MELODIES OF THE HEART

Michael F. Flynn

I have never been to visit in the gardens of my youth. They are dim and faded memories, brittle with time: A small river town stretched across stony bluffs and hills. Cliffside stairs switchbacking to a downtown of marvels and magical stores. A little frame house nestled in a spot of green, with marigolds tracing its bounds. Men wore hats. Cars gleamed with chrome and sported tailfins enough to take flight. Grown-ups were very tall and mysterious. Sometimes, if you were good, they gave you a nickel, which you could rush to the corner grocery and buy red hot dollars and jawbreakers and licorice whips.

I don't remember the music, though. I know I should, but I don't. I even know what the tunes must have been; I've heard them often enough on Classic Rock and Golden Oldy shows. But that is now, my memories are silent.

I don't go back; I have never gone back. The town would all be different— grimier and dirtier and twenty years more run down. The house I grew up in was sold, and then sold again. Strangers live there now. The cliffside stairs have fallen into disrepair, and half the stores are boarded up and silent. The corner groceries are gone, and a nickel won't buy you squat. Grown-ups are not so tall.

They are still a mystery, though. Some things never change.

The music is dreamy.
It's peaches and creamy.
Oh! don't let my feet touch the ground. . . .

I remember her as I always remember her: sitting against the wall in the garden sunshine, eyes closed, humming to herself.

The first time I saw Mae Holloway was my first day at Sunny Dale. On a tour of the grounds, before being shown to my office, the director pointed out a shrunken and bent old woman shrouded in a shapeless, pale-hued gown. "Our Oldest Resident." I smiled and acted as if I cared. What was she to me? Nothing, then.

The resident doctor program was new then. A conservative looking for a penny to pinch and a liberal looking for a middle-class professional to kick had gotten drunk together one night and come up with the notion that, if you misunderstood the tax code, your professional services could be extorted by the state. My sentence was to provide on-site medical care at the Home three days a week. Dr. Khan, who kept an office five miles away, remained the "primary care provider."

The Home had set aside a little room that I could use for a clinic. I had a metal desk, an old battered filing cabinet, a chair with a bad caster that caused the wheel to seize up—as if there were a Rule that the furniture there be as old and as worn as the inhabitants. For supplies, I had the usual medicines for aches and pains. Some digitalis. Ointments of one sort or another. Splints and bandages. Not much else. The residents were not ill, only old and tired. First aid and mortuaries covered most of their medical needs.

The second time I saw Mae Holloway was later that same day. The knock on the door was so light and tentative that at first I was unsure I had heard it. I paused, glanced at the door, then bent again over my medical journal. A moment later, the knock came again. Loud! As if someone had attacked the door with a hammer. I turned the journal down, open to the page I had been reading, and called out an invitation.

The door opened and I waited patiently while she shuffled across the room. Hobble, hobble, hobble. You would think old folks would move faster. It wasn't as though they had a lot of time to waste.

When she had settled into the hard plastic seat opposite my desk, she leaned forward, cupping both her hands over the knob of an old blackthorn walking stick. Her face was as wrinkled as that East Tennessee hill country she had once called home. "You know," she said—loudly, as the slightly deaf often do, "you oughtn't leave your door shut like that. Folks see it, they think you have someone in here, so they jes' mosey on."

That notion had been in the back of my mind, too. I had thought to use this time to keep up with my professional reading. "What may I do for you, Mrs. Holloway?" I said.

She looked away momentarily. "I think—" Her jaw worked. She took a

breath. "I think I am going insane."

I stared at her for a moment. Just my luck. A nut case right off the bat. Then I nodded. "I see. And why do you say that?"

"I hear music. In my head."

"Music?"

"Yes. You know. Like this." And she hummed a few bars of a nondescript tune.

"I see—"

"That was 'One O'Clock Jump!' " she said, nearly shouting now. "I used to listen to Benny Goodman's band on 'Let's Dance!' Of course, I was younger then!"

"I'm sure you were."

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?"

"I SAID, 'I'M SURE YOU WERE'!" I shouted at her across the desk.

"Oh. Yes," she said in a slightly softer voice. "I'm sorry, but it's sometimes hard for me to hear over the music. It grows loud, then soft." The old woman puckered her face and her eyes drifted, becoming distanced. "Right now, it's 'King Porter.' A few minutes ago it was—"

"Yes, I'm sure," I said. Old folks are slow and rambling and forgetful; a trial to talk with. I rose, hooking my stethoscope into my ears, and circled the desk. Might as well get it over with. Mrs. Holloway, recognizing the routine, unfastened the top buttons of her gown.

Old folks have a certain smell to them, like babies; only not so pleasant. It is a sour, dusty smell, like an attic in the summer heat. Their skin is dry, spotted parchment, repulsive to the touch. When I placed the diaphragm against her chest, she smiled nervously. "I don't think you'll hear my music that way," she said.

"Of course not," I told her. "Did you think I would?"

She rapped the floor with her walking stick. Once, very sharp. "I'm no child, Doctor Wilkes! I have not been a child for a long, long time; so, don't treat me like one." She waved her hand up and down her body. "How many children do you know who look like me?"

"Just one," I snapped back. And instantly regretted the remark. There was no point in being rude; and it was none of her business anyway. "Tell me about your music," I said, unhooking my stethoscope and stepping away.

She worked her lips and glared at me for a while before she made up her mind to cooperate. Finally, she looked down at the floor. "It was one, two nights ago," she whispered. Her hands gripped her walking stick so tightly that the knuckles stood out large and white. She twisted it as if screwing it into the floor. "I dreamed I was dancing in the Roseland Ballroom, like I used to do years and years ago. Oh, I was once so light on my feet! I was dancing with Ben Wickham—he's dead now, of course; but he was one smooth apple and sure knew how to pitch woo. The band was a swing band—I was a swinger, did you know?—and they were playing Goodman tunes. 'Sing, Sing, Sing.' 'Stardust.' But it was so loud, I woke up. I thought I was still dreaming for a while, because I could still hear the music. Then I got riled. I thought, who could be playing their radio so loud in the middle of the night? So I took myself down the hall, room by room, and listened at each door. But the music stayed the same, no matter where I went. That's when I knowed ..." She paused, swallowed hard, looked into the corner. "That's when I knowed, knew, it was all in my head."

I opened the sphygmomanometer on my desk. Mae Holloway was over a hundred years old, according to the Home's director; well past her time to shuffle off. If her mind was playing tricks on her in her last years, well, that's what old minds did. Yet, I had read of similar cases of "head" music. "There are several possibilities, Mrs. Holloway," I said, speaking loudly and distinctly while I fastened the pressure cuff to her arm, "But the best bet is that the music really *is* all in your head."

I smiled at the *bon mot*, but all the wire went out of her and she sagged shapelessly in her chair. Her right hand went to her forehead and squeezed. Her eyes twisted tight shut. "Oh, no," she muttered. "Oh, dear God, no. It's finally happened."

Mossbacks have no sense of humor. "Please, Mrs. Holloway! I didn't mean 'in your head' like that. I meant the fillings in your teeth. A pun. Fillings sometimes act like crystal radios and pick up broadcast signals, vibrating the small bones of the middle ear. You are most likely picking up a local radio station. Perhaps a dentist could—"

She looked up at me and her eyes burned. "That was a wicked joke to pull, boy. It was cruel."

"I didn't mean it that way—"

"And I know all about fillings and radios and such," she snapped. "Will Hickey had that problem here five years ago. But that can't be why I hear music." And she extruded a ghastly set of false teeth.

"Well, then—"

"And what sort of radio station could it be? Swing tunes all the time, and only those that I know? Over and over, all night long, with no interruptions. No commercials. No announcements of song titles or performers." She raised her free hand to block her ear, a futile gesture, because the music was on the other side.

On the other side of the ear . . . ? I recalled certain case studies from medical school. Odd cases. "There are other possibilities," I said. "Neurological problems . . ."I pumped the bulb and she winced as the cuff tightened. She lowered her hand slowly and looked at me.

"Neuro . . . ?" Her voice trembled.

"Fossil memories," I said.

She shook her head. "I ain't—I'm not rememberin'. I'm hearin'. I know the difference."

I let the air out of the cuff and unfastened it. "I will explain as simply as I can. Hearing occurs in the brain, not the ear. Sound waves vibrate certain bones in your middle ear. These vibrations are converted into neural impulses and conveyed to the auditory cortex by the eighth cranial nerve. It is the auditory cortex that creates 'sound.' If the nerve were connected to the brain's olfactory region instead, you would 'smell' music."

She grunted. "Quite a bit of it smells, these days."

Hah, hah. "The point is that the sensory cortices can be stimulated without external input. Severe migraines, for example, often cause people to 'see' visions or 'hear' voices. And sometimes the stimulus reactivates so-called 'fossil' memories, which your mind interprets as contemporary. That may be what you are experiencing."

She looked a little to the side, not saying anything. I listened to her wheezy breath. Then she gave me a glance, quick, almost shy. "Then, you don't think I'm . . . you know . . . crazy?" Have you ever heard hope and fear fused into a single question? I don't know. At her age, I think I might prefer a pleasant fantasy world over the dingy real one.

"It's unlikely," I told her. "Such people usually hear voices, not music. If you were going insane, you wouldn't hear Benny Goodman tunes; you would hear Benny Goodman—probably giving you important instructions."

A smile twitched her lips and she seemed calmer, though still uneasy. "It's always been a bother to me," she said quietly, looking past me, "the notion that I might be—well, you know. All my life, it seems, as far back as

I can remember."

Which was not that far, the director had told me that morning. "All your life. Why is that?"

She looked away and did not speak for a moment. When she did, she said, "I haven't had no, any, headaches, doc. And I don't have any now. If that's what did it, how come I can still hear the music?"

If she did not want to talk about her fears, that was fine with me. I was no psychiatrist, anyway. "I can't be sure without further tests, but a trigger event— possibly even a mild stroke—could have initiated the process." I had been carefully observing her motor functions, but I could detect none of the slackness or slurring of the voice typical of severe hemiplegia. "Dr. Wing is the resident neurologist at the hospital," I said. "I'll consult with him."

She looked suddenly alarmed, and shook her head. "No hospitals," she said firmly. "Folks go to hospitals, they die."

At her age, that was largely true. I sighed. "Perhaps at Khan's clinic, then. There really are some tests we should run."

That seemed to calm her somewhat, for she closed her eyes and her lips moved slightly.

"Have you experienced any loss of appetite, or episodes of drowsiness?" I asked. "Have you become irritable, forgetful, less alert?" Useless questions. What geezer did not have those symptoms? I would have to inquire among the staff to find out if there had been a recent change in her behavior.

And she wasn't listening any more. At least, not to me. "Thank you, Doctor Wilkes. I was so afraid. . . . That music. . . . But only a stroke, only a stroke. It's such a relief. Thank you. Such a relief."

A relief? Compared to madness, I suppose it was. She struggled to her feet, still babbling. When she left my office, hobbling once more over her walking stick, she was humming to herself again. I didn't know the tune.

Even though we're drifting down life's stream apart
Your face I still can see in dream's domain;
I know that it would ease my breaking heart
To hold you in my arms just once again.

It was dark when I arrived home. As I turned into the driveway I hit the dashboard remote, and the garage door rose up like a welcoming lover. I slid into the left-hand slot without slowing, easing the Lincoln to a halt just as the tennis ball, hanging by a string from the ceiling, touched the windshield. Brenda never understood that. Brenda always came to a complete stop in the driveway before raising the garage door.

I could see without looking that I had beaten her home again. And they said doctors kept long hours. . . . When I stepped from the car, I turned my back on the empty slot.

I stood for some moments at the door to the kitchen, jiggling the car keys in my hand. Then, instead of entering the house, I turned and left the garage through the backyard door. I had seen the second story light on as I came down the street. Deirdre's room. Tonight, for some reason, I couldn't face going inside just yet.

The back yard was a gloom of emerald and jade. The house blocked the glare of the street lamps, conceding just enough light to tease shape from shadow. I walked slowly through the damp grass toward the back of the lot. Glowing clouds undulated in the water of the swimming pool, as if the ground had opened up and swallowed the night sky. Only a few stars poked through the overcast. Polaris? Sirius? I had no way of knowing. I doubted that half a dozen people in the township knew the stars by name; or perhaps even that they had names. We have become strangers to our skies.

At the back of the lot, the property met a patch of woodland—a bit of unofficial greenbelt, undeveloped because it was inaccessible from the road. Squirrels lived there, and blue jays and cardinals. And possum and skunk, too. I listened to the rustle of the night dwellers passing through the carpet of dead leaves. Through the trees I could make out the lights of the house opposite. Distant music and muffled voices. Henry and Barbara Carter were throwing a party.

That damned old woman. Damn all of them. Shambling, crackling, brittle, dried-out old husks, clinging fingernail-tight to what was left of life. . . .

I jammed my hands in my pockets and stood there. For how long, I do not know. It might have been five minutes or half an hour. Finally the light on the second floor went out. Then I turned back to the house and reentered through the garage. The right-hand stall was still empty.

Consuela sat at the kitchen table near the French doors, cradling a ceramic mug shaped like an Olmec head. Half the live-in nurses in the country are Latin; and half of those are named Consuela. The odor of cocoa filled the room, and the steam from the cup wreathed her broad, flat face, lending it a sheen. More *Indio* than *Lodino*, her complexion contrasted starkly with her nurse's whites. Her jet-black hair was pulled severely back, and was held in place with a plain, wooden pin.

"Good evening, Nurse," I said. "Is Dee-dee down for the night?"

"Yes, Doctor. She is."

I glanced up at the ceiling. "I usually tuck her in."

She gave me an odd look. "Yes, you do."

"Well. I was running a little late today. Did she miss me?"

Consuela looked through the French doors at the back yard. "She did."

"I'll make it up to her tomorrow."

She nodded. "I'm sure she would like that."

I shed my coat and carried it to the hall closet. A dim night light glowed at the top of the stairwell. "Has Mrs. Wilkes called?"

"An hour ago." Consuela's voice drifted down the hallway from the kitchen. "She has a big case to prepare for tomorrow. She will be late."

I hung the coat on the closet rack and stood quietly still for a moment before closing the door. Another big case. I studied the stairs to the upper floor. Brenda had begun getting the big cases when Deirdre was eighteen months and alopecia had set in. Brenda never tucked Dee-dee into bed after that.

Consuela was washing her cup at the sink when I returned to the kitchen. She was short and dark and stocky. Not quite chubby, but with a roundness that scorned New York and Paris fashion. I rummaged in the freezer for a frozen dinner. Brenda had picked Consuela from among a dozen applicants. Brenda was tall and thin and blonde.

I put the dinner in the microwave and started the radiation. "I met an interesting woman today," I said.

Consuela dried her cup and hung it on the rack. "All women are interesting," she said.

"This one hears music in her head." I saw how that piqued her interest.

"We all do," she said, half-turned to go.

I carried my microwaved meal and sat at the table. "Not like this. Not like hearing a radio at top volume."

She hesitated a moment longer; then she shrugged and sat across the table from me. "Tell me of this woman."

I moved the macaroni and cheese around on my plate. "I spoke with Dr. Wing over the car phone. He believes it may be a case of 'incontinent nostalgia,' or Jackson's Syndrome."

I explained how trauma to the temporal lobe sometimes caused spontaneous upwellings of memory, often accompanied by "dreamy states" and feelings of profound and poignant joy. Oliver Sacks had written about it in one of his bestsellers. "Shostakovitch had a splinter in his left temporal lobe," I said. "When he cocked his head, he heard melodies. And there have been other cases. Stephen Foster, perhaps." I took a bite of my meal. "Odd, isn't it, how often the memories are musical."

Consuela nodded. "Sometimes the music is enough."

"Other memories may follow, though."

"Sometimes the music is enough," she repeated enigmatically.

"It should make the old lady happy, at least."

Consuela gave me a curious look. "Why should it make her happy?" she asked.

"She has forgotten her early years completely. This condition may help her remember." An old lady reliving her childhood. Suddenly there was bitterness in my mouth. I dropped my fork into the serving tray.

Consuela shook her head. "Why should it make her happy?" she asked again.

That little bird knew lots of things.
It did, upon my word. . . .

The Universe balances. For every Consuela Montejo there is a Noor Khan.

Dr. Noor Khan was a crane, all bones and joints. She was tall, almost as tall as I, but thin to the point of gauntness. She cocked her head habitually from side to side. That, the bulging eyes, and the hooked nose accentuated

her bird-like appearance. A good run, a flapping of the arms, and she might take squawking flight—and perhaps appear more graceful.

"Mae Holloway. Oh, my, yes. She is a feisty one, is she not?" Khan rooted in her filing cabinet, her head bobbing as she talked. “Does she have a problem?"

"Incontinent nostalgia, it's sometimes called," I said. "She is experiencing spontaneous, musical recollections, possibly triggered by a mild stroke to the temporal lobes." I told her about the music and Wing's theories.

She bobbed her head. "Curious. Like *dejà vu* only different." Then, more sternly. "If she has had a stroke, even a mild one, I must see her at once."

"I've told her that, but she's stubborn. I thought since you knew her better. ..."

Noor Khan sighed. "Yes. Well, the older we grow, the more set in our ways we become. Mae must be set in concrete."

It was a joke and I gave it a thin smile. *The older we grow*. . . .

The file she finally pulled was a thick one. I took the folder from her and carried it to her desk. I had nothing particular in mind, just a review of Holloway's medical history. I began paging through the records. In addition to Dr. Khan's notes, there were copies of records from other doctors. I looked up at Khan. "Don't you have patients waiting?"

She raised an eyebrow. "My office hours start at ten, so I have no patients at the moment. You need not worry that I am neglecting them."

If it was a reproof, it was a mild one, and couched in face-saving Oriental terms. I hate it when people watch me read. I always feel as if they were reading over my shoulder. I wanted to tell Khan that I would call her if I needed her; but it was, after all, her office and I was sitting at her desk, so I don't know what I expected her to do. "Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to ruffle your feathers."

Holloway was in unusually good health for a woman of her age. Her bones had grown brittle and her eyes nearsighted—but no glaucoma; and very little osteoporosis. She had gotten a hearing aid at an age when most people were already either stone deaf or stone dead. Clinical evidence showed that she had once given birth, and that an anciently broken leg had not healed entirely straight. What right had she to enjoy such good health?

Khan had been on the phone. "Mae has agreed to come in," she told me as she hung up. "I will send the van to pick her up Tuesday. I wish I could do a CAT scan here. I would hate to force her in hospital."

"It's a waste, anyway," I muttered.

"What?"

I clamped my jaw shut. All that high technology, and for what? To add a few miserable months to lives already years too long? How many dollars per day of life was that? How much of it was productively returned? That governor, years ago. What was his name? Lamm? He said that the old had a duty to die and make room for the young. "Nothing," I said.

"What is wrong?" asked Khan.

"There's nothing wrong with me."

"That wasn't what I asked."

I turned my attention to the folder and squinted at the spidery, illegible handwriting on the oldest record: 1962, if the date was really what it looked like. Why did so many doctors have poor handwriting? Holloway's estimated age looked more like an eighty five than sixty-five. I waved the sheet of stationery at her. "Look at the handwriting on this," I complained. "It's like reading Sanskrit."

Khan took the letter. "I can read Sanskrit, a little," she said with a smile. "It's Doctor Bench's memoir, isn't it? Yes, I thought so. I found it when I assumed Dr. Rosenblum's practice a few years ago. Dr. Bench promised he would send Mrs. Holloway's older records, but he never did, so Howard had to start a medical history almost from scratch, with only this capsule summary."

I took the sheet back from her. "Why didn't Bench follow through?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? He put it off. Then one of those California brush fires destroyed his office. Medically, Mae is a blank before 1962."

Just like her mind. I thought. Just like her mind.

For the joy of eye and ear
For the heart and mind's delight
For the mystic harmony
Linking sense to sound and sight. . . .

The third time I saw Mae Holloway, she was waiting by the clinic door when I arrived to open it. Eyes closed, propped against the wall by her walking stick, she hummed an obscure melody. "Good morning, Mrs. Holloway," I said. "Feeling better today?"

She opened her eyes and squeezed her face into a ghastly pucker. "Consarn music kept me awake again last night."

I gave her a pleasant smile. "Too bad you don't hear Easy Listening." I stepped through the door ahead of her. I heard her cane tap-tap-tapping behind me and wondered if a practiced ear could identify an oldster by her distinctive cane tap. I could imagine Tonto, ear pressed to the ground. "Many geezer come this way, *kemo sabe*."

Snapping open my briefcase, I extracted my journals and stacked them on the desk. Mae lowered herself into the visitor's chair. "Jimmy Kovacs will be coming in to see you later today. He threw his back out again."

I opened the issue of *Brain* that Dr. Wing had lent me. “Never throw anything out that you might need again later," I said, running my eye down the table of contents.

"You do study on those books, Doctor."

"I like to keep up on things."

I flipped the journal open to the article I had been seeking and began to read. After a few minutes, she spoke again. "If you spent half the time studying on people as you do studying on books, you'd be better at doctorin'."

I looked up scowling. Who was she to judge? A bent-up, shriveled old woman who had seen more years than she had a right to. "The body is an intricate machine," I told her. "The more thoroughly I understand its mechanisms, the better able I am to repair it."

"A machine," she repeated.

"Like an automobile."

"And you're jest an auto mechanic." She shook her head.

I smiled, but without humor. "Yes, I am. Maybe that's less glamorous than being a godlike healer, but I think it's closer to the truth." An auto mechanic. And some cars were old jalopies destined for the junk heap; so why put more work into them? I did not tell her that. And others were not built right to begin with. I did not tell her that, either. It was a cold vision, but in its way, comforting. Helplessness is greater solace than failure.

Mae grunted. "Mostly milk sours 'cause it's old."

I scowled again. More hillbilly philosophy? Or simply an addled mind unable to hold to a topic? "Does it," I said.

She studied me for a long while without speaking. Finally, she shook her head. "Most car accidents are caused by the driver."

"I'll pass that along to the National Transportation Safety Board."

"What I mean is, you might pay as much attention to the driver as to the automobile."

I sighed and laid the journal aside. "I take it that you want to tell me what is playing on your personal Top 40 today."

She snorted, but I could see that she really did. I leaned back in my chair and linked my hands behind my head. "So, tell me, Mrs. Holloway, what is 'shaking'?"

She made fish faces with her lips. Mentally, I had dubbed her Granny Guppy when she did that. It was as if she had to flex her lips first to ready them for the arduous task of flapping.

" 'Does Your Mother Know You're Out, Cecelia?' "

"What?" It took a moment. Then I realized that it must have been a song title. Some popular ditty now thankfully forgotten by everyone save this one old lady. "Was that a favorite song of yours?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Oh, mercy, no; but there was a year when you couldn't hardly avoid it."

"I see."

"And, let's see. . . ." She stopped and cocked her head. The Listening Look, I called it. "Now it's The Red, Red Robin'—"

"Comes bob-bob-bobbing along?"

