

ELIZABETH HAND

LAST SUMMER AT MARS HILL

Even before they left home, Moony knew her mother wouldn't return from Mars Hill that year. Jason had called her from his father's house in San Francisco --

"I had a dream about you last night," he'd said, his voice cracking the way it did when he was excited. "We were at Mars Hill, and my father was there, and my mother, too-- I knew it was a dream, like can you imagine my mother at Mars Hill? -- and you had on this sort of long black dress and you were sitting alone by the pier. And you said, 'This is it, Jason. We'll never see this again.' I felt like crying, I tried to hug you but my father pulled me back. And then I woke up."

She didn't say anything. Finally Jason prodded her. "Weird, huh, Moony? I mean, don't you think it's weird?"

She shrugged and rolled her eyes, then sighed loudly so that he'd be able to tell she was upset. "Thanks, Jason. Like that's supposed to cheer me up?"

A long silence, then Jason's breathless voice again. "Shit, Moony, I'm sorry. I didn't --"

She laughed, a little nervously, and said, "Forget it. So when you flying out to Maine?"

Nobody but Jason called her Moony, not at home at least, not in Kamensic Village. There she was Maggie Rheining, which was the name that appeared under her junior picture in the high school yearbook.

But the name that had been neatly typed on the birth certificate in San Francisco sixteen years ago, the name Jason and everyone at Mars Hill knew her by, was Shadowmoon Starlight Rising. Maggie would have shaved her head before she'd admit her real name to anyone at school. At Mars Hill it wasn't so weird:

there was Adele Grose, known professionally as Madame Olaf; Shasta Daisy O'Hare

and Rvis Capricorn; Martin Dionysos, who was Jason's father; and Ariel Rising, nee Amanda Mac Rheining, who was Moony's mother. For most of the year Moony and

Ariel lived in Kamensic Village, the affluent New York exurb where her mother ran Earthly Delights Catering and Moony attended high school, and everything was

pretty much normal. It was only in June that they headed north to Maine, to the

tiny spiritualist community where they had summered for as long as Moony could remember. And even though she could have stayed in Kamensic with Ariel's friends

the Loomises, at the last minute (and due in large part to Jason's urging, and threats if she abandoned him there] she decided to go with her mother to Mars Hill. Later, whenever she thought how close she'd come to not going, it made

her

feel sick: as though she'd missed a flight and later found out the plane had crashed.

Because much as she loved it, Moony had always been a little ashamed of Mars Hill. It was such a dinky place, plopped in the middle of nowhere on the rocky Maine coast -- tiny shingle-style Carpenter Gothic cottages, all tumbled into disrepair, their elaborate trim rotting and strong with spider-webs; poppies and

lupines and tiger lilies sprawling bravely atop clumps of chickweed and dandelions of truly monstrous size; even the sign by the pier so faded you almost couldn't read the earnest lettering:

MARS HILL SPIRITUALIST COMMUNITY FOUNDED 1883

"Why doesn't your father take somebody's violet aura and repaint the damn sign with it?" she'd exploded once to Jason.

Jason looked surprised. "I kind of like it like that," he said, shaking the hair

from his face and tossing a sea urchin at the silvered board. "It looks like it

was put up by our Founding Mothers." But for years Moony almost couldn't stand to even look at the sign, it embarrassed her so much.

It was Jason who helped her get over that. They'd met when they were both twelve.

It was the summer that Ariel started the workshop in Creative Psychokinesis, the

first summer that Jason and his father had stayed at Mars Hill.

"Hey," Jason had said, too loudly, when they found themselves left alone while the adults swapped wine coolers and introductions at the summer's first barbecue. They were the only kids in sight. There were no other families and few

conventionally married couples at Mars Hill. The community had been the cause of

more than one custody battle that had ended with wistful children sent to spend

the summer with a more respectable parent in Boston or Manhattan or Bar Harbor.

"That lady there with my father --"

He stuck his thumb out to indicate Ariel, her long black hair frizzed and bound

with leather thongs, an old multicolored skirt flapping around her legs. She was

talking to a slender man with close-cropped blond hair and goatee, wearing a sky-blue eartan and shabby Birkenstock sandals. "That your mom?"

"Yeah." Moony shrugged and glanced at the man in the cartan. He and Ariel both turned to look at their children. The man grinned and raised his wine glass. Ariel did a little pirouette and blew a kiss at Moony.

"Looks like she did too much of the brown acid at Woodstock," Jason announced, and flopped onto the grass. Moony glared down at him.

"She wasn't at Woodstock, asshole," she said, and had started to walk away when

the boy called after her.

"Hey -- it's a joke! My name's Jason --" He pointed at the man with Ariel. "That's my father. Martin Dionysos. But like that's not his real name, okay? His real name is Schuster but he changed it, but I'm Jason Schuster. He's a painter. We don't know anyone here. I mean, does it ever get above forty degrees?"

He scrambled to his feet and looked at her beseechingly. Smaller even than Moony herself, so slender he should have looked younger than her, except that his sharp face beneath floppy white-blond hair was always twisted into some ironic pronouncement, his blue eyes always flickering somewhere between derision and pleading.

"No," Moony said slowly. The part about Jason not changing his name got to her. She stared pointedly at his thin arms prickled with gooseflesh, the fashionable surfer-logo T-shirt that hung nearly to his knees. "You're gonna freeze your skinny ass off here in Maine, Jason Schuster." And she grinned.

He was from San Francisco. His father was a well-known artist and a member of the Raging Faery Queens, a gay pagan group that lived in the Bay Area and staged elaborately beautiful solstice gatherings and AIDS benefits. At Mars Hill, Martin Dionysos gave workshops on strengthening your aura and on clear nights led the community's men in chanting at the moon as it rose above Penobscot Bay. Jason was so diffident about his father and his father's work that Moony was surprised, the single time she visited him on the West Coast, to find her friend's room plastered with flyers advertising Faery gatherings and newspaper photos of Martin and Jason at various ACT-HP events. In the fall Jason would be staying in Maine, while she returned to high school. Ultimately it was the thought that she might not see him again that made Moony decide to spend this last summer at Mars Hill.

"That's what you're wearing to First Night?"

Moony started at her mother's voice, turned to see Ariel in the middle of the summer cottage's tiny living room. Wine rocked back and forth in her mother's glass, gold shot with tiny sunbursts from the crystals hung from every window. "What about your new dress?"

