little divots of the manicured lawn. Only Connie and I remained.

"Looks like we'll be having leftovers for a week," I said, offering her the box of original recipe. She took a wing and a leg and popped open her can of beer. We smiled. Connie's eyes were as sparkling and blue as the cloudless sky. It was a beautiful day.

We clanked our cans together in a toast. Nearly full, they made a dull, metallic sound like a shovel hitting a rock. We watched as the backhoe operator drove up and finished what my sister and I had begun.

After the Flood / Coming Home

Connie and I were halfway home when we realized we hadn't checked to see whether Mom's and Dad's house'd been locked up after the sheriff and the coroner left. The keys handed to us at the hospital morgue were still on the floor of my car. Connie suggested we stop at the house on my way to dropping her back at her apartment.

Our parents' place was camouflaged among the other unimpressive gray stucco houses on the block, all built from similar templates: what we called two-storey bungalows. We hesitated at the curb. The house's slanting upper windows and protruding side dormers gave it the appearance of a crouching cat. The sun-porch of windows across the front of the house lent the further impression that the cat was baring its teeth, and the sag in the middle of the porch gave the cat an unsettling Cheshire grin.

The sheriff *had* locked the house, but we decided to go in and have a look around. Several years had passed since we were last inside. We intended to sell the place and thought it might be a good idea to see whether it was in marketable shape.

The fourth key I tried fit the lock on the front door. I pushed it aside and my sister and I entered cautiously. We felt like intruders and always had, even when we lived there. We'd never been comfortable at home, feeling at times like squatters or, when we were on better terms with Mom and Dad, like a couple of tenants with a tenuous sub-lease. Mom had always kept our rooms on the second floor as tediously tidy as spare bedrooms, making us feel like visitors admitted only with reluctance. Our beds had seemed as much our permanent property as those in an overnight motel room. Even our pajamas had hung on us like rental attire for which there'd been no time for

After the Flood / Coming Home

alterations. Not for a minute did we pretend we were entering the secure abode where the sweet memories of childhood dwelled.

Connie and I stood in the small foyer between the living and dining rooms. Connie shut the door, careful not to let the wind slam it shut, a serious infraction. In the little alcove on the back wall was a photograph of Mom and Dad. Beside it on the ledge of the niche sat the old black rotary telephone.

I turned the photo face down on the linen doily. At that precise instant the phone rang. Connie jumped back and let out a scream. My arm tingled and my hair bristled, as though the phone had sent a charge of current through me. I stood in shock until, on the fourth or fifth ring, Connie picked up the oversized receiver, as dark and heavy as a paleolithic femur.

“Yes, they did. Yes, I am. Yeah. Yeah. I think so. No. No. Constance Swan. Fine. Of course. Thank you. See you then,” she said, and hung up.

“Who was that?” I asked.

“A real estate agent. Mrs. Springer. She wanted to know if we planned on selling the house. I told her we did. She’s coming by Friday evening.”

“Fine with me,” I told Connie. “I wish we didn’t have to deal with this at all. I wish Mom and Dad had died smoking in bed and the house had gone up in flames with them. We’d get a settlement from the insurance company and that would have been the end of it. Now we’re stuck with a house to sell.”

“I don’t think we’ll be stuck with it,” Connie said. “It’s a nice house. A little cleaning and fixing up, maybe some painting, and I think it’ll sell real quick.”

After the Flood / Coming Home

“A little?” I asked. “Open your eyes. This place looks like a ’50s cultural museum. There’s an oxymoron for you. I mean, look at that wallpaper. They haven’t changed anything since we were kids. God-damned doilies and cutesy knickknacks everywhere. You could fill a trash dumpster just with bric-a-brac and cheap souvenirs. It’ll take us months to get it ready to show.”

“No it won’t. You’ll see. Let’s get together over here after work tomorrow. We’ll bring out the buckets and mops and rags and get to it. We’ll be done in no time.”

“But it’ll still look like the place got stuck in a time warp or something.”

“Some people like that sort of thing. The ’50s are having a big revival. We’ll find somebody who feels right at home here.”

“Huh,” I said, doubtfully. “Wards of the state can’t own property, and I don’t know who else you think we’re going to find to take it off our hands.”

“Just quit worrying about it, will you?” Connie urged. “Let’s get going. I’m tired. We’ve had enough hassles for one day. Tomorrow we’ll start fresh.”

I pulled the door shut and locked it. I thought maybe I should’ve left it open. If we were lucky, someone might come after dark and steal the whole damn house, from attic to cellar, doilies, plastic slipcovers, geisha TV lamps, scratchy Elvis records and all.

The next night I waited until Connie arrived before going inside. I believed our parents haunted the house with their weird, ghostly presences even when they were alive. I’d never be able to spend a single night there alone.

Connie came with a shopping bag full of cleaning supplies. She was very organized about what we needed to do. She had a checklist. The first thing she did was clean out the refrigerator.

After the Flood / Coming Home

I stood around with my hands in my pockets until Connie had enough for me to cart to the trash cans in the alley. She'd cleared out the refrigerator completely, chucking even the beer and ketchup and relish, things that wouldn't spoil. I rummaged through the plastic bags when I reached the alley.

Connie had gotten carried away, throwing out foodstuffs that were perfectly all right and other items that'd keep as long as they stayed cold. Instead of dumping everything, I carried the bags down the back way to the basement. I plugged in the old dome-top refrigerator and filled it with all the cans and bottles and jars and packages Connie had so thoughtlessly tossed out.

As long as there remained hunger in the world, especially in Asia and particularly in China, as my parents had been so fond of pointing out at mealtimes, I couldn't throw out unspoiled food without suffering a stab of guilt worse than any pang of hunger. Beside that very adequate reason to counteract my sister's mania for tossing out anything our parents had touched, I thought it reasonable to expect we'd want a sandwich and a couple of beers at the end of our dusty labors. It'd be more convenient to just reach into the fridge and take out what we needed rather than chase after take-outs. I didn't want to get into an argument with Connie, though. She'd likely turn the anger fueling her house-cleaning on me for opposing her policy of sparing nothing.

I quietly carried the still useful items down to the cellar, restocking all the empty shelves, careful to circumvent the sweeping fury of her broom.

"What takes you so long out there?" Connie asked. "All you've got to do is lift the lid and dump it in. What gives?"

After the Flood / Coming Home

“Uh, it’ll never all fit if I just dump it in, Connie. I’ve got to compact stuff and break down the cartons and fold the cardboard. It’s quite a load to be tossing out all at once. Maybe we should go a little slower and be a little more selective, don’t you think?”