"Yes, that's the one. And already today I've heard 'Don't Bring Lulu' and 'Side by Side' and 'Kitten on the Keys' and 'Bye-bye Blackbird.' " She made a pout with her lips. "I do wish the songs would play out entirely."

"You told me they weren't your favorite songs."

"Some are, some aren't. They're just songs I once heard. Sometimes they remind me of things. Sometimes it seems as if they *almost* remind me of things. Things long forgotten, but waiting for me, just around a corner somewhere." She shook herself suddenly. "Tin Pan Alley wasn't my favorite, though," she went on. "I was a sheba. I went for the wild stuff. The Charleston; the Black Bottom. All those side kicks. ... I was a little old for that, but. . . . Those were wild days, I tell you. Hip flasks and stockings

rolled down and toss away the corset." She gave me a wink.

This . . . *prune* had gone for the wild stuff? Though, grant her, she had had her youth once. It didn't seem fair that she should have it twice. "Sheba?" I asked.

"A sheba," she said. "A flapper. The men were sheiks. Because of that . . . what was his name?" She tapped her cane staccato on the floor. "Valentino, that was it. Valentino. Oh, those eyes of his! All the younger girls dreamed about having him; and I wouldn't have minded one bit, myself. He had It."

"It?"

"It. Valentino drove the girls wild, he did. And a few boys, too. Clara Bow had It, too."

"Sex appeal?"

"Pshaw. Sex appeal is for snugglepups. A gal didn't have It unless both sexes felt something. Women, too. Women were coming out back then. We could smoke, pet, put a bun on if we wanted to—least, 'til the dries put on the kabosh. We had the vote. Why we even had a governor, back in Wyoming, where I once lived. Nellie Taylor Ross. I met her once, did I tell you? Why I remember—"

Her sudden silence piqued me. "You remember what?"

"Doc?" Her voice quavered and her eyes looked right past me, wide as tunnels.

"What is it?"

"Doc? I can see 'em. Plain as day."

"See whom, Mrs. Holloway?" Was the old biddy having a seizure right there in my office?

She looked to her left, then her right. "We're sitting in the gallery," she announced. "All of us wearing pants, too, 'stead o' dresses. And down there . . . down there ..." She aimed a shaking finger at a point somewhere below my desk. "That's Alice with the gavel. Law's sake! They're ghosts, Doc. They're ghosts all around me!"

"Mrs. Holloway," I said. "Mrs. Holloway, close your eyes."

She turned to me. "What?"

"Close your eyes."

She did. "I can still see 'em," she said, with a wonder that was close to terror. "I can still see 'em. Like my eyes were still open." She raised a

shaking hand to her mouth. Her ragged breath slowly calmed and, more quietly, she repeated, "I can still see 'em." A heartbeat went by, then she sighed. "They're fading, now," she said. "Fading." Finally, she opened her eyes. She looked troubled. "Doc, what happened to me? Was it a hallucy-nation?"

I leaned back in my chair and folded my hands under my chin. "Not quite. Simply a non-musical memory."

"But ... it was so *real*, like I done traveled back in time."

"You were here the whole time," I assured her with a grin.

She struck the floor with her cane. "I know that. I could see you just as plain as I could see Alice and the others."

I sighed. Her sense of humor had dried out along with the rest of her. "Patients with your condition sometimes fall into 'dreamy states,' " I explained. "They see or hear their present and their remembered surroundings simultaneously, like a film that has been double-exposed. Hughlings Jackson described the symptom in 1880. He called it a 'doubling of consciousness.' " I smiled and tapped the journal Wing had given me. "Comes from studying on books," I said.

But she wasn't paying me attention. "I remember it all so clearly now. I'd forgotten. Alice Robertson of Oklahoma was the first woman to preside over the House of Representatives. June 20, 1921, it was. Temporary Speaker. Oh, those were a fine fifteen minutes, I tell you." She sighed and shook her head. "I wonder," she said. "I wonder if I might remember my Ma and Pa and my little brother. Zach . . . ? Was that his name? It's always been a trouble to me that I've forgotten. It don't seem right to forget your own kin."

An inverse square law, I suppose. Memories dim and blur with age, their strength depending on distance and mass. Too many of Mae's memories were too distant. They had passed beyond the horizon of her mind, and had faded like an old photograph left too long in the Sun. And yet sometimes, near the end, like ashes collapsing in a dying fire, the past can become brighter than the present.

"No," I said. "It don't seem right."

"And Mister. . . . Haven't thought on that man in donkey's years," she said. "Green Holloway was my man. I always called him Mister. He called me his Lorena."

"Lorena?"

Mae shrugged. "I don't remember why. There was a song. ... He took the

name from that. It was real popular, so I suppose I'll recollect it bye and bye. He was an older man, was Mister. I remember him striding up through Black's hell; gray and grizzled, but strong as splo. All brass and buckles in his state militia uniform. Company H, 5th Tennessee. Just that one scene has stayed with me all my life, like an ole brown photograph. Dear Lord, but that man had arms like cooper's bands. I can close my eyes and feel them around me sometimes, even today." She shivered and looked down.

"Splo?" I prompted.

"Splo," she repeated in a distracted voice. Then, more strongly, as if shoving some memory aside, "Angel teat. We called it apple John back then. Mister kept a still out behind the joe. Whenever he run off a batch, he'd invite the spear-side over and we'd all get screwed."

I bet. Whatever she had said. "Apple John was moonshine?" *High tail it, Luke. The revenooers are a-coming*. What kind of Barney Google life had she led up in those Tennessee hills? "So when you say you got screwed, you mean you got drunk, not, uh. ..."

Mae sucked in her lips and gnawed on them. "It was good whilst we were together," she said at last. "Right good." Her lips thinned. "But Mister, he lit a shuck on me, just like all the others." She gave me a look, half angry, half wary; and I could almost see the shutter come down behind her eyes. "Ain't no use getting close to nobody," she said. "They're always gone when you need them. Why, I ain't, haven't seen Little Zach nigh unto. ..." She looked momentarily confused. "Not for years and years. I loved that boy like he was more'n a brother; but he yondered off and never come back." She creaked to her feet. "So, I'll just twenty-three skidoo, Jack. You got things to do; so do I."

I watched her go, thinking she was right about one thing. Old milk does go sour.

There will I find a settled rest
While others go and come.
No more a stranger or a guest
But like a child at home.

Brenda's silver Beemer was parked in the garage when I got home. I pulled up beside it and contemplated its shiny perfection as I turned my

engine off. Brenda was home. How long had it been, now? Three weeks? Four? It was hard to remember. Leave early; back late. That was our life. A quick peck in the morning and no-time-for-breakfast-dear. Tiptoes late at night, and the sheets rustle and the mattress sags; and it was hardly enough even to ruffle your sleep. Always on the run; always working late. One of us would have to slow down, or we might never meet at all.

My first thought was that I might give Consuela the night off. It had been so long since Brenda and I had been alone together. My second thought was that she had gotten in trouble at the office and had lost her job.

Doctors make good money. Lawyers make good money. Doctors married to lawyers make *very* good money. It was not enough.

"Brenda?" I called as I entered the kitchen from the garage. "I'm home!" There was no one in the kitchen; though something tangy with orange and sage was baking in the oven. "Brenda?" I called again as I reached the hall closet.

A squeal from upstairs. "Daddy's home!"

I hung up my overcoat. "Hello, Dee-dee. Is Mommy with you?" Unlikely, but possible. Stranger things have happened.

"No." Followed by a long silence; "Connie is telling me a story, about a mule and an ox."

Another silence, then footsteps on the stairs. Consuela looked at me over the banister as she descended.

"The mule and the ox?" I said.

"Nothing," she replied curtly. "An old Mayan folk tale."

"Where's Brenda?" I asked her. "I know she's home; her car is in the garage." Maybe she was in the back yard, by the pool or in the woods.

No, she didn't like the woods; she was afraid of deer ticks.

"Mrs. Wilkes came home early," Consuela said, "and packed a bag—"

Mentally, I froze. Not *this*. Not *now*. Without Brenda's income. . . . "Packed a bag? Why?"

"She said she must go to Washington for a few days, to assist in an argument before the Supreme Court."

"Oh." Sudden relief coupled with sudden irritation. She could have phoned. At the Home. In my car. I showed Consuela my teeth. "The Supreme Court, you say. Well. That's quite a feather in her cap."

"Were she an Indio, a feather in the cap might mean something."

"Consuela. A joke? Did Brenda say when she would be back?"

Consuela hesitated, then shook her head. "She came home, packed her bag, gave me instructions. When the car arrived, she left."

And never said good-bye to Deedee. Maybe a wave from the doorway, a crueler good-bye than none at all. "What sort of instructions?" That wasn't the question I wanted to ask. I wanted to ask whose car picked her up. Whom she was assisting in Washington? Walther Crowe, the steeleyed senior partner with the smooth, European mannerisms? FitzPatrick, the young comer who figured so often on the society pages? But Consuela would not know; or, if she did, she would not say. There were some places where an outsider did not deliberately set herself.

"The sort of instructions," she replied, "that are unnecessary to give a professional. But they were only to let me know that I was her employee."

"You're angry." I received no answer. Then I asked, "Have you and Deedee eaten yet?"

"No." A short answer, not quite a retort.

"I didn't pull rank on you. Brenda did."

She shrugged and looked up at me with her head cocked to the side. "You are a doctor; I am a nurse. We have a professional relationship. Mrs. Wilkes is only an employer."

She was in a bad mood. I had never seen her angry before. I wondered what patronizing tone Brenda had used with her. I always made the effort to treat Consuela as an equal; but Brenda seldom did. Sometimes I thought Brenda was half-afraid of our Deirdre's nurse; though for what reason, I could not say. I glanced at the overcoat in the closet. "Would you and Dee-dee like to go out to eat?"

She gave me a thoughtful look; then shook her head. "She will not leave the house."

I glanced at the stairs. "No, she'll not budge, will she?" It was an old argument, never won. "She can play outside. She can go to school with the other children. There is no medical reason to stay in her—"

"There is something wrong with her heart."

"No, it's too soon for—"

"There is something wrong with her heart," she repeated.

"Oh." I looked away. "But. . . . We'll eat in the dining room today. The

three of us. Whatever that is you have in the oven. I'll set the table with the good dinnerware."

"A special occasion?"

I shook my head. "No. Only maybe we each have a reason to be unhappy just now." I wondered if Brenda had left a message in the bedroom. Some hint as to when she'd return. I headed toward the dining room.

"The ox was weary of plowing," Consuela said.

"Eh?" I turned and looked back at her. "What was that?"

"The ox was weary of plowing. All day, up the field and down, while the farmer cracked the whip behind him. Each night in the barn, when the ox complained, the mule would laugh. 'If you detest the plowing so much, why do it?' 'It is my job, senor mule,' the ox would reply. 'Then do it and don't complain. Otherwise, refuse. Go on strike.' The ox thought about this and, several days later, when the farmer came to him with the harness, the ox would not budge. 'What is wrong, senor ox?' the farmer asked him. 'I am on strike,' the ox replied. 'All day I plow with no rest. I deserve a rest.' The farmer nodded. 'There is justice in what you say. You have worked hard. Yet the fields must be plowed before the rains come.' And so he hitched the mule to the plow and cracked the whip over him, and worked him for many weeks until the plowing was done."

Consuela stopped, and with a slight gesture of the head turned for the kitchen.

Although entitled to two evenings a week off, Consuela seldom took them, preferring the solitude of her own room. She lived there quietly, usually with the hall door closed; always with the connecting door to Dee-dee's room open. Once a month she sent a check to Guatemala. She read books. Sometimes she played softly on a sort of flute: weird, serpentine melodies that she had brought with her from the jungle. More than once, the strange notes had caused Brenda to stop whatever she was doing, whether mending or reading law or even making love, and listen with her head cocked until the music stopped. Then she would shiver slightly, and resume whatever she had been doing as though nothing had happened.

Consuela had furnished her room with Meso-American bric-a-brac. Colorful, twisty things. Statuettes, wall hangings, a window treatment. Squat little figurines with secretive, knowing smiles. A garland of fabric flowers. An obsidian carving that suggested a panther in mid-leap. Brenda

found it all vaguely disturbing, as if she expected chittering monkeys swinging from the bookshelves and curtains; as if Consuela had brought a part of the jungle with her into Brenda's clear, ordered, rational world. It wasn't proper, at all. It was somehow out of control.

"Did you like having dinner downstairs today?" I asked Dee-dee as I studied Consuela's room through the connecting door. The flute lay silent on Consuela's dresser top. It was the kind you blew straight into, with two rows of holes, one for each hand.

"It was OK, I guess." A weak voice, steady but faint.

I turned around. "Only OK?" There was an odd contrast here, a paradox. Although it was evening and Deirdre's room was shrouded in darkness, Consuela's room had seemed bright with rioting colors.

"Did I leave any toys downstairs?" A worried voice in the darkness. Anxious.

"No, I checked." I resolved to check again, just in case we had overlooked something that had rolled under the sofa. Brenda detested disorder. She did not like finding things out of place.

"Mommy won't mind, will she? That I ate downstairs."

I turned. "Not if we don't tell her. Mommy will be at the Supreme Court for a few days."

Dee-dee made a sound in her throat. No sorrow, no joy. Just acknowledgment. Mommy might never come home at all for all the difference it made in Dee-dee's life. "Ready to be tucked in?"

Dee-dee grinned a delicious smile and snuggled deeper into the sheets. It was a heartbreaking smile. I gave her back the best one I could muster, and took a long, slow step toward the bed. She shrieked and ducked under the covers. I waited until she peeked out and took another step. It was a game we played, every move as encrusted with ritual as a Roman Mass.

Hutchinson-Gilford Syndrome. Deedee's smile was snaggle-toothed. Her hair, sparse; her skin, thin and yellow.

Manifestations: Alopecia, onset at birth to eighteen months, with degeneration of hair follicles. Thin skin. Hypoplasia of the nails. ... I had read the entry in *Smith's* over and over, looking for the one item I had missed, the loophole I had overlooked. It was committed to memory now; like a mantra. *Periarticular fibrosis; stiff or partially flexed prominent joints. Skeletal hypoplasia, dysphasia and degeneration*.

Dee-dee had weighed 2.7 kilos at birth. Her fontanel had ossified late,

but the slowness of her growth had not become apparent until seven months. She lagged the normal growth charts by one-third. When she lost hair, it did not grow back. Her skin had brownish-yellow "liver" spots.

Natural history: Deficit of growth becomes severe after one year. The tendency to fatigue easily may limit participation in childhood activities. Intelligence and brain development are unimpaired.

Deirdre Wilkes was an alert, active mind trapped in a body aging far too quickly. A shrunken little gnome of a ten-year old. *Etiology: Unknown*. I hugged her and kissed her on the cheek. Then I tucked the sheets tightly under the mattress.

Prognosis: The life span is shortened by relentless arterial atheromatosis. Death usually occurs at puberty.

There were no papers delivered on Hutchinson-Gilford that I had not crawled through word after word, searching for the slightest whisper of a breakthrough. Some sign along the horizon of research. But there were no hints. There were no loopholes.

Prognosis: death.

There were no exceptions.

Deirdre could smile because she was only a child and could not comprehend what was happening to her body. She knew she would have to "go away" someday, but she didn't know what that really meant.

Smiling was the hardest part of the game.

Come along, Josephine,
In my flying machine.
We'll go up in the air. . . .

How can I explain the feelings of dread and depression that enveloped me every time I entered Sunny Dale? I was surrounded by ancients. Bent, gray, hobbling creatures forever muttering over events long forgotten or families never seen. And always repeating their statements, always repeating their statements, as if it were I who were hard of hearing and not they. The Home was a waiting room for Death. Waiting and waiting, until they had done with waiting. Here is where the yellowed skin and the liver spots belonged. Here! Not on the frame of a ten-year-old.

The fourth time I saw Mae Holloway, she crept up behind me as I opened the door to the clinic. "Morning, doc," I heard her say.

"Good morning, Mrs. H.," I replied without turning around. I opened the door and stepped through. Inevitably, she followed, humming. I wondered if this was going to become a daily ritual. She planted herself in the visitor's chair. Somehow, it had become her own. "The show just ended," she announced. "Oh, it was a peach." She waved a hand at my desk. "Go on, set down. Make yourself pleasant."

It was my own fault, really. I had shown an interest in her tiresome recollections, and now she felt she had to share everything with me, as if I were one of her batty, old cronies. No good deed goes unpunished. Perhaps I was the only one who put up with her.

But I did have a notion that could wring a little use out of my sentence. I could write a book about Mae Holloway and her musical memories. People were fascinated with how the mind worked; or rather with how it failed to work. Sacks had described similar cases of incontinent nostalgia in one of his books; and if he could make the best-seller lists with a collection of neurological case studies, why not I? With fame, came money; and the things money could buy.

But my book would have to be something new, something different; not just a retelling of the same neurological tales. The teleology, perhaps. Sacks had failed to discover any meaning to the music his patients had heard, any reason *why* this tune or that was rememb-heard. If I kept a record, I might discover enough of a pattern to form the basis of a book. I rummaged in my desk drawer and took out a set of file cards that I had bought to make notes on my patients. Might as well get started. I poised my pen over a card. "What show was that?" I asked.

"*Girl of the Golden West*. David Belasco's new stage play." She shook her head. "I first seen it, oh, years and years ago, in Pittsburgh; before they made it a high falutin' opera. That final scene, where Dick Johnson is hiding in the attic, and his blood drips through the ceiling onto the sheriff. That was taken from real life, you know."

"Was it." I wrote *Girl of the Golden West* and *doubling episode* and made a note to look it up. Then I poised my pen over a fresh card. "I'd like to ask you a few questions about your music, Mrs. Holloway. That is, if you don't mind."

She gave me a surprised glance and looked secretly pleased. She fussed

with her gown and settled herself into her seat. "You may fire when ready, Gridley."

"You *are* still hearing the music, aren't you, Mrs. Holloway?"

"Well, the songs aren't so loud as they were. They don't keep me awake anymore; but if I concentrate, I can hear 'em."

I made a note. "You've learned to filter them out, that's all."

"If You Talk in Your Sleep, Don't Mention My Name."

"What?"

" 'If You Talk in Your Sleep, Don't Mention My Name.' That was one of 'em. The tunes I been hearing. Go on, write that down. Songs were getting real speedy in those days. There was 'Mary Took the Calves to the Dairy Show' and 'This is No Place for a Minister's Son.' Heh-heh. The blues was all in a lather over 'em. That, and actor-folks actually kissing each other in the moving picture shows. They tried to get that banned. And the animal dances, too."

"Animal dances?"

"Oh, there were a passel of 'em," she said. "There was the kangaroo dip, the crab step, the fox trot, the fish walk, the bunny hug, the lame duck. ... I don't remember them all."

"The fox trot," I offered. "I think people still dance that."

Mae snorted. "All the fire's out of it. You should have read what the preachers and the newspapers had to say about it back then. They sure were peeved; but the kids thought it was flossy. It was a way to get their parents' goat. 'Bug them,' I guess you say now."

"Kids? Isn't the fox trot a ballroom dance for, well, you know—mature people?"

She made her sour-lemon face. "Sure. Now. But today's old folks were yesterday's kids. And they still like the music they liked when they were young. Heh-heh. When you're ninety or a hundred, sonny, you'll be a-listening to that acid rock and telling your grandkids what hell-raisers you used to be. And they won't believe you, either. We tote the same bags with us all our lives, doc. The same interests; the same likes and dislikes. Those older'n us and those younger'n us, why, they have their own bags." A sudden scowl, halfway between fright and puzzlement, passed across her face like the shadow of a cloud. Then she hunched her shoulders. "Me, I've got too many bags."

She'd get no argument from me on that. "Have you heard any other

songs?" I asked.

She folded her hands over the knob of her walking stick and rested her chin on them. "Let's see. . . . Yesterday, I heard, heard 'Waiting for the Robert E. Lee' and 'A Perfect Day.' Those were real popular, once. And lots of Cohan songs. 'Oh, it was Mary, Mary, long before the fashion changed. . . . ' And 'Rosie O'Grady.' Then there was 'Memphis Blues.' Young folks thought it was 'hep.' Even better than ragtime."

She shook her head. "I never cottoned too well to those kids, though," she said. "They remind me of the kids nowadays. A little too. . . . What do you say now? 'Close to the edge.' Ran wild when they were young 'uns, they did. Hung around barbershops. Hawked papers as newsies. Worked the growler for their old man."

I looked up from my notes. "Worked the growler?"

"Took the beer bucket to the saloon to get it filled. Imagine sending a child— even girls!—into a saloon! No wonder Carrie and the others wanted to close 'em up. Maybe folks my age were a little too stuck on ourselves, like the younger folks said; but at least we had principles. With us, it wasn't all just to have a good time. We fought for things worth fighting for. Suffrage. Prohibition. Birth control. Oh, those were times, I tell you. Maggie, making those speeches about birth control and standing up there on the stage that one time with the tape over her mouth, because they wouldn't let her talk. I helped her open that clinic of hers over in Brooklyn, though I never did care for her attitude about Jews and coloreds. Controlling 'undesirables' wasn't the real reason for birth control, anyway."

"Mrs. Holloway!"

She looked at me and laughed. "Now, don't tell me *your* generation is shocked at such talk!"

"It's not that. It's—"

"That old folks wrangled over it, too? Well, folks aren't born old. We were young, too; and as full of piss and vinegar as anyone else. I read *Moral Physiology* when it first come out; though Mister did try mightily to discourage me. And, later, there was *The Unwelcomed Child*. Doc, if men had babies, birth control would never have been a crime."

Folks aren't born old. ... I squared off my deck of index cards. "I suppose not." My generation had been as strong as any for civil rights and feminism. Certainly stronger than the hard-edged cynics coming up behind us. It sounded as if Mae had had a similar generational experience.

Though, that would put her in the generation *before* the hell-raising Lost Generation. What was it called? The Missionary Generation? Maybe she was older than she looked; though that hardly seemed possible. "Let's get back to the songs—" I suggested.

"Yes, the songs," she said. "The songs. Why, I recollect a man had a right good voice. Now what was his name . . . ? A wonderful dancer, too."

"Ben Wickman?" I suggested.

"No. No, Ben was later. This was out Pittsburgh way. Joe Paxton. That was it." She tilted her head back. "He was a barnstormer, Joe was. He knew 'em all. Calbraith Rodgers, Glenn Curtiss, Pancho Barnes, even Wilbur Wright. Took me up once, through the Alleghenies. Oh, my, that was something, let me tell you. The wind in your face and the ground drifting by beneath you, and the golden Sun peeking between the shoulders of the hills. . . . And you felt you were dancing with the clouds." She sighed, and the light in her eyes slowly faded. "But he was like all the rest." Her face closed up; became hard. "I come on him one day packing his valise, and when I asked him why he was cutting out, all he could say was, 'How old is Ann?' "

"What?"