Moony shrugged. She couldn't tell her mother about Jason's dream, about the black dress he'd seen her wearing. Ariel set great store by dreams, especially these last few months. What she'd make of one in which Moony appeared in a black dress and Ariel didn't appear at all, Moony didn't want to know.

"Too hot," Moony said. She paused in front of the window and adjusted one of three silver crosses dangling from her right ear. "Plus I don't want to upstage you."

Ariel smiled. "Smart kid," she said, and took another sip of her wine.

Ariel wore what she wore to every First Night: an ankle-length patchwork skirt so worn and frayed it could only be taken out once a year, on this ceremonial

occasion. Squares of velvet and threadbare satin were emblazoned with suns and moons and astrological symbols, each one with a date neatly embroidered in crimson thread.

Sedona, Aug 15, 1972. Mystery Hill, NH, 5/80. The Winter Garden 1969. Jajouka, Tangiers, Marrakech 1968.

Along the bottom, where many of the original squares had disintegrated into fine webs of denim and chambray, she had begun piecing a new section: squares that each held a pair of dates, a name, an embroidered flower. These were for friends who had died. Some of them were people lost two decades earlier, to the War, or drugs or misadventure; names that Moony knew only from stories told year after year at Mars Hill or in the kitchen at home.

But most of the names were those of people Moony herself had known. Friends of Ariel's who had gathered during the divorce, and again, later, when Moony's father died, and during the myriad affairs and breakups that followed. Men and women who had started out as Ariel's customers and ended as family. Uncle Bob and Uncle Raymond and Uncle Nigel. Laurie Salas. Tommy McElroy and Scan Jacobson. Chas Bowen and Martina Glass. And, on the very bottom edge of the skirt, a square still peacock-bright with its blood-colored rose, crimson letters spelling out John's name and a date the previous spring.

As a child Moony had loved that skirt. She loved to watch her mother sashay into the tiny gazebo at Mars Hill on First Night and see all the others laugh and run to her, their fingers plucking at the patchwork folds as though to read something there, tomorrow's weather perhaps, or the names of suitors yet unmet.

But now Moony hated the skirt. It was morbid, even Jason agreed with that.

"They've already got a fucking quilt," he said, bitterly. "We don't need your more wearing a goddamn skirt."

Moony nodded, miserable, and tried not to think of what they were most afraid of: Martin's name there beside John's, and a little rosebud done in flower-knots. Martin's name, or Ariel's.

There was a key to the skirt, Moony thought as she watched her mother sip her wine; a way to decode all the arcane symbols Ariel had stitched there over the last few months. It lay in a heavy manila envelope somewhere in Ariel's room, an envelope that Ariel had started carrying with her in February, and which grew heavier and heavier as the weeks passed. Moony knew there was something horrible in that envelope, something to do with the countless appointments Ariel had since February, with the whispered phone calls and macrobiotic diets and the resurgence of her mother's belief in devas and earth spirits and plain old-fashioned ghosts.

But Moony said nothing of this, only smiled and fidgeted with her earrings. "Go ahead," she told Ariel, who had settled at the edge of a wicker hassock and peered up at her daughter through her wineglass. "I just got to get some stuff."

Ariel waited in silence, then drained her glass and set it on the floor.
"Okay.

Jason and Martin are here. I saw them on the hill --"

"Yeah. I know, I talked to them, they went to Camden for lunch, they can't wait

to see you." Moony paced to the door to her room, trying not to look impatient.

Already her heart was pounding.

"Okay," Ariel said again. She sounded breathless and a little drunk. She had ringed her aquamarine eyes with kohl, to hide how tired she was. Over the last few months she'd grown so thin that her cheekbones had emerged again, after years of hiding in her round peasant's face. Her voice was hoarse as she asked,

"So you'll be there soon?"

Moony nodded. She curled a long tendril of hair, dark as her mother's but finer,

and brushed her cheek with it. "I'm just gonna pull my hair back. Jason'll give

me shit if I don't."

Ariel laughed. Jason thought that they were all a bunch of hippies. "Okay." She

crossed the room unsteadily, touching the backs of chairs, a windows ill, the edge of a buoy hanging from the wall. When the screen door banged shut behind her Moony sighed with relief.

For a few minutes she waited, to make sure her mother hadn't forgotten something, like maybe a joint or another glass of wine. She could see out the window to where people were starting downhill toward the gazebo. If you didn't look too closely, they might have been any group of summer people gathering for

a party in the long northern afternoon.

But after a minute or two their oddities started to show. You saw them for what

they really were: men and women just getting used to a peculiar middle age. They

all had hair a little too long or too short, a little too gray or garishly colored. The women, like Ariel, wrapped in clothes like banners from a triumphant campaign now forgotten. Velvet tunics threaded with silver, miniskirts crossing pale bare blue-veined thighs, Pucci blouses back in vogue again. The men more subdued, in chinos some of them, or old jeans that were a little too bright and neatly pressed. She could see Martin beneath the lilacs by

the gazebo, in baggy psychedelic shorts and T-shirt, his gray-blond hair longer

than it had been and pulled back into a wispy ponytail. Beside him Jason leaned

against a tree, self-consciously casual, smoking a cigarette as he watched the First Night promenade. At sight of Ariel he raised one hand in a lazy wave.

And now the last two stragglers reached the bottom of the hill. Mrs. Grose carrying her familiar, an arthritic wheezing pug named Milton: Ancient Mrs. Grose, who smelled of Sen-sen and whiskey, and prided herself on being one of the spiritualists exposed as a fraud by Houdini. And Gary Bonetti, who (the story went) five years ago had seen a vision of his own death in the City, a

knife wielded by a crack-crazed kid in Washington Heights. Since then, he had stayed on at Mars Hill with Mrs. Grose, the community's only other year-round resident.

Moony ducked back from the window as her mother turned to stare up at the cottage. She waited until Ariel looked away again, as Martin and Jason beckoned her toward the gazebo.

"Okay," Moony whispered. She took a step across the room and stopped. An overwhelming smell of cigarette smoke suddenly filled the air, though there was no smoke to be seen. She coughed, waving her hand in front of her face.