Connie took an angry swipe at the dusty, discolored patch of linoleum where the refrigerator had been standing, sending yellowed macaroni noodles and fossilized Cheerios skittering across the floor. “You want to finish, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“Then let’s just get it done. If you go picking through things, we’ll still be at it next year. Come on. Let’s get after the cupboards and closets next. You’ll have to open up that other box of heavy-duty garbage sacks.”

The pots and pans and dishes Connie instructed me to carry away were in far better shape than the blackened pots and chipped plates and mismatched cups I hid in the cabinets of my apartment. I taped up a few of the folded cartons and repacked them with the dishes and kitchen utensils, setting the boxes to one side near the cellar door. I planned on putting them in my trunk and taking them home when Connie wasn’t keeping such a close eye on me.

While I went through Dad’s closet and chest-of-drawers, Connie rummaged through Mom’s things. Dad had been a foot shorter and a foot wider than me, but he had dozens of nice dress shirts and ties and even some underwear and socks still in their packages that would fit me. It seemed a shame to throw them out, and I doubted Connie wanted to be bothered with packing it up and carting the boxes over to the Salvation Army. I put all Dad’s things down in the basement, stuffing them into the empty wardrobe and the old bureau.

After the Flood / Coming Home

It was nearly midnight when Connie and I collapsed in the living room chairs, our limbs heavy and our throats coated with dust.

“We should’ve got something to eat before,” Connie said. “I could go for a nice cold beer, too. Now I don’t feel like moving.”

“I’ll get us something, a couple of sandwiches, anyway,” I said. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where’d you get all the energy? I’ve really had it.”

I shrugged. Connie put her feet up on Mom’s footstool and closed her eyes. I slipped down to the basement and brought out bread and butter and lunchmeat and two beers. I opened the box of kitchenware and took out plates and knives and trudged upstairs to make our late-night snack. Connie was snoring like Mom did when her asthma acted up. She shot awake with one final bovine snort.

“You’re an angel,” she said. “Where’d you find a deli open at this hour?”

I thought of lying, but feared she’d probably recognize the brand of beer and the kind of bland bologna Mom and Dad always ate, not to mention the insipid white bread no self-respecting deli would ever use, even for croutons.

“I couldn’t see throwing all that food out,” I admitted. “You know, all the starving children in Africa. I turned on the old dome-top down in the basement.”

“I should be mad at you,” my sister said, “but I’m grateful you did it. Maybe I got a little carried away.”

After our late supper, Connie fell asleep again. I covered her with one of Mom’s shapeless afghans from the piles of things lined up against the wall on their way out to the alley. I crawled up

After the Flood / Coming Home

to my old room and pulled back the musty covers. Too tired to undress, I kicked my shoes off and fell back on the bed.

My feet hung over the end of the mattress; the walls seemed closer in than they had; even the forked pattern of shadows from the hawthorn tree outside the tiny window, writhing in the wind and folding themselves into the corners of the room, were not the same shadows once cast over me. Those limbs and branches had grown upwards out of the frame of the moonlit window, as my own limbs now stretched beyond the bedframe. The room had never felt entirely like my own, but now neither did my body.

Only my excessive tiredness permitted me to sleep. I drifted down into an old dream, running sluggishly in my hand-me-down body to escape tormentors borrowed from the worn-out waking world.

When I awoke from my faded dreams, the morning wind was already stale, the sunlight wilted by a humid haze. My clothes were damp, and everything in the room smelled of mildew and the moldy mementos of an attic trunk. I heard shuffling and scraping on the unfinished floorboards above me.

Connie had been rummaging through things in the attic: the source of the stale air wafting languidly into my room. I startled her. She'd just raised the stepped trap-door in the hallway when I stumbled out of my room.

“You trying to give me a heart attack?” she grouched. “Come on. I’ll fix us some breakfast.”

“Is there something packed for me to carry down?” I asked. “It’ll save me a trip.”

“Uh, no, there isn’t. Maybe later. I’m still sorting through Mom’s stuff.”

After the Flood / Coming Home

The aroma of perking coffee greeted me as we descended the stairs. “I’m glad you’ve decided to take care of the attic,” I told Connie. “I can’t stand that musty odor. To me, it’s the smell of a life poisoned by the past and left to rot.”

“I’m happy you’re straightening out the basement,” Connie said. “I can’t go down there. The damp, moldy smell is part of it, but I feel so claustrophobic. I think of all the times we were locked in the coal bin, Sam scratching at the door to let us out and howling until Grandma or Uncle Ernie whacked him one.”

“Well, that’s how I feel about the attic.”

“Why? Did something happen to you up there?”

“N-no,” I said, “n-not that I remem-mem-ber.”

“You sure convinced me,” Connie remarked. “God, this place is filled with such wonderful memories, isn’t it? Want some coffee?”

“Yeah,” I said, fearing to say more, in case my stutter had come back for good.

“You’ll have to bring up the coffee mugs then, unless you’ve already thrown them out.”

Connie looked at me wryly, with as much piquant humor in her voice as disapproval.

As I descended the cellar steps, Connie hollered down to me. “When you get the bacon and eggs and bread from the fridge, would you mind bringing up one of the skillets?”

We sat down to a huge breakfast, the first meal I didn’t have to make for myself or eat out since leaving home.

“I’m not going in to work today,” Connie announced. “I’m exhausted, and I couldn’t concentrate anyway.”

After the Flood / Coming Home

“I’m not either,” I said. “My boss was surprised to see me yesterday. He put his hand on my shoulder and drew me aside. ‘You take the rest of the week off, son,’ he told me. ‘You deal with your grief over this terrible loss and come back next Monday. We’ll get along without you.’ He’s putting it down as sick-leave. I guess I can be grief-stricken as long as I’m getting paid for it.”

Connie laughed. “Yeah, that’s part of why I’m not going in either. My co-workers kept asking me how I was holding up. I couldn’t tell them I felt worse when Barney died.”

“Barney?” I asked.

“You remember. My parakeet.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “I think I’d rather go to work, though, than deal with all this shit. Where’s the marmalade?”

“Still in the cellar, I’d imagine.”

I came upstairs with a whole box of things. There was no sense pretending. We didn’t unpack everything, only the items we’d be using, but the cupboards were soon full again.

Connie went to her apartment to pick up a change of clothes and a few other things. I made use of the time alone to stash some more of Dad’s belongings where Connie wouldn’t find them, that is, down in the cellar. Then I went through the stacks of boxes on their way out to the trash and hid more stuff away.

I drove to my own apartment later that afternoon, gathering enough clothes so I wouldn’t have to go back again, a few books to read late at night, and my iPod so we wouldn’t have to listen to Mom’s and Dad’s collection of Perry Como and Dean Martin records over and over. My trunk

After the Flood / Coming Home

and the back seat were full. I didn't bring it in all at once, but waited until Connie lay down for a nap. I wondered if she felt all right. She hadn't made much progress in my absence.