She blinked and focused moistened eyes on me. Slowly, before they could even fall, her tears vanished into the sand of her soul. "Oh, that's what everyone said back then. 'How old is Ann?' It meant 'Who knows?' Came from one of those brain teasers that ran in the *New York Press*. You know. 'If Mary is twice as old as Ann was when Mary . . . ' And it goes through all sorts of contortions and ends up 'How old is Ann?' Most folks hadn't the foggiest notion and didn't care, so they started saying 'How old is Ann?' when they didn't know the answer to something." She pushed down on her walking stick and started to rise.

"Wait. I still have a few questions."

"Well, I don't have any more answers. Joe, well, he turned out worthless in the end; but we had some high times together." Then she sighed and looked off into the distance. "And he did take me flying, once, when flying was more than just a ride."

As I was walking down the street,
down the street, down the street,
A handsome gal I chanced to meet.
Oh, she was fair to view.

Lovely Fan', won't you come out tonight,
come out tonight, come out tonight?
Lovely Fan', won't you come out tonight,
and dance by the light of the moon?

It was late in the evening—midnight, perhaps—and, dressed in housecoat and slippers, I was frowning over a legal pad and a few dozen index cards, a cup of cold coffee beside me on the kitchen table. I was surrounded by small, sourceless sounds. If you have been in a sleeping building at night, you know what I mean. Creaks and rustlings and the sighs of ... what? Spirits? Air circulation vents? The soft groan of settling timbers. The breath of the wind against the windows. The staccato scritching of tiny night creatures dancing across the roof shingles. The distant rumble of a red-eye flight making its descent into the metropolitan area. Among such confused, muttering sounds, who can distinguish the pad of bare feet on the floor?

A gasp, and I turned.

I had never seen Consuela when she was not wearing nurse's whites. Perhaps once or twice, bundled in a coat as she sought one of her rare nights out; but never in a red and yellow flowing flowered robe. Never with her black hair unfastened and sweeping around her like a ravenfeather cape. She stood in the kitchen doorway, clenching the robe's collar in her fist.

"Consuela," I said.

"I—saw the light on. I thought you had already gone to sleep. So I—" Consuela flustered was a new sight, too. She turned to go. "I did not mean to disturb you."

"No, no. Stay a while." I laid my pen down and stretched. "I couldn't get to sleep, so I came down here to work a while." When she hesitated, I stood and pulled a chair out for her. She gave me a sidelong look, then bobbed her head once and took a seat. I wondered if she thought I might "try something." Late at night; wife away; both of us in pajamas, thoughts of bed in our minds. Hell, *I* wondered if I might try something. Brenda had grown more distant each year since Deirdre's birth.

But Consuela was not my type. She was too short, too wide, too dark. I studied her covertly while I handled her chair. Well, perhaps not "too." And she did have a liquid grace to her, like a panther striding through the jungle. Brenda's grace was of a different sort. Brenda was fireworks arcing

and bursting across the night sky. You might get burnt, but never bitten.

"Would you like something to drink?" I asked when she had gotten settled. "Apple juice, orange juice." Too late for coffee; and a liqueur would have been inappropriate.

"Orange juice would be fine, thank you," she said.

I went to the refrigerator and removed the carafe. Like everyone else, we buy our OJ in wax-coated paperboard containers; but Brenda transferred the milk, the juices, and half a dozen other articles into carafes and canisters and other more appropriate receptacles. Most people shelved their groceries. We repackaged ours.

"Do you remember the old woman I told you about last week?"

"The one who hears music? Yes."

I brought the glasses to the table. "She's starting to remember other things, now." I told her about Mae's recollections, her consciousness doubling. "I've started to keep track of what she sees and hears," I said, indicating the papers on the table. "And I've sent to the military archives to see if they could locate Green Holloway's service records. Later this week, I plan to go into the City to check the census records at the National Archives."

Consuela picked up the legal pad and glanced at it. "Why are you doing this thing?"

"For verification. I'm thinking I might write a book."

She looked at me. "About Mrs. Holloway?"

"Yes. And I think I may have found an angle, too." I pointed to the pad she held. "That is a list of the songs and events Holloway has rememb-heard."

After a moment's hesitation, Consuela read through the list. She shook her head. "You are looking for meaning in this?" Her voice held a twist of skepticism in it. For a moment, I saw how my activities might look from her perspective. Searching for meaning in the remembered songs of a half-senile old woman. What should that be called, senemancy? Melodimancy? What sort of auguries did High Priest Wilkes find, eviscerating this morning's ditties?

"Not meaning," I said. "Pattern. Explanation. Some way to make sense of what she is going through."

Consuela gave me that blank look she liked to affect. "It may not make sense."

"But it almost does." I riffed the stack of index cards. Each card held information about a song Mae had heard. The composer, songwriter, performer; the date, the topic, the genre. Whether Mae had liked it or not. "The first time she came to me," I said, "she was 'rememb-hearing' swing tunes from the 1930s. A few days later, it was music of the 'Roaring Twenties.' Then the jazz gave way to George M. Cohan and the 'animal dance' music of the Mauve Decade. Do you see? The songs keep coming from earlier in her life."

"Memphis Blues," 1912. "A Perfect Day," 1910. "Mary Took the Calves to the Dairy Show," 1909. "Rosie O Grady," 1906. Songs my grandparents heard as children. "East side, west side, All around the town. . . ." I remembered how Granny used to sit my brother and me on her lap, one on each knee, and rock us back and forth while she sang that. I paused and cocked my head, listening into the silence of the night.

But I could hear nothing. I could remember *that* she sang it; but I could not remember the singing.

"It is a voyage," I said, loudly, to fill the silence. "A voyage of discovery up the stream of time."

Consuela shook her head. "Rivers have rapids," she said, "and falls."

Hello, my baby, hello, my honey,
hello, my ragtime gal . . .
Send me a kiss by wire.
Baby, my heart's on fire.

Mae's morning visit fell into a routine. She settled herself into her chair with an air of proprietorship and croaked out snatches of tunes while I wrote down what I could, recording the rest on a cheap pocket tape recorder I had purchased. She hummed "The Maple Leaf Rag" and "Grace and Beauty" and the "St. Louis Tickle." I suffered through her renditions of "My Gal Sal" and "The Rosary." ("A big hit," she assured me, "for over twenty-five years.") She rememb-heard the bawdy "Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" (sounding grotesque on her ancient lips), the raggy "You've Been a Good Old Wagon, But You've Done Broke Down," and the poignant "Good-bye, Dolly Gray."

She frowned for a moment. "Or was that 'Nellie Gray'?" Then she shrugged. "Those were happy songs, mostly," she said. "Oh, they were such

good songs back then. Not like today, all angry and shouting. Even the sad songs were sweet. Like 'Tell Them that You Saw Me' or 'She's Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage.' And Mister taught me 'Lorena,' once. I wish I could recollect that 'un. And 'Barbry Ellen.' I learned me that 'un when I was knee-high to a grasshopper. Pa told me it was the President's favorite song. The old President, from when his Pappy fought in the War. I haven't heard those yet. Or—" She cocked her head to the side. "Well, dad-blast it!"

"What's wrong, Mrs. Holloway?"

"I'm starting to hear coon songs."

"Coon songs!"

She shook her head. "Coon songs. They was—were—all the rage. 'Coon, Coon, Coon' and 'All Coons Look Alike to Me' and 'If the Man in the Moon were a Coon.' Some of them songs were writ by coloreds themselves, because they had to write what was popular if they wanted to make any money."

"Mrs. Holloway . . . !"

"Never said I liked 'em," she snapped back. "I met plenty of coloreds in my time, and there's some good and some bad, just like any other folks. Will Biddle, he farmed two hollers over from my Pa when I was a sprout, and he worked as hard as any man-jack in the hills, and carried water for no man. My Pa said—my Pa. ..." She paused, frowned and shook her head. "Pa?"

"What is it?"

"Oh."

"Mrs. Holloway?"

She spoke in a whisper, not looking at me, not looking at anything I could see. "I remember when my Pa died. Him a-laying on the bed, all wore out by life. Gray and wrinkled and toothless. And, dear Lord, how that ached me. I remember thinking how he'd been such a strong man. Such a strong man." She sighed. "It's an old apartment, and the wallpaper is peeling off'n the walls. There's a big dark water stain on one wall and the steam radiator is hissing like a cat."

"You don't remember where you were . . . are?" I asked, jotting a few quick notes.

She shook her head. "No. I'm humming 'In the Good Old Summertime.' Or maybe the tune is just running through my head. Pa, he. ..." A tear

formed in the corner of her eye. "He wants me to sing him the song."

"The song? What song is that?"

"An old, old song he used to love. 'Sing it to me one last time,' he says. And I can't sing at all because my throat's clenched up so tight. But he asks me again, and. . . . Those eyes of his! How I loved that old man." Mae's own eyes had glazed over as she lived the scene again in her mind. She reached out as if clasping another pair of hands in her own and croaked haltingly:

"*I gaze on the moon as I tread the drear wild,*
And feel that my mother now thinks of her child . . .
Be it ever so humble ..."

She could not finish. For a time, she sobbed softly. Then she brushed her eye with her sleeve and looked past me. "I never knew, doc. I never knew at all what a blessing it was to forget."

Come and sit by my side if you love me.
Do not hasten to bid me adieu,
But remember the bright Mohawk Valley
And the girl that has loved you so true.

Later that day, as I was leaving the Home, I noticed Mae sitting in the common room and paused a moment to eavesdrop. There were a handful of other residents moldering in chairs and rockers; but Mae sat singing quietly to herself and I thought what the hell, and pulled out my pocket tape recorder and stepped up quietly beside her.

It was a patriotic hymn. "America, the Beautiful." I'm sure you've heard it. Even I know the words to that one. Enough to know that Mae had them all wrong. *Oh beautiful for halcyon skies? Above the enameled plain*? And the choruses. . . . The way Mae sang it, "God shed his grace for thee" sounded more like a plea than a statement.

America! America!
God shed his grace for thee

Till selfish gain no longer stain
The banner of the free!

The faulty recollection disturbed me. If Mae's memories were unreliable, then what of my book? What if my whole rationale turned out wrong?

Her croakings died away and she opened her eyes and spotted me. "Heading home, doc?"

"It's been a long day," I said. There was no sign on her face of her earlier melancholy, except that maybe her cheeks sagged a little lower than before, her eyes gazed a little more sadly. She seemed older, somehow; if such a thing were possible.

She patted the chair next to her. "Hot foot it on over," she said. "You're just in time for the slapstick."

She was obviously having another doubling episode, and, in some odd way, I was being asked to participate. I looked at my watch, but decided that since our morning session had been cut short, I might as well make the time up now. My next visit was not until Friday. If I waited until then, these memories could be lost.

"Slapstick?" I asked, taking the seat she had offered.

"You never been to the Shows?" She tsk-ed and shook her head. "Well, Jee-whiskers. They been the place to go ever since Tony Pastor got rid of the cootchee-cootchee and cleaned up his acts. A young man can take his steady there now and make goo-goo eyes." She nudged me with her elbow. "A fellow can be gay with his fairy up in the balcony."

I pulled away from her. "I beg your pardon?"

"Don't you want to be gay?" she asked.

"I should hope not! I have a wife, a dau—"

Mae laughed suddenly and capped a gnarled hand over her mouth. So help me, she blushed. "Oh, my goodness, me! I didn't mean were you a *cake-eater*. I got all mixed up. I was sitting down front at the burly-Q and I was sitting here in the TV room with you. When we said 'be gay,' we meant let your hair down and relax. And a 'fairy' was your girl friend, what they used to call a chicken when I was younger. All the boys wanted to be gay blades, with their starched collars and straw hats and spats. And their moustaches! You never saw such moustaches! Waxed and curled and barbered." She chuckled to herself. "I was a regular daisy, myself." She

closed her eyes and leaned back.

"A regular daisy?"

"A daisy," she repeated. "Like in the song. Gals was going out to work in them days. So they made a song about it. Now, let me see. ..." She pouted and stared closed-eyed at the sky. "How did that go?" She began to sing in a cracked, quavery voice.

"My daughter's as fine a young girl as you'll meet
In your travels day in and day out;
But she's getting high-toned and she's putting on airs
Since she has been working about. . . .
When she comes home at night from her office,
She walks in with a swag like a fighter;
And she says to her ma, 'Look at elegant me.'
Since my daughter plays on the typewriter.

She says she's a 'regular daisy,'
Uses slang 'til my poor heart is sore;
She now warbles snatches from operas
Where she used to sing 'Peggy O Moore.'
Now the red on her nails looks ignited;
She's bleached her hair 'til it's lighter.
Now perhaps I should always be mad at the man
That taught her to play the typewriter.

She cries in her sleep, 'Your letter's to hand.'
She calls her old father, 'esquire';
And the neighbors they shout
When my daughter turns out,
'There goes Bridget Typewriter Maguire.' "

When Mae was done, she laughed again and wiped tears from her eyes. "Law's sake," she said. "Girls a-working in the offices. I remember what a stir-up that was. Folks said secretarial was man's work, and women couldn't be good typewriters, no how. There was another song, 'Everybody Works But Father,' about how if women was to go to work, all the men would be out of jobs. Heh-heh. I swan! It weren't long afore one gal in four

had herself a 'position,' like they used to say; and folks my age complained how the youngsters were 'going to pot.' " She shook her head and chuckled.

"I always did find those kids more to my taste," she went on. "There was something about 'em; some spark that I liked. They knew how to have fun without that ragged edge that the next batch had. And they had, I don't know, call it a dream. They were out to change the world. They sure weren't wishy-washy like the other folks my age. 'Middle-aged,' that's what the kids back then called us. We were 'Professor Tweetzers' and 'Miss Nancys' and 'goo-goos.' And to tell you the truth, Doc, I thought they pegged it right. People my age grew up trying to imitate their parents; until they saw how much more fun the kids were having. Then they tried to be just like their kids. Heh-heh."

I grunted something noncommital. Middle-aged crazy, just like my Uncle Larry. "I suppose there were a lot of 'mid-life crises' back then, too." I ventured. Uncle Larry had gone heavy into love beads and incense, radical politics. He grew a moustache and wore bell-bottoms. The whole hippie scene. Walked out on his wife for a young "chick" and thought it was all "groovy." I remember how pathetic those thirtysomething wannabes seemed to us in college.

Dad, now, he never had an "identity crisis." He always knew exactly who he was. He had gone off to Europe and saved the world, and then came back home and rebuilt it. Uncle Larry was too young to save the world in the Forties, and too old to save it in the Sixties. He was part of that bewildered, silent generation sandwiched between the heroes and the prophets.

"Neurasthenia," Mae said. "We called it neurasthenia back then. Seems everyone I knew was getting divorced or having an attack of 'the nerves.' Even the President was down in the mullygrubs when he was younger. Nervous breakdown. That's what you call it nowadays, isn't it? Now, T.R. There was a man with sand in him. Him and that 'strenuous life' he always preached about. Why, he'd fight a circle saw. Saw him that time in Milwaukee. Shot in the chest, and he still gave a stem-winder of a speech before he let them take him off. Did you know he got me in trouble one time?"

"Who, Teddy Roosevelt? How?"

"T.R., he was a-hunting and come on a bear cub; but he wouldn't shoot the poor thing because it wasn't the manly thing to do. So, some sharper started making stuffed animal dolls and called 'em Teddy's Bear. I given

one to my neighbor child as a present." Mae slapped her knee. "Well, her ma had herself a conniption fit, 'cause the experts all said how animal dolls would give young 'uns the nightmares. And the other President who had the neurasthenia." Mae scowled and waved a hand in front of her face. "Oh, I know who it was," she said in an irritated voice. "That college professor. What was his name?"

"Wilson," I suggested, "Woodrow Wilson."

"That's the one. I think he was always jealous of T.R. He wouldn't let him take the Rough Riders into the Great War."

I started to make some comment, but Mae's mouth dropped open. "The war . . . ?" she whispered. "The war! Oh, Mister. . . ." Her face crumpled. "Oh, Mister! You're too old!" She covered her face and began to weep.

She felt in her sleeves for a handkerchief; then wiped her eyes and looked at me. "I forgot," she said. "I forgot. It was the war. Mister went away to the war. That's why he never come back. He never run out on me, at all. He would have come back after it was over, if he'd still been alive. He would have."

"I'm sure he would have," I said awkwardly.

"I told him he was too old for that sort of thing; but he just laughed and said it was a good cause and they needed men like him to spunk up the young 'uns. So he marched away one day and someone he never met before shot him dead, and I don't even know when and where it happened."

"I'm sorry," I said, at a loss for anything else to say. A good cause? The War to End All Wars, nearly forgotten now; its players, comic-opera Ruritanians on herky-jerky black and white newsreels. The last war begun in innocence.

Her hands had twisted the handkerchief into a knot. She fussed with it, straightened it out on her lap, smoothed it with her hand. In a quiet voice, she said, "Tell me, doc. Tell me. Why do they have wars?"

I shook my head. Was there ever a good reason? To make the world safe for democracy? To stop the death camps? To free the slaves? Maybe. Those were better reasons than cheap oil. But up close, no matter what the reason, it was husbands and sons and brothers who never came home.

Oh, them golden slippers,
Oh, them golden slippers

Golden slippers I'm gonna wear,
Because they look so neat;
Oh, them golden slippers,
Oh, them golden slippers,
Golden slippers I'm gonna wear
To walk them golden streets.

Ever since our late evening encounter, Consuela had begun wearing blouses, skirts, and robes around the house instead of her nurse's whites. The colors were bright, even garish; the patterns, blocky and intricate. The costumes made the woman more open, less mysterious. It was as if, having once seen her *deshabille*, a barrier had come down. She had begun teaching Dee-dee to play the cane flute. Sometimes I heard them in the evening, the notes drifting down from above stairs, lingering in the air. Was it a signal, I wondered? I sensed that the relationship between Consuela and myself had changed; but in what direction, I did not know.

Dee-dee should have been in school. She should have been in fifth grade; and she should have come home on the school bus, full of laughter and bursting to tell us what she had learned that day. Brenda and I should have helped her with her homework, nursed her bruises, and hugged her when she cried. That was the natural order of things.

But Dee-dee lived in her room, played in the dark. She studied at home, tutored by Consuela or myself or by private instructors we sometimes hired. School and other children were far away. She was a prisoner, half of her mother's strained disapproval, half of her own withdrawal. Save for Consuela and myself and a few, brief contacts with Brenda, she had no other person in her short, bounded life. Who could dream what scenarios her dolls performed in the silence of her room?

I found the two of them at the kitchen table: Consuela with her inevitable cocoa, Dee-dee with a glass of milk and a stack of graham crackers. There were cracker crumbs scattered across the Formica and a ring of white across Dee-dee's lip.

I beamed at her. "The princess has come down from her tower once more!"

She tucked her head in a little. "It's all right, isn't it?"

I kissed her on the forehead. How sparse her hair had grown! "Of

course, it is!"

I settled myself across the table from Consuela. She was wearing an ivory blouse with a square-cut neck bordered by red stitching in the shape of flowers. "Thank you, nurse," I said. "She should be downstairs more often."

"Yes, I know."

Was there a hint of disapproval there? A slight drawing together of the lips? I wanted to make excuses for Brenda. It was not that Brenda made Dee-dee stay in her room, but that she never made her leave. It was Deirdre who stayed always by herself. "So, what did you do today, Dee-dee?"

"Oh, nothing. I read my schoolbooks. Watched TV. I helped Connie bake a cake."

"Did you? Sounds like a pretty busy day to me."

She and Consuela shared a grin with each other. "We played ball, a little, until I got tired. And then we played word games. I see something . . . blue! What is it?"

"The sky?"

"I can't see the sky from here. It's long and thin."

"Hmm. Long, thin and blue. Spaghetti with blueberry sauce?"

Dee-dee laughed. "No, silly. It has a knot in it."

"Hmm. I can't imagine what it could be." I straightened my tie and Dee-dee laughed again. I looked down at the tie and gave a mock start. "Wait! Long, thin, blue and a knot. . . . It's my belt!"

"No! It's your tie!"

"My tie? Why. . . ."I gave her a look of total amazement. "Why, you're absolutely, positively right. Now, why didn't I see that? It was right under my nose. Imagine missing something right under your nose!"

We played a few more rounds of "I see something" and then Dee-dee wandered back to the family room and settled on the floor in front of the TV. I watched her for a while as she stared at the pictures flickering there. I thought of how little time was left before cartoons would play unwatched.

Consuela placed a cup of coffee in front of me. I sipped from it absently while I sorted through the day's mail stacked on the table. "Brenda will be coming home on Monday," I said. Consuela already knew that and I knew

that she knew, so I don't know why I said it.

But why Monday? Why not Friday? Why spend another weekend in Washington with Walther Crowe? I could think of any number of reasons, I could.

"Deirdre will be happy to have her mother back," Consuela said in flat tones.

I was looking at the envelopes, so I did not see her face. I knew what she meant, though. No more flute lessons; no more games downstairs. I reached across the table and placed my hand atop one of hers. It was warm, probably from holding the cocoa mug.

"Deirdre's mother never left," I said.

Consuela looked away. "I am only her nurse."

"You take care of her. That's more—" I caught myself. I had started to say that that was more than Brenda did; but there were some things that husbands did not say about their wives to other women. I noticed, however, that Consuela had not pulled her hand away from mine.

I released her hand. "Say, here's a letter from the National Archives." I said with forced heartiness, dancing away from the sudden abyss that had yawned open before me. Too many lives had been ruined by reading invitations where none were written.

Consuela stood and turned away, taking her cup to the sink. I slit the envelope open with my index finger and pulled out the yellow flimsy. *Veteran: Holloway, Green. Branch of Service: Infantry (Co. H, 5th Tennessee). Years of Service: 1918 or 1919*. It was the order form I had sent to the Military Service Records department after Mae's earlier recollection of her husband. As I unfolded it, Consuela came and stood beside me, reading over my shoulder. Somehow, it was not uncomfortable.

v *We were unable to complete your request as written*.

v*We found additional pension and military service files of the same name (or similar variations)*.

v *The enclosed records are those which best match the information provided. Please resubmit, if these are not the desired files*.

I grunted and paged through the sheets. Company muster rolls. A Memorandum of Prisoner of War Records: *Paroled and exchanged at Cumberland Gap, Sept. 5 '62*.

The last page was a white photocopy of a form printed in an

old-fashioned typeface. **Casualty Sheet.** The blanks were penned in by an elegant Spencerian hand. Name, *Green Holloway*. Rank, *Private*. Company "*H*", Regiment 5"2. Division, 3"2. Corps, 23"2. Arm, *Inf*. State, *Tenn*.

Nature of casualty, *Bullet wound of chest (fatal)*.

Place of casualty, *Resaca, Ga*.

Date of casualty, *May 14, 1864, the regiment being in action that date*.

Jno. T. Henry, Clerk

I tossed the sheets to the kitchen table. "These can't be right," I said.