"Damn it, Jason," she hissed beneath her breath. The smell was gone as abruptly as it had appeared. "I'll be right there --"

She slipped through the narrow hallway with its old silver-touched mirrors and faded Maxfield Parrish prints, and went into Ariel's room. It still had its beginning-of-summer smell, mothballs and the salt sweetness of rugosa roses blooming at the beach's edge. The old chenille bedspread was rumpled where Ariel had lain upon it, exhausted by the flight from LaGuardia to Boston, from Boston via puddle jumper to the tiny airport at Green Turtle Reach. Moony pressed her hand upon the spread and closed her eyes. She tried to focus as Jason had taught her, tried to dredge up the image of her mother stretched upon the bed. And suddenly there it was, a faint sharp stab of pain in her left breast, like a stitch in her side from running. She opened her eyes quickly, fighting the dizziness and panicky feeling. Then she went to the bureau.

At home she had never been able to find the envelope. It was always hidden away, just as the mail was always carefully sorted, the messages on the answering machine erased before she could get to them. But now it was as if Ariel had finally given up on hiding. The envelope was in the middle drawer, a worn cotton camisole draped halfheartedly across it. Moony took it carefully from the drawer and went to the bed, sat and slowly fanned the papers out.

They were hospital bills. Hospital bills and Blue Cross forms, cash register receipts for vitamins from the Waverly Drugstore with Ariel's crabbed script across the top. The bills were for tests only, tests and consultation.'s. Nothing for treatments; no receipts for medication other than vitamins. At the bottom of the envelope, rolled into a blue cylinder and tightened with a rubber band, she found the test results. Stray words floated in the air in front of her as Moony drew in a long shuddering breath.

Mammography results. Sectional biopsy. Fourth stage malignancy. Metastasized. Cancer. Her mother had breast cancer.

"Shit," she said. Her hands after she replaced the papers were shaking. From outside echoed summer music, and she could hear voices -- her mother's, Diana's,

Gary Bonetti's deep bass -- shouting above the tinny sound of a cassette player
--

"Wouldn't it be nice if we could wake up

In the kind of world where we belong? "

You bitch," Moony whispered. She stood at the front window and stared down the hill at the gazebo, her hands clamped beneath her armpits to keep them still. Her face was streaked with tears. "When were you going to tell me, when were you going to fucking tell met"

At the foot of Mars Hill, alone by a patch of daylilies stood Jason, staring back up at the cottage. A cigarette burned between his fingers, its scent miraculously filling the little room. Even from here Moony could tell that somehow and of course, he already knew.

Everyone had a hangover the next morning, not excluding Moony and Jason. In spite of that the two met in the community chapel. Jason brought a thermos of coffee, bright red and yellow dinosaurs stenciled on its sides, and blew ashes from the bench so she could sit down.

"You shouldn't smoke in here." Moony coughed and slumped beside him. Jason shrugged and stubbed out his cigarette, fished in his pocket and held out his open palm.

"Here. Ibuprofen and valerian capsules. And there's bourbon in the coffee."

Moony snorted but took the pills, shooting back a mouthful of tepid coffee and grimacing.

"Hair of the iguna," Jason said. "So really, Moony, you didn't know?"

"How the hell would I know?" Moony said wearily. "I mean, I knew it was something --"

She glanced sideways at her friend. His slender legs were crossed at the ankles and he was barefoot. Already dozens of mosquito bites pried his arms and legs. He was staring at the little altar in the center of the room. He looked paler than usual, more tired, but that was probably just the hangover.

From outside, the chapel looked like all the other buildings at Mars Hill, faded gray shingles and white trim. Inside there was one large open room, with benches arranged in a circle around the walls, facing in to the plain altar. The altar was heaped with wilting day lilies and lilacs, an empty bottle of chardonnay and a crumpled pack of Kents --Jason's brand -- and a black velvet hair ribbon that Moony recognized as her mother's. Beneath the ribbon was an old snapshot, curled at the edges. Moony knew the pose from years back. It showed her and Jason and Ariel and Martin, standing at the edge of the pier with their faces raised skyward, smiling and waving at Diana behind her camera. Moony made a face when

she saw it and took another swallow of coffee.

"I thought maybe she had AIDS," Moony said at last. "I knew she went to the Walker Clinic once, I heard her on the phone to Diana about it."

Jason nodded, his mouth set in a tight smile. "So you should be happy she doesn't. Hip hip hooray." Two years before Jason's father had tested HIV-positive. Martin's lover, John, had died that spring.

Moony turned so that he couldn't see her face. "She has breast cancer. It's metastasized. She won't see a doctor. This morning she let me feel it. . ."

Like a gnarled tree branch shoved beneath her mother's flesh, huge and hard and lumpy. Ariel thought she'd cry or faint or something but all Moony could do was wonder how she had never felt it before. Had she never noticed, or had it just been that long since she'd hugged her mother?

She started crying, and Jason drew closer to her.

"Hey," he whispered, his thin arm edging around her shoulders. "It's okay, Moony, don't cry, it's all right --"

How can you say that she felt like screaming, sobs constricting her throat so she couldn't speak. When she did talk the words came out in anguished grunts.

"They're dying -- how can they -- Jason --"

"Shh --" he murmured. "Don't cry, Moony, don't cry. . ."

Beside her, Jason sighed and fought the urge for another cigarette. He wished he'd thought about this earlier, come up with something to say that would make Moony feel better. Something like, Hey! Get used to Everybody dies! He tried to smile, but he felt only sorrow and a headache prodding at the corners of his eyes. Moony's head felt heavy on his shoulder. He shifted on the bench, stroking her hair and whispering until she grew quiet. Then they sat in silence.

He stared across the room, to the altar and the wall beyond, where a stained glass window would have been in another kind of chapel. Here, a single great picture window looked out onto the bay. In the distance he could see the Starry Islands glittering in the sunlight, and beyond them the emerald bulk of Blue Hill and Cadillac Mountain rising above the indigo water.

And, if he squinted, he could see Them. The Others, like tears or blots of light floating across his retina. The Golden Ones. The Greeters.

The Light Children.

"Hey!" he whispered. Moony sniffed and burrowed closer into his shoulder, but he wasn't talking to her. He was welcoming Them.

They were the real reason people had settled here, over a century ago. They were the reason Jason and Moony and their parents and all the others came here now;

although not everyone could see Them. Moony never had, nor Ariel's friend Diana;
although Diana believed in Them, and Moony did not. You never spoke of Them, and
if you did, it was always parenthetically and with a capital T --- "Rvis and I were looking at the moon last night [They were there) and we thought we saw a whale." Or, "Martin came over at midnight (he saw Them on the way) and we played
Scrabble. . ."

