

COURTING DISASTERS

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Simon remembered the vision of the crash. He saw the windows shatter, the splash of glass, the crunching, inward impact. He was aware of the steering wheel smashing into his ribcage, the windshield battering his face, and the car's front end crushing his legs as the Ferrari and the redwood met, but he didn't feel the pain. There were certain sensations he allowed to travel from his body to his home, deep in his skull, but pain was not one of them. He had learned how to turn off the pain when he was eight.

But he didn't hear anything, either, and that disturbed him; he had never damped sound before. Hearing and sight were his favorite senses, vital to his job as well as to his off-hour pleasures. He recalled the mixture of desperation, abandon, and numbness he had felt; the pulse of the car around him, the cool night air blowing in the vents, the driving beat of rock music from the speakers behind him, the scent of wet and redwood as he mazed his way around the curves of the Avenue of the Giants.

When his control collapsed, when the road curved and his car did not, sound vanished. Instead, in the last moment before blackout, images battered his mind. He felt himself shaped and hammered in the heart of fire. He felt his feet had turned to hands with a million pale slim fingers, reaching downward into moist, fragrant earth.

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In the blinking moment it took him to focus, Simon noted the colors around him: a muted sand-beige ceiling, warm gold curtains dangling from a host of bead-chains locked into a ceiling track that half-circled his bed on his left, light apricot walls to his right. According to the Lüscher color test, these colors should be relaxing yet slightly energizing, which seemed appropriate to the environment. He suspected this was a hospital, since the bed he lay in had rails.

He heard breathing: his own, and someone else's. The other person's breathing was slow, with long pauses between inhalation and exhalation.

Messages waited for him from outlying areas of his body, but he sensed the scream of pain in them and shunted them away. His glance fell on a tall machine beside the bed. It hummed and ticked very quietly-Red LED numbers flashed and changed on the face of a small blue box hanging midway down a chrome pipe. Drops travelled from a fat, clear hanging bottle down a plastic tube which vanished into the blue box, re-emerged from the bottom, and snaked under a bandage on his left forearm, which was taped to the bedrail.

Fueling up, he thought. Something about getting life-juice from a hose felt familiar to him. With his eyes shut he could imagine himself healthy, crouched upon asphalt, his rigid form encapsulating a power waiting to growl to life, a human heart locked inside him, the all-important spark that set everything in motion and brought him to waking life.

Simon lay and grinned beneath his bandages. His fantasies were usually darker. He had never suspected his Ferrari loved him as much as he loved it. He lay imagining the warmth that entered the car when the human sat in its seat, turned the key, pressed pedals, shifted gears, and laid hands on the steering wheel. An almost unbearable thrill of anticipation simmered in him, like an unscratchable itch. The car did not care where it went. Movement excited it, the continual meeting and mating with the surface of the road.

Fueling up. The car understood.

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When he woke the second time, there were flowers on the table by his bed. The flowers were color-coordinated with the walls: bronze chrysanthemums, sprays of pale everlasting, a sprinkling of strawflowers colored like the orange metal of cheap Far Eastern jewelry. The color reminded him of Rachel. She often wore large sun-colored pendants with snippets of metal dangling and jingling. He felt a momentary longing for her so intense it eclipsed everything else. Closing his eyes, he waited; eventually the desire eased its clutch. He opened his eyes again and looked at the flowers. The splayed, fingered chrysanthemum leaves were a green so dark it blotted light like black. The smell was strong, not flowery at all, but wet and aggressive and slightly swampy.

He began to remember what it was like to thrust upward among other trees, sun on his upper reaches, the light a liquor bringing life and wakefulness. His consciousness diffused between the green growing needles on the upside and the creeping roots beneath wet black soil on the down. Half of him strained toward the sun, the other half toward the center of the earth, with a tapestry of living tissue stretching along the length of the strong dead fibers of the trunk between. Information climbed slowly, riding chains of water during the day; he could think faster when the sun shone, yet moisture pleased him too. Young fogs often gathered, thickening the air so one's messages could cross open space and reach others, instead of having to seep through soil, between root hairs.

Simon blinked. For a moment he frowned, wondering who this waking self was.

He glanced at the IV again. Only a single root, he thought. Closing his eyes, he could almost track the spread of nutrients through his body. He had a growing awareness that lightning had struck him for the second time, cleaving and disrupting parts of his form. He rode his circulatory system, finding places where the gaps had been bridged, circumvented, or shut down. Processes of repair spun and crystallized, struggled, failed, restarted. Submerged in his systems, he explored, learned, lost himself.