Consuela picked them up. "What is wrong?"

"Right name, wrong war. These are for a Green Holloway who died in the Civil War."

Consuela raised an eyebrow. "And who served in the same company as your patient's husband?"

"State militia regiments were raised locally, and the same families served in them, generation after generation. Green here was probably 'Mister's' grandfather. Back then children were often given their grandparents' names." I took the photocopies from Consuela and stuffed them back in the envelope. "Well, there was a waste of ten dollars." I dropped the envelope on the table.

Dee-dee called from the family room. "What's this big book you brought home?"

"*The Encyclopedia of Song*," I said over my shoulder. "It's to help me with a patient I have."

"The old lady who hears music?"

I turned in my chair. "Yes. Did Connie tell you about her?"

Dee-dee nodded her head. "I wish I could hear music like that. You wouldn't need headphones or a Walkman, would you?"

I remembered that Mae had had two very unhappy recollections in one day. "No," I said, "but you don't get to pick the station, either."

Later that evening, after Dee-dee had been tucked away, I spread my index cards and sheets of paper over the kitchen table, and arranged the

tape recorder on my left where I could replay it as needed. The song encyclopedia lay in front of me, open to its index. A pot of coffee stood ready on my right.

Consuela no longer retreated to her own room after dinner. When I looked up from my work I could see her, relaxed on the sofa in the family room, quietly reading a book. Her shoes off, her legs tucked up underneath her, the way some women sit curled up. I watched her silently for a while. So serene, like a jaguar indolent upon a tree limb. She appeared unaware of my regard, and I bent again over my work before she looked up.

I soon verified that Mae's latest recollections were from the Gay Nineties. The earliest one, "Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-der-ay," had been written in 1890, and the others dated from the same era. "Good-bye, Dollie Gray," had been a favorite of the soldiers going off to fight in the Philippine "insurrection," while "Hot Time in the Old Town" had been the Rough Riders' "theme song." Mae's version of "America the Beautiful," I discovered, was the original 1895 lyrics. Apparently, Katherine Lee Bates had written the song as much for protest as for patriotism.

When I had finished the cataloging I closed the songbook, leaned back in my chair, and stretched my arms over my head. Consuela looked up at the motion; I smiled at her and she smiled back. I checked my watch. "Almost bed time," I said. Consuela said nothing, but nodded slightly.

Middle-aged?

The thought struck me like a discordant note and I turned back to my work. I ran the tape back and forth until I found what I was looking for. Yes. Mae had said that the "young folks" at the turn of the century had called her age-mates "middle-aged." So Mae must have already been mature by then. How was that possible? At most, she might have been a teenager, one of the "young folks," herself.

Unless she had looked old for her age.

God! I stabbed the shut-off button with my forefinger.

After a moment, I ran the tape through again, listening for Mae's descriptions of her peers and her younger contemporaries. "Wishy-washy." Folks her age had been wishy-washy. Yet, in an earlier session, she had described her age-mates as moralistic. I flipped through my written notes until I found it.

Yes, just as I remembered. But, psychologically, that made no sense. Irresolute twenty-somethings do not mature into forty-something moralists. The irresolute become the two-sides-to-every-question types;

the mediators, the compromisers, the peace-makers. The ones both sides despise—and miss desperately when they are gone. The moralists are no-compromise world-savers. They preach "prohibition," not "temperance."

The wild youth Mae remembered from the Ragtime Era and the Mauve Decade—the hard-edged "newsies"—those were the young Hemingways, Bogies and Mae Wests; the "Blood-and-Guts" Pattons and the "Give-'em-Hell" Harrys. The Lost Generation, they had been called. The idealistic, young teeners and twenty-somethings of the Gay Nineties that Mae found so simpatico were the young FDR, W.E.B. DuBois and Jane Addams. The generation of "missionaries" out to save the world. They had all been "the kids" to her. But that would put Mae into the even older, Progressive Generation, a contemporary of T.R. and Edison and Booker T. Washington.

I drummed my pencil against the table top. That would make her 120 years old, or thereabouts. That wasn't possible, was it? I pushed myself from the table and went to the bookcase in the family room.

The Guinness Book of Records sat next to the dictionary, the thesaurus, the atlas and the almanac, all neatly racked together. Sometimes, Brenda's obsessive organizing paid off. I noticed that Dee-dee had left one of her own books, *The Boxcar Children*, on the shelf and made a mental note to return it to her room later. According to *Guinness*, the oldest human being whose birth could be authenticated was Shigechiyo Izumi of Japan, who had died in 1986 at the ripe age of 120 years and 237 days. So, a few wheezing, stumbling geezers did manage to hang around that long. But not many. Actuarial tables suggested one life in two billion. So, with nearly six billion of us snorting and breathing and poking each other with our elbows, two or three such ancients were possible. Maybe, just maybe, Mae could match Izumi's record. The last surviving Progressive. The oldest human being. The oldest human being remembers.

The oldest human being remembers pop music of the last hundred years. *A Hundred-and-Twentysomething*. Great book title. It had "best-seller" written all over it.

'Neath the chestnut tree, where the wild flow'rs grow,
And the stream ripples forth through the vale,
Where the birds shall warble their songs in spring,
There lay poor Lilly Dale.

On my next visit, Mae was not waiting by the office door for me to unlock it. So, after I had set my desk in order, I hung the "Back in a Minute" sign on the doorknob and went to look for her. Not that I was concerned. It was just that I had grown used to her garrulous presence.

I found Jimmy Kovacs in the common room watching one of those inane morning "news" shows. "Good morning, Jimmy. How's your back?"

He grinned at me. "Oh, I can't complain." He waited a beat. "They won't let me."

I smiled briefly. "Glad to hear it. Have you seen—"

"First hurt my back, oh, it must have been sixty-six, sixty-seven. Lifting forms."

"I know. You told me already. I'm looking for—"

"Not forms like paperwork. Though nowadays you could strain your back lifting them, too." He crackled at his feeble joke. It hadn't been funny the first two times, either. "No, I'm talking about those 600-pound forms we used to use on the old flatbed perfectors. Hot type. Blocks of lead quoined into big iron frames. Those days, printing magazines was a *job*, I tell you. You could smell the ink; you could feel the presses pounding through the floor and the heat from the molten lead in the linotypes." He shook his head. "I saw the old place once a few years back. A couple of prissy kids going ticky-ticky on those computer keyboards." He made typing motions with his two index fingers.

I interrupted before he could give me another disquisition on the decadence of the printing industry. I could just imagine the noise, the lead vapors, the heavy weight-lifting. Some people have odd notions about the Good Old Days. "Have you seen Mae this morning, Jimmy?"

"Who? Mae? Sure, I saw the old gal. She was headed for the gardens." He pointed vaguely.

Old gal? I chuckled at the pot calling the kettle black. But then I realized with a sudden shock that there were more years between Mae and Jimmy than there were between Jimmy and me. There was old, and then there was *old*. Perhaps we should distinguish more carefully among them—say "fogies," "mossbacks" and "geezers."

Mae was sitting in the garden sunshine, against the red brick back wall,

upon a stone settee. I watched her for a few moments from behind the large plate glass window. The Sun was from her right, illuminating the red and yellow blossoms around her and sparkling the morning dew like diamonds strewn across the grass. The dewdrops were matched by those on her cheeks. She wore a green print dress with flowers, so that the dress, the grass and the flower beds; the tears and the dew, all blended together, like old ladies' garden camouflage.

She did not see me coming. Her eyes were closed tight, looking upon another, different world. I stood beside her, unsure whether to rouse her. Were those tears of joy or tears of sorrow? Would it be right to interrupt either? I compromised by placing my hand on her shoulder. Her dry, birdlike claw reached up and pressed itself against mine.

"Is that you, Doctor Wilkes?" I don't know how she knew that. Perhaps her eyes had not been entirely closed. She opened them and looked at me, and I could see that her regurgitated memories had been sorrowful ones. That is the problem with Jackson's syndrome. You remember. You can't help remembering. "Oh, Doctor Wilkes. My mama. My sweet, sweet mama. She's dead."

The announcement did not astonish me. Had either of Mae Holloway's parents been alive I would have been astonished. I started to tell her that, but my words came out surprisingly gently. "It happened a long time ago," I told her. "It's a hurt long over."

She shook her head. "No. It happened this morning. I saw Pa leaning over my bed. Oh, such a strong, young man he was! But he'd been crying. His eyes were red and his beard and hair weren't combed. He told me that my mama was dead at last and she weren't a-hurtin' no more."

Mae Holloway pulled me down to sit beside her on the hard, cold bench, and she curled against me for all the world like a little girl. I hesitated and almost pulled away; but I am not without pity, even for an old woman who half-thought she was a child.

"He told me it was my fault."

"What?" Her voice had been muffled against my jacket.

"He told me it was my fault."

"Who? Your father told you that? That was . . . cruel."

She spoke in a high-pitched, childish voice. "He tol' me that mama never gotten well since I was borned. There was something about my birthin' that hurt her inside. I was six and I never seen my mama when she weren't a-bed ..."

She couldn't finish. Awkwardly, I put an arm around her shoulder. A husband who lost his wife to childbirth would blame the child, whether consciously or not. Especially a husband in the full flush of youth. Worse still, if it was a lingering death. If for years the juices of life had drained away, leaving a gasping, joyless husk behind.

If for years the juices of life had drained away, leaving a gasping, joyless husk behind.

"I have to get back to my office," I said, standing abruptly. "There may be a patient waiting. Is there anything I can get you? A sedative?"

She shook her head slowly back and forth several times. When she spoke, she sounded more like an adult Mae. "No. No, thank you. I ain't—haven't had these memories for so long that I got to feel them now, even when it pains me. There'll be worse coming back to me, bye and bye. And better, too. The Good Man'll help me bear it."

It wasn't until I was back behind my desk and had made some notes about her recollection for my projected book that I was struck with an annoying inconsistency. If Mae's mother had died from complications of childbirth, where did her "little brother Zach" come from?

Step-brother, probably. A young man like her father would have sought a new bride before too long. Eventually, we put tragedy behind us and get on with life. But if I was going to analyze the progress of Mae's condition, I would need to confirm her recollections. After all, memories are tricky things. The memories of the old, trickier than most.

Peaches in the summertime,
Apples in the fall;
If I can't have the girl I love,
I won't have none at all.

There was music in the air when I returned home, and I followed the thread of it through the garage and into the back yard, where I found Consuela sitting on a blanket of red, orange and brown, swathed in a flowing, pale green muumuu, and Deirdre beside her playing on the cane flute. Dee-dee's thin, knobby fingers moved haltingly and the notes were flat, but I actually recognized the tune. Something about a spider and a waterspout.

"Hello, Dee-dee. Hello, Consuela."

Deirdre turned. "Daddy!" she said. She pulled herself erect on Consuela's gown and hobbled across the grass to me. I crouched down and hugged her. "Dee-dee, you're outside playing."

"Connie said it was all right."

"Of course, it's all right. I wish you would come out more often."

A cloud passed across the sunshine. "Connie said no one can see me in the yard." A hesitation. "And Mommy's not home."

No one to tell her how awful she looked. No cruel, taunting children. No thoughtlessly sympathetic adults offering useless condolences. Nothing but Connie, and me, and the afternoon sun. I looked over Dee-dee's shoulder: "Thank you, nur—Thank you, Connie."

She blinked at my use of her familiar name, but made no comment. "The sunshine is good for her."

"She *is* my sunshine. Aren't you, Dee-dee?" *You are my sunshine, my only sunshine*. A fragment of a tune. Only, how did the rest of it go?

"Oh, Daddy. . . ."

"So, has Connie been teaching you to play the flute?"

"Yes. And she showed me lots of things. Did you know there are zillions of different bugs in our grass?"

"Are there?" *You make me happy when skies are grey*.

"Yeah. There's ants and centipedes and . . . and mites? And honey bees. Honey bees like these little white flowers." And she showed me a ball of clover she had tucked behind her ear.

"You better watch that," I said, "or the bees will come after you, too."

"Oh, Daddy. ..."

"Because you're so sweet." *You'll never know, dear, how much I love you*.

"Daaddyy. I saw some spiders, too."

"Going up in the waterspout?"

She giggled. "There are different kinds of spiders, too. They're like eensy-weensy tigers, Connie says. They eat flies and other bugs. Yuck! I wouldn't want to be a spider, would you?"

"No."

"But you are!" Secret triumph in her voice. She had just tricked me, somehow. "There was this spider that was nothing but a little brown ball

with legs *this* long!" She held her arms far enough apart to cause horror movie buffs to blanch. "They named it after you," she added with another giggle. "They call it a Daddy-long-legs. You're a daddy and you have long legs, so you must be a spider, too."

"Then . . . I've got you in my web!" I grabbed her and she squealed. "And now I'm going to gobble you up!" I started kissing her on the cheeks. She giggled and made a pretense of escape. I held her all the tighter. *Please don't take my sunshine away*.

We sat for a while on the blanket, just the three of us. Consuela told us stories from Guatemala. How a rabbit had gotten deeply into debt and then tricked his creditors into eating one another. How a disobedient child was turned into a monkey. Dee-dee giggled at that and said she would *like* to be a monkey. I told them about Mae Holloway.

"She didn't give me any new songs today," I said, "but she finally remembered something from her childhood." I explained how her mother had died and her father had blamed her for it.

"Poor girl!" Consuela said, looking past me. "It's not right for a little girl to grow up without a mother."

"Deirdre Wilkes! What on *earth* are you doing *outside* in the *dirt*?"

Dee-dee stiffened in my arms. I turned and saw Brenda in the open garage door, straight as a rod. A navy blue business suit with white ruffled blouse. Matching overcoat, hanging open. A suitbag slung from one shoulder, a briefcase clenched in the other hand. "Brenda," I said, standing up with Dee-dee in my arms. "We didn't expect you until Monday."

She looked at each of us. "Evidently not."

"Dee-dee was just getting a little sunshine."

Brenda stepped close and whispered. "The neighbors might see."

I wanted to say, So what? But I held my peace. You learn there are times when it is best to say nothing at all. You learn.

"Nurse." She spoke to Consuela. "Aren't you dressed a bit casually?"

"Yes, senora. It is after five." When she had to, Consuela could remember what was in her contract.

"A professional does not watch the clock. And a professional dresses appropriately for her practice. How do you think it would look if I went to

the office in blouse and skirt instead of a suit? Take Deirdre inside. Don't you know there are all sorts of bugs and dirt out here? What if she were stung by a bee? Or bitten by a deer tick?"

"Brenda," I said, "I don't think—"

She turned to me. "Yes, exactly. You didn't think. How could you have allowed this, Paul? Look, in her hand. That's Nurse's whistle, or whatever it is. Has Deirdre been playing it? Putting it in her mouth? How unsanitary! And there are weeds in her hair. For God's sake, Paul, you're a doctor. You should have said something."

Sometimes I thought Brenda had been raised in a sterile bubble. The least little thing out of place, the least little thing done wrong, was enough to set her off. Dust was a hanging offense. She hadn't always been that way. At school, she'd been reasonably tidy, but not obsessed. It had only been in the last few years that cleanliness and order had begun to consume her life. Each year, I could see the watch spring wound tighter and tighter.

Consuela bundled up flute, blanket, and Dee-dee, and took them inside, leaving me alone with Brenda. I tried to give here a hug, and she endured it briefly. "Welcome home."

"Christ, Paul. I go away for two weeks and everything is falling apart."

"No, Nurse was right to bring her outside. Deirdre should have as much normal activity as possible. There is nothing wrong with her mind. It's just her body aging too fast." That wasn't strictly true. Hutchinson-Gilford was sometimes called *progeria*, but it differed in some of its particulars from normal senile aging.

Brenda swatted at a swarm of midges. "There are too many bugs out here," she said. "Let's go inside. Carry my suitbag for me."

I took it from her and followed her inside the house. She dropped her briefcase on the sofa in the living room and continued to the hall closet, where she shed her overcoat. "You're home early," I said again.

"That's right. Surprised?" She draped her overcoat across a hanger.

"Well. ..." *Yes, I was*. "Did Crowe drop you off?"

She shoved the other coats aside with a hard swipe. "Yes." Then she turned and started up the stairs. I closed the closet door for her.

"How was Washington?" I asked. "Did you impress the Supremes?"

She didn't answer and I followed her up the stairs. I found her in our bedroom, shedding her travel clothes. I hung the suit bag on the closet

door. "Did you hear me? I asked how—"

"I heard you." She dropped her skirt to the floor and sent it in the direction of the hamper with a flick of her foot. "Walther offered me a partnership."

"Did he?" I retrieved her skirt and put it in the hamper. "That's great news!" It was. Partners made a bundle. They took a cut of the fees the associates charged. "It opens up all sorts of opportunities."

Brenda gave me a funny look. "Yes," she said. "It does." If I hadn't known better, I would have said she looked distressed. It was hard to imagine Brenda being unsure.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"Nothing. It's just that there are conditions attached."

"What conditions? A probationary period? You've been an associate there for seven years. They should know your work by now."

"It isn't that."

"Then, what—"

Deirdre interrupted us. She stood in the doorway of our bedroom, one foot crossed pigeontoed over the other, a gnarled finger tucked in one shrunken check. "Mommy?"

Brenda looked at a point on the door jamb a quarter inch above Deedee's head. "What is it, honey?"

"I should tell you 'welcome home' and 'I missed you.' "

I could almost hear *Connie said* ... in front of that statement and I wondered if Brenda could hear it, too.

"I missed you, too, honey," Brenda told the door knob.

"I've got to take my bath, now."

"Good. Be sure to get all that dirt washed off."

"OK, Mommy." A brief catch, and then, "I love you, Mommy."

Bienda nodded. "Yes."

Dee-dee waited a moment longer, then turned and bolted for the bathroom. I could hear Connie already running the water. I waited until the bathroom door closed before I turned to Brenda. "You could have told her that you loved her, too."

"I do," she said, pulling on a pair of slacks. "She knows I do."

"Not unless you tell her once in a while."

She flashed me an irritated look, but made no reply. She took a blouse from her closet and held it in front of her while she stood before the mirror. "Let's go out to eat tonight."

"Go out? Well, you know that Dee-dee doesn't like to leave the house, but—"

"Take Deirdre with us? Whatever are you thinking of, Paul? She would be horribly embarrassed. Think of the stares she'd get! No, Consuela can feed her that Mexican goulash she's cooking."

"Guatemalan."

"What?"

"It's Guatemalan, whatever it is."

"Do you have to argue with everything I say?"

"I thought, with you being just back and all, that the three of us—" *The four of us*. "—could eat dinner together, for a change."

"I won't expose Deirdre to the rudeness of strangers."

"No, not when she can get it at home." I don't know why I said that. It just came out.

Brenda stiffened. "What does that crack mean?"

I turned away. "Nothing."

"No, tell me!"

I turned back and faced her. "All right. You treat Dee-dee like a non-person. She's sick, Brenda, and it's not contagious and it's not her fault."

"Then whose fault is it?"

"That's lawyer talk. It's no one's fault. It just happens. We've been over that and over that. There is no treatment for progeria."

"And, oh, how it gnaws at you! *You can't cure her*!"

"No one can!"

"But especially you."

No one could cure Dee-dee. I knew that. It was helplessness, not failure. I had accepted that long ago. "And you're angry and bitter," I replied, "because there's nobody you can sue!"

She flung her blouse aside and it landed in a wad in the corner.

"Maybe," she said through clenched teeth, "Maybe I'll take that partnership offer, after all."

It was not until much later that evening, as I lay awake in bed, Brenda a thousand miles away on the other side, that I remembered Consuela's remark. *It's not right for a little girl to grow up without a mother*. I wondered. Had she been making a comment, or making an offer?

I don't want to play in your yard
I don't like you any more.
You'll be sorry when you see me
Sliding down our cellar door.

The next time I saw Mae Holloway, we quarreled.

Perhaps it was her own constant sourness coming to the fore, or perhaps it was her fear of insanity returning. But it may have been a bad humor that I carried with me from Brenda's homecoming. We had smoothed things out, Brenda and I, but it was a fragile repair, the cracks plastered over with I-was-tired and I-didn't-mean-it, and we both feared to press too hard, lest it buckle on us. At dinner, she had told me about the case she had helped argue, and I told her about Mae Holloway and we both pretended to care. But it was all monologue. Listening holds fewer risks than response; and an attentive smile, less peril than engagement.

Mae wouldn't look at me when I greeted her. She stared resolutely at the floor, at the medicine cabinet, out the window. Sometimes, she stared into another world. I noticed how she gnawed on her lips.

"We have a couple of days to catch up on, Mrs. Holloway," I said. "I hope you've been making notes, like I asked."

She shook her head slowly, but in a distracted way. She was not responding to my statement, but to some inner reality. "I just keep remembering, doc. There's music all the time, and that double vision—"

"Consciousness doubling."

"It's like I'm in two places at once. Sometimes, I forget which is which and I try to step around things only I cain't, because they're only ghosts, only ghosts. And sometimes, I recollect things that couldn't have. ..."

The "dreamy states" of Jackson patients often grow deeper and more frequent. In one woman, they had occupied nearly her entire day; and, in the end, they had crowded out her normal consciousness entirely. "I could prescribe something, if you like," I said. "These spells of yours are similar to epileptic seizures. So, there are drugs that—"

She shook her head again. "No. I won't take drugs." She looked directly at me at last. "Don't you understand? I've got to know. It's always been bits and pieces. Just flashes. A jimble-jamble that never made sense. Now. . . ." She paused and took a deep breath. "Now, at least, I'll know."

"Know what, Mrs. Holloway?"

"About . . . everything." She looked away again. Talking with her today was like pulling teeth.

"What about the songs, Mae? We didn't get anything useful on Wednesday and I wasn't here Tuesday or yesterday, so that's three days we have to catch up on."

Mae turned and studied me with lips as thin as broth. "You don't care about any of this, do you? It's all professional; not like you and I are friends. You don't care if'n I live or die; and I don't care if'n you do."

"Mrs. Holloway, I—"

"Good." She gave a sharp nod of her head. "That's jake with me. Because I don't like having friends," she said. "I decided a long time ago if'n I don't have 'em, I won't miss 'em when they cut out. So let's just keep this doc and old lady." Her stare was half admonition, half challenge, as if she dared me to leap the barriers she had set down around her.

I shrugged. Keep things professional. That was fine with me, too. A crabby old lady like her, it was no wonder they all ran out on her.

She handed over a crumpled, yellow sheet of lined paper, which I flattened out on my desk. She had written in a soft pencil, so I smeared some of the writing and smudged my palm. I set a stack of fresh index cards by and began to copy the song titles for later research. "Where Did You Get That Hat?" "Comrades." "The Fountain in the Park." "Love's Old Sweet Song?" While I worked, I could hear Mae humming to herself. I knew without looking that she had her eyes closed, that she was living more and more in another world, gradually leaving this one behind. "White Wings." "Walking for That Cake." "My Grandfather's Clock." "In the Gloaming." "Silver Threads Among the Gold." "The Mulligan Guard." Mae was her own Hit Parade. Though if the music did play continually, as she said, this list could only be a sample of what she had heard over the

last three days. "The Man on the Flying Trapeze." "Sweet Genevieve." "Champagne Charlie." "You Naughty, Naughty Men." "When You and I were Young, Maggie." "Beautiful Dreamer." Three days' worth of unclaimed memories.