My sister and I found more energy for the tasks at hand with Led Zeppelin and Aerosmith for background. The acoustics of the old house, however, seemed to soak up the sound, even with the stereo cranked all the way up. You had to be right in front of the speakers to catch the subtleties and nuances of the Heavy Metal music we listened to.

We remained busy in the house for the rest of the week, often long into the night. It became difficult to gauge our progress with so much stuff around. I rented a carpet cleaner. We washed all the walls, which looked good except for a few stubborn stains in the living room wallpaper, and then painted the ceilings.

On Friday, the real estate agent came over. Her arrival was so punctual we almost missed her. The sound of the doorbell was absorbed in the chiming of the mantle clock striking seven.

Mrs. Springer handed me her silk jacket and scarf as though I were the doorman. She took an iPad out of her leather handbag and began tapping away, chattering into the device as much as to Connie and me as we went from room to room. She took pictures with her iPhone, waving us out of the way. She went snapping and scribbling and muttering throughout the house.

"This is a wonderful little place!" Mrs. Springer said. Nearly every utterance was an exclamation. "I'm surprised you want to give it up! This would be ideal for a young couple just starting out! I wouldn't worry about the furnishings. The '50s are very in these days! You might consider selling it furnished. If not, I know a dealer in collectibles who'd sell his mother to get the

After the Flood / Coming Home

first look at this place! Here's his card," she said, whipping it out of thin air as though she were a magician.

"I suppose we'd better have a look at the rest of the house," Mrs. Springer said, gathering pod, pad, and phone.

"The rest?" my sister and I chimed.

"The basement and the attic," Mrs. Springer explained. "The buyers will want to see those, too. I need to know what we're dealing with. Don't worry if things aren't in the best of shape. I'll give you my recommendations for things that should be taken care of before we list the property."

Mrs. Springer already knew her way around. She grabbed our hands and led us to the basement. I heard Connie suck in a big gasp of air. I went down the stairs first; the real estate lady pushed Connie on ahead of her.

"My goodness! Your parents sure accumulated a lot of... things," Mrs. Springer remarked, entering the first box-walled aisle of the maze. I half expected the old family beast, Sam, to come roaring and snorting out of the next gap in the maze like the Minotaur.

"We... we w-were p-planning t-to discard m-most of this s-stuff," Connie said, shooting me a stern glance. Her own stammering was a basement stutter that had something to do with Sam and Uncle Ernie. If not for her stutter and the presence of the real estate lady, I knew I would've got a ringing earful from my sister for salvaging what should have been in the trash bins.

"It's otherwise in presentable shape," Mrs. Springer said, checking the dials on the furnace and following each tentacle of the old behemoth to where it met the registers in the floor above.

After the Flood / Coming Home

“Looks good, but we’ll have it inspected. I know a fellow in heating and air conditioning. I’ve got his card some place.”

We followed Mrs. Springer out of the basement and continued on to the second floor. She pulled down the trap-door and ascended the steps, driving me on ahead, I suppose, so I wouldn’t be tempted to look up her skirt. She seemed to know every angle.

My heart pounded. My attic stutter returned. “W-what’s all this c-crap?” I said, glaring at Connie as she climbed the final step.

“I wanted to save some of these things,” she replied, more in explanation to the real estate agent than to me. “I need a little more time to go through them.”

“I understand completely,” Mrs. Springer remarked. “You’ve both had quite a shock! This house holds many memories for you! I’m sure you’ll want to keep several mementos. I’ll wait till you’re ready. I’ll get the contract to you by Monday.”

She led Connie and me down. While waiting for her jacket and scarf, she spun around to take one last sweeping look, as though trying to fix in her mind whatever her iPhone may have missed.

“We’ll be in touch. Nice meeting you both!” Mrs. Springer said, extending her hand and her business card to each of us. Her strong perfume lingered in the house. The exhaust of her silver BMW trailed after her along the Chevy-lined street.

“She seems kind of slick,” I remarked.

“But she knows her business,” Connie said, “and that’s what counts. What do you say we take the night off? We’ll order out for pizza or something and just play *Scrabble* or watch TV.”

After the Flood / Coming Home

“Sounds good to me,” I said. “We worked pretty hard this week, didn’t we? Especially in the attic.”

Connie laughed. I was glad she hadn’t taken my remark as an invitation to argue. “And what about the cellar?” she asked.

“I just didn’t want you doing all the work.”

“You’re so thoughtful.”

The pizza arrived while I was in the shower. I put on Dad’s terry cloth bathrobe and his stretched-out slippers. His brand of after-shave wasn’t too sweet and I splashed a little on, just so it would get used up.

Connie divvied up the pizza and we ate it in the living room. I didn’t really care for Dad’s beer, but that’s all there was in the fridge. I told Connie she looked silly in Mom’s fuzzy bathrobe and bunny slippers. She told me to get a load of myself.

I set my plate down and leaned back in Dad’s recliner.

“Dad used to do that,” Connie remarked.

“What?”

“Pile all the olives and green peppers on the side of the plate. I thought you liked them.”

“Yeah, I used to,” I said. “Think we’ll ever get rid of it?”

“The pizza?”

“No, the house.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t rush into it. Just think of not having to pay rent. Wouldn’t that be great?”

After the Flood / Coming Home

I nodded. Connie's shadow filled the hazy outline where the stain of Mom's shadow had seeped into the wallpaper.

"I can live with that," I said, reaching for another beer.

FOURTEEN

Neither Melanie nor Rick said anything. They got up, wobbling slightly, and carried their plates and wine glasses to the sink.

“I’m going to make some coffee, Unc,” Melanie announced.

“Fine,” I said. “Do you still know where everything is?”

“Of course.”

The perking coffee maker filled our silences. Finally, Rick ventured to say something.

“That last one was the scariest story yet. I guess we have the *least* to fear from others; isn’t that what you’re saying? We do the most damage to ourselves. We fall into completing the scheme others have laid out for us by living up to, or down to, their expectations of us.”

“That’s pretty close,” I told him. “I’m glad to see you’ve got more than just meat between your ears.”

Rick smiled and Melanie grinned. The gurgling of the coffee maker again filled the quiet kitchen.

“You still haven’t said whether you can give us your blessing, Unc.”

“I don’t know that I have any blessings to give. I might bring you bad luck instead.”

“You’re not still spouting that Paige Turner propaganda, are you, Unc?”

“You mean the goofball billionaire?” Rick interrupted. “What have you got to do with him?”

After the Flood / Fourteen

“Unc was taken into his inner circle,” Melanie said. I was grateful she was trying to explain it to Rick. I could hardly explain it to myself.