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The third time he woke, he smelled perfume. It was a delicate scent, like night-blooming jasmine at a distance. An image of the beach house he and Rachel had rented one weekend took on hue and texture behind his eyelids. He remembered waking in the morning to see her stand, a dark silhouette, against the window, with the glory of a morning sky and surf beyond her. Some strange mystery had opened in his mind then, a sense of forever, a feeling of peace and contentment.

One moment out of six months. Not enough.

A murmur of conversation came through the curtain to his left. "You're going to be *all right*, Chris. You are," said a woman in a tear-thickened voice.

"Don't lie to me, Mom." The boy's voice was very clear.

Simon looked at the ceiling. It was the color of ginger ale. He could faintly remember the explorations he, or someone, had made earlier. Without judging or evaluating, he had memorized himself, learned exactly which bones and organs were broken or damaged.

Today his detachment had lessened. He groaned.

"Simon?"

He turned his head. Rachel sat in a chair nearby, her dark hair raying out around her head, the freckles stark on her thin, pale face, her green eyes sunken. She wore a bronze-green Indian-print dress with dots of gold on it.

“Rae?” he said. He tried to reach for her, but his hand was taped to the railing. He wanted her. He remembered why he had run away from her. “What are you doing here?”

“Do you know where you are?”

“Obviously it’s a hospital,” he said, once again secure in the fortress of his skull, all input from below the neck reduced to proper second-class status. “No one has seen fit to inform me of its name or location. I never expected to see you again.” His voice seemed raspy, and talking hurt.

She leaned forward and gave him a strained smile. “Same Simon,” she said.

“No,” he said, staring up at the ceiling. Stranger-thoughts had been passing through his brain. After two breaths, he looked at her.

She clasped the fingers of her left hand in her right.

“Then you know?”

He had never seen the skull so clearly beneath her skin before.

“Know? Oh, you mean the foot?” He heard his own detachment, then felt his stomach churn. He tasted bile, and felt a sinus ache around his eyes. The foot. One of his selves had recognized that his right foot was gone, but somehow it hadn’t mattered to that self. Simon closed his eyes and tried to keep back tears. He had not cried since he was eight, the last time he had given his father any satisfaction during a whipping.

—It doesn’t really hurt, having it replaced. First the jack, then a violation of the place under the hood where you hide the spare; but then you’re back in business.—

Simon smiled, heard a gasping laugh come from his throat.

“Simon?” Rachel reached for his free hand. “Are you all right? Can I get you anything?”

He swallowed, wadded up the pain and put it away. Years of practice made it easy. “Information. Where am I? How long since the accident? What are you doing here?”

“You’re in a town called Hoodoo. You were in intensive care a week, then they moved you in here three days ago. They found my phone number in your stuff, Simon. They couldn’t find any other addresses or phone numbers except the apartment you stayed in, in Menlo Park. The landlady couldn’t give them any information. They called me. I came up. Is there anybody you want me to call?”

“No,” he said. “Nobody out there to wonder.”

“Except me. How come you didn’t say good-bye? The landlady didn’t even know you were gone. Said you were paid through the end of the month. I called Express Communications and they said you had finished up and left. How could you?”

He looked at her, and knew the power he had tried to throw away was still with him. Leaving her seemed like the most beautiful thing he had ever done: he hadn’t loved anybody so much since his mother died. Yet, intending to preserve her, he had hurt her, just like he had hurt the last two women he had gotten involved with.

She released his hand and rubbed her eyes, then gave him a trembling smile. “I’m sorry. You just woke up. I don’t mean to accuse you of anything. I want to help. How can I help?”

He thought of the three white roses he had placed on his mother's coffin. Perfect and unstained. His wish for her heaven, a quiet place with no sign of the color red. Women should not suffer. But his father was strong in him, pushing him against his will into relationships that led to suffering. "I wish you would go away," he said, and watched the tears spill down her cheeks.

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Her chair was empty and the room was dark. He looked up toward the dim ceiling and listened to the boy breathe in the next bed. The nurse had shown him how to operate his bed; the controls lay under his hand. Earlier, he had elevated his knees. Now he wanted to lower them, but the bed made so much noise he was afraid it would wake the boy.