I noticed that she had recorded no doubling episodes, this time. Because she had not had any? It seemed doubtful, considering. But one entry had been crossed out; rubbed over with the pencil until there was nothing but a black smear and a small hole in the paper where the pencil point had worn through. I held it up to the light, but could make out nothing.

I heard Mae draw in her breath and looked up in time to see a mien on her face, almost of ecstasy. "What is it?"

"I'm standing out in a meadow. There's a sparkling stream meandering through it, and great, grey, rocky mountains rearing all around. Yellow flowers shivering in the breeze and I think how awful purty and peaceful it is." She sighed. "Oh, doc, sometimes, just for a second, we can be so happy."

Jackson had often described his patients' "dreamy states" as being accompanied by intense feelings of euphoria; sudden bursts of childlike joy. No doubt some endorphin released in the brain.

"There's a fellow coming up toward me from the ranch," she continued, trepidation edging into her voice. "My age, maybe a little older. Might be Mister's younger brother, because he favors him some. He's a-weeping something awful. I reach out to him and he puts his head on my shoulder and says. ..." Mae stopped and winced in pain. She sucked in her breath and held it. Then she let it out slowly. "And he says how Sweet Annie is dead and the baby, too; and there was nothing the sawbones could do. Nothing at all. And I think, *Thank you, Goodman Lord. Thank you, that she won't suffer the way that Ma did*. And then a mockingbird takes wing from the aspen tree right in front of me and I think how awful peaceful the meadow is now that the screaming has stopped."

She wiped at her nose with her sleeve. "Listen to it. Can you hear it, doc? There ain't a sound but for the breeze and that old mockingbird." The look on her face changed somehow, changed subtly. "Listen to the mockingbird," she croaked. "Listen to the mockingbird. Oh, the mockingbird still singing o'er her grave. ..."

Then she looked about in sudden surprise. "Land's sake! Now, how did I get here? Why, everybody's so happy; singing the mockingbird song and dancing all over the lawn and a-hugging each other." A smile slowly came

over her face. She had apparently tripped from one doubling episode directly into another, due to some association with the song, and the imprinted emotions were playing back with it, overwriting the melancholy of the first episode. Or else she had seized on the remembered joy herself, and had wrapped herself in it against the cold.

"I'm a-wearing my Sanitary Commission uniform," she went on, preening her shabby, faded gown. She shot her cuffs, straightened something at her throat that wasn't there. "I was a nurse, you know; and when the news come that the war was finally over we all heighed over to the White House and had ourselves a party on the lawn, the whole kit 'n boodle of us. Then the President hisself come out and joined us." She turned in her seat and pointed toward the medicine cabinet. "Here he comes now!"

And in that instant, her joy became absolute terror. "Him?" Her smile stretched to a ghastly rictus and she cowered into her chair, covering her eyes with her hand. But you can't close your eyes to memory. You can't. "No! I kin still see him!" she said.

What was so terrifying about seeing President Wilson close up? "What's wrong, Mrs. Holloway?"

"They shot him."

"What, on the White House lawn? No president has been shot there." And certainly not Wilson.

She took her hands away from her eyes, glanced warily left, then right. Slowly, she relaxed, though her hands continued to tremble. Then, she looked at me. "No, the shooting happened later," she snapped, anger blossoming from her fear. Then she closed up and her eyes took on a haunted look. "I'm taking up too much of your time, doc," she said, creaking to her feet.

"No, you're not. Really," I told her.

"Then you're taking up too much of mine." I thought her blackthorn stick would punch holes in the floor tiles as she left.

After a moment's hesitation, I followed. She had recalled her father's death. She had remembered that her birth had killed her mother and that her father had blamed her for it. She had remembered her husband going off to war, never to return. Sad memories, sorrowful memories; but there was something about this new recollection that terrified her.

She thought she was going crazy.

It was easy to track her through the garden. Deep holes punched into

the sod marked her trail among the flower beds. When I caught up with her, she was leaning over a plot of gold and crimson marigolds. "You know, I remember exactly where I was when President Kennedy was shot," I said by way of easing her into conversation.

Mae Holloway scowled and bent over the flower bed. "Don't make no difference no-how," she said. "He's dead either way, ain't he?" She turned her back on me.

"No particular reason." I had figured it out. She had seen McKinley, not Wilson; and her husband had fought in the Spanish-American War, not World War I.

She turned her dried-out face to me. "Think I'm getting senile, doc? Why aren't you back in your office reading on your books? You might have a patient to ignore."

"They'll find me if they need me."

"I tol' you the songs I been remembering. Why did you follow me out here, anyway?"

I had better things to do than have a bitter old woman berate me. "If you feel in a friendlier mood later," I said, "you know where to find me."

Back in my office, I began checking the latest tunes against the song encyclopedia. The mindless transcription kept me busy, so that I did not dwell on Mae's intransigence. Let her stew in her own sour juices.

But I soon noticed a disturbing trend in the data. "Champagne Charlie" was written in 1868. "You Naughty, Naughty Men" ("When married how you treat us and of each fond hope defeat us, and there's some will even beat us. . . .") had created a scandal at Niblo's Gardens in 1866. And "Beautiful Dreamer" dated from *1864*. Mae could not have heard those songs when they were new. Born in the early seventies at best, tucked away back in the hills of Tennessee— "So far back in the hollers," she had said one time, "that they had to pipe in the daylight."—She must have heard them later.

And if a little bit later, why not a whole lot later?

And there went the whole rationale for my book.

The problem with assigning dates to Mae's neurological hootenanny was that she could have heard the songs at any time. A melody written in the twenties, like "The Red, Red Robin," is heard and sung by millions of children today. Scott Joplin created his piano rags at the turn of the

century; yet most people knew them from *The Sting*, a movie made in the seventies and set in the thirties, an era when ragtime had been long out of fashion.

(The telescoping effect of distance. From this far down the river of years, who can distinguish the Mauve Decade from the Thirties? Henry James and Upton Sinclair and Ernest Hemingway came of age in very different worlds; but they seem alike to us because they are just dead people in funny clothing, singing quaint, antique songs. "Old-fashioned" is enough to blur them together.)

Face it. Many of those old songs were still being sung and recorded when I was young. Lawrence Welk. Mitch Miller. Preservation Hall. Leon Redbone had warbled "Champagne Charlie" on the "Tonight Show" in front of God and everybody. Wasn't it far more likely that Mae had heard it then, than that she had heard it in 1868?

A Hundred-and-Twentysomething. I had deduced a remarkable age for Mae from the dates of the songs she remembered. If that was a will-o'-the wisp, what was the point? There was no teleology to interest the professionals; no hook to grab the public. How many people would care about an old woman's recollections? Not enough to make a best-seller.

And what right had that old bat, what right had anyone, to live so long when *children* were dying? What use were a few extra years remembering the past when there were others who would never have a future?

Damn! I saw that I had torn the index card. I rummaged in the drawer for tape, found none, and wondered if it made any sense to bother recopying the information. The whole effort was a waste of time. I picked up the deck of index cards and threw them. I missed the wastebasket and they fluttered like dead leaves across the room.

Oh, how old is she, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?
Oh, how old is she, charming Billy?
She's twice six and she's twice seven,
Forty-eight and eleven.
She's a young thing that cannot leave her mother.

I could have gone home, instead, and gotten an early start on the weekend.

I had planned to visit the National Archives today, but to continue the

book project now seemed pointless. The whole rationale had collapsed; and Mae had withdrawn into that fearful isolation in which I had found her. Brenda had taken the day off to recuperate from her trip. She was probably waiting for me. There was no reason not to go home.

But, I closed the clinic at noon and took the Transit to Newark's Penn Station, where I transferred to the PATH train into the World Trade Center. From there a cab dropped me at Varick and Houston in lower Manhattan.

If we did not meet, we could not quarrel.

The young woman behind the information desk was a pixie: short, with serious bangs and serious, round glasses. Her name tag read SARA. "Green?" she said when I had explained my mission. "What an odd name. It might be a nickname. You know, like 'Red.' One of my grandfathers was called 'Blackie' because his family name was White." She took out a sheet of scratch paper and made some notes on it. "I'd suggest you start with the 1910 Census and look for Green Holloway in the Soundex."

"Soundex?" I said. "What is that?"

"It's like an Index, but it's based on sounds, not spelling. Which is good, since the enumerators didn't always spell the names right. Holloway might have been recorded as, oh, H-a-1-i-w-a-y, for example, or even H-a-1-l-a-w-a-y; but the Soundex code would be the same."

"I see. Clever."

She took out a brochure and jotted another note on the scratch pad. "Holloway would be ... H. Then L is a 4, and the W and Y don't count. That's H400. There will be a lot of other names listed under H400, like Holly and Hall, but that should narrow your search." She filled out a request voucher for me. ' 'Even with the Soundex," she said as she wrote, "there are no guarantees. There are all sorts of omissions, duplicates, wrong names, wrong ages. Dad missed his great-grandmother in the 1900 Census, because she was living with her son-in-law and the enumerator had listed her with the son-in-law's family name. One of my great-great-grandfathers 'aged' fourteen years between the 1870 and 1880 censuses; and his wife-to-be was listed twice in 1860. People weren't always home; so, the enumerator would try to get the information from a neighbor, who didn't always know. So you should always cross-check your information."

She directed me to an empty carrel, and shortly after, an older man

delivered the 1910 Soundex for Blount County, Tennessee. I threaded the microfilm spool into the viewer and spun forward, looking for H400. Each frame was an index card with the head of household on top and everyone else listed below with their ages and relationships.

I slowed when I started to see first names starting with G: Gary . . . George . . . Gerhard . . . Glenn . . . Granville . . . Gretchen . . . Gus . . . No Green. I backed up and checked each of the G's, one by one, thinking Green might be out of sequence.

Still, no luck. And I couldn't think of any other way "Green" might be spelled. Unless it was a nickname, in which case, forget it. I scrolled ahead to the M's. If the census taker had interviewed Mae, Green might be listed as "Mister."

But. . . . No "Mister." Then I checked the M's again, this time searching for "Mae" or "May," because if Mister had died in the Spanish-American War rather than World War I, Mae herself would have been listed as head of household in 1910.

Still nothing. It was a fool's errand, anyway. For all I knew, Mae was really Anna-Mae or Lulu-Mae or some other such Appalachianism, which would make finding her close to impossible.

I tried the 1900 Soundex next. But I came up dry on that, too. No Green, no Mister, no Mae. Eventually, I gave up.

I leaned back in the chair and stretched my arms over my head. Now what? *We lived so far back in the hollers they had to pipe in the daylight*. It could be that the census takers had flat out missed her. Or she had already left the hills by 1900. In which case, I did not know where to search. She had gone to Cincinnati, I remembered. And to California. At one time or another, she had mentioned San Francisco, and Chicago, and Wyoming, and even New York City. The old bag had a lot of travel stickers on her.

I took a walk to stretch my legs. If I left now, and the trains were on time, and the traffic was light, I could still be home in time to tuck Dee-dee in. But a check of the sidewalk outside the building showed the crowds running thick. The Financial District was getting an early start on the weekend. Not a good time to be leaving the City. Not a good time at all. Traffic heading for the tunnels sat at a standstill. Tightly-packed herds of humans trampled the sidewalks. I would have likened them to sheep, but for the in-your-face single-mindedness with which they marched toward their parking lots and subway entrances.

The trains would be SRO, packed in with tired, sweaty office workers

chattering about Fashion Statements or Sunday's Big Game; or (the occasional Type A personality) hunched over their laptops, working feverishly on their next deal or their next angina, whichever came first.

Was there ever a time when the New York crowds thinned out? Perhaps there was a continual stream of drones flowing through the streets of Manhattan twenty-four hours a day. Or maybe they were simply walking around and around this one block just to fool me. A Potemkin Crowd.

I returned to the information desk. "I guess as long as I'm stuck here I'll check 1890." That would be before the Spanish-American War, so Green might be alive and listed.

"I'm sorry," Sara told me. "The 1890 Census was destroyed in a fire in 1921, and only a few fragments survived.

I sighed. "Dead end, I guess. I'm sorry I took up so much of your time."

"That's what I'm here for. You could try 1880, though, and look for parents. There's a partial Soundex for households with children aged ten and under. If the woman was born in the 1870s like you think. ..."

I shook my head. "No. I know she was born a Murray, but I don't know her father's name." Checking each and every M600 for a young child named Mae was not an appealing task. I might only be killing time; but I had no intention of bludgeoning it to death. I'd have a better chance hunting Holloways, because Green's name was so out of the ordinary. But I'd have to go frame-by-frame there, too, since I didn't know his parents' names, either. That sort of painstaking research was the reason why God invented professionals.

Sara pointed to a row of shelves near the carrels. "There is one other option. There are printed indices of Heads of Households for 1870 and earlier."

I shook my head. "The grandparents? I don't know their names, either."

"Did she have a brother?"

"Zach," I said. "Just the two of them, as far as I know. At least, she's never mentioned any other siblings."

"Children sometimes were given their grandparents' names. Maybe her father's parents were Zach and Mae Murray. It's a shot in the dark, but what do you have to lose? If you don't look, you'll never find anything."

"OK, thanks." I wandered over to the row of index volumes and studied them. I was blowing off the time now and I knew it. Still, I could always strike it lucky.

The indices for Tennessee ran from 1820 through 1860. Thick, bound volumes on heavy paper. No Soundex here. I'd have to remember to check alternate spellings. I pulled out the volume for 1860 and flipped through the pages until I found Murray. Murrays were "thick as ticks on a hound dog's hide," but none of them were named Zach. However, when I checked H, I did find a "Green Holloway" in District 2, Greenback, Tennessee. Mister's grandfather? How many Green Holloways could there be? I copied the information and put in a request for the spool; then, just for luck, I checked 1850, as well.

The 1850 Census listed a "Greenberry Hollaway," also in District 2, Greenback P.O. I chuckled. Greenberry? Imagine sending a kid to school with a name like Greenberry!

Green appeared in the 1840 and 1830 indexes, too. And 1830 listed a "Josh Murry" in the same census district as Green. Mae's great-grandfather? Worth a look, anyway.

The trail ended there. The Blount County returns for 1820 were lost, and all the earlier censuses had been destroyed when the British burned Washington in 1814.

I put the volumes back on the shelf. There was a thick atlas on a reading stand next to the indices and, out of curiosity, I turned it open to Tennessee. It took me a while to find Greenback. When I finally did, I saw that it lay in Loudon County, not Blount.

"That doesn't make any sense," I muttered.

"What doesn't?" A shriveled, dried up old man with wire frame glasses was standing by my elbow waiting to use the atlas.

"The indices all say Blount County, but the town is in Loudon." I didn't bother to explain. It wasn't any of his business. There could be any number of reasons for the discrepancy. The Greenback post office could have serviced parts of Blount County.

The man adjusted his glasses and peered at the map. I stepped aside. "It's all yours," I said.

"Now, hold on, sonny." He opened his satchel, something halfway between a purse and a briefcase, and pulled out a dog-eared, soft-bound red book. He licked his forefinger and rubbed pages aside. He hummed and nodded as he read. "Here's your answer," he said, jabbing a finger at a table. "Loudon County was erected in 1870 from parts of Blount and neighboring counties. Greenback was in the part that became Loudon County. See?" He closed the book one-handed with a snap. "It's simple."

I guess if hanging around musty old records is your whole life, it's easy to sound like an expert. He looked like something the Archives would have in storage anyway. "Thanks," I said.

The whole afternoon had been a waste of time. I had been searching in the wrong county. Blast the forgetfulness of age! Mae had said she had been born in Blount County, so I had looked in Blount County. And all the while, the records were tucked safely away under Loudon.

I checked the clock on the wall. Four-thirty? Too late to start over. Time to pack it in and catch the train.

When I returned to my carrel, however, I found the spool for 1860 Blount County had already been delivered. I considered sending it back, but decided to give it a fast read before leaving. I mounted the spool and spun the fast forward, slowing when I reached District 2. About a third of the way through, I stopped.

Hah! There it was. Success—of sorts—at last! This Green Holloway must have been the same one whose Civil War records I had gotten. Green and Mabel Holloway begat Zach Holloway, who must have begat Green "Mister" Holloway. Jesus. If those ages were correct, Mabel was only fifteen when she did her begatting. Who said babies having babies was a modern thing? But, kids grew up faster back then. They took on a lot of adult responsibilities at fifteen or sixteen. Today, they behave like juveniles into their late twenties.

Now that I knew what I was looking for and where it was, it didn't take me very long to check the 1850 Census, as well.

Those names . . . the eerie coincidence gave me a queer feeling. And Mabel should have been twenty-seven, not thirty-two. (Or else she should have been forty-two in 1860.) But then I remembered Sara's cautions. How easy it was for enumerators to get names and ages wrong; and how the same names were used generation after generation.

Just one more spool, I promised myself. Then I head home.

Uncle Sugar had been less nosy in 1840. The Census listed only heads of households. Everyone else was tallied by age bracket.

The "white female" was surely Mabel, and she was in her twenties. So her age in 1860 had been wrong. She must have been forty-two, not

thirty-seven. Twenty-two, thirty-two, forty-two. That made sense. I folded the sheet with the information and stuffed it in my briefcase. Sara had been right about crosschecking the documentation. The census takers had not always gotten the straight skinny. Mabel had probably looked younger than her years in 1860 and a neighbor, asked for the data, had guessed low.

"She looks younger than her years." The phrase wriggled through my mind and I thought fleetingly of Dee-dee looking older than her years. For every yin there is a yang, and if the Universe did balance ... if for some reason Mabel herself never spoke to the enumerator and a neighbor in the next holler guessed her age instead, the guess would be low. So, twenty-seven, thirty-two, thirty-seven made a weird kind of sense, too. And it actually agreed better with the written documents!

And what if she kept it up! I laughed to myself. Now there was a crazy thought! Aging five years to the decade, by 1870 she would have seemed . . . mmm, forty-two. And today? Add another sixty-odd years, and Mabel would appear to be. ... A hundred and five or thereabouts. About as old as Mae seemed to be.

I paused with one arm in my jacket.

About as old as Mae seemed to be? I stared at the spool boxes stacked in the carrel, ready for pick-up.

Greenberry and Mabel. Green and Mae? No, it was absurd. A wild coincidence of names. *The census records are not that reliable. And it's only that Dee-dee is aging too fast that you even thought about someone aging too slow*. I took a few steps toward the door.

And the 1830 Census? I hadn't bothered checking it. What if it listed a Green Holloway aged twenty to twenty-nine and a "white female" *still* aged twenty to twenty-nine?

I turned and looked back at the reading room and my heart began to pound in my ears, and all of a sudden I knew why Dr. Bench had figured Mae for eighty-five three decades ago, and why Mae had feared for her sanity all her life.

So early in the month of May,
As the green buds were a-swelling.
A young man on his death-bed lay,
For the love of Barbry Ellen.

It was pitch-black out when I finally arrived home. There was a light on in the kitchen, none above stairs. I parked in the driveway and got out and walked around the end of the garage through the gate into the back yard. The crickets were chirruping like a swing with a squeaky hinge. Lightning bugs drifted lazily through the air. I walked all the way to the back of the yard, to the edge of the woods and leaned against a bent gum tree. The ground around me was littered with last year's prickly balls. I listened to the night sounds.

I had checked 1830 and found ... I didn't know what I found. Nothing. Everything. A few tantalizing hints. Greenberry, Mabel and Zachary. Mister, Mae and . . . Zach? Not a younger brother, but a son? And another entry: *Wm. Biddle, Jr., a free man of color*. Mae had spoken of "Will Biddle who farmed two hollers over from us when I was a child. . . ." But in 1830? In *1830*?

There was a logical part of my mind that rejected those hints. Each had an alternative explanation. Coincidence of names. Clerical errors. Senile memory.

Sometimes we remember things only because we have been told them so often. I remember that I stepped in a birthday cake when I was two years old. It had been placed on the floor in the back of the family car and I had climbed over the seat and. . . . But do I *remember* it? Or do I remember my parents telling me the story—and showing me the snapshot—so many times over the years that it has become real to me. Mae could be remembering family tales she had heard, tales scrambled and made *hers* by a slowly short-circuiting brain.

But there was another part of me that embraced those hints; that wanted to believe that Mae had known Margaret Sanger, had voted for Teddy Roosevelt, had danced on the White House lawn in a Sanitary Commission uniform, because if they were true. . . .

I stepped away from the tree and a rabbit shot suddenly left to right in front of me. I watched it bound away . . . And spied figures moving about in the Carters's backyard. Henry and Barbara. I watched them for a while, wondering idly what they were up to. Then I recalled Henry's nickname for his wife—and a song that Mae had known.

I took the same route the rabbit had taken. Last year's dead leaves crackled and dry twigs snapped beneath my feet. I saw one of the Carters—Henry, I thought—come suddenly erect and look my way. I hoped

he wouldn't call the police. Then I thought, Christ, they're newlyweds. What sort of backyard shenanigans was I about to walk in on?

I stopped and waved a hand. "That you, Henry? Barbara? It's Paul Wilkes."

A second shadow stood erect by the first. "What's wrong?" It was Barbara's voice.

"I—I saw you moving around back there and thought it might be prowlers. Is everything all right?"

"Sure," said Henry. "Come on out. You'll get tick-bitten if you stay in there."

"Why don't you have your yard light on?" I asked as I stepped from the woods. Stupid question. I could think of a couple of reasons. Brenda and I had once gone skinny dipping in our pool at three in the morning. *Stifled laughter and urgent play, and the water glistening like pearls on her skin*. That had been years ago, of course; but sometimes it was good to remember that there had once been times like that.

"It would spoil the viewing," Henry said.

Now that I was close enough, I saw that they had a telescope set up on a tripod. It was a big one. "Oh. Are you an astronomer?"

Henry shook his head. "I'm a genetic engineer, or I will be when I finish my dissertation. Barbry's going to be a biochemist. Astronomy is our hobby."

"I see." I felt uncomfortable, an intruder; but I had come there with a purpose. I made as if to turn away and then turned back. "Say, as long as I'm here, there is a question you might be able to answer for me."

"Sure." They were an obliging couple. The Moon was half-full, the air was spring evening cool, they did not really want me there interrupting whatever it was that the sky-gazing would have led to.

"I've heard Henry call you Barbry," I said to Barbara. "And ... do you know a song called 'Barbry Ellen'?"

She laughed. "You mean 'Barbara Allen.' Sure. That's where Henry came up with the nickname. He's into folk singing. 'Barbry Ellen' is an older version."