A few years earlier a movement was afoot, to change the way of referring to Them. In a single slender volume that was a history of the Mars Hill spiritualist community, They were referred to as the Light Children, but no one
ever really called Them that. Everyone just called them Them. It seemed the most
polite thing to do, really, since no one knew what They called Themselves.

"And we'd hate to offend Them," as Ariel said.

That was always a fear at Mars Hill. That, despite the gentle nature of the community's adherents, They inadvertently would be offended one day la
too-noisy
volleyball game on the rocky beach; a beer-fueled Solstice celebration
irrupting
into the dawn), and leave.

But They never did. Year after year the Light Children remained. They were a magical commonplace, like the loons that nested on a nearby pond and made the night an offertory with their cries, or the rainbows that inexplicably
appeared
over the Bay almost daily, even when there was no rain in sight. It was the same
with Them. Jason would be walking down to call his father in from sailing, or knocking at Moony's window to awaken her for a three A.M. stroll, and suddenly there They'd be. A trick of the light, like a sundog or the aurora borealis: golden patches swimming through the cool air. They appeared as suddenly as a cormorant's head slicing up through the water, lingering sometimes for ten minutes or so. Then They would be gone.

Jason saw Them a lot. The chapel was one of the places They seemed to like, and
so he hung out there whenever he could. Sometimes he could sense Them moments before They appeared. A shivering in the air would make the tips of his
fingers
go numb, and once there had been a wonderful smell, like warm buttered bread. But usually there was no warning. If he closed his eyes while looking at Them, Their image still appeared on the cloudy scrim of his inner eye, like gilded tears. But that was all. No voices, no scent of rose petals, no rapping at the door. You felt better after seeing Them, the way you felt better after seeing a
rainbow or an eagle above the Bay. But there was nothing really magical about Them, except the fact that They existed at all. They never spoke, or did anything special, at least nothing you could sense. They were just there; but Their presence meant everything at Mars Hill.

They were there now: flickering above the altar, sending blots of gold dancing across the limp flowers and faded photograph. He wanted to point Them out to Moony, but he'd tried before and she'd gotten mad at him.

"You think I'm some kind of idiot like my mother? she'd stormed, sweeping that day's offering of irises from the altar onto the floor. "Give me a break, Jason!"

Okay, I gave you a break, he thought now. Now I'll give you another.

Look, Moony, there They are! he thought; then said, "Moony. Look --"

He pointed, shrugging his shoulder so she'd have to move. But already They were gone.

"What?" Moony murmured. He shook his head, sighing.

"That picture," he said, and fumbled at his pocket for his cigarettes. "That stupid old picture that Diana took. Can you believe it's still here?"

Moony lifted her head and rubbed her eyes, red and swollen. "Oh, I can believe anything," she said bitterly, and filled her mug with more coffee.

In Martin Dionysos's kitchen, Ariel drank a cup of nettle tea and watched avidly as her friend ate a bowl of mung bean sprouts and nutritional yeast. Just like in Annie Hall, she thought. Amazing.

"So now she knows and you're surprised she's pissed at you." Martin raised another forkful of sprouts to his mouth, angling delicately to keep any from falling to the floor. He raised one blond eyebrow as he chewed, looking like some hardscrabble New Englander's idea of Satan, California surfer boy gone to seed. Long gray-blond hair that was thinner than it had been a year ago, skin that wasn't so much tanned as an even pale bronze, with that little goatee and those piercing blue eyes, the same color as the Bay stretching outside the window behind him. Oh yes: and a gold hoop earring and a heart tattoo that enclosed the name JOHN and a T-shirt with the pink triangle and SILENCE-DEATH printed in stem block letters. Satan on vacation.

"I'm not surprised," Ariel said, a little crossly. "I'm just, mmm, disappointed. That she got so upset."

Martin's other eyebrow arched. "Disappointed? As in, 'Moony, darling I have breast cancer (which I have kept a secret from you for seven months) and I am very disappointed that you are not self-actualized enough to deal with this without falling to pieces'?"

"She didn't fall to pieces." Ariel's crossness went over the line into fullblown annoyance. She frowned and jabbed a spoon into her tea. "I wish she'd fall to pieces, she's always so --" She waved the hand holding the spoon, sending green droplets raining onto Martin's knee. "-- so something."

"Self-assured?"

"I guess. Self-assured and smug, you know? Why is it teenagers are always so fucking smug?"

"Because they share a great secret," Martin said mildly, and took another bite of sprouts.

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Their parents are all assholes."

Ariel snorted with laughter, leaned forward to get her teacup out of the danger zone and onto the table. "Oh, Martin," she said. Suddenly her eyes were filled with tears. "Damn it all to hell. . ."

Martin put his bowl on the table and stepped over to take her in his arms. He didn't say anything, and for a moment Ariel flashed back to the previous spring, the same tableau only in reverse, with her holding Martin while he sobbed uncontrollably in the kitchen of his San Francisco townhouse. It was two days after John's funeral, and she was on her way to the airport. She knew then about the breast cancer but she hadn't told Martin yet; didn't want to dim any of the dark luster of his grief.

Now it was her grief, but in a strange way she knew it was his, too. There was this awful thing that they held in common, a great unbroken chain of grief that wound from one coast to the other. She hadn't wanted to share it with Moony, hadn't wanted her to feel its weight and breadth. But it was too late, now. Moony knew and besides, what did it matter? She was dying, Martin was dying and there wasn't a fucking thing anyone could do about it.

"Hey," he said at last. His hand stroked her mass of dark hair, got itself tangled near her shoulder, snagging one of the long silver-and-quartz-crystal earrings she had put on that morning, for luck. "Ouch."

Ariel snorted again, laughing in spite of, or maybe because of, it all. Martin extricated his hand, held up two fingers with a long curling strand of hair caught between them: a question mark, a wise serpent waiting to strike. She had seen him after the cremation take the lock of John's hair that he had saved and hold it so, until suddenly it burst into flames, and then watched as the fizz of ash flared out in a dark penumbra around Martin's fingers. No such thing happened now, no Faery Pagan pyrotechnics. She wasn't dead yet, there was no sharp cold wind of grief to fan Martin's peculiar gift. He let the twirl of hair fall away and looked at her and said, "You know, I talked to Adele."