He considered pulling the needle from his arm. Not fast or drastic enough. He touched the bandages on his face, felt the ones encasing his chest. He thought about the space where a foot should be. Maybe his new appearance would not affect his job as an organizational behavior consultant that much. He could still walk into any office,—walk, or crutch, or wheel? Would they give him a prosthesis?—analyze the personal interactions, the colors, the atmosphere, the lighting, and figure out how to rechannel the energy into higher productivity. No bones pressing on his *brain*.

But his last assignment with Express Communications had convinced him that competence was no longer enough. Or maybe Rachel had. Both the job and the relationship had come too easily, followed too exactly in the footsteps of the ones before. Although Rachel had started out a little different. She had trusted him less—at first. He had hoped something outside of him would force change on him, since he had tried so often to change himself without success. Rachel's strength had given him hope. But hope was a poison in him that lifted him out of reality, making him vulnerable. He should have known better; he should have known he could trust himself to screw it up every time.

He began tugging at the adhesive on his face. He was just beginning to enjoy letting himself feel the little sharp pains as the bandages pulled at the scabs when his arm straightened, then dropped to his side. He could feel the texture of the sheets, but he could no longer move any of his muscles.

—This is what it's like when you turn off the ignition and take the key out. I put on the emergency brake. Leave the masking alone; we want the new paint job to work. Don't want to start with rust—

His chest moved up and down of its own accord. His eyes blinked. His heart beat. He could feel the blood moving through him, but none of his muscles responded to him.

Body work.

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"They said I could feed you," Rachel told him. She reached for the bed control and elevated his head and shoulders.

Simon licked his lips. The odd paralysis of the previous night had passed, leaving him afraid it would return. "I'm eating," he said, nodding toward his arm.

"Do you want to live, or not?" she asked. She stirred the bowl of chicken broth, looking down as floating bits of parsley swirled in the wake of her spoon.

"Not very much," he said, and felt the loss of control overtake him again. His mouth opened, but he had nothing to do with it.

She glanced up. "Make up your mind," she said. She fed him, and something in him ate. The next day,

they took him off the IV.

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Every morning a nursing technician came in at 7:30 to take his temperature and blood pressure. After one of her visits, the curtain to Simon's left twitched back, the beadchains rattling in their track above, and he found himself staring into the large gray eyes of a bald boy. Chris. Although he found himself participating in Chris's life vicariously, Simon had never been curious enough to pull the curtain aside. The child was wasting away, and he seemed more aware of it than his doctor or his mother.

"You're mean," Chris told him. "You're too mean to her. Don't you even care?"

"If you worked a little harder, you could convince her you're really going to die, and the relationship could move into a more comfortable stage for both of you," Simon said. He had read Kubler-Ross's work after his mother died, trying to label and reduce his feelings so they wouldn't overwhelm him. "You're already at acceptance, and she's still in denial. You going to let it go on until it's too late? She'll have to fight it all afterwards anyway."

"I know. There's time," said Chris. "I'll do it. So are you going to lighten up on your girlfriend?"

"I didn't ask her here."

"Aw, come on. You're giving life away with both hands. Why should you care who picks it up? When you were still asleep, she talked to me. She said some religions say suicides don't go to the next life, but get stuck in nightmares, hovering over this earth, never moving on. She believes that, you know. She's trying to pull you back from the edge. Maybe you don't care. Maybe you want to be on the edge. But you don't have to make it so hard on her."

"You're asking me to delude her? Take her back to stage one, while I'm at stage five?"

They stared at each other for a long moment.

"You're hurting her, and I don't like that," Chris said at last.

"The same to you," said Simon.

He fell asleep watching Chris stare at the ceiling.

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In the dream, he glided down a road as smooth as polished chrome. Night air cooled him, rushing along his lines, curling around and backwashing him. Ahead of him, up the hill, two arcs of paired red lights raced away, leaving traces of hot harsh breath, and the friction heat of tires on the road surface. Lines of paired white lights raced toward him on the left. Nothing else existed. The road curved and he curved with it, delighting in the interplay of speed and grip and curve. Mined metal and mica had never dreamed of this as it lay under the earth, waiting only for water and rust and erosion. But since the furnace heat, the crafting and tempering and shaping, this was all his purpose.

The world existed in only three dimensions—behind, ahead, and speed.

He raced on, meshing with traffic, riding for brief times in certain groupings, shifting and slowing or speeding to change patterns.

More curves.

And at last, a curve too tight. He went too fast and turned too slowly. He plunged off into the nothingness that was everything not The Road.