"Well, someone told me it was the 'old president's favorite song,' and I wondered if you knew—"

"Which old president? That's easy. George Washington. You see, he had this secret crush on his best friend's wife, and—"

"George Washington? Are you sure?"

"Well, there might have been other presidents who liked it. But Washington's partiality is on the record, and the song has been out of vogue a long, long time."

"Was that all you wanted to know?" asked Henry. There was something in his voice that sounded a lot like "good bye." He wasn't happy, I could tell. I had spoiled the mood for him.

" Yes, certainly," I said. " I thought you might have been prowlers." I backed away into the woods, then turned and walked quickly home.

I learned me that 'un when I was knee-high to a grasshopper. Pa told me it was the President's favorite song. The old President, from when his Pappy fought in the War.

The old President, from when his Pappy fought in the War.

Lost my partner, what'll I do?
Lost my partner, what'll I do?
Lost my partner, what'llI do?
Skip to my love, my darling.

Brenda drank tea. She always allowed the bag to steep for a precise five minutes (read the package) and always squeezed it dry with her tea spoon. She always disposed of the bag in the trash before drinking from the cup. When she drank, she held the saucer in her left hand and the cup in her right and hugged her elbows close to her body. She stood near the French doors in the family room, gazing out toward the back yard and the woods beyond. I had no idea if she had heard me.

"I said, I think I'll go over to Sunny Dale today and look in on Mrs. Holloway."

Brenda held herself so still she was nearly rigid. Not because she was reacting to what I had said. She always stood that way. She spent her life at attention.

"You didn't have any plans, did you?"

A small, precise shake of the head. "No. No plans. We never have any plans." A sip of tea that might have been measured in minims. "Maybe I'll go into the office, too. There are always cases to work on."

I hesitated a moment longer before leaving. When I reached the front

door, I heard her call.

"Paul?"

"Yes?" Down the length of the hall I could see her framed by the glass doors at the far end. She had turned around and was facing me. "What?"

"Why do you have to go in today? It's a Saturday."

"It's . . . nothing I can talk about yet. A wild notion. It might be nothing more than a senile woman's ravings, but it might be the most important discovery of the century. Brenda, if I'm right, it could change our lives."

Even from where I stood I could see the faint smile that trembled on her lips. "Yes, it could, at that." She turned around and faced the glass again. "You do what you have to do, Paul. So will I."

It was odd, but I suddenly remembered how much we had once done together. Silly things, simple things. Football games, Scrabble, Broadway shows. Moments public and private. The party had asked Brenda to run for the state legislature one time, and I had urged her to accept, but the baby had been due and. . . . Somehow, now we stood at opposite ends of the house. I thought for a moment of asking her to come with me to the Home, but thought better of it. Brenda would find those old, grey creatures more distressing than I did. "Look," I said, "this should only take a couple of hours. I'll call you and we'll do something together this afternoon. Take in a movie, maybe."

She nodded in her distracted way. I saw that she had spilled tea into her saucer.

Once at the Home, I sought out Mae in her garden retreat, hoping that she was in a better mood than yesterday. I had a thousand questions to ask her. A dozen puzzles and one hope. But when she saw me coming, her face retreated into a set of tight lines: eyes, narrowed; mouth and lips, thin and disapproving.

"Go away," said Mae Holloway.

"I only wanted to ask a few—"

"I said, go away! Why are you always pestering me?"

"Don't mind her," said a voice by my elbow. "She's been that way since yesterday." I turned and saw Jimmy Kovacs, the retired printer. "Headache. Maybe you should give her something."

"You don't need a doctor to take aspirin."

He shook his head. "Aspirin didn't work. She needs something stronger. Might be a migraine. I had an allergy once. To hot dog meat. Every time I had a frank, my head felt like fireworks going off inside. So, my doc, he tells me—"

"I'll see what I can do," I said. Old folks chatter about little else than their ailments. They compare them the way young boys compare . . . well, you know what I mean. "Mine is bigger than yours." They have contests, oldsters do, to see who has the biggest illness. The winner gets to die.

I sat on the stone bench beside Mae. "Jimmy tells me you have a headache," I said.

"Jimmy should mind his own affairs."

"Where does it hurt?"

"In my haid, jackass. That's what makes it a headache."

"No, I mean is it all over or in one spot? Is it a dull ache or sharp points. Is it continual, or does it come in bursts? Do you see or hear anything along with the headache?"

She gave me a look. "How do you make a headache into such a contraption?"

I shrugged. "There are many things that can cause a headache. When did it start?" If I could relieve her pain, she might be willing to answer the questions I had about her family history.

She squinted at the ground, her face tight as a drum. I heard her suck in her breath. Bees danced among the flowers to our right; the fragrances hung in the air. "Yesterday afternoon," she said. "Yesterday afternoon, after you left. It was like the Sun come up inside my head. I was lying down for a nap when everything turned blind-white for a few seconds and I heard a chorus a-singing hymns. I thought I'd surely died and gone to heaven." She took a deep breath and massaged her left temple with her fingers. "Somedays I'ud as lief I were dead. All these here aches and pains. And I cain't do the things I used to. I used to dance. I used to love to dance, but I can't do that no more. And everybody who ever mattered to me is a longtime gone."

Her parents. Little Zach. Green Holloway. Gone a very long time, if I was right. Joe Paxton. Ben Wickham. There must have been plenty of others, besides. Folks in Cincinnati, in California, in Wyoming. She left a trail of alienation behind her every place she had ever been. It was a cold trail, in more ways than one.

"When the white light faded out, I saw it weren't an angel choir, after

all. It were Christy's Minstrels that time when they come to Knoxville, and Mister and me and ..." she frowned and shook her head. "Mister and me, we tarryhooted over to hear 'em. Doc, it was the clearest spell I ever had. I was a-settin' in the audience right down in front. I clean forgot I was a-bedded down here in Sunny Dale."

Sometimes migraines triggered visions. Some of the saints had suffered migraines and seen the Kingdom of God. "Yes?" I prompted.

"Well, Mister was a-settin' on my left holding my hand; and someone's man-child, maybe fifteen year, was press't up agin me on my right—oh, we was packed in almighty tight, I tell you—but, whilst I could see and hear as clear as I can see and hear you, I couldn't feel any of them touching me. When I thunk on it, I could feel that I was lying a-bed with the sheets over me."

I nodded. "You weren't getting any tactile memories, then. I think your—"

She didn't hear me. "The troupe was setting on benches, with each row higher than the one in front—Tiers, that be what they call 'em. They all stood to sing the medley, 'cept 'Mr. Interlocutor,' who sat in a chair front and center. Heh. That was the outdoin'est chair I ever did see. Like a king's throne, it was. They sang 'Jim Along Josie' and 'Ring, Ring the Banjo.' I h'ain't heard them tunes since who flung the chuck. The interlocutor was sided by the soloists on his right and the glee singers—what they later called barbershop singers—on the left." She gestured, moving both hands out from the center. "Then the banjo player and the dancer. Then there was four end-men, two t' either side. Those days, only the end-men were in the Ethiopian business."

"The Ethiopian business?"

"You know. Done up in black-face."

Images of Cantor singing "Mammy." Exaggerated lips; big, white, buggy eyes. An obscene caricature. "Black face!"

My disapproval must have shown in my voice, for Mae grew defensive. "Well, that was the only way us reg'lar folks ever got to hear nigra music back then," she said, rubbing her temple. "The swells could hear 'em any time; but the onlyest nigras I ever saw 'fore I left the hills was Willie Biddle and his kin, and they didn't do a whole lot of singing and dancing."

"Nigras?" That was worse than black-face. I tried to remind myself that Mae had grown up in a very different world.

Mae seemed to refocus. Her eyes lost the dreamy look. "What did I say?

Nigra? Tarnation, that isn't right, any more, is it? They say 'coloreds' now."

"African-American. Or black."

She shook her head, then winced and rubbed her temple again. "They weren't mocking the col—the black folks. The minstrels weren't. Not then. It was fine music. Toe-tapping. And the banjo. Why, white folks took that up from the coloreds. But we'uns couldn't go to dark-town shows, and they couldn't come to us—not in them days. So, sometimes white folks dressed up to play black music. Daddy Rice, he was supposed to be the best, though I never did see him strut "Jim Crow"; but James Bland, that wrote a lot of the tunes, was a black man his own self. I heard he went off to France later 'cause of the way the white folks was always greenin' him."

"I see. Has your headache subsided since then?" *Minstrel shows,* I thought.

"It's all so mixed up. These memories I keep getting. It's like a kalidey-scope I had as a young-un. All those pretty beads and mirrors. ..."

"Your headache, Mrs. Holloway. I asked if it was still the same." Try to keep old folks on the track. Go ahead, try it.

She grimaced. "Why, it comes and goes, like ocean waves. I seen the ocean once. Out in Californey. Now, that was a trek, let me tell you. Folks was poor on account of the depression, so I took shank's mare a long part of the way, just like Sweet Betsy." She sighed. "That was always a favorite of mine. Every time I heard it, it was like I could see it all in my mind. The singing around the campfire; the cold nights on the prairie. The Injuns a-whooping and a-charging." She began to sing.

"*The Injuns come down in a great yelling horde. And Betsy got sheered they would scalp her adored. So behind the front wagon wheel Betsy did crawl. And she fought off the Injuns with powder and ball*."

Mae tried to smile, but it was a weak and pained one. "I went back to Californey years later. I taken the *Denver Zephyr*, oh, my, in the 1920s I think it was. Packed into one of them old coach cars, cheek by jowl, the air so thick with cigar smoke. And when you opened the window, why you got coal ash in your face from the locomotive."

"Look, why don't you come to the clinic with me and I'll see if I have anything for that headache of yours."

She nodded and rose from her bench, leaning on her stick. She took one step and looked puzzled. Then she staggered a little. "Dizzy," she muttered. Then she toppled forward over her stick and fell to the ground. I leapt to

my feet and grabbed her by the shoulders, breaking her fall.

"Hey!" I said. "Careful! You'll break something."

Her eyes rolled back up into her head and her limbs began to jerk uncontrollably. I looked over my shoulder and saw Jimmy Kovacs hurrying up the garden path. "Quick," I said. "Call an ambulance! Call Dr. Khan! Tell her to meet us at the hospital."

Jimmy hesitated. He looked at Mae, then at me. "What's wrong?" he said.

"Hurry! I think she's having another stroke."

Jimmy rushed off and I turned back to Mae. Check-out time, I thought. But why now? Why now?

I have always loved hospitals. They are factories of health, mass producers of treatments. The broken and defective bodies come in, skilled craftsmen go to work—specialists from many departments, gathered together in one location—and healthy and restored bodies emerge. Usually. No process is 100 percent efficient. Some breakdowns cannot be repaired. But it is more efficient to have the patients come to the doctor than to have the doctor waste time traveling from house to house. Only when health is mass produced can it be afforded by the masses.

Yet, I can see how some people would dislike them. The line is a thin one between the efficient and the impersonal.

Khan and I found Mae installed in the critical care unit. The ward was shaped like a cul-de-sac, with the rooms arranged in a circle around the nurses' station. White sheets, antiseptic smell. Tubes inserted wherever they might prove useful. Professionally compassionate nurses. Bill Wing was waiting for us there. With clipboard in hand and stethoscope dangling from his neck, he looked like an archetype for The Doctor. We shook hands and I introduced him to Khan. Wing led us out into the corridor, away from the patient. Mae was in a coma, but it was bad form to discuss her case in front of her, as if she were not there.

"It was not a stroke," he told us, "but a tumor. An astrocytoma encroaching on the left temporal lobe. It is malignant and deeply invasive." Wing spoke with an odd Chinese British accent. He was from Guangdong by way of Hong Kong.

I heard Khan suck in her breath. "Can it be removed?" she asked.

Wing shook his head. "On a young and healthy patient, maybe; though I

would hesitate to perform the operation even then. On a woman this old and weak. . . ." He shook his head again. "I have performed a decompression to relieve some of the pressure, but the tumor itself is not removable."

Khan sighed. "So sad. But she has had a long life."

"How much longer does she have?" I asked.

Wing pursed his lips and looked inscrutable. "That is hard to say. Aside from the tumor, she is in good health—for a woman her age, of course. It could be tomorrow; it could be six months. She has a time bomb in her head, and no one knows how long the fuse is. We only know that the fuse—"

"Has been lit," finished Khan. Wing looked unhappy, but nodded.

"As the tumor progresses," he continued, "her seizures will become more frequent. I suspect there will be pain as the swelling increases." He paused and lowered his head slightly, an Oriental gesture.

"There must be something you can do," I said. Khan looked at me.

"Sometimes," she said, "there is nothing that can be done."

I shook my head. "I can't accept that." Holloway could not die. Not yet. Not now. I thought of all those secrets now sealed in her head. They might be fantasies, wild conclusions that I had read into partial data; but I had to know. I had to know.

"There is an end to everything." Noor Khan gazed toward the double doors that led to the medical CCU. "Though it is always hard to see the lights go out."

I drew my coat on. "I'm going to go to the University library for a while."

Khan gave me a peculiar look. "The library?" She shrugged. "I will stay by her side. You know how she feels about hospitals. She will be frightened when she recovers consciousness. Best if someone she knows is with her."

I nodded. "She may not regain consciousness for some time," I reminded her. "What about your patients?"

"Dr. Mendelson will handle my appointments tomorrow. I called him before I came over."

All right, let her play the martyr! I tugged my cap onto my head. Khan didn't expect thanks, did she? I could just picture the old crone's ravings. The hysteria. She would blame Khan, not thank her, for bringing her here.

As I reached the door, I heard Khan gasp. "She's singing!"

I turned. "What?"

Khan was hovering over the bed. She flapped an arm. "Come. Listen to this."

As if I had not listened to enough of her ditties. I walked to the bedside and leaned over. The words came soft and slurred, with pauses in between as she sucked in breath: "There was an old woman ... at the foot of the hill. ... If she ain't moved away . . . she's living there still. . . . Hey diddle . . . day-diddle . . . de-dum. ..." Her voice died away into silence. Khan looked at me.

"What was that all about?"

I shook my head. "Another random memory," I said. "The tumor is busy, even if she is not."

It was not until mid-afternoon, buried deep in the stacks at the University library, that I remembered my promise to call Brenda. But when I phoned from the lobby, Consuela told me that she had gone out and that I was not to wait up for her.

But the summer faded, and a chilly blast
O'er that happy cottage swept at last;
When the autumn song birds woke the dewy morn,
Our little "Prairie Flow'r" was gone.

In the year before Deirdre was born, Brenda and I took a vacation trip to Boston and Brenda laid out an hour-by-hour itinerary, listing each and every site we planned to visit. Along the way, she kept detailed logs of gas, mileage, arrival and departure times at each attraction, expenses, even tips to bellboys. It did not stop her from enjoying Boston. She did not insist that we march in lockstep to the schedule. "It's a guide, not a straitjacket," she had said. Yet, she spent an hour before bed each night updating and revising the next day's itinerary. Like an itch demanding a scratch, like a sweet tooth longing for chocolate, satisfying the urge to organize gave her some deep, almost sensual pleasure.

Now, of course, everything was planned and scheduled, even small trips. Sometimes the plan meant more than the journey.

Brenda frowned as I pulled into the secluded lot and parked in front of an old, yellow, wood-frame building. A thick row of fir trees screened the office building from the busy street and reduced the sound of rushing traffic to a whisper.

"Paul, why are we stopping? What is this place?"

"A lab," I told her. "That phone call just before we left the house. Some work I gave them is ready."

"Can't you pick it up tomorrow when you're on duty?" she said. "We'll be late."

"We won't be late. The Sawyers never start on time, and there'll be three other couples to keep them busy."

"I hope that boy of theirs isn't there. He gives me the creeps, the way he stares at people."

"Maybe they changed his medication," I said. "Do you want to come in, or will you wait out here?"

"Is there a waiting area?"

"I don't know. I've never been here before."

Brenda gave a small sound, halfway between a cough and a sigh. Then she made a great show of unbuckling her seat belt.

"You don't have to come in if you don't want to," I said.

"Can you just get this over with?"

Inside the front door was a small lobby floored with dark brown tiles. The directory on the wall listed three tenants in white plastic, push-pin letters: a management consulting firm, a marriage counselor, and the genetics lab.

When Brenda learned that S/P Microbiology, was situated on the third floor, she rolled her eyes and decided to wait in the lobby. "Don't be long," she said, her voice halfway between an order, a warning and a plaintive plea to keep the schedule.

The receptionist at S/P was a young redhead wearing a headset and throat mike. He showed me to a chair in a small waiting room, gave me a not-too-old magazine to read, and spoke a few words into his mouthpiece. When the telephone rang, he touched his earpiece once and answered the phone while on his way back to his station. Clever, I thought, to have a receptionist not tied to a desk.

I was alone only for a moment before Charles Randolph Singer himself came out. He was a short, slightly rumpled-looking man a great deal younger than his reputation had led me to expect. His white lab coat hung open, revealing a pocket jammed full of pens and other instruments. "Charlie Singer," he said. "You're Doctor Wilkes?"

"Yes."

He shook my hand. "You sure did hand us one larruping good problem." Then he cocked his head sideways and looked at me. "Where'd you get the samples?"

"I'd . . . rather not say yet."

"Hunh. Doctor-patient crap, right? Well, you're paying my rent with this job, so I won't push it. Come on in back. I'll let Jessie explain things."

I followed Singer into a larger room lined with lab benches and machines. A desiccator and a centrifuge, a mass spec, a lot of other equipment I didn't recognize. A large aquarium filled with brackish water, fish and trash occupied one corner. The plastic beverage can rings and soda bottles were dissolving into a floating, liquid scum, which the fish calmly ignored.

"Jessie!" Singer said. "Wilkes is here."

A round-faced woman peered around the side of the mass spectrometer. "Oh," she said. "You." She was wearing a headset similar to the receptionist's.

"Jessica Burton-Peeler," said Singer introducing us, "is the second-best geneticist on the face of the planet."

Peeler smiled sweetly. "That was last year, Charlie." She spoke with a slight British accent.

Singer laughed and pulled a stick of gum from the pocket of his lab coat. He unwrapped it and rolled it into a ball between his fingers. "Tell Doctor Wilkes here what we found." He popped the wad of gum into his mouth.

"Would you like some tea or coffee, Doctor? I can have Eamonn bring you a cup."

"No, thanks. My wife is waiting downstairs. We were on our way to a dinner party, but I couldn't wait until tomorrow to find out."

Singer gave me a speculative look. "Find out what?"

"What you found out."

After a moment, Singer grunted and shrugged. "All right. We cultured all three cell samples," he said. "The 'B' sample was normal in all respects. The cells went through fifty-three divisions."

"Which is about average," Peeler added. "As for the other two ... one of them divided only a dozen times—"

"The 'A' sample," I interjected.

"Yes," she said after a momentary pause. "The 'A' sample. But the 'C' sample . . . that one divided one hundred and twenty-three times."

I swallowed. "And that is ... abnormal?"

"Abnormal?" Singer laughed. "Doc, that measurement is so far above the Gaussian curve that you can't even see abnormal from there."

"The 'A' sample wasn't normal, either," said Peeler quietly.

I looked at her, and she looked at me calmly and without expression. "Well," I said and coughed. "Well."

"So, what's next?" Singer demanded. "You didn't send us those tissue samples just to find out they were different. You already knew that—or you suspected it—when you sent them in. We've confirmed it. Now what?"

"I'd like you to compare them and find out how their DNA differs."

Singer nodded after a thoughtful pause. "Sure. If the reason is genetic. We can look for factors common to several 'normal' samples but different for your 'A' and 'C' samples. Run polymerase chain reactions. Tedious, but elementary."

"And then. . . ." I clenched and unclenched my fists. "I've heard you work on molecular modifiers."

"Nanomachines," said Singer. "I have a hunch it'll be a big field someday, and I'm planning to get in on the ground floor." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the aquarium. "Right now I'm working on a bacterium that eats plastic waste."

"Dear Lord," said Burton-Peeler in sudden wonder. "You want us to modify the DNA, don't you?"

Singer looked from me to his wife. "Modify the DNA?"

"Yes," I started to say.

Burton-Peeler pursed her lips. "Modify the 'A' sample, of course. Whatever factor we find in the 'C' sample that sustains the cell division . . . you want us to splice that into the short-lived sample."

I nodded, unable to speak. "I thought it might be possible to bring it up to normal."

Singer rubbed his jaw. "I don't know. Splicing bacterial DNA is one thing. Human DNA is another. A universe more of complexity. Of course, there is that business with the multiple sclerosis aerosol. They used a modified rhinovirus to carry the mucous-producing genes into the lungs. If the factor is gene specific, we could do something similar. Infect the cells with a retrovirus and—"

"Then you can do it?"

"Now hold on. I said no such thing. I said *maybe* it was possible, *if* the chips fall right. But there'll be some basic research needed. It will cost. A lot."

"I'll . . . find the money. Somehow."

Singer shook his head slowly. "I don't think you can find that much. You're talking about maybe three to five years research here."

"Three to—" I felt the pit of my stomach drop away. "I don't have three to five years." Dee-dee would be dead by then. And Mae, too, taking the secret in her genes with her.

"We'll do it at cost," said Burton-Peeler. Singer turned and looked at his wife.

"What?"

"We'll do it at cost, Charlie, I'll tell you why later." She looked back to me. "Understand, we still cannot promise fast results. When you set off into the unknown, you cannot predict your arrival time."

Go for broke. Damn the torpedoes. "Just try is all I ask."

Burton-Peeler saw me out. On the landing to the stairwell she stopped. "You're the father of the young girl with progeria," she said. "I saw it in the paper a few years ago. The 'A' sample was hers, wasn't it?"

I nodded. "Yes, and the second sample was my own. For comparison." I turned to go.

Peeler stopped me with an arm on my sleeve. She looked into my eyes. "Whose was the third sample?" she asked.

I smiled briefly and sadly. "My faith, that the Universe balances."

In the lobby, Brenda was just handing a tea cup and saucer back to Singer's red-haired receptionist when she saw me coming. With a few brisk motions she collected her things and was already breezing out the door as I caught up with her.

"I'll drive," she said. "We're way behind schedule now, thanks to you." I said nothing and she continued in what was supposed to be an idly curious tone. "Who was that woman with you? The one on the landing."

"Woman? Oh, that was Jessica Burton-Peeler. Singer's wife."

Brenda arched an eyebrow and made a little moue with her lips. "She's a little on the plump side," she said. "Do you find plump women attractive?"

I didn't have the time to deal with Brenda's insecurities. "Start the car," I told her. "We'll be late for dinner."

They say we are aged and gray, Maggie
As spray by the white breakers flung;
But to me you're as fair as you were, Maggie,
When you and I were young.

Mae Holloway lay between white sheets, coupled to tubes and wires. She lay with her eyes closed, and her arms limp by her sides atop the sheets. Her mouth hung half-open. She seemed grey and shrunken; drawn, like a wire through a die. Her meager white hair was nearly translucent.