Adele was Mrs. Grose, she of the pug dog and suspiciously advanced years. Ariel retrieved her cup and her equanimity, sipping at the nettle tea as Martin went on, "She said she thought we had a good chance. You especially. She said for you it might happen. They might come." He finished and leaned back in his chair, spearing the last forkful of sprouts.

Ariel said, "Oh yes?" Hardly daring to think of it; no don't think of it at all.

Martin shrugged, twisted to look over his shoulder at the endless sweep of Penobscot Bay. His eyes were bright, so bright she wondered if he were

fighting

tears or perhaps something else, something only Martin would allow himself to feel here and now. Joy, perhaps. Hope.

"Maybe," he said. At his words her heart beat a little faster in her breast, buried beneath the mass that was doing its best to crowd it out. "That's all. Maybe. It might. Happen."

And his hand snaked across the table to hers and held it, clutched it like it was a link in that chain that ran between them, until her fingers went cold and numb.

On Wednesday evenings the people at Mars Hill gave readings for the public. Tarot, palms, auras, dreams-- five dollars a pop, nothing guaranteed. The chapel was cleaned, the altar swept of offerings and covered with a frayed red and-white checked table cloth from Diana's kitchen and a few candles in empty Chianti bottles.

"It's not very atmospheric," Gary Bonetti said, as someone always did. Mrs. Grose nodded from her bench and fiddled with her rosary beads.

"Au contraire," protested Martin. "It's very atmospheric, if you're in the mood for spaghetti carbonara at Luigi's."

"May I recommend the primavera?" said Jason. In honor of the occasion he had put on white duck pants and white shirt and red bow tie. He waved at Moony, who stood at the door taking five dollar bills from nervous, giggly tourists and the more solemn-faced locals, who made this pilgrimage every summer. Some regulars came week after week, year after year. Sad Brenda, hoping for the Tarot card that would bring news from her drowned child Mr. Spruce, a roddy-faced lobsterman who always tipped Mrs. Grose ten dollars. The Hamptonites Jason had dubbed Mr. and Mrs. Pissant, who were anxious about their auras. Tonight the lobsterman was there, with an ancient woman who could only be his mother, and the Pissants, and two teenage couples, long blonde hair and sunburned, reeking of marijuana and summer money.

The teenagers went to Martin, lured perhaps by his tie-dyed caftan, neatly pressed and swirling down to his Birkenstock-clad feet.

"Boat trash," hissed Jason, arching a nearly invisible white-blond eyebrow as they passed. "I saw them in Camden, getting off a yacht the size of the fire station. God, they make me sick."

Moony tightened her smile. Catch her admitting to envy of people like that. She swiveled on her chair, looking outside to see if there were any newcomers making their way to the chapel through the cool summer night. "I think this is gonna be it," she said. She glanced wistfully at the few crumpled bills nesting in an old oatmeal tin. "Maybe we should, like, advertise or something. It's been so slow this summer."

Jason only grunted, adjusting his bow tie and glaring at the rich kids, now

deep

in conference with his father. The Pissants had fallen to Diana, who with her chignon of blonde hair and gold-buttoned little black dress could have been one of their neighbors. That left the lobsterman and his aged mother.

They stood in the middle of the big room, looking not exactly uneasy or lost, but as though they were waiting for someone to usher them to their proper seats.

And as though she read their minds (but wasn't that her job?), Mrs. Grose swept up suddenly from her corner of the chapel, a warm South Wind composed of yards of very old rayon fabric, Jean Nate After-Bath, and arms large and round and powdered as wheaten loaves.

"Mr. Spruce," she cried, extravagantly trilling her rrr's and opening those arms like a stage gypsy. "You have come --"

"Why, yes," the lobsterman answered, embarrassed but also grateful. "I, uh -- I brought my mother, Mrs. Grose. She says she remembers you.'--'

"I do," said Mrs. Spruce. Moony twisted to watch, curious. She had always wondered about Mrs. Grose. She claimed to be a true clairvoyant. She had predicted things-- nothing very useful, though. What the weather would be like the weekend of Moony's Junior Prom (rainy), but not whether she would be asked to go, or by whom. The day Jason would receive a letter from Harvard (Tuesday, the fifth of April), but not whether he'd be accepted there (he was not). It aggravated Moony, like so much at Mars Hill. What was the use of being a psychic if you could never come up with anything really useful?

But then there was the story about Harry Houdini. Mrs. Grose loved to tell it, how when she was still living in Chicago this short guy came one day and she gave him a message from his mother and he tried to make her out to be a fraud. It was a stupid story, except for one thing. If it really had happened, it would make Mrs. Grose about ninety or a hundred years old. And she didn't look a day over sixty.

Now Mrs. Grose was cooing over a woman who really did look to be about ninety. Mrs. Spruce peered up at her through rheumy eyes, shaking her head and saying in a whispery voice, "I can't believe it's you. I was just a girl, but you don't look any different at all. . ."

"Oh, flattery, flattery!" Mrs. Grose laughed and rubbed her nose with a Kleenex.

"What can we tell you tonight, Mrs. Spruce?"

Moony turned away. It was too weird. She watched Martin entertaining the four golden children, then felt Jason coming up behind her: the way some people claim they can tell a cat is in the room, by some subtle disturbance of air and dust. A cat is there. Jason is there.

"They're all going to Harvard. I can't believe it," he said, mere disgust

curdled into utter loathing. "And that one, the blond on the end --" "They're all blond, Jason," said Moony. "You're blond."

"I am an albino," Jason said with dignity. "Check him out, the Nazi Youth with the Pearl Jam T-shirt. He's a legacy, absolutely. SAT scores of 1060, tops. I know." He closed his eyes and wiggled his fingers and made a whoo-whooh noise, beckoning spirits to come closer. Moony laughed and covered her mouth. From where he sat Martin raised an eyebrow, requesting silence. Moony and Jason turned and walked outside.

"How old do you think she is?" Moony asked, after they had gone a safe distance from the chapel.

"Who?"

"Mrs. Grose."

"Adele?" Jason frowned into the twilight distance, thinking of the murky shores and shoals of old age. "Jeez, I dunno. Sixty? Fifty?"

Moony shook her head. "She's got to be older than that. I mean, that story about Houdini, you know?"

"Huh! Houdini. The closest she ever got to Houdini is seeing some Siegfried and Roy show out in Las Vegas."