Ages earlier, a silence in the wood, broken only by the sound of dripping in the distance, and an occasional waterfall of birdcall. Salt mists rose, weaving through the trees. Seasons passed, some waterfat, some waterlean, each recording itself in the tree's trunk as it expanded outward, building and shedding bark as it grew, upper tips reaching ever toward the sun. A slow tangle of gossip came through the soil, ways to proof oneself against this moth or that moss, new mixtures of self to produce. The tree shed seed every season.

One storm season, lightning struck the tree, cleaving to the heart and leaving a burning in its wake that ate through many waterchains and foodchains, interrupting the pathways of life. An age the tree lingered between giving itself back to the soil and repairing itself, but the new green needles grew, roots spread beneath the soil, and life built new trails between.

Then the roads arrived, first logging roads, and small moving parts to a landscape that had never moved before, but the movers would not die no matter how much one poisoned the soil; then tar roads which fought back and carried more movers. This explosion of activity came late and happened quickly. The tree woke up more than it ever had before. Something about the noise, the enriched air the movers made, excited the tree. Trees farther back from the road did not understand. Questions took seasons to travel to the road, and answers seasons more to travel back. The tree observed, until at last a mover came and cracked it. Roots bereft of needles, needles bereft of roots, waterchains broken, no tissues still alive to carry the necessary information for healing.

—But now I am part of something that lives while it moves,— said the tree.

—But now I am part of something that lives while it is still,— said the car.

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Simon sat up gasping out of the dream, and fell back, the full pain in his chest hammering at him before he shut off the message system.

—And we won't let you die,— they said. —This is too interesting.—

He lay and gasped.

“Are you all right? Should I call a nurse?” asked Rachel.

Simon trembled. He had bitten his cheek; the rusty taste of blood had a peculiar, violent vividness that both his ghosts savored. Blood thrummed in his head. “This building condemned,” he said. “This building condemned.”

“Are you delirious? Answer yes or no,” said Rachel, touching his forehead with cool fingers.

“You smell like jasmine,” he said.

“Simon?” The dent between her brows that appeared when she was worried looked much deeper than it used to. “Please. Are you okay?”

He drew in deep breaths, felt his heart calm inside him, no longer trying to knock its way free. “I'm all right.”

She relaxed. He studied her, wondering what brought her up here after him, when he had come so close

to beating her before he left. “Why did you come?” he asked at last.

“The doctor called me. She told me how badly hurt you were, and all alone. I thought—” She stared toward the door, beyond the open end of his curtain. “When you first asked me out, I thought, is this the one? You really noticed me. And you listened to me—such listening eyes. The men I’ve known before didn’t listen like that. I think I got addicted to it.”

“I can’t give you that anymore.”

“I know that,” she said. She smiled. “I thought if I helped you get well—”

“What? I’d be grateful, and marry you? That’s not the way it works. I wanted to get away from you before you knew me any better, because—”

“That last date we had, you scared me,” she said, and looked at the floor.

So she had sensed something.

“You started sounding like someone else. Another person’s voice in your throat, Simon; another person’s words in your mouth. Is that who you have nightmares about? That man, the mean one?”

“You don’t understand. That’s me, that’s who I am underneath.” The words were hard to say; once they came out, he shuddered, his secret fear at last given form. Sometimes when he turned around, he thought he threw his father’s shadow. A man he had hated all his life, a man who taught him everything he knew about women, walked in his own shoes.

She touched his hand. “It doesn’t matter,” she said, “because now you couldn’t hurt me if you wanted to. First, you have to learn to walk, and I still know how to run.”

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“You didn’t use to be a fast healer, did you?” she asked a few days later. “Remember that day you cut yourself shaving? I thought it was funny how upset you got, as if a little cut would ruin your whole appearance. You said it would take days to go away, too.”

“The things I used to worry about.” He could hear the laugh in his voice, and it troubled him. He was relaxing with her, and if he relaxed, his old habits would come back. Maybe she could escape physical harm, but he knew words could deal worse blows, and he hadn’t been able to convince her to leave yet.

“Listen, they’re going to take off the bandages today. The doctor can’t believe how fast you’re healing. I always thought attitude had a lot to do with it. You have one of the worst attitudes I’ve ever seen.”

“But that’s only a third of me. Two thirds of me want to get well and go mobile again.”

“What?” She peered at the bandages on his head. “Maybe you *did* get a brain injury.”