She looked like a woman half her age.

Noor Khan was sitting near the wall reading a magazine. She looked up as I entered the room. "They told you?"

"That Mae has recovered consciousness? Yes. I'm surprised to see you still here."

Khan looked at the bed. "I have made arrangements. She has no family to keep watch."

"No," I agreed. "They are long gone." Longer than Khan could suppose. "Is she sleeping?"

She hesitated a moment, then spoke in a whisper. "Not really. I think that as long as she keeps her eyes closed she can pretend she is not in hospital. Those memories of hers . . . the consciousness-doubling, you called it. I think they play continually, now. The pressure from the tumor

on the temporal lobe."

I nodded. Suppress all external stimuli and Mae could—in a biological kind of virtual reality—live again in the past. If we spoke too loudly, it would bring her back to a time and place she did not want. "Why don't you take a break?" I said. "I'll sit with her for a while."

Khan cocked her head to the side and looked at me. "You will?"

"Yes. Is that so surprising?"

She started to say something and then changed her mind. "I will be in the cafeteria." And then she fluttered out.

When she was gone, I pulled the chair up to the bedside and sat in it. "Mae? It's Doctor Wilkes." I touched her gently on the arm, and she seemed to flinch from the contact. "Mae?"

"I hear yuh," she said. Her voice was low and weak and lacked her usual snap. I had to lean close to hear her. "It'ud pleasure me if you'd company for a mite. It's been mighty lonely up hyar."

"Has it? But Doctor Khan—"

"I kilt the b'ar," she whispered, "but it stove up Pa something awful. He cain't hardly git around no more, so I got to be doin' for him." She paused as if listening. "I'm not so little as that, mister; I jest got me a puny bone-box. I ain't no yokum. I been over the creek. And I got me a Tennessee toothpick, too, in case you have thoughts about a little girl with a crippled-up Pa. What's yore handle, mister?"

"Mrs. Holloway," I said gently. "Don't you know me?"

Mae giggled. "Right pleased to meet you, Mister Holloway. Greenberry's a funny name, so I'll just call you Mister. If you'll set a spell, I'll whup up a bait to eat. H'ain't much, only squirrel, but I aim to go hunting tomorry and find a deer that'll meat us for a spell."

I pulled back and sat up straight in my chair. She was reliving her first meeting with Green Holloway. Was she too far gone into the quicksand of nostalgia to respond to me? "Mae," I said more loudly, shaking her shoulder. "It's Doctor Wilkes. Can you hear me?"

Mae gasped and her eyes flew open. "Whut . . . ? Where . . . ?" The eyes lighted on me and went narrow. "You."

"Me," I agreed. "How are you feeling, Mrs. Holloway?"

"I'm a-gonna die. How do you want me to feel?"

Relieved? Wasn't there a poem about weary rivers winding safe to the

sea? But, no matter how long and weary the journey, can anyone face the sea at the end of it? "Mrs. Holloway, do you remember the time you were on the White House lawn and the president came out?"

Her face immediately became wary and she looked away from me. "What of it?"

"That president. It was Lincoln, wasn't it?"

She shook her head, a leaf shivering in the breeze.

I took a deep breath. "The Sanitary Commission was the Union Army's civilian medical corps. If you were wearing that uniform, you were remembering the 1860s. That business on the lawn. It happened. I looked it up. The dancing. 'Listen to the Mockinbird.' Lincoln coming outside to join the celebration. The whole thing. You know it, but you won't admit it because it sounds impossible."

"Sounds impossible?" She turned her head and looked at me at last. "How could I remember Lincoln? I'm not *that* old!"

"Yes, you are, Mae. You are that old. It's just that those early memories have gone all blurry. It's become hard for you to tell the decades apart. Your oldest memories had faded entirely, until your stroke revived them."

"You're talking crazy."

"I think it must be a defense mechanism," I went on as if she had not spoken. "The blurring and forgetting. It keeps the mental desktop cleared of clutter by shoving the old stuff aside."

"Doc. . . ."

"But, every now and then, one of those old, faded memories would pop up, wouldn't it? Some impossible recollection. And you would think—"

"That I was going crazy." In a whisper, half to herself, she said, "I was always afraid of that, as long back as I can remember."

No wonder. Sporadic recollections of events generations past. Could a sane mind remember meeting Lincoln? “Mae. I found your name in the 1850 census."

She shook her head again. Disbelief. But behind it ... hope? Relief that those impossible memories might be real? "Doc, how can it be possible?"

I spread my hands. "I don't know. Something in your genes. I have some people working on it, but ... I think you have been aging slow. I don't know how that is possible. Maybe it has never happened before. Maybe you're the only one. Or maybe there were others and no one ever noticed. Maybe they were killed in accidents; or they really did go mad; or they thought

they were recalling past lives. It doesn't matter. Mae, I've spent the last week in libraries and archives. You were born around 1800."

"No!"

"Yes. Your father was a member of Captain James Scott's settlement company. The Murrays, the Hammontrees, the Holloways, the Blacks and others. The overmountain men, they were called. They bought land near Six Mile Creek from the Overhill Cherokees."

I paused. Mae said nothing but she continued to look at me, slowly shaking her head. "Believe me," I said. "Your father's name was Josh, wasn't it?"

"Josiah. Folks called him Josh. I ... I had forgotten my folks for such a long time; and now that I can remember, it pains me awful."

"Yes. I overheard. A bear mauled him."

"Doc, he was such a fine figure of a man. Right portly—I mean, handsome. He cut a swath wherever he walked. To see him laid up like that. . . . Well, it sorrowed me something fierce. And him always saying I shouldn't wool over him."

"He died sometime between 1830 and 1840, after you married Green Holloway."

She looked into the distance. "Mister, he was a long hunter. He come on our homestead one day and saw how things stood and stayed to help out. Said it wasn't fittin' for a young gal to live alone like that with no man to side her. 'Specially a button like I was. There was outlaws and renegades all up and down the Trace who wouldn't think twice about bothering a young girl. When Pa finally said 't was fittin,' we jumped the broom 'til the preacher-man come through." She stopped. "Doc?"

"Yes?"

"Doc, you must have it right. Because . . . because, how long has it been since folks lived in log cabins, and long hunters dressed up in buckskins?"

"A long time," I said. "A very long time."

"Seems like just a little while ago to me, but I know it can't be. The Natchez Trace? I just never gave it much thought."

Have you ever seen a neglected field overgrown with weeds? That was Mae's memory. Acres of thistle and briar. All perspective lost, all sense of elapsed time. "Your memories were telescoped," I said. "Remember when you sang 'Sweet Betsy from Pike' for me, and you said how real it all seemed to you? Well, after the Civil War, sometime during the Great

Depression of the 1870s, you went out west, probably on one of the last wagon trains, after they finished the railroad. After that, I lost track."

She stayed quiet for a long time and I began to think she had dozed off. Then she spoke again.

"Sometimes I remember the Tennessee hills," she said in a faraway voice, "all blue and purple and cozy with family." She sighed. "I loved them mountains," she said. "We had us a hardscrabble, side-hill farm. The hills was tilted so steep we could plow both sides of an acre. And the cows had their legs longer on the one side than the other so's they could stand straight-up." She chuckled at the hillbilly humor. "Oh, it was a hard life. You kids today don't know. But in the springtime, when the piney roses and star-flowers and golden bells was in bloom, and the laurel bells was all purpled up; why, doc, you couldn't ask God for a puttier sight." She sighed. "And other times . . . other times, I remember a ranch in high-up, snow-capped mountains with longhorned cattle and vistas where God goes when He wants to feel small. There was a speakeasy in Chicago, where the jazz was hot; and a bawdy house in Frisco, where I was." She let her breath out slowly and closed her eyes again. "I remember wearing bustles and bloomers, and linen and lace, and homespun and broadcloth. I've been so many people, I don't know who I am."

She opened her eyes and looked at me. "But I was always alone, except in them early years. With Mister. And with Daddy and my brother Zach." A tear dripped down the side of her face. I pulled a tissue from the box and blotted it up for her. "There weren't nobody left for me. Nobody."

I hesitated for a moment. Then I said, "Mae, you never had a brother."

"Now what are you talking about? I remember him clear as day."

"I've checked the records. Your mother died and your father never remarried."

Mae started to speak, then frowned. "Pa did tell me oncet that he'd never hitch ag'in, because he loved the dust of Ma's feet and the sweat of her body more than he loved any other woman. But Zach—"

"Was your own child."

She sucked in her breath between clenched teeth. "No, he weren't! He was near my own age."

"You remember Zach from 1861 when he followed your husband into the army. He was twenty-two then, and you . . . Well, you seemed to be thirty-seven to those around you. So, in your memory he seems like a brother. By the time you rejoined him on his ranch in Wyoming, he was

even a bit older than your apparent age. Remember how you thought he resembled Mister? Well, that was because he was Mister's son. I think ... I think that was when you started forgetting how the years passed for you. Mae, no one ever ran out on you. You just outlived them. They grew old and they died and you didn't. And after a while you just wouldn't dare get close to anyone."

Tears squeezed from behind her eyes. "Stop it! Every time you say something, you make me remember."

"In all this time, Mae, you've never mentioned your child. You did have one; the clinical evidence is there. If Zach wasn't your boy, who was? Who was the boy sitting next to you at the minstrel show in Knoxville?"

She looked suddenly confused, and there was more to her confusion than the distance of time. "I don't know." Her eyes glazed and she looked to her right. I knew she was re-seeing the event. "Zach?" she said. "Is that you, boy? Zach? Oh, it is. It is." She refocused on me. "He cain't hear me," she said plaintively. "He hugged me, but I couldn't feel his arms."

"I know. It's only a memory."

"I want to feel his arms around me. They grow up so fast, you know. The young-uns. One day, they're a baby, cute as a button; the next, all growed up and gone for a soldier. All growed up. I could see it happening. All of 'em, getting older and older. I thought there was something wrong with me. That I'd been a bad girl, because I kilt my Ma; and the Good Man was punishing me by holding me back from the pearly gates. If'n I never grew old, I'd never die. And if I never died, I'd never see any of my kin-folk again. Doc, you can't know what it's like, knowing your child will grow old and wither like October corn and die right before your eyes."

For a moment, I could not breathe. "Oh, I know," I whispered. "I know."

"Zach. ... I lived to see him turn to dust in the ground. He died in my own arms, a feeble, old man, and he asked me to sing 'Home, Sweet Home,' like I used to when he was a young 'un. Oh, little Zach!" And she began to cry in earnest. She couldn't move her arms to wipe the tears away, so I pulled another tissue from the box on the tray and dabbed at her cheeks.

She reached out a scrawny hand and clutched my arm. "Thank you, doc. Thank you. You helped me find my child again. You helped me find my boy."

And then I did an odd thing. I stood and bent low over the bed, and I

kissed Mae Holloway on her withered cheek.

I'm going there to see my mother.
She said she'd meet me when I come.
I'm only going over Jordan,
I'm only going over home.

My days at the Home passed by in an anonymous sameness, dispensing medicines, treating aches and pains. Only a handful of people came to see me; and those with only trivial complaints. Otherwise, I sat unmolested in my office, the visitor's chair empty. I found it difficult even to concentrate on my journals. Finally, almost in desperation, I began making rounds, dropping in on Rosie and Jimmy and the others, chatting with them, enduring their pointless, rambling stories; sometimes suggesting dietary or exercise regimens that might improve their well-being. Anything to feel useful. I changed a prescription on Old Man Morton, now the Home's Oldest Resident, and was gratified to see him grow more alert. Sometimes you have to try different medications to find a treatment that works best for a particular individual.

Yet somehow those days seemed empty. The astonishing thing to me was how little missed Mae Holloway was by the other residents. Oh, some of them asked after her politely. Jimmy did. But otherwise it was as if the woman had evaporated, leaving not even a void behind. Partly, I suspected, it was because they were unwilling to face up to this reminder of their own mortality. But partly, too, it must have been a sense of relief that her aloof and abrasive presence was gone. If she never had any friends, Mae had told me, she wouldn't miss them when they were gone. But neither did they miss her.

I usually stopped at the hospital on my way home, sometimes to obtain a further tissue sample for Singer's experiments, sometimes just to sit with her. Often, she was sedated to relieve the pain of the tumor. More usually, she was dreaming; adrift on the river of years, connected to our world and time by only the slenderest of threads.

When she was conscious, she would spin her reminiscences for me and sing. "Rosalie, the Prairie Flower." "Cape Ann." "Woodsman, Spare that Tree." "Ching a Ring Chaw." "The Hunters of Kentucky." "Wait for the Wagon."

We agreed, Mae and I, that a wagon was just as suitable as a Chevrolet

for courting pretty girls, and Phyllis and her wagon was the ancestor of Daisy and her bicycle, Lucille and her Oldsmobile, and Josephine and her flying machine. And someday, I suppose, Susie and her space shuttle.

It was odd to see Mae so at peace with her memories. She no longer feared them; no longer suppressed them. She no longer fled from them. Rather, she embraced them and passed them on to me. When she sang, "Roisin the Beau," she remarked casually how James Polk had used its melody for a campaign song. She recollected without flinching that she had voted for Zachary Taylor. "Old Rough and Ready," she said. "There was a man for you. 'Minds me some'at of that T.R. Too bad they pizened him, but he was out to break the slave power." It gave her no pause to recall how at New Orleans, "*There stood John Bull in martial pomp/And there stood Old Kentucky*." It must have been an awful relief to acknowledge those memories, to relax in their embrace.

There were fond memories of her "bean," Green the Long Hunter. Of days spent farming or hunting or spinning woolen or cooking 'shine. Of nights spent 'setting' by the fire, smoking their pipes, reading to each other from the Bible. Quiet hours from a time before an insatiable demand for novelty—for something always to be *happening*—had consumed us. Green had even taken her down to Knoxville to see the touring company of *The Gladiator*, a stage play about Spartacus. Tales of slave revolts did not play well elsewhere in the South, but the mountaineers had no love for the wealthy flatland aristocrats.

She recalled meeting Walt Whitman, a fellow nurse in the Sanitary Commission. "A rugged fellow and all full of himself," she recalled, "but as kind and gentle with the men as any of the women-folk."

She still confused her son sometimes with a brother, with her father, with Green. He was younger, he was older, he was of her own age. But there were childhood memories, too, of the sort most parents have. How he had "spunked up with his gal," "spooned with his chicken," or "lollygagged with his peach," depending on the slang of the decade. How they had "crossed the wide prairie" together after the War and set up a ranch in Wyoming Territory. How he met and wed Sweet Annie, a real "piece of calico."

Not all the memories were pleasant—Sweet Annie had died screaming—but Mae relished them just the same. It was her life she was reclaiming, and a life consists of different parts good and bad. The parts make up a whole. I continued to record her tales and tunes, as much because I did not know what else to do as because of any book plans. I noticed that, while her doubling episodes often hopscotched through her

life—triggered by associations and chance remarks— the music that played in her mind continued its slow and inexorable backward progression, spanning the 1840s and creeping gradually into the mid-thirties.

Slowly, a weird conviction settled on me. When the dates of her rememb-heard tunes finally reached 1800, she would die.

Time was running short. Most brain tumor patients did not survive a year from the time of first diagnosis; and Mae was so fragile to begin with that I doubted a whole year would be hers. Reports from Singer alternated between encouragement and frustration. Apparent progress would evaporate with a routine, follow-up test. Happenstance observation would open up a whole new line of inquiry. Singer submitted requests for additional cell samples almost daily. Blood, skin, liver. It seemed almost as if Mae might be used up entirely before Singer could pry loose the secret of her genes and splice that secret into my Deirdre.

I began to feel as if I were in a race with time. A weird sort of race in which time was speeding off in both directions. A young girl dying too old. An old woman dying too young.

One day, Wing was waiting for me when I entered the hospital. Seeing the flat look of concern on his face, my heart faltered. *Not yet*, I thought; *not yet!* My heart screeched, but I kept my own face composed. He took me aside into a small consultation room. Plaster walls with macro designs painted in happy, soothing colors. Comfortable chairs; green plants. An appallingly cheerful venue in which to receive bad news.

But it was not bad news. It was good news, of an odd and unexpected sort.

"Herpes?" I said when he had told me. "Herpes is a cure for brain tumors?" I couldn't help it. I giggled.

Wing frowned. "Not precisely. Culver-Blaese is a new treatment and outside my field of specialty, but let me explain it as Maurice explained it to me." Maurice LeFevre was the resident in genetic engineering, one of the first such residencies in the United States. "Several years ago," said Wing, "Culver and Blaese successfully extracted the gene for the growth enzyme, thymidine kinase, from the herpes virus, and installed it into brain tumor cells using a harmless retro virus."

"I would think," I said dryly, "that an enzyme that facilitates reproduction is the last thing a brain tumor needs spliced into its code."

Wing blinked rapidly several times. "Oh, I'm sorry. You see it's the ganciclovir. I didn't make that clear?"

"Ganciclovir is—?"

"The chemical used to fight herpes. It reacts with thymidine kinase, and the reaction products interfere with cell reproduction. So if tumor cells start producing thymidine, injecting ganciclovir a few days later will gum up the tumor's reproduction and kill it. There have been promising results on mice and an initial trial with twenty human patients."

"What is 'promising'?"

"Complete remission in 75 percent of the cases, and appreciable shrinkage in all of them."

I sucked in my breath. I could hardly credit what Wing was telling me. Here was a treatment, a *deus ex machina*. Give Singer another year of live tissue experiments and he would surely find the breakthrough we sought. "What's the catch?" I asked. There had to be a catch. There was always a catch.

There were two.

"First," said Wing, "the treatment is experimental, so the insurance will not cover it. Second . . . well, Mrs. Holloway has refused."

"Eh? Refused? Why is that?"

Wing shook his head. "I don't know. She wouldn't tell me. I thought if I caught you before you went to see her—"

"That I could talk her into it?"

"Yes. The two of you are very close. I can see that."

Close? Mae and I? If Wing could see that, those thick eyeglasses of his were more powerful than the Hubble telescope. Mae had not been close to anyone since her son died. *Since her child died in her arms, an old, old man*. Inwardly, I shuddered. No wonder she had never gotten close to anyone since. No wonder she had lost an entire era of her life.

"I'll give it a try," I said.

When I entered her room, Mae was lying quietly in her bed, humming softly. Awake, I knew, but not quite present. Her face was curled into a

smile, the creases all twisted around in unwonted directions. There was an air about her, something halfway between sleep and joy, a *calm* that had inverted all those years of sourness, stood everything on its head, and changed all her minus signs to plus.

Setting on her cabin porch, I imagined, gazing down the hillside at the laurel hells, and at a distant, pristine stream meandering through the holler below. At peace. At last.

I pulled the visitor's chair by the bedside and laid a hand lightly on her arm. She didn't stir. "Mae, it's me. I've come to set a spell with you."

"Howdy there, doc," she whispered. "Oh, it's such a lovely sunset. All heshed. I been telling Li'l Zach about the time his grandpap and Ol' Hickory went off t' fi't the Creeks. I was already fourteen when Pa went off, so I minded the cabin while he was away."

I leaned closer to her. "Mae, has Dr. Wing spoken to you about the new treatment?"

She took in a long, slow breath, and let it out as slowly. "Yes."

"He told me you refused."

"I surely did that."

"Why?"

"Why?" She opened her eyes and looked at me; looked sadly around the room. "I been hanging on too long. It's time to go home."

"But—"

"And what would it git me, anyways? Another year? Six months? Doc, even if I am nigh on to two hunnert year, like you say, and my bone-box only thinks it's a hunnert, *that's still older'n most folks git*. Even if that Doctor LeFevre can do what he says and rid me of this hyar tumor, there'll be a stroke afore long or my ticker'll give out, or something. Doc, *there ain't no point to it*. When I was young, when I was watching everyone I knew grow old and die, I wanted to go with them. I wanted to be with them. Why should I want to tarry now? If the Lord'll have me, I'm ready." She closed her eyes again and turned a little to the side.

"But, Mae—"

"And who'll miss me, beside?" she muttered.

"I will."

She rolled out flat again and looked at me. "You?"

"Yes. A little, I guess."

She snorted. "You mean you'll miss whatever you want that you're wooling me over. Always jabbing me with needles, like I was a pincushion. There's something gnawing away at you, Doc. I kin see it in your eyes when you think no one is looking. Kind of sad and angry and awful far away. I don't know what it is, but I know I got something to do with it."

I drew back under her speech. Her words were like slaps.

"And suppose'n they do it and they do git that thang outen my brain. Doc, what'll happen to my music? What'll happen to my memories?"

"I..."

"You done told me they come from that tumor a-pressing against the brain. What happens if it's not pressing any longer?"

"The memories might stay, now that they've been started, even with the original stimulus removed. It might have been a 'little stroke' that started it, just like we thought originally."

"But you can't guarantee it, can you?" She fixed me with a stare until I looked away.

"No. No guarantees."

"Then I don't want it." I turned back in time to see her face tighten momentarily into a wince.

"It will relieve the pain," I assured her.

"Nothing will relieve the pain. Nothing. Because it ain't that sort of pain. There's my Pa, my Ma, Green, Little Zach and his Sweet Annie. Ben and Joe and all the others I would never let cozy up to me. They're all waiting for me over in Gloryland. I don't know why the Good Man has kept me here so long. H'isn't punishment for killing Ma. I know that now. There must be a reason for it; but I'm a-weary of the waiting. If'n I have this operation like you want, what difference will it make? A few months? Doc, I won't live those months in silence."

My Chloe has dimples and smiles, I must own;
But, though she could smile, yet in truth she could frown.
But tell me, ye lovers of liquor divine,
Did you e'er see a frown in a bumper of wine?

There is something about the ice cold shock of a perfect martini. The pine tree scent of the gin. The smooth liquid sliding down the throat.

Then, a half second later, wham! It hits you. And in that half second, there is an hour of insight; though, sometimes, that hour comes very late at night. You can see with the same icy clarity of the drink. You can see the trail of choices behind you. Paths that led up rocky pitches; paths beside still waters. You can see where the paths forked, where, had you turned that way instead of this, you'd not be here today. You can even, sometimes, see where, when the paths forked, people took different trails. "Paul!"

And you can wonder whether you can ever find that fork again.

I turned to see Brenda drop her briefcase on the sofa. "Paul! I *never* see you drinking."

Subtext: Do you drink a lot in secret when I can't see you? Sub-subtext: Are you an alcoholic? Holding a conversation with Brenda was a challenge. Her words were multi-layered; and you never knew on which layer to answer.

I placed my martini glass, still half-full, carefully down upon the sideboard, beside the others. It spilled a little as I did, defying the laws of gravity. I faced her squarely. "I'm running out of time," I said.

She looked at me for a moment. Then she said, "That's right. I'd wondered if you knew."

"I'm running out of time," I repeated. "She'll die before I know."

"*She*. ..." Brenda pulled her elbows in tight against her sides. "I don't want to hear this."

"That old woman. To live so long, only to die just now."