"I don't think she's ever left here. At least not since I can remember." Jason nodded absently, then squatted in the untidy drive, squinting as he stared out into the darkness occluding the Bay. Fireflies formed mobile constellations within the birch trees. As a kid he had always loved fireflies, until he had seen Them. Now he thought of the Light Children as a sort of evolutionary step, somewhere between lightning bugs and angels.

Though you hardly ever see Them at night, he thought. Now why is that? He rocked back on his heels, looking like some slender pale gargoyle toppled from a modernist cathedral, the cuffs of his white oxford-cloth shirt rolled up to show large bony wrists and surprisingly strong square hands, his bow tie unraveled and hanging rakishly around his neck. Of a sudden he recalled being in this same spot two years ago, grinding out a cigarette as Martin and John approached. The smoke bothered John, sent him into paroxysms of coughing so prolonged and intense that more than once they had set Jason's heart pounding, certain that This Was It, John was going to die right here, right now, and it would be all Jason's fault for smoking. Only of course it didn't happen that way.

"The longest death since Little Nell's," John used to say, laughing hoarsely. That was when he could still laugh, still talk. At the end it had been others softly talking, Martin and Jason and their friends gathered around John's bed at home, taking turns, spelling each other. After a while Jason couldn't stand to be with them. It was too much like John was already dead. The body in the bed so wasted, bones cleaving to skin so thin and mottled it was like damp newsprint.

By the end, Jason refused to accompany Martin to the therapist they were supposed to see. He refused to go with him to the meetings where men and women talked about dying, about watching loved ones go so horribly slowly. Jason just couldn't take it. Grief he had always thought of as an emotion, a mood, something that possessed you but that you eventually escaped. Now he knew it was different. Grief was a country, a place you entered hesitantly, or were thrown into without warning. But once you were there, amidst the roiling formless blackness and stench of despair, you could not leave. Even if you wanted to: you could only walk and walk and walk, traveling on through the black reaches with the sound of screaming in your ears, and hope that someday you might glimpse far off another country, another place where you might someday rest.

Jason had followed John a long ways into that black land. And now his own father would be going there. Maybe not for good, not yet, but Jason knew. An HIV-positive diagnosis might mean that Death was a long ways off but Jason knew his father had already started walking.

". . .you think they don't leave?"

Jason started. "Huh?" He looked up into Moony's wide gray eyes. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Why do you think they don't leave? Mrs. Grose and Gary. You know, the ones who stay here all year." Moony's voice was exasperated. He wondered how many times she'd asked him the same thing.

"I dunno. I mean, they have to leave sometimes. How do they get groceries and stuff?" He sighed and scrambled to his feet. "There's only two of them, maybe they pay someone to bring stuff in. I know Gary goes to the Beach Store sometimes. It's not like they're under house arrest. Why?"

Moony shrugged. In the twilight she looked spooky, more like a witch than her mother or Diana or any of those other wannabes. Long dark hair and those enormous pale gray eyes, face like the face of the cat who'd been turned into a woman in a fairy tale his father had read him once. Jason grinned, thinking of Moony jumping on a mouse. No way. But hey, even if she did, it would take more than that to turn him off.

"You thinking of staying here?" he asked slyly. He slipped an arm around her shoulders. "'Cause, like, I could keep you company or something. I hear Maine gets cold in the winter."

"No." Moony shrugged off his arm and started walking toward the water: no longer exasperated, more like she was distracted. "My mother is."

"Your mother?"

He followed her until she stopped at the edge of a gravel beach. The evening sky was clear. On the opposite shore, a few lights glimmered in Dark Harbor,

reflections of the first stars overhead. From somewhere up along the coast, Bayside or Nagaseek or one of the other summer colonies, the sounds of laughter and skirling music echoed very faintly over the water, like a song heard on some distant station very late at night. But it wasn't late, not yet even nine o'clock. In summers past, that had been early for Moony and Jason, who would often stay up with the adults talking and poring over cards and runes until the night grew cold and spent.

But tonight for some reason the night already felt old. Jason shivered and kicked at the pebbly beach. The last pale light of sunset east an antique glow upon stones and touched the edge of the water with gold. As he watched, the light withdrew, a gauzy veil drawn back teasingly until the shore shimmered with afterglow, like blue glass.

"I heard her talking with Diana," Moony said. Her voice was unsettlingly loud and clear in the still air. "She was saying she might stay on, after I go off to school. I mean, she was talking like she wasn't going back at all, I mean not back to Kamensic. Like she might just stay here and never leave again." Her voice cracked on the words never leave again and she shuddered, hugging herself.

"Hey," said Jason. He walked over and put his arms around her, her dark hair a perfumed net that drew him in until he felt dizzy and had to draw back, gasping a little, the smell of her nearly overwhelming that of rugosa roses and the sea. "Hey, it's okay, Moony, really it's okay."

Moony's voice sounded explosive, as though she had been holding her breath. "I just can't believe she's giving up like this. I mean, no doctors, nothing. She's just going to stay here and die."

"She might not die," said Jason, his own voice a little desperate. "I mean, look at Adele. A century and counting. The best is yet to come."

Moony laughed brokenly. She leaned forward so that her hair once again spilled over him, her wet cheek resting on his shoulder. "Oh Jason. If it weren't for you I'd go crazy, you know that? I'd just go fucking nuts."

Nuts, thought Jason. His arms tightened around her, the cool air and faraway music nearly drowning him as he stroked her head and breathed her in. Crazy, oh yes. And they stood there until the moon showed over Dark Harbor, and all that far-off music turned to silvery light above the Bay.

Two days later Ariel and Moony went to see the doctor in Bangor. Moony drove, an hour's trip inland, up along the old road that ran beside the Penobscot River, through failed stonebound (arms and past trailer encampments like sad rusted toys, until finally they reached the sprawl around the city, the kingdom of car lots and franchises and shopping plazas.

The hospital was an old brick building with a shiny new white wing grafted on. Ariel and Moony walked through a gleaming steel-and-glass door set in the expanse of glittering concrete. But they ended up in a tired office on the far end of the old wing, where the squeak of rubber wheels on worn linoleum played counterpoint to a loudly echoing, ominous drip-drip that never ceased the whole time they were there.

"Ms. Rising. Please, come in."

