

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.