“Unc just returned from an errand for Turner in Thailand. But he hasn’t talked much about it yet, have you, Unc? Turner said people shouldn’t get married or have kids because we’re facing the end of the world. He says the human race should just let itself die out and spare the rest of the planet our destructive mischief. But I thought Unc got over all of that.”

“How’d you ever get mixed up with him?” Rick asked.

“My life’s been so screwed up, I always fall prey to those I think have the answers. It takes me a while to figure out they’re no smarter than the rest of us. Turner was my guru. He said humanity is irretrievably fucked up. I didn’t have to work to convince myself of the truth of that. I’d lived it. But giving up and just letting the human race die out doesn’t solve anything.”

I went into my bedroom and brought back several packets of photographs. “My Thailand pictures,” I announced. “I learned a lot more than the last time I was there. I learned we have to take responsibility for ourselves and those we love. Blame doesn’t fix anything. And, no one’s going to come and stamp wickedness out. We live after the Flood. The rainbow is the reminder we’re on our own, that we’re orphans, that we’re...”

. . .The Children of Noah

I learned early during my stay in Thailand that if I had any business to conduct, it was best to tend to it early in the morning before the glowing disk of the sun emerged from behind the slumbering horizon.

I rinsed my shirt out in the chipped sink basin, waved it a few times at the open window like a torero challenging the enraged sun, and slipped it on damp. Even a fresh shirt, taken from its still crackling laundry paper, would be clinging to my back by the time I stepped out onto the dew-moistened street.

It was not only the more seasoned expatriate Midwesterners like me who took advantage of the coolest part of the day to wander through the produce markets, drop off a bundle of sweaty clothes wrapped in a sweaty pillowcase, or loiter outside the post office. No matter how early I arrived, there was a small crowd on the post office steps smoking black market cigarettes and sipping green tea purchased from sandal-clad vendors, waiting for the morning clerk to arrive, unlatch the doors, and switch on the flickering lights and wire-caged fans.

My friends Khuang and Doi Pia were arranging their glassy-eyed wares in order of size on the woven mat spread atop their little cart. I pointed to the fish I would pick up on my way back from my stroll to the post office. Doi Pia rolled the fish in a sheet of newspaper and set it beneath the bamboo mat. Khuang jingled the coins in the leather pouch hanging from the waist of his baggy

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

trousers. It was a gentle reminder that I hadn't paid him in the last week. I unwound my wad of tissue-paper bills, in the process of turning to papier-mache in my pocket, and peeled two off. Khuang nodded. The coins in his pouch stirred again. I shook my head and waved away his attempt to make change. He smiled and nodded some more, his head bobbing like one of those silly mascots nodding its assent in the rear window of a big blue Buick as it stops suddenly in the snarl of Bangkok traffic.

"Today it come," Khuang assured me.

"I hope so," I said. "See you later."

I knew Khuang and his wife found me a distraction while they were trying to align their fish, so I moved on. Those along the street for whom I had not yet become a regular morning and evening visitation paused in their drowsy duties to stare after me. I felt their gaze cling to my back like my sweat-soaked shirt.

I meandered back and forth across the murky rivulet coursing its way through the gutter in the center of the brick-paved street. I stopped in front of the cafe to have a cigarette and to stare at the remaining copy of a soggy, month-old *New York Times*. But I still arrived at the Phrakhanong Post Office too early. I took my customary place on the steps, shivering a little as a trickle of sweat spilled along the knobs of my spine and soaked the waistband of my pants.

I'd gotten used to the routine of waiting for my mail at the Phrakhanong Post Office, but I was weary of this habit which marked the high point of my day so early in the morning. It made the remainder of the day seem useless and wasteful. Pleasure merely made the rest of my life drab and numbingly dull. I no longer ventured forth in the afternoons. I slouched in the old claw-foot bathtub,

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

water lapping at my ears. I stayed in so long I thought I'd better drain the tub slowly, allowing my skin to re-harden, or else the flesh would simply slide off my bones like a chicken left in the pot too long.

The thought of my sister, who accompanied me on my last trip to Bangkok, made me aware of how much I'd been complaining to myself. Connie was always griping about how much I complained. In her absence, now, my thoughts to myself on the post office steps simply wove themselves into complaints as readily as vines twining around a stick.

The postal clerk arrived. She smiled and nodded, her ring of keys jingling with her exaggerated gestures. I lit up another cigarette. I didn't want to rush into the darkened post office as though I'd been waiting for her. The cigarette was a stalling gesture. I puffed it continuously, watching the ash lengthen and the paper glow and spurt, until I grew light-headed. Taking my time, I reached the glass doors and went inside. I put my hands in my pockets and stood at the counter for foreign mail.

The other postal patrons who'd been milling around and pacing on the steps followed me inside. A din of conversations was whipped around the room by the briskly-spinning ceiling fans.

The clerk bent behind the counter and produced an envelope for me. Her grin became glaringly bright. She slid the envelope across the counter. "Now you happy," she said, not as a question, but as a statement.

"Yes," I replied, "I'm happy." It was the best I could manage. The letter wasn't the one I was expecting. Even with the return address blurred by water stains and a series of smeared marks from rubber stamps, I could tell the letter was from my niece. Melanie's handwriting was as familiar to

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

me as my own, maybe more so, in fact, since she wrote more often. I didn't want to feel so disappointed, but I was and I couldn't hide it, even from the exuberant clerk. I folded the envelope and tucked it into my back pocket.

The atmosphere, linked since my arrival in Bangkok to my internal weather, became unbearably oppressive. I wondered whether I'd make it back to my hotel room or just lie down at the curb and give up. I knew, however, from trying the technique countless times before that surrendering my will to a humid melancholy, like a frustrated infant holding his breath, wouldn't cause the cessation of my miserable existence. It would only make it harder to bear.

I turned onto my own street and headed for the hotel. I heard Khuang and Doi Pia arguing before I even saw them. I caught a sound like a dead fish slapping the pavement and knew Khuang had struck Doi Pia. I wanted to dwindle into invisibility and retreat to the cool water of my bathtub, but they'd already seen me.

Khuang smiled and nodded; Doi Pia wiped her eyes on her fishy apron. I knew it was foolish, but I'd expected life to be different here, half a world away from the hectic pace and unrelenting pressures and unreasonable expectations that imperiled marriages in America. They may have aspired to it, but my Thai friends were clearly not American, except in the superficial accoutrements. Where could their meanness and ugliness come from? I didn't want to believe it could've originated in this beautiful country among these placid people. It had to be imported. Yet I knew it wasn't Coca-Cola that made Khuang beat his wife. It must be something in the water.