“Yes. I did.” He leaned back and closed his eyes. This was the third day she had worn the red dress. He wanted to let go of everything going on, detach his mind, and analyze why she would wear something with a deep V neck and a high hemline to visit an incapacitated man in a hospital. She had never worn anything like that while he was seeing her in Menlo Park. Did she want to torment him or encourage him?

“Simon?”

One of the others opened his eyes and looked at her. Her face had started to flesh out a little. The shock had worn off and she was getting enough rest. “How can you leave school and spend so much time up

here?" he asked.

"I have my own set of priorities."

"You're getting something you need from this transaction?"

"If you start talking about system dynamics and quality circles and participatory management, I'm leaving." She stood up.

"Don't leave." He touched his throat. It was the first time one of the others had spoken aloud. He had wondered if they could talk. Most of their communication came in sensory images, though he suspected there was some translation mechanism, since neither of them had the same senses he had. "Why you wear that dress he wonders."

"What?"

Simon cleared his throat, trying to cough the other loose of it. "Chris? You awake?"

"Yes," said Chris from behind the curtain. He twitched the curtain open. "That was one of those *things*, wasn't it?"

"What things?" Rachel and Simon asked.

"Sometimes when you're asleep, you make these noises. They sound like other people trying to talk. They don't know how to do it, though. Are they in you when you're awake?"

"Yes," said Simon.

"The other two thirds of you?" Chris asked.

"Yes."

Rachel sat down again, hugging her purse. "Are you crazy?"

He took a deep breath. "I don't know." He made a fist.

"Is one of them the mean man?" she asked.

"No, oh no. This is something else. Something I don't want on my medical record." He frowned at Rachel.

"All right," she said. "I won't tell Dr. Kelsey if you don't want me to."

Simon gave Chris a long look.

Chris nodded. Simon said, "I'm haunted. The car and the tree. They're both in my head." He knocked on his head. His breath came out in a restrained sob. "I've dreamed the accident from all three angles. When I wanted to pull out the IV or tear off the bandages, the car made me be still. When I wanted to die, the tree started healing me."

"Oh," said Rachel, her eyes wide. "Make up your mind."

"Yeah. Which one?"

"Well, that sounds pretty crazy to me," she said, "but I don't care. Maybe they'll talk to me, and say something besides telling me to leave." She leaned closer, her eyes bright. "Hey, one of you others, was

he really wondering about this dress?"

"Yes," he said.

"Which one are you?"

"Still me," said Simon. "Why are you wearing a dress that's an open invitation when you know I'm practically tied to this bed?"

"Maybe I'm seeing someone else here; did you ever consider that?"

"Not yet." He began to weigh factors: time she had actually spent at his bedside while still wearing the dress versus time she had to spend sleeping, eating, traveling from the hotel and back; what he knew or suspected of her character and her actions...

Dr. Kelsey came in without knocking, pulled the curtain aside, set Simon's chart and a stainless steel tray on his bed table and rolled the table, with its pitcher of water, emesis bowl, deck of cards, cup, and a new purple flower in the jam jar away from the bed. She peered at him through thick-lensed glasses and took some tools out of the pocket of her white jacket, laying them on the tray. She was an enormous old woman with short red hair going white; Simon thought she must have studied medicine during the Depression. "Ready to have these off, son?" she asked, looming over him and tugging at the edges of the bandages on his face.

"If you say so." Simon had stared into his own eyes several times while shaving as much of his face as he could reach. He wondered what was left of what he used to consider an important asset. In odder moments he had wondered if half his face would be metal and the other half bark beneath the gauze.

"Would you rather the young lady left? You want Chris watching?"

"I don't care."

Dr. Kelsey looked at Rachel. "He's not going to be pretty yet."

"That's all right."

The doctor took a pair of long, slender, round-ended scissors from the tray. She began snipping the bandage along the curve of his cheek. The metal felt cold against his skin. He closed his eyes and waited.

She lifted an edge. "Wow," she said, as he felt clean air touch his cheeks and nose for the first time since he had awakened. "It comes away so clean. Usually there's some adherence. And these wounds look old."

He opened his eyes, reached his hand up to touch his face, but she caught his wrist. "Don't touch," she said. "Above all, don't scratch. There are still stitches in there. You can have little scars or great big ones; the choice is yours now."

"Can I see a mirror?"