Ariel squeezed her daughter's hand, then followed the doctor into her office. It was a small bright room, a hearty wreath of living ivy trained around its single grimy window in defiance of the lack of sunlight and, perhaps, the black weight of despair that Ariel felt everywhere, chairs, desk, floor, walls.

"I received your records from New York," the doctor said. She was a slight fine-boned young woman with sleek straight hair and a silk dress more expensive than what you usually saw in Maine. The little metal name-tag on her breast might have been an odd bit of heirloom jewelry. "You realize that even as of three weeks ago, the cancer had spread to the point where our treatment options are now quite limited."

Ariel nodded, her arms crossed protectively across her chest. She felt strange, light-headed. She hadn't been able to eat much the last day or two, that morning had swallowed a mouthful of coffee and a stale muffin to satisfy Moony but that was all. "I know," she said heavily. "I don't know why I'm here."

"Frankly, I don't know either," the doctor replied. "If you had optioned for some kind of intervention oh, even two months ago; but now. . ."

Ariel tilted her head, surprised at how sharp the other woman's tone was. The doctor went on, "It's a great burden to put on your daughter --" She looked in the direction of the office door, then glanced down at the charts in her hand. "Other children?"

Ariel shook her head. "No."

The doctor paused, gently slapping the sheaf of charts and records against her open palm. Finally she said, "Well. Let's examine you, then."

An hour later Ariel slipped back into the waiting room. Moony looked up from a magazine. Her gray eyes were bleary and her tired expression hastily congealed into the mask of affronted resentment with which she faced Ariel these days.

"So?" she asked as they retraced their steps back through cinder-block corridors to the hospital exit. "What'd she say?"

Ariel stared straight ahead, through the glass doors to where the summer afternoon waited to pounce on them. Exhaustion had seeped into her like heat; like the drugs the doctor had offered and Ariel had refused, the contents of crystal vials that could buy a few more weeks, maybe even months if she was

lucky, enough time to make a graceful farewell to the world. But Ariel didn't want weeks or months, and she sure as hell didn't want graceful goodbyes. She wanted years, decades. A cantankerous or dreamy old age, aggravating the shit out of her grandchildren with her talk about her own sunflower youth. Failing that, she wanted screaming and gnashing of teeth, her friends tearing their hair out over her death, and Moony. . .

And Moony. Ariel stopped in front of a window, one hand out to press against the smooth cool glass. Grief and horror hit her like a stone, struck her between the eyes so that she gasped and drew her hands to her face.

"Mom!" Moony cried, shocked. "Mom, what is it, are you all right? --"

Ariel nodded, tears burning down her cheeks. "I'm fine," she said, and gave a twisted smile. "Really, I'm --"

"What did she say?" demanded Moony. "The doctor, what did she tell you, what is it?"

Ariel wiped her eyes, a black line of mascara smeared across her finger. "Nothing. Really, Moony, nothing's changed. It's just -- it's just hard. Being this sick. It's hard, that's all."

She could see in her daughter's face confusion, despair, but also relief. Ariel

hadn't said death, she hadn't said dying, she hadn't since that first day said cancer. She'd left those words with the doctor, along with the scrips for morphine and Fiorinal, all that could be offered to her now. "Come on," she said, and walked through the sliding doors. "I'm supposed to have lunch with Mrs. Grose and Diana, and it's already late."

Moony stared at her in disbelief: was her mother being stoic or just crazy? But Ariel didn't say anything else, and after a moment her daughter followed her to the car.

In Mars Hill's little chapel Jason sat and smoked. On the altar in front of him were several weeks' accumulated offerings from the denizens of Mars Hill. An old-fashioned envelope with a glassine window, through which he could glimpse the face of a twenty-dollar bill -- that was from Mrs. Grose, who always gave the money she'd earned from readings (and then retrieved it at the end of the summer). A small square of brilliantly woven cloth from Diana, whose looms punctuated the soft morning with their steady racketing. A set of blueprints from Rvis Capricorn. Shasta Daisy's battered Ephemera. The copy of Paul Bowles' autobiography that Jason's father had been reading on the flight out from the West Coast. In other words, the usual flotsam of love and whimsy that washed up here every summer. From where Jason sat, he could see his own benefaction, a heap of small white roses, already limp but still giving out their heady sweet scent, and a handful of blackberries he'd picked from the thicket down by the pier. Not much of an offering but you never knew.

From beneath his roses peeked the single gift that puzzled him, a lacy silk

camisole patterned with pale pink-and-yellow blossoms. An odd choice of offering Jason thought. Because for all the unattached adults sipping chardonnay and Bellinis of a summer evening the atmosphere at Mars Hill was more like that of summer camp. A chaste sort of giddiness ruled here, compounded of equal parts of joy and longing that always made Jason think of the garlanded jackass and wistful fairies in A Midsummer Night's Dream. His father and Ariel and all the rest stumbling around in the dark, hoping for a glimpse of Them, and settling for fireflies and the lights from Dark Harbor. Mars Hill held surprisingly little in the way of unapologetic lust-- except for himself and Moony, of course. And Jason knew that camisole didn't belong to Moony.

At the thought of Moony he sighed and tapped his ashes onto the dusty floor. It was a beautiful morning gin-clear and with a stiff warm breeze from the west. Perfect sailing weather. He should be out with his father on the Wendameen. Instead he'd stayed behind, to write and think. Earlier he'd tried to get through to Moony somewhere in Bangor, but Jason couldn't send his thoughts any farther than from one end of Mars Hill to the other. For some reason, smoking cigarettes seemed to help. He had killed half a pack already this morning but gotten nothing more than a headache and a raw throat. Now he had given up. It never seemed to work with anyone except Moony, anyhow, and then only if she was nearby.

He had wanted to give her some comfort. He wanted her to know how much he loved her, how she meant more to him than anyone or anything in the world, except perhaps his father. Was it allowed, to feel this much for a person when your father was HIV-positive? Jason frowned and stubbed out his cigarette in a lobster-shaped ashtray, already overflowing with the morning's telepathic aids. He picked up his notebook and Rapidograph pen and, still frowning, stared at the letter he'd begun last night.