I collected my fish without saying a word. I couldn't look at the smiling couple. They had let me down more than they'd ever know.

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

I filled my bathtub with cold water and spent the afternoon complaining to the dead fish floating disinterestedly between the twin islands of my knees like a ship foundering midway between two havens of safety, equidistant from rescue.

Why had Paige Turner let me down so miserably? How long would I have to wait for his letter? Was this Thailand trip another of his tests to prove me worthy of his trust? A dispirited bubble of air escaped the mouth of the fish.

I was worried I'd lose my resolve to complete my mission on behalf of Turner's Voluntary Human Extinction Society. Yet every day I spent among the citizens of Bangkok convinced me there was no other option but to get rid of the lot of us. At least the other inhabitants of the planet would be spared our violent self-destruction. The fish bobbed and rolled over. It seemed to be grinning. A bubble of relief slid from the corner of its gaping mouth.

I cooked the fish on my hotplate. With the cooler, less humid evening air, my clothes had at last dried on the iron railing of the tiny balcony. A rust stain streaked the back of my shirt and the thighs of my cotton trousers. In a week, or maybe less, my Thai friends would be wearing streaked clothes, thinking this the latest fashion idea from America. They watched every move I made, imitating me to the point of parody. They made me feel I was living in a fish bowl.

The letter from my niece was still in the trouser pocket. It had turned rigid again and it crackled as I unfolded it. I set Melanie's letter on the night table and went out.

The night air had its own fragrance. The shift in the wind dispersed the exhaust fumes and fishy smells and stale humidity of the afternoon. The fragrances gathered on the street corners like bouquets of unrecognizable flowers.

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

The prostitutes congregated at the next intersection, their clinging, silky skirts hiked up to the tops of their thighs. They wobbled on their spiked heels as the scent-laden breeze jostled past them. The prostitutes, most of them still young enough to be considered girls, watched my approach and giggled with their hands over their mouths.

“You not wanting fun?” one of them asked me.

“Not tonight,” I replied.

“You say that last night,” the girl scolded, jutting out her lavender lips in a pout.

I smiled and they giggled again, concealing their faces with their hands, like geishas hiding behind their fluttering fans.

Bangkok’s business districts, scattered across the city, seemed to change character after sundown, where the neon of the bars and discotheques and massage parlors was washed out by the glare of daylight. But at night the neon came into its own, and the small groceries and drugstores and fish markets receded into the shadows between the swirls of pulsing light.

The cinema in my neighborhood was showing a French film entitled *Mouton Menage A Trois*. The posters in the glass cases beside the theater entrance suggested a frolicsome threesome involving at least one sheep. The preposterous postures of the entangled actors in the still shots prevented my figuring out exactly who was doing what to whom. The vagueness of these suggestions seemed sufficient to draw a steady stream of patrons into the teeming, butter-scented lobby. A vendor hawked colored condoms and rainbow-hued tubes of petroleum jelly to the patrons leaving the cinema. A second vendor around the corner peddled packets of pills that came in all the primary colors.

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

A middle-aged American with a high forehead, wearing a dark blue suit and red tie, latched onto one of the Thai girls offering herself at the curbside. She did not appear, with her inexpertly applied make-up and immature breasts, to be more than about fourteen years old. Her pimp interrupted the repartee in tortured Thai and halting English for a discussion of price. The sweating American agreed to the pimp's price, but grew increasingly frustrated with the unwieldy wad of tissue-like Thai currency engorging his wallet. He shoved a fistful of bills at the chattering procurer. "Here. I can't figure out your stupid money. This better be enough. If not, you can go fuck yourself."

The pimp grinned and nodded, bowing with pavement-sweeping obsequiousness as he held open the wide door of the American's silvery blue Oldsmobile. The American slid across the seat and got behind the wheel. The girl slipped in beside him, resting her head against the padded shoulder of his suit jacket, and the toadying pimp heaved the door shut.

I would have liked to tear my compatriot to pieces right there on the street for the way he seemed to think he could buy anything with a flourish of his fat wallet. But one swipe of his meaty paw would have flattened me against the hood of his car. I had already been warned by the Bangkok police, who wore silly uniforms more appropriate to train conductors than officers of the law, that another attempt on my part to interfere with a legal business transaction would land me in a cell at the local constabulary. I'd get to spend the night with characters far more unsavory than the American businessman and the Thai pimp with whom I started the row.

Instead, I spit on the American's windshield, splattering it with the foul phlegm that had accumulated in my throat as a result of having to bite my tongue. Then I melded with the milling

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

crowd of Thais and head-taller foreigners bobbing among them like debris in a languidly brackish stream.

Finding my customary place at the end of the bar in the *Disco L.A.*, I settled in for the remainder of what I'd remember of the night. I felt comfortable away in my corner. The music and tumult of voices were too loud to think above.

I poured drink after drink down my throat, concoctions with little paper parasols stuck into the tropical foam spilling over the rims of the tall, frosted glasses. I collected these souvenirs, as I once had for my niece's Barbie doll, in the pocket of my shirt. I thought the paper umbrella was too small and delicate a device for a Puritanical Amazon like Barbie, but Melanie liked them and I never outgrew my habit of saving them for her. No one ever left them on the bar. They always took the paper parasols home.

As the night wore on, however, the watery colors bled through the pocket of my sweat-soaked shirt and streamed down my shirt front like the gory wound of the Sacred Heart.

I stumbled along the sidewalk on my way back to the hotel, spewing the nauseatingly fruity contents of my stomach into the gutter. The dead fish was back on the street.

Two students helped me to my feet. They were alarmed at the stain on my shirt and wanted to call an ambulance. They thought I'd been stabbed near my heart. I had, but it was not a wound anyone could see. I pulled the paper parasols from my pocket and showed them what had happened. They smiled and nodded. I couldn't look at the students any longer. As I tried to fix them in my gaze, their bobbing heads caused my view of the street to bounce and roll like a bad TV picture. I

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

thanked them and stumbled on, reaching my room without further incident. I collapsed on the bed and awoke with the sun slapping me in the face.

After rinsing out my shirt, which removed most of the stains, I dashed out of the hotel. My brain sloshed around in my head with each abrupt movement. I decided to take it easy. The post office would still be there when I arrived.

I selected my fish at Khuang's and Doi Pia's stand: another day, another flounder. We exchanged the usual pleasantries, but I didn't loiter.