She gave him a small round hospital-issue mirror and he stared at himself. Somehow, he had more trouble recognizing himself without the bandage than he had with it on. His eyes were harder to find amidst the maze of scabby scratches. "I look like a jigsaw puzzle," he said, and laughed for feeling like one too.

"You are a very odd boy," the doctor said, her eyes narrowing behind the large, thick lenses of her

glasses. “If you’re a puzzle, I put you back together, and I’m proud of my work. Provided you leave yourself alone, you should end up looking a lot like you used to.”

“But how do I get rid of the extra pieces?”

The doctor frowned at him, then retrieved his chart and made some notations on it. “If your ribs have healed as fast as the rest of you, it’s time we started you on some physical therapy,” she said. “You’ll like that.” She left.

“Do you really want to get rid of the extra pieces?” Rachel asked him when the door shut behind the doctor. “I want to talk to them.”

“I don’t know what I want.” He felt himself at a balance point on a teeter-totter. He had a sudden image of Death at one end, his old life at the other. Whichever way the balance shifted, he would slide down toward an unbearable alternative. Silly. The tree, a red-brown girl, and the car, a midnight-blue boy, pulled him off the teeter-totter and led him away from the playground. “Silly,” he said. “Where are we going?”

—There’s road—

—There’s sun—

—There’s fuel—

—There’s water—

—There’s movement—

—There’s interaction...—

“So what are you doing? You having a three-way conversation in your head?” Rachel asked. “No wonder you kept spacing out before.”

“Do the creatures inside you say anything about being dead?” Chris asked. “Did it hurt?”

“It was a great shock,” he heard himself say. “It was a great scream. It was just a translation... we are not dead yet.” His voice independent of him was gaining intonation, Simon thought. His arm lifted; the fingers on the hand spread wide, then closed into a loose fist. “We could not do that before.” One of them gave a delighted laugh. “Flexibility is very interesting.”

“Quick, before he comes back, will you tell me why he crashed?” Rachel asked.

“The weight of history lay heavy on him,” said the tree in wondering tones. “He was searching for change.” The tree knew things changed; the lightning had almost killed it, and afterwards it had a new shape; once there had been no road; then the road came, and later the road changed. But the tree had never imagined changing its own actions, because its actions were perfect.

Rachel sat back, hugging herself. “What history, Simon?” she said.

“Family history; the chain stretches from the past, through me; the strands shape me and lock me into a future—” He sucked in breath between his teeth. He opened his hand, looked at his palm, saw blood. “Flexibility is an illusion.”

“No,” said Rachel. “You always have a choice.”

“That’s what I tell all those executives, when I take them off on team-building weekends. Blow off the frustrations! Establish new lines of communication! Take another look at the overall picture and…” He sighed. He fingered his face, feeling the ridges of scab, the tiny prickly whiskers of the stitches. “I can’t step back and see the overall picture when I’m in the picture myself. History takes over. Next time, I would have hit you. Then I would apologize and tell you not to trust me, but I would be very sincere, and you would trust me, and then I would hurt you worse.”

“You must think I’m pretty dumb.”

“I think you’re locked into the history! You came here even after I scared you and left you without saying good-bye. Is that dumb? Or is it just what your mother would have done? Or what? I tried to choose away from my history, and you brought it back. It’s inevitable.”

“What! You’re going to get better and follow me down the hospital halls and catch me and beat me? I don’t think so. I think you’ve already chosen a new way out. These ghosts will stop you. How are your arms?”

Simon risked opening his mind to his body. His chest ached fiercely, his face prickled, and the end of his leg, where his foot no longer was, felt—strange. He could feel bandages against the skin of his calf, but there was no bottom to his leg, and yet there was. He frowned. As if he could feel the texture of the sheet, not very fine linen, against the sole of his non-existent foot.

He thought about his arms. He raised his hands and looked at them. The muscles in his shoulders pulled and hurt, but his arms responded. “My arms are fine,” he said.

“All right.” She rose and set her purse on the chair. She glanced at Chris, who lay and watched, his eyes very large in his thin face. “What’s the sequence? I kiss you, and you hit me?”