"The old woman from the home? *She* has you upset? For God's sake, Paul." And she turned away from me.

"You don't understand. She could save Dee-dee."

Brenda's head jerked a little to the left. Then she retrieved her briefcase and shook herself all over, as if preparing to leave. "How can a dying old woman save a dying old girl?"

"She's yin to Dee-dee's yang. The Universe is neutral. There's a plus sign for every minus. But she wants to go over Jordan and I ... can't stop her. And I don't understand why I can't."

"You're not making any sense, Paul. How many of those have you had?"

"She's two centuries old, Brenda. Two centuries old. She was a swinger and a sheba and a daisy and a pippin. She hears songs, in her head; but sometimes they're wrong, except they're right. The words are different.

Older. 'Old Zip Coon,' instead of 'Turkey in the Straw.' 'Lovely Fan', instead of 'Buffalo Gals.' 'Bright Mohawk Valley,' instead of 'Red River Valley.' She read *Moral Physiology*, when it first came out. Mae did. Do you know the book? *Moral Physiology*, by Robert Dale Owen? No, of course not. It was all about birth control and it sold twenty-five thousand copies even though newspapers and magazines refused to carry the ads *and it was published in 18-god-damned-30*. She voted for Zachary Taylor, and her Pa fought in the Creek War, and her husband died at Resaca, and she saw Abraham-fucking-Lincoln—"

"Paul, can you hear yourself? You're talking crazy."

"Did you know *The Gladiator* debuted in New York in 1831? 'Ho! slaves, arise! Freedom . . . Freedom and revenge!' " I struck a pose, one fist raised.

"I can't stand to watch you like this, Paul. You're sopping drunk."

"And you're out late every night." Which was totally irrelevant to our discussion, but the tongue has a life of its own.

Through teeth clenched tight, she answered: "I have a job to keep."

I took a step away from the sideboard, and there must have been something wrong with the floorboards. Perhaps the support beam had begun to sag, because the floor suddenly tilted. I grabbed for the back of the armchair. The lamp beside it wobbled and I grabbed it with my other hand to keep it still.

Awkwardly twisted, half bent over, I looked at Brenda and spoke distinctly. "Mae Holloway is two centuries old. There is something in her genes. We think. Singer and Peeler and I. We think that with enough time. With enough time. Singer and Peeler can crack the secret. They can tailor a ... tailor a . . . ." I hunted for the right word, found it scuttling about on the floor and snatched it. "Nanomachine." Triumph. "Tailor a nanomachine that can repair Dee-dee's cells. But Mae is dying. She has a brain tumor, and it's killing her. There's a treatment. An experimental treatment. It looks very good. But Mae won't take it. She doesn't want it. She wants to sleep."

I don't know what I expected. I expected hope, or disbelief. I expected a demand of proof, or for more details. I expected her to say, 'do anything to save my daughter!' I expected anything but indifference.

Brenda brushed imaginary dust from her briefcase and turned away. "Do what you always do, Paul. Just ignore what she wants."

I was in the clinic at the Home the next day when I received the call from the hospital. My head felt as if nails had been driven into it. I was queasy from the hangover. When the phone rang and I picked it up, a tinny voice on the other end spoke crisply and urgently and asked that I come over right away. I don't remember what I said, or even that I said anything; and I don't suppose my caller expected a coherent answer. My numb fingers fumbled the phone several times before it sat right in its cradle. *Heart attack*, I thought. And as quickly as that, the time runs out.

But they hadn't said she was dead. They hadn't said she was dead.

I hope that there was no traffic on the road when I raced to the hospital, for I remember nothing of the journey. Three times along the way I picked up the car phone to call the hospital for more information, and three times I replaced it. It was better not to know. Half an hour, with the lights right and the speed law ignored. That was thirty minutes in which hope was thinkable.

Smythe, the cardio-vascular man, met me in the corridor outside her room. He grabbed me by both my arms and steadied me. I could not understand why he was grinning. What possible reason could there be?

"She'll live, mon," he said. "It was a near thing, but she'll live."

I stared at Smythe without comprehension. He shook me by the arm, hard. My head felt like shattered glass.

"She'll live," he said again. His teeth were impossibly white.

I brushed him off and stepped into the room. *She'll live*? Then there was still time. Everything else was detail. My body felt suddenly weak, as if a stopcock had been pulled and all my sand had drained away. I staggered as far as the bed side, where I sank into a steel and vinyl chair. Smythe waited by the door, in the corridor, giving me the time alone.

Dee-dee lay asleep upon the bed, breathing slowly and softly through a tube set up her nose. An intravenous tube entered her left arm. Remote sensor implants on her skull and chest broadcast her heartbeat and breathing and brain waves to stations throughout the hospital. Smythe was never more than a terminal away from knowing her condition. I reached out and took her right hand in mine and gently stroked the back of it. "Hello, Dee-dee, I came as fast as I could. Why didn't. . . ."I swallowed hard. "Why didn't you wait for me to tuck you in?" Dee-dee was still

unconscious from the anesthetic. She couldn't hear me; but a quiet sob, quickly stifled, drew my attention to the accordion-pleated expandable wall, drawn halfway out on the opposite side of the bed. When I walked around it, I saw Consuela sitting in a chair on the other side. Her features were tightly leashed, but the tracks of tears had darkened both her cheeks. Her hands were pale where they gripped the arms of the chair. "Connie!"

"Oh, Paul, we almost lost her. We almost lost her."

It slammed against my chest with the force of a hammer, a harder stroke for having missed. *Someday we will*. I took Connie's hand and brushed the backside of it as I had brushed Dee-dee's. "It's all right now," I said. "She is such a sweet child. She never complains."

Prognosis: The life span is shortened by relentless arterial athermoatosis. Death usually occurs at puberty. "She's all right now."

"For a little while. But it will become worse, and worse; until. . . ." She leaned her head against me and I cradled her; I nibbed her neck and shoulders, smoothed her hair. With my left hand, I caressed her cheek. *It is not the end; but it is the beginning of the end*.

"We knew it would happen." The emotions are a very odd thing. When all was dark, when I believed myself helpless, I could endure that knowledge. It was my comfort. But now that there was a ray of light, I found it overwhelming me, crushing me so that I could hardly breathe. A sliver of sunshine makes a darkened room seem blacker still. I could live with Fate, but not with Hope. I found that there was a new factor in the equation now. I found that I could fail. "Where is Brenda?" I asked.

Connie pulled herself from my arms, turned and pulled aside the curtain that separated her from Deirdre. "She didn't come."

"What?"

"She didn't come."

Something went out of me then, like a light switch turned off. I didn't say anything for the longest time. I drifted away from Connie over toward the window. A thick stand of trees filled the block across the street from the hospital. Leaves fresh and green with spring. Forsythia bursting yellow. A flock of birds banked in unison over the treetops and shied off from the high tension lines behind. I thought of the time when Brenda and I first met on campus, both of us young and full of the future. I remembered how we had talked about making a difference in the world.

I found Brenda at home. I found her in the family room, late at night after I had finally left the hospital. She was still clad in her business suit, as if she had just come from the office. She was standing rigidly by the bookcase, with her eyes dry and red and puffy, with Dee-dee's book, *The Boxcar Children*, in her hands. I had the impression that she had stood that way for hours.

"I tried to come, Paul," she said before I could get any words out. "I tried to come, but I couldn't. I was paralyzed; I couldn't move."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Connie was there. She'll stay until I get changed and return." I rubbed a hand across my face. "God, I'm tired."

"She's taken my place, hasn't she? She feeds Deirdre, she nurses her, she tutors her. Tell me, Paul, has she taken over *all* my duties?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I didn't think there was room in your life for anyone beside your daughter. You've shut everyone else out."

"I never pushed you away. You ran."

"It needs more than that. It needs more than not pushing. You could have caught me, if you'd reached. There was an awful row at the office today. Crowe and FitzPatrick argued. They're dissolving the partnership. I was taking too long to say yes to the partnership offer; so Sean became curious and. ... He found out Walther had wanted a 'yes' on a lot more, so we filed for harrass. . . . Oh, hell. It doesn't matter any more; none of it."

She was talking about events on another planet. I stepped to her side and took hold of the book. It was frozen to her fingers. I tugged, and pried it from her grasp. Slowly, her hands clenched into balls, but she did not lower her arms. I turned to place the book on the shelf and Brenda said in a small voice, "It doesn't go there, Paul."

"Damn it, Brenda!"

"I'm afraid," she said. "Oh, God, I'm afraid. Someday 1 will open up the tableware drawer and find her baby spoon; or I'll look under the sofa and find a ball that had rolled there forgotten. Or I'll find one of her dresses bundled up in the wash. And I won't be able to take it. Do you understand? Do you know what it's like? Do you have any feelings at all? How can you look at that shelf and remember that *her* book had once lain there? Look at that kitchen table and remember her high chair and how we played airplane with her food? Look into a room full of toys, with no child any more to play with them? Everywhere I look I see an aching void."

With a sudden rush of tenderness, I pulled her to me, but she remained stiff and unyielding in my arms. Yet, we all mourn in our own ways. "She did not die, Brenda. She'll be OK."

"This time. But, Paul, I can't look forward to a lifetime looking back. At the little girl who grew up and grew old, and went away before I ever got to know her. Paul, it isn't right. It isn't right, Paul. It isn't right for a child to die before the parent."

"So, you'll close her out of your mind? Is that the answer? Create the void now? You'll push all those memories into one room and then close the door? You can't do that. If we forget her, it will be as if she had never lived."

She softened at last and her arms went around me. "What can I do? I've lost her, and I've lost you, and I've lost . . . everything."

We stood there locked together. I could feel her small, tightly-controlled sobs trembling against me. Sometimes the reins have been held so close for so long that you can never drop them, never even know if they have been dropped. The damp of her tears seeped through my shirt. Past her, I could see the shelf with *The Boxcar Children* lying flat upon it and I tried to imagine how, in future years, I could ever look on that shelf again without grief.

"Tell me the tales that to me were so dear
Long, long ago; long, long ago.
Sing me the songs I delighted to hear
Long, long ago, long ago."

Dee-dee was wired. There was a tube up her nose and another in her arm. A bag of glucose hung on a pole rack by her bed, steadily dripping into an accumulator and thence through the tube. A catheter took her wastes away. A pad on her finger and a cuff around her arm were plugged into a CRT monitor. I smiled when I saw she was awake.

" Hi, Daddy." Her voice was weak and hoarse, a byproduct of the anaesthesia.

"Hi, Dee-dee. How do you feel?"

"Yucky."

"Me, too. You're a TV star." I pointed to the monitor, where red and

yellow and white lines hopped and skipped across the screen. Heart rate, blood pressure. Every time she breathed, the white line crested and dropped. She didn't say anything and I listened for a moment to the sucking sound that the nose tube made. A kid trying for the last bit of soda in the can. The liquid it carried off was brown, which meant that there was still a little blood. "Connie is here." I nodded to the other side of the bed.

Dee-dee turned her eyes, but not her head. "Hello, Connie. I can't see you."

Consuela moved a little into her field of vision. "Good morning, Little One. You have a splendid view from your window."

"Nurse Jeannie told me that. Wish I could see. ..."

"Then, I will tell you what it looks like. You can see the north end of town— all those lovely, old houses—and far off past them, on the edge of the world, the blue-ridge mountain wall and, in the very center of it, the Gap; and through the Gap, you can see the mountains beyond."

"It sounds beautiful. ..."

"Oh, it is. I wish I could be here instead of you, just so I could have the view."

I looked up at Connie when she said that and, for a moment, we locked gazes with one another. I could see the truth of her words in her eyes.

And then I saw surprise. Surprise and something else besides. I looked over my shoulder—and Brenda was standing there in the doorway, smartly dressed, on wobbly legs, with her purse clutched tightly in her hands before her.

"The nurses," she said. "The nurses said she could have two visitors at a time." Visiting was allowed every three hours, but only for an hour and only two visitors at a time. I was a doctor and Connie was a nurse and the staff cut us a little slack, but the rules were there for a reason. Consuela stood.

"I will leave."

Brenda looked at her and caught her lower lip between her teeth. She laid her purse with military precision on a small table beside the bed. "I would like to spend some time with Deirdre, Paul. If you don't mind."

I nodded. As I stood up I gave Dee-dee a smile and a little squeeze on her arm. "Mommy's here," I told her.

Connie and I left them alone together (a curious expression,

that—"alone together") and waited in the outer nursing area. I didn't eavesdrop, though I did overhear Brenda whisper at one point, "No, darling, it was never anything that *you* did wrong." Maybe it wasn't much, not when weighted against those years of inattention. It wasn't much; but it wasn't nothing. I knew—maybe for the first time—how much it cost Brenda to take on these memories, to take on the risks of remembering; because she was right. If in later years you remembered nothing, you would feel no pain.

And yet, I had seen two centuries of pain come washing back, bringing with it joy.

Children recover remarkably well. Drop them, and they bounce. Maybe not so high as before, but they do rebound. Dee-dee bore a solemn air about her for a day or two, sensing, without being told, that she had almost "gone away." But to a child, a day is a lifetime, and a week is forever; and she was soon in the recovery ward, playing with the other children. Rheumatic children with heart murmurs; shaven-headed children staring leukemia in the face; broken children with scars and cigarette burns. . . . They played with an impossible cheerfulness, living, as most children did, in the moment. But then, the Now was all most of them would ever have.

There came a day when Dee-dee was not in her room when I arrived. Connie sat framed in a bright square of sunlight, reading a book. She looked up when I walked in. "Deirdre has gone to visit a new friend," she said.

"Oh." A strange clash of emotions: Happy she was up and about again, even if confined to a wheelchair; disappointed that she was not there to greet me.

"She will return soon, I think."

"Well," I said, "we had wanted her to become more active."

Consuela closed her book and laid it on the small table beside her. "I suppose you will no longer need my services," she said. She did not look at me when she said it, but out the window at the new-born summer.

"Not need you? Don't be foolish."

"She has her mother back, now."

Every morning before work; every evening after. Pressing lost years into a few hours. "She still needs you."

"The hospital staff cares for her now."

I shook my head. "It's not that she *needs* you, but that she needs *you*. You are not only her nurse."

"If I take on new clients," she went on as if I had not spoken, "I can do things properly. I can visit at the appointed times, perform my duties, and leave; and not allow them such a place in my heart when they are gone."

"If people don't leave a hole in your life when they are gone, Consuela, they were never in your life at all."

She turned away from the window and looked at me. "Or two holes."

I dropped my gaze, looked instead at the rumpled bed.

"In many ways," I heard her say, "you are a cold man, Doctor. Uncaring and thoughtless. But it was the fruit of bitterness and despair. I thought you deserved better than you had. And you love her as deeply as I. If death could be forestalled by clinging tight, Deirdre would never leave us."

I had no answer for her, but I allowed my eyes to seek out hers.

"I thought," she said, "sometimes, at night, when I played my flute, that because we shared that love . . . that we could share another."

"It must be lonely for you here, in a strange country, with a strange language and customs. No family and fewer friends. I must be a wretched man for never having asked."

She shook her head. "You had your own worry. A large one that consumed you."

"Consuela Montejo, if you leave, you would leave as great a hole in my life as in Dee-dee's."

"And in Mrs. Wilkes's." She smiled a little bit. "It is a very odd thing, but I believe that if I stayed I might even grow to like her."

"She was frightened. She thought she could cauterize the wound before she received it. It was only when she nearly lost Dee-dee that she suddenly realized that she had never had her."

Consuela stood and walked to the bed. She touched the sheet and smoothed it out, pulling the wrinkles flat. She shook her head. "It will hurt if I go; it will hurt if I stay. But Mrs. Wilkes deserves this one chance."

I reached out and took her hand, and she reached out and took mine. Had Brenda walked in then, I do not know what she would have made of our embrace. I do not know what I made of it. I think I would have pulled Brenda in with us, the three of us arm in arm in arm.

The really strange thing was how inevitable it all was in hindsight.

When I left Consuela, I went to visit Mae. It had been nearly two weeks since I had last seen her and it occurred to me that the old bat might be lonely, too.

And what the hell, she could put up with me and I could put up with her. I found my Dee-dee in Mae Holloway's room. The two of them had their heads bent close together, giggling over something. Deirdre was strapped to her electric wheelchair and Mae lay flat upon her bed; but I was struck by how alike they looked. Two gnarled and bent figures with pale, spotted skin stretched tight over their bones, lit from within by a pure, childlike joy. Two old women; two young girls. Deirdre looked up and saw me.

"Daddy! Granny Mae has been teaching me the most wonderful songs."

Mae Holloway lifted her head a little. "Yours?" she said in a hoarse whisper. "This woman-child is yours?"

"Yes," I said, bending to kiss Dee-dee's cheek. "All mine." No. Not *all* mine. There were others who shared her.

"Listen to the song Granny Mae taught me! It goes like this."

I looked over Dee-dee's head at the old woman. "She didn't tell you?"

"Noor brought her in, but didn't say aye, yea, or no. Just that she thought we should meet."

Dee-dee began singing in her high, piping voice.

"The days go slowly by, Lorena.
The snow is on the grass again.
The years go slowly by Lorena. ..."

"Her days are going by too fast, ain't they?" Mae said. I nodded and saw how her eyes lingered on my little girl. "Growing old in the blink of an eye," she said softly. "Oh, I know how that feels."

"Granny Mae tells such interesting stories," Dee-dee insisted. "Did you know she saw Abraham Lincoln one time?" I rubbed her thinning hair. Too young to know how impossible that was. Too young to doubt.

Mae's hand sought out Dee-dee's and clenched hold of it. "Doc, I'll have me that operation."

"What?"

"I'll have me that operation. The one that's supposed to make this tumor of mine go away. I'll have it, even if my music and my memories go with it."

"You will? Why?"

"Because I know why you been poking me and taking my blood. And I know why the Good Lord has kept me here for all this long time."

Noor Khan was waiting in the hallway when I stepped out of the room.

"Ah, Doctor," I said. "How are things at Sunny Dale?"

"Quiet," she said. "Though the residents are all asking when you will be back."

I shrugged. "Old people dislike upsets to their routine. They grew used to having me around."

Khan said, "I never knew about your little girl. I heard it from Smythe. Why did you never tell me?"

I shrugged again. "I never thought it was anyone's business."

Khan accepted the statement. "After you told Wing and me of Mae's remarkable longevity, I knew you were taking blood samples to that genetic engineering firm—"

"Singer and Peeler."

"Yes. I thought you had . . . other reasons."

"What, that I would find the secret of the Tree of Life?" I shook my head. "I never thought to ask for so much. Mae has lived most her life as an old woman. I would not count that a blessing. But to live a normal life? To set right what had come out wrong? Yes, and I won't apologize. Neither would you, if it were your daughter."

"Is Singer close? To a solution?"

"I don't know. Neither do they. We won't know how close we are until we stumble right into it. But we've bought a little time now, thanks to you. Is that why you did it? Because you knew that meeting my daughter would convince Mae to accept the Culver-Blaese gene therapy?"

Khan shook her head. "No. I never even thought of that."

"Then, why?"

"Sometimes," said Khan, looking back into the room where the young girl and the old girl taught each other songs. "Sometimes, there are other medicines, for other kinds of hurts."

I seek no more the fine and gay.
For each does but remind me
How swift the hours did pass away
With the girl I left behind me.

They are all gone now. All gone. Mae, Dee-dee, all of them. Consuela was first. Brenda's partnership arrangement with FitzPatrick—telecommuting, they called it—left no place for her at the house. She came to visit Dee-dee, and she and Brenda often met for coffee—what they talked about I do not know—but she stopped coming after Dee-dee passed on and I have not seen her in years.

Brenda, too. She lives in LA, now. I visit her when I'm on the Coast and we go out together, and catch dinner or a show. But she can't look at me without thinking of *her*, and neither can I, and sometimes, that becomes too much.

There was no bitterness in the divorce. There was no bitterness left in either of us. But Dee-dee's illness had been a fault line splitting the earth. A chasm had run through our lives, and we jumped out of its way, but Brenda to one side and I, to the other. When Dee-dee was gone, there was no bridge across it and we found that we shared nothing between us but a void.

The operation bought Mae six months. Six months of silence in her mind before the stroke took her. She complained a little, now and then, about her quickly evaporating memories, but sometimes I read to her from my notes, or played the tape recorder, and that made her feel a little better. When she heard about seeing Lincoln on the White House lawn, she just shook her head and said, "Isn't that a wonder?" The last time I saw Mae Holloway, she was fumbling after some elusive memory of her Mister that kept slipping like water through the fingers of her mind, when she suddenly brightened, looked at me, and smiled. "They're all a-waiting," she whispered, and then all the lights went out.

And Dee-dee.

Dee-dee.

Still, after all these years, I cannot talk about my little girl.

They call it the Deirdre-Holloway treatment. I insisted on that. It came too late for her, but maybe there are a few thousand fewer children who die now each year because of it. Sometimes I think it was worth it. Sometimes I wonder selfishly why it could not have come earlier. I wonder if there wasn't something I could have done differently that would have brought us home sooner.

Singer found the key; or Peeler did, or they found it together. Three years later, thank God. Had the break-through followed too soon on Deirdre's death, I could not have borne it. The income from the book funded it and it took every penny, but I feel no poorer for it.

It's a mutation, Peeler told me, that codes for an enzyme that retards catabolism. In males, the gene's expression is suppressed by testosterone. In females, there's a sudden acceleration of fetal development in the last months of pregnancy that almost always kills the mother, and often the child as well. After birth, aging slows quickly until it nearly stops at puberty. It only resumes after menopause. Generations of gene-spliced lab mice lived and died to establish that. Sweet Annie's dear, dead child would have been programmed for the same long future had she lived.

Is the line extinct now? Or does the gene linger out there, carried safely by males waiting unwittingly to kill their mates with daughters?

I don't know. I never found another like Mae, despite my years of practice in geriatrics.

When I retired from the Home, the residents gave me a party, though none of them were of that original group—Jimmy, Rose, Leo, Old Man Morton. . . . By then I had seen them all through their final passage. When the residents began approaching my own age, I knew it was time to take down my shingle.

I find myself thinking more and more about the past these days. About Mae and the Home and Khan—I heard from my neighbor's boy that she is still in practice, in pediatrics now. Sometimes, I think of my own parents and the old river town where I grew up. The old cliffside stairs. Hiking down along the creek. Hasbrouk's grocery down on the corner.

The memories are dim and faded, brittle with time.

And I don't remember the music, at all. My memories are silent, like an old Chaplin film. I've had my house wired, and tapes play continually, but

it isn't the same. The melodies do not come from within; they do not come from the heart.

They tell me I have a tumor in my left temporal lobe, and it's growing. It may be operable. It may not be. Wing wants to try Culver-Blaese, but I won't let him. I keep hoping.

I want to remember. I want to remember Mae. Yes, and Consuela and Brenda, too. And Dee-dee most of all. I want to remember them all. I want to hear them singing.