No one waited on the post office steps and no one stood at the counters inside. I stepped up to the wicket for foreign mail out of breath, the sweat streaming down my face. I understood why the natives shunned alcohol: it brought all your body heat to the surface, leaving your insides chilly and your skin drenched. I vowed to abstain for the rest of my stay in Thailand, a promise I knew would be good until the next time I found myself sitting alone at the end of the bar in the *Disco L.A.*

The clerk came from the back room, nearly assaulting me with her ivory smile. She handed me another envelope, this one neatly typed, white and smudgeless. It was devoid of all marks of personality. My name seemed as bleak as an announcement in the obituaries.

"You lucky," the clerk said. "Two times a letter. You very lucky."

"Right," I replied, and thanked her.

Unable to restrain myself until I got back to the hotel, I tore into the envelope with my bloated and unwieldy fingers. I thought I knew what Turner's letter would tell me, but I needed to see it spelled out.

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

The letter was typed, and no signature accompanied the text. I doubted Turner's secretary had any idea what he was conveying by his cryptic message. "The seeds must be planted no later than the third week in May, when the forecast calls for an abatement in the seasonal monsoon. The agreed-upon location is still recommended as the most fertile."

I didn't have much time. I folded the letter, stuffed it into my pocket, and left the post office.

Khuang and Doi Pia were unloading a basketful of fish onto their cart. Doi Pia handed me my fish wrapped in newspaper and said, "You not looking good. Maybe you rest before festival tonight. You feel better then."

"Yeah," I replied. "I don't want to miss it. I'll see you guys there."

Doi Pia laughed. "Guy? I'm no guy," she said, putting her hands on her slender waist and thrusting forward first one rounded hip and then the other. Her hair dangled over the bruise on her cheek.

"It's just an expression," I said.

"Huh," Doi Pia remarked.

I shrugged. As I watched them lining up their fresh catch, a gloomy sadness overwhelmed me. I felt I would drown in it.

Khuang and Doi Pia arranged the larger fish at the back of their display, wedging the smaller ones in between, as though they were laying shingles. Such pathetically frail efforts to impose order on the chaos of life saddened me.

My simple friends were no different in their rage for order than Paige Turner and his followers. Turner's scientists pored over their charts and deliberated long into the night. They had

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

it all worked out. They'd been waiting for the perfect weather conditions and the right interplay of currents before giving me the go-ahead to smash the vials of the virus they'd concocted on the shores of the ocean.

I stared at Khuang's milky-eyed fish. Once I broke the vials at the mouth of the Chao Phraya, the virus would churn over the shoals at the mouth of the river and spill into the Indian Ocean. The treacherous tendrils would reach every place where water lapped against a shore or trickled slowly between the banks of a tiny stream: everywhere water flowed. Everything that breathed would carry the virus, but only humanity would feel the effects.

The fish Khuang and Doi Pia were arranging so neatly on their cart would be among the last they'd catch that wouldn't be tainted with the virus. Their careful display seemed so pitiful and futile an effort against the flood of plague about to wash over them. And there'd be no ark to climb aboard this time.

Turning and leaving Khuang's and Doi Pia's stand, I trudged to the hotel with my letter and my fish, burdened by the awareness that they were connected in a way only I comprehended.

I spent the afternoon again soaking in the bath with my supper. I set a pitcher of iced tea on a stool beside the tub and leaned Melanie's and Turner's letters against the sweating pitcher. Turner's letter was in front and I decided to reread it.

It was clear I didn't have more than a couple of days to accomplish my mission. I supposed it might offer some cover to spill the vials during the hubbub of the Songkran festival. I thought it'd be fittingly ironic, too. While the Thais splashed the blessing of water on each other and beseeched their goddess to grant them fertile crops and a bountiful harvest, I'd be unleashing a rapidly mutating

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

viral plague that would stay two steps ahead of any effort to provide immunity against it. Within two years, every human, male and female, would be completely sterile.

“You’ll have the place to yourselves again,” I told the milky-eyed fish bobbing between my knees, giving him a playful jab. I sank lower in the tub until the water filled my ears. I listened to the comforting sound of the water spilling down the rusty overflow drain.

I awoke, sputtering and coughing, when I swallowed a mouthful of fishy-tasting water. It was time to get dressed and cook my supper. I tore Turner’s missive into tiny pieces and flushed them down the toilet.

After my supper, I stood on the narrow balcony and watched the sun complete its descent. It bothered me that I still hadn’t opened the missive from Melanie. Her letter seemed to follow me around the hotel room. Several times I found the envelope in my hand, unable to account for how it got there. This spooked me so badly I was afraid to open it.

Melanie’s letters were depressingly cheerful. I knew I’d break out in a rash of hesitations when the time came for me to uncork the vials. The only way for me to surmount these doubts would be to recall all the terrible calamities we humans had brought down on one another’s heads, our life on the planet flashing before my eyes like a rapidly spooling microfiche of newspaper headlines. That was the only way I’d be able to go through with it. Melanie’s letter would only distract me.

On the other hand, simply touching Melanie’s letter made me remember the wickedness in personal detail: my sister’s suicide, Melanie’s abandonment by her father, and every incident in my own wretched childhood at the hands of my parents and Grandpa Linder and Uncle Ernie. I thought

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

maybe Melanie's letter might spur me on instead, and help me complete my task with relish rather than surrender.

As I took out my pocket knife to slice open the envelope, Khuang and Doi Pia called to me from the street. I put the letter back in my pocket, and went downstairs to join the revelers.

Khuang and Doi Pia were as eager as two children anticipating the circus. They bounced up and down on their rubber-soled sandals, leading me by the hand through the narrow side streets to the park along the Chao Phraya River where the festival was to take place. My small travel bag with the lethal vials in it clapped against my hip.

The throng of people became oppressively thick. I felt claustrophobically short of breath, as though I were in a crammed elevator. The individuals in this press of flesh had no wills of their own. Nearly everyone carried bowls or colorful plastic buckets. I bobbed along like a cork in a swollen stream.

Vendors of various goods, from bananas to hashish, stood in the doorways snaring the passersby, latching onto their shirt sleeves or purse straps. I avoided most of these rabid merchants thanks to the nimble maneuvers of Khuang and Doi Pia, between whom I was sandwiched and supported like a tottering drunk. We did not as easily evade those who splashed us with water.

Children paced on every streetcorner, winnowing out the head-taller, overdressed *farang* and, after gleefully dousing us with water, pressed flyers or cards into our damp hands. One boy caught me by the elbow and shoved a neatly folded hot-pink flyer at me. I caught it before it fluttered to the pavement and was trampled underfoot. I stuffed the advertisement inside my shirt and consented to be carried along in the surge, soaked to the skin by the bucketfuls of blessings showered on all.