Simon consulted his history. For a moment he could see it as clearly as if he were reading the instructions to a game. His father’s patterns, repeated and locked into him. “No,” he said. “I make impossible demands on you. You either refuse, or tell me the demands are impossible… then I go into a rage, tell you how worthless you are, and *then*, when I’ve convinced you that you deserve it, I hit you…”

She lowered the rail and sat beside him, staring at the wall above his head. “I remember,” she said. “I remember that starting. I couldn’t understand it. You seemed so sensitive when we first went out. Then, all of a sudden, you were asking me to give up a seminar I was really interested in and run away to the beach house for the weekend.” “If you really loved me…” “She looked at him.” “And no other weekend would do. It had to happen *that* weekend. After I said no, you disappeared, and I thought, I can’t let it end here. I didn’t want to lose everything just because of a misunderstanding. I thought I could make you see my side, and everything would get better.”

He touched her hand, feeling its dry warmth. One of the others lifted her hand, bent the fingers, touched her nails, examined the articulation of her bones. He stayed behind his eyes and watched as the other explored, feeling the texture of her dress, her hair, her face.

She caught his hand and looked at him. “Are you trying to distract me?”

“Everything is new,” said the car.

“You’re one of the ghosts, huh? Stay there a moment.” She let his hand go and scooted forward on the bed. She held herself away from him at first, touching only her lips to his, but he put his arms around her and hugged her to him before he remembered his ribs. He groaned and held her away again, more aware of himself than he had been since before the accident. So much of him hurt, and yet, pain was so

connected to pleasure in his mind that he found himself aroused. Usually it was not his own pain that acted on him like this.

He stared into Rachel's face, excited with this new discovery, and thrilled to have her close enough to help him test it.

He lifted his hands to grasp her shoulders. His arms froze, then dropped. His breathing slowed to normal. His eyes closed. The tree had decided it was time for another inventory, time to mend broken connections again.

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The bed was flat when he opened his eyes. He wondered if Rachel had worked it, or a nurse. The light in his section of room was off, but a glow came through Chris's curtain, which was closed all the way again. "You have to accept it, Mom," said Chris. His voice, like the rest of him, had thinned. "Now, or later, but it would be easier if you could accept it now. Then we could talk about it. I don't want to leave you alone with this. You don't take care of yourself."

"You're getting better, Chrissie. Your eyes are so bright, baby."

"I'm not getting better."

"Why you? Why my baby?" the woman asked, after a space of silence. She began to cry. "Such a good boy. Never harmed anyone. Why?"

"Why is no good now," he said. "This is happening. Mom... I love you. I love you. Don't hurt yourself about this. It's been worth it. Do you understand?"

"No," she said. Simon fell asleep to the sound of her quiet crying.

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He had always found the Student Union Building cafeterias good hunting grounds. After all, that was where his father found his mother... Father an army veteran, going to college after World War II on the G.I. bill. He had stayed in school only long enough to take Mother away from her library science courses before she got her degree.

She used to talk about the moment when Father came to her table, stood above her and just looked at her. "He was so tall," she said. "Tall and quiet—I thought there must be some deep thinking going on in his head."

In the dream, Simon stood above Rachel, where she sat at the table in the cafeteria. Each time he started the cycle, he waited in the door of a cafeteria and let history fill him. Each time, he saw the right woman, went to her, stood and looked at her till his sense of himself as his father overcame him. The women never said anything when he sat down with them. They were always a little afraid—he never picked the really self-confident ones.

Rachel did not smile at him like the others. A glimmer of hope in that. He sat down and put his hands flat on the varnished pinewood table.

Between his hands, twigs began to sprout. Flat green needles grew from the tips of the branches. Some of the twigs grew right through his hands, rooting them to the table. The metal of the chair he sat on grew up and over his legs, tendrils of it curling around him, as if the metal were vines.

Rachel gave him a slow, sweet smile. She rose, picked up her books, leaned forward to give him a lingering kiss, then walked away.

Helpless to follow, he watched her, wanting her, yet feeling relieved.

Then he felt release. He looked down at his hands. Twigs sprouted from their backs, but they were no longer pinned to the table. Metal banded his jeans, but no longer locked him to the chair. He stood up.

Rachel pushed open the glass door and walked out of the building, into a snow storm, or a light storm; each snowflake seemed like a light flake. He waited a moment for history to tell him what to do, but there were no precedents. He watched her walk off through falling light. After a moment, he followed her outside, but the light had become a blizzard, and he couldn't find her.

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—Simon?—

“Chris?” Simon shook his head, trying to wake up. He elevated the bed head and grabbed his cup, swallowed a mouthful of water.

—Simon, I'm going now.—

He switched on his light and pulled back the curtain. Chris lay with his chin pointing at the ceiling. His mouth was slightly open, but his eyes were closed. He wasn't breathing.