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

As we approached the park, the narrow side streets were intersected by wide tree-lined boulevards. The crowd fanned out and spilled over into these wider avenues, lessening the press. I felt my chest expand to take in the rush of fresh air. The fragrance of exotic blossoms, incense and hashish displaced the sweat-laden, fetid air in my nostrils. My mood grew more hopeful, as though I had at last broken the surface of the water after a long, lung-bursting submersion. I might actually enjoy myself at the festival. The next bucket of cold water was poured over my head.

I had nothing with which to compare the festival atmosphere—clogged with singing voices, laughter, fragrant smoke, solitary chanting, and the taunts of children—except the be-ins of a former age. I knew this was a religious festival, but there was nothing in my background of decadent Puritanism that enabled me to consider the words “religion” and “festival” in the space of a single thought. I had grown up hundreds of miles from any celebration of Fat Tuesday. My family knew only the suffocating incense and somber smudges of Ash Wednesday.

Khuang and Doi Pia let go of my elbows. Khuang lit up his hash pipe and offered it to me. My expanding lungs made me aware of the flyer plastered against my sweaty chest. I took it out and unfolded it, noting a new, bright pink stain on my linen shirt.

My friends asked me what it said. They understood a fair amount of basic English, but could not read a word of it. The rigid Roman letters were probably too intimidating to those accustomed to the fluidity and grace of Thai script.

I read over the flyer and laughed so hard I had to lean against a tree to steady myself. No doubt the hashish helped in the hilarity. The flyer was an advertisement for the *Pleasure Palace*. It

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

contained several phrases not intended to be humorous, concocted by someone familiar with English slang, but whose facility among the fine points of grammar was a bit clumsy.

YOU HAVEN'T HAD YOUR JOB BLOWN

UNTIL ONE OF OUR GIRLS

DOES YOU FOR IT.

COME SEE WHERE YOU ARE MISSING.

I realized the futility of attempting to explain why this struck me so funny. Nevertheless, I read the ad to Khuang and Doi Pia without altering a jot or tittle. Their stony stares and baffled silence became as hilarious as the unintended joke itself. I slumped to the base of the tree, holding my sides and gasping for breath, a fish out of water. On cue, I received another dousing.

Those milling about in that quadrant of the park smiled at the *farang* who had decided to observe the festival in his own peculiar, though not altogether inappropriate fashion.

My friends helped me to my feet. I felt they no longer wanted to be seen with me. Khuang suggested a meeting place in the event we got separated, and then he and Doi Pia rushed several steps ahead of me, darting in and out among the festival-goers until I lost sight of them.

I was at first afraid of being left alone in the crowd. It was like the times our parents tried to ditch my sister and me in a department store. But, just as it did on those occasions, the fear gave way, slowly, to a feeling of exhilaration and wonderful lightness, of giddy freedom. I was no longer tethered to Khuang and Doi Pia. I could drift along wherever the mood of the crowd swept me.

I was drawn inexorably, as were all the other recent arrivals at the festival, to the towering wooden structure in the middle of the park, at the center of a huge, treeless, grassy field. The

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

building was constructed entirely of bundled sticks and long, narrow poles. The flimsy framework would be lit for a sacrificial bonfire, and I had no doubt it would ignite quickly and ferociously.

The tower of kindling was designed to resemble an elaborate spired temple, like those the Thais and their neighbors had built centuries ago. The temples and palaces could be found throughout Southeast Asia wherever uninterrupted use prevented their encrustation with voracious vegetation, or where archaeologists had rescued them from the devouring jungles. But this edifice of sticks and poles and lashed twigs was not intended to last.

As the crowd pressed closer to the base of the wooden temple, its spires tottered and swayed like the soft limbs of a Malacca tree tugged by the wind. I wondered if the tower would stand long enough to have the torch put to it.

I drew closer and saw that sheaves of grain, bunches of herbs, and bouquets of flowers had been tied to the ends of the thousands of branches comprising the temporary temple. Crude clay figures in improbable erotic postures dangled from colorful ribbons.

There were also more modern artifacts hanging from the twigs and wedged into the gaps between the lashed bundles of kindling: carefully folded wads of currency, mostly one-*baht* notes; small toys; articles of costume jewelry; double-dyed scarves; and baubles, trinkets, and strung beads of every size and color. I suspected the significance of these objects tied and pegged to the ceremonial woodpile was known only to those who tied them there. It was a ritual both communal and private. I felt I might want to put something on the sacrificial altar, too, and fished around in my pockets.

A familiar voice called out behind me. “Mister *Farang!*”

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

I turned around and saw the little Thai woman from the Phrakhanong Post Office. She grinned with the simple delight of having discovered me in an unfamiliar setting. Her husband and two daughters stood behind her in the shadows. They all splashed me with water.

“Ah, Mister *Farang*,” she repeated. “I happy you come to *Songkran*. You will like it. Like Happy New Year.”

I looked down at her and smiled. Her whole family nodded and bowed.

“You like letter you get? It make you happy?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, rather sheepishly. “I haven’t looked at it yet.”

“What you say? Every day you come bother me for important letter. Then letter come, and you not read it? You goofy, Mister *Farang*?”

“Probably,” I admitted. “The weather here cooks our brains. All *farang* are a little strange, don’t you think?”

“Yes, yes,” she said, nodding and bowing. Her family joined in. I suspected they didn’t know to what they were agreeing. The postal clerk said good-bye, tacking on a final “Don’t forget letter, Mister *Farang*.” She and her family melded with the crowd.

I was amused by her persistence. She was like one of the little terriers that dogged mailmen, only in Thailand the custom was reversed and it was the postal customer who was set upon by a zealous employee. I had certainly hounded her for the past two weeks, but I didn’t appreciate her making me feel guilty. Perhaps I would sacrifice my niece’s letter to the bonfire.

Like ink shrinking back from a waxy resist, the crowd drew back from the temple of kindling. The tumult of voices grew deafening. Four athletic young men in billowing silk pants bore

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

lit torches to the temple, one to each of its four sides. To the gonging of a deep bass bell, the young men set their torches at the base of the wooden temple and tumbled back into the crowd.

The flames leapt skyward like the ghostly afterimages of the spires they would shortly consume. The light grew in intensity until the pale bellies of the clouds reflected the pinkish glow. The heat blasted forth as though from the opening of an oven door. I turned away, watching the flames dart and waver in the dark eyes of the transfixed onlookers, and found a more comfortable vantage at a further remove from the searing heat. I hoped for another soaking.

It was a clean fire, sending up plumes of white, smudgeless smoke. The aromas of the burning herbs and flowers entwined like smoky tendrils with that of the soft, fragrant wood.

As the fire retreated from its first voracious surge, more of the crowd approached the fringe of now charred grass. They tossed small mementos onto the licking, glowing tongues. I reached into my rear pocket and took out my niece's letter.

I knew I couldn't consign her missive to the flames without first reading it, yet I was afraid of what news she might impart. I again turned my back to the fire and unfolded the three pages of her letter. The fire, reduced from roaring to crackling, illuminated the pages with a soft, steady glow.

My niece was adept at filling both sides of each sheet of paper with her small, cursive script. She began as though that had been her intention, but broke off several times in the middle of a page and started her letter all over again on the other side.

She excoriated me, as I expected, for allowing myself to be taken in by the smooth-talking, messianic Turner. While I couldn't have revealed the nature of my mission to her, I needn't have

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

departed in such haste, leaving her just a short note and the number of my post office box in Bangkok. She scolded me for that, too.

Then, on the second side, she was more conciliatory, but that, apparently, wasn't the tone she wanted either. On the second sheet, Melanie announced her engagement to Rick. I had been dreading this news even as I prepared to leave for Thailand. Her tone was pleading; she tread lightly on my feelings. But she must have sensed her inability to convince me. On the other side, she conveyed the same news, but in the harsh tone of a statement of fact about which I could do nothing. My lectures on the improbability of love had fallen on deaf ears.

On the last page, dated three days after the rest of her letter, Melanie resorted to simplicity.

Dear Uncle,

I love you.

I miss you.

Please come home.

Love,

Melanie

P.S. We'll wait with the wedding until you can give me away with proper ceremony.

My hands shook. I let my arms fall to my sides and spun around to face the fire, feeling a chill spill down my spine as my back turned into the cool, shaded lee of the flames.

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

Melanie was savvy enough to know the difference between love and passion, between fucking and making love. If she said she loved this guy Rick, I had to believe her. But could he love her? That's what was so improbable about love: that two people should feel affection for one another in nearly the same way at the same moment.

I had told Melanie my history and her mother's. I introduced her to all our idiotic, hurtful relatives. I insisted she read the papers and watch the news. I wanted her to have no illusions about what people really did. I wanted her to lose faith in love, so she wouldn't be hurt. But I let her love me, and I dared to love her. That was my greatest mistake: I lectured one way and behaved another: I lacked consistency. I told her love was not possible, and then loved her. No wonder she was confused.

I stood holding the letter, staring into the fire. The temple collapsed into a heap of glowing rubble, the coruscating, opalescent embers lying at its heart. A group of boys goaded one another into flinging packets of firecrackers onto the coals, jumping back and laughing with delight as the strings of fireworks sputtered and crackled, shooting hot embers onto the blackened ground.

An old man grabbed one of the boys by both arms and shook him, shouting into his face. Even without understanding a word of Thai, I would have known he was telling the boy how stupid it was to play with a pocketful of fireworks so near a fire. I had been trying to tell Melanie much the same thing.

Like any adult entrusted with a child's education, I tried to spare Melanie life's harsher lessons. I disabused her of the illusion of an orderly, caring universe; I tried to make her see the world as a hostile place. I succeeded only in perpetrating against her what had been done to me: I'd

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

placed my lenses over her eyes. Now she was rebelling, telling me she had to find out for herself. I'd raised her well after all.

It was a lesson I couldn't help extending, for it was so obvious. I, too, had sought answers, sitting like a child in Paige Turner's lap while he consoled me with his own desperate notions on a world hopelessly lost. Like Melanie, I, too, needed to rebel: not only against Turner, but against the emptiness and pain that had brought me to him and made me believe in him.

I folded Melanie's letter and tucked it back in my pocket. I slipped the travel bag off my shoulder and, holding it by its long strap, twirled it over my head like a sling. The whooshing noise sliced the stagnant air. I let go of the strap and the bag flew into the fire, the flasks tumbling out and crashing onto the bed of coals.

"Fuck Paige Turner!" I yelled.

Those nearby laughed and applauded. Here was a strange *farang* ritual, an American ritual, in which they could take part. They took up the refrain. "Fuck Paige Turner!" they chanted.

"Fuck the apocalypse!" I hollered.

"Fuck apocalypse!" they screamed.

One of the crowd hurled his Coke bottle onto the blazing embers. A volley of Coke bottles crashed into the fire.

"Fuck Coca-Cola!" I shouted.

"Fuck Coca-Cola!" they yelled.

The crowd was mine.

And the world was theirs.

FIFTEEN

Melanie's laughter was more a squeal. She hung her arms around me and gave me a wet, sloppy kiss. "You've made me so happy, Unc." Then she stood back, at arm's length, and peered into my eyes, squinting and contorting her face. "That was a 'yes,' wasn't it?"

I nodded. She latched onto me again and danced around the kitchen with me like one of those oversized dolls whose feet you strap to your shoes.

Rick actually became exuberant. He joined in our dance, putting his arms around us. We stumbled around the kitchen, knocking my Pyrex baking dish out of the dish rack onto the floor. Giggling, Melanie scrambled for the broom and dustpan.

"How about a drink in celebration?" I asked.

"It's kind of late, Unc," Rick said. He was aware I heard what he called me. "We better be going."

"Neither of you is in any shape to drive. Hand the keys over, Rick." He complied with only the weakest resistance.

"I'll sleep in Melanie's room," I said. "You two can have my bed. Maybe you'll bring it some good luck."

"Oh, Unc. You torture yourself. You'll find somebody."

I couldn't keep from grinning.

After the Flood / Fifteen

“What, Unc?”

“I think maybe I’m in love, too.” I shuffled through the photographs lying on the counter and took out the one of Doi Pia standing beside their little boat down at the river. It was the only one I had of her where Khuang was out of the picture.

“Doi Pia? She’s beautiful. But I thought...”

“I know. But she’s leaving Khuang. I’m sponsoring her to come to America. She’ll have a job at the *Thai Cousin* fish market: you know, the one next to the Thai restaurant you like.”

“That’s wonderful,” Melanie squealed. “Maybe we could have a double ceremony.”

“You’re jumping to conclusions, Melanie,” I scolded, pouring brandy into three small glasses.

“I’m just optimistic. She wouldn’t leave her husband *and* her family and her country if you didn’t mean something to her. Come on. Let’s toast. To the future!”

We clinked our glasses and stood around the sink for a while, discussing Melanie’s and Rick’s wedding plans. There’d be a lot to arrange. They shuffled off to bed and I turned in, too.

Melanie would lose her old room, but I don’t think she cared. I’d have to get it ready for Doi Pia. I hoped Melanie wouldn’t mind lending a hand.

I lay back on the bed with the nightlight on, staring at the shelves full of Melanie’s stuffed animals and high school memorabilia. I pretended they were mine, part of my childhood. Tonight would be my last night of childhood. Tomorrow I’d awake an adult, responsible for my own happiness and maybe, I hoped, for a little of Doi Pia’s, too.