“Chris? Chris!” Simon pressed the call button.

—Don't get so upset. I thought you, at least, would be ready for this.—

The tree began flooding his system with calmers. He lay back. “You're already gone?”

—Almost. I wanted to meet your ghosts. I really thought you made them up.—

“Did I?” Why hadn't that occurred to him? The most obvious explanation!

Chris laughed.—I'm glad you're going to get better. Will you please talk to my mother? If I had a will, I'd leave her to you.—

“Chris,” he said.

The nurse came in. She was frowning. Simon rubbed his eyes and pointed to Chris's bed—There was a lot of activity in the room after that, behind the closed curtain. Simon lay in relative darkness and thought about roses. He thought about fishing with his father off the pier, using drop lines, tying hooks and lead sinkers onto rough green string, baiting the hooks with bacon. Fish scales stuck to his fingers; sometimes he found them on his clothes hours later.

Miniature golf and fractions. His father had been good at both. Miniature golf, fractions, and fishing were the only things his father ever taught him that he really liked. He had learned so many other things from his father.

When at last they took Chris's body away and shut off the lights, he thought about Chris. White roses, yellow roses, red roses, pink ones?

—How about a spray of pine needles?—

—You still here?—

—I'm going now. Tell her it didn't hurt. Tell her I love her. Tell her I was ready, and hanging on any longer would just be wasted time. Goodbye, Simon. I'm glad I knew you.—

—Good-bye.—

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Chris's mother sat behind the curtain and cried. Rachel, in a dark blue dress, walked in, tossed her purse at the chair, then walked around the end of the curtain. She gasped. "Is he—is he—?"

"He's gone," said Chris's mother.

Simon lay and tried to gather his strength. "Mrs.—Mrs.—ma'am?" he said. "Ma'am? He told me to tell you some things."

"What? They said he died in his sleep."

"He said he loves you, and that it didn't hurt. He said living any longer would be just wasting time. He asked me to talk to you."

She opened the curtain, and he saw her for the first time. She had Chris's gray eyes, but her hair was the same chestnut color his mother's had been. He felt the tangle of patterns trying to begin again, a murmur in his father's voice to leave her alone.

He held out his hand to her, and she took it.

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"Are you going to let go of your ghosts now?" Rachel asked him later. His hand still tingled from the pressure of Chris's mother's clasp, and his mind was fuzzy from her stones about her child. She had stayed two hours, staring at nothing, and talking to him; Rachel wandered away early on, and only came back when Chris's mother left and the nurse brought in Simon's supper.

He flexed his fingers. "Do you want me to let go of them?"

She made a church of her hands, spread her thumbs as if they were doors, and wiggled the fingers inside. See all the people. "Do you need the ghosts anymore?"

"Yes." He touched his lips. "There's something I have to figure out. Something about pain." He felt the pain, letting it come through the barriers; the scabs on his face itched, but he didn't respond to them. His ribs ached, and he felt strange nerve firings from his legs. But he could also feel the satisfaction of movement, how each finger bent in answer to his thought, and his pleasure was amplified by the presence of the ghosts, who had never experienced anything like it. "Besides. Suppose I give up my ghosts, and you go away too. Then I'd be alone."

"And then what? Get better, get a job in some other city, pick up another student and start over again?"

He lay quietly and thought. Chris's mother had invited him to live in her house during his convalescence. She had a place on the beach, with trees all around. She would like to watch somebody get better, she said.

"I don't think I'm going to start over the same way," he said.

Rachel looked at her fingers for a long time. Then she looked up at him. “Simon, I’m going back to school.”

“I thought you might.”

“Is that in the program? Is that on the map of your past? Something you psyched out the way you psych out those businessmen?”

“No,” he said. Tree felt calm, car felt calm, Simon felt calm. Something inside had shifted. He had lost all the old tactics, and hadn’t had time to craft new ones.

Maybe when she walked off into the light blizzard he had known she would leave. Or maybe it was just the sense he had that she was attracted to danger; she would know he wasn’t dangerous anymore, almost before he knew it himself. She was still trapped in her own history. She would have to look for someone else to replay it with.

She stood a moment beside his bed. “I miss you,” she said.

“I’m still here.”

“It doesn’t feel the same,” she said. She put her hand to her face, turned and left.

He touched his chest. Underneath the bandages, he knew there were bones of wood, bones of steel, and safe within, a human heart.