Dearest Moony,

(he crossed out eat, it sounded too fussy)

*

I just want you to know that I understand how you feel. When John died it was the most horrible thing in the world, even worse than the divorce because I was just a kid then. I just want you to know how much I love you, you mean more than anyone or anything in the world, and

And what? Did he really know how she felt? His mother wasn't dying, his mother was in the Napa Valley running her vineyard, and while it was true enough that John's death had been the most horrible thing he'd ever lived through, could that be the same as having your mother die? He thought maybe it could. And then of course there was the whole thing with his father. Was that worse? His father wasn't sick, of course, at least he didn't have any symptoms yet; but was it worse for someone you loved to have the AIDS virus, to watch and wait for months or years, rather than have it happen quickly like with Ariel? Last night he'd

sat in the living room while his father and Gary Bonetti were on the porch talking about her.

"I give her only a couple of weeks," Martin had said, with that dry strained calm voice he'd developed over the last few years of watching his friends die. "The thing is, if she'd gone for treatment right away she could be fine now. She could be fine." The last word came out in an uncharacteristic burst of vehemence, and Jason grew cold to hear it. Because of course even with treatment his father probably wouldn't be all right, not now, not ever. He'd never be fine again. Ariel had thrown all that away.

"She should talk to Adele," Gary said softly. Jason heard the clink of ice as he poured himself another daiquiri. "When I had those visions five years ago, that's when I saw Adele. You should too, Martin. You really should."

"I don't know as Adele can help me," Martin said, somewhat coolly. "She's just a guest here, like you or any of the rest of us. And you know that you can't make Them. . ."

His voice trailed off. Jason sat bolt upright on the sofa, suddenly feeling his father there, like a cold finger stabbing at his brain.

"Jason?" Martin called, his voice tinged with annoyance. "If you want to listen, come in here, please."

Jason had sworn under his breath and stormed out through the back door. It was impossible, sometimes, living with his father. Better to have a psychic wannabe like Ariel for a parent, and not have to worry about being spied on all the time.

Now, from outside the chapel came frenzied barking. Jason started, his thoughts broken. He glanced through the open door to see Gary and his black labrador retriever heading down to the water. Gary was grinning, arms raised as he waved at someone out of sight. And suddenly Jason had an image of his father in the Wendameen, the fast little sloop skirting the shore as Martin stood at the mast waving back, his long hair tangled by the wind. The vision left Jason nearly breathless. He laughed, shaking his head, and at once decided to follow Gary to the landing and meet his father there. He picked up his pen and notebook and turned to go. Then stopped, his neck prickling. Very slowly he turned, until he stood facing the altar once more.

They were there. A shimmering haze above the fading roses, like Zeus's golden rain falling upon imprisoned Danae Jason's breath caught in his throat as he watched Them -- They were so beautiful, so strange. Flickering in the chapel's dusty air, like so many scintillant coins. He could sense rather than hear a faint chiming as They darted quick as hummingbirds from his roses to Mrs.

Grose's envelope, alighting for a moment upon Diana's weaving and Rvis's prize tomatoes before settling upon two things: his father's book and the unknown camisole.

And then with a sharp chill Jason knew whose it was. Ariel's, of course -- who else would own something so unabashedly romantic but also slightly tacky?

Maybe

it was meant to be a bad joke, or perhaps it was a real offering, heartfelt, heartbreaking. He stared at Them, a glittering carpet tossed over those two pathetic objects, and had to shield his eyes with his hand. It was too bright, They seemed to be growing more and more brilliant as he watched. Like a swarm of

butterflies he had once seen, mourning cloaks resting in a snow-covered field one warm March afternoon, their wings slowly fanning the air as though They had

been stunned by the thought of spring. But what could ever surprise Them, the Light Children, the summer's secret?

Then as he watched They began to fade. The glowing golden edge of the swarm grew

dim and disappeared. One by one all the other gilded coins blinked into nothing,

until the altar stood as it had minutes before, a dusty collection of things, odd and somewhat ridiculous. Jason's head pounded and he felt faint; then realized he'd been holding his breath. He let it out, shuddering, put his pen and notebook on the floor and walked to the altar.

Everything was as it had been, roses, cloth, paper, tomatoes; excepting only his

father's offering and Ariel's. Hesitantly he reached to touch the book Martin had left, then recoiled.

The cover of the book had been damaged. When he leaned over to stare at it more

closely, he saw that myriad tiny holes had been burned in the paper, in what at

first seemed to be a random pattern. But when he picked it up -gingerly, as though it might yet release an electrical jolt or some other hidden energy -- he

saw that the tiny perforations formed an image, blurred but unmistakable. The shadow of a hand, four fingers splayed across the cover as though gripping it.

Jason went cold. He couldn't have explained how, but he knew that it was a likeness of his father's hand that he saw there, eerie and chilling as those monstrous shadows left by victims of the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. With a frightened gasp he tossed the book back onto the altar. For a moment he stood beside the wooden table, half-poised to flee; but finally reached over and

tentatively pushed aside his roses to fully reveal the camisole.

It was just like the book. Thousands of tiny bum-holes made a mined lace of the

pastel silk, most of them clustered around one side of the bodice. He picked it

up, catching a faint fragrance, lavender and marijuana, and held it out by its pink satin straps. He raised it, turning toward the light streaming through the

chapel's picture window, and saw that the pinholes formed a pattern, elegant as

the tracery of veins and capillaries on a leaf. A shadowy bull's-eye --

breast,
aureole, nipple drawn on the silken cloth.

With a small cry Jason dropped the camisole. Without looking back he ran from the chapel. Such was his hurry that he forgot his pen and notebook and the half-written letter to Moony, piled carefully on the dusty floor. And so he did not see the shining constellation that momentarily appeared above the pages, a curious cloud that hovered there like a child's dream of weather before flowering into a golden rain.

Moony sat hunched on the front stoop, waiting for her mother to leave. Ariel had been in her room for almost half an hour, her luncheon date with Diana and Mrs. Grose notwithstanding. When finally she emerged, Moony could hear the soft uneven tread of her flip-flops, padding from bedroom to bedroom to kitchen. There was the sigh of the refrigerator opening and closing, the muted pop of a cork being pulled from a bottle, the long grateful gurgle of wine being poured into a glass. Then Ariel herself in the doorway behind her. Without looking Moony could tell that she'd put on The Skirt. She could smell it, the musty scents of patchouli and cannabis resin and the honeysuckle smell of the expensive detergent Ariel used to wash it by hand, as though it were some precious winding sheet.

"I'm going to Adele's for lunch." Moony nodded silently.

"I'll be back in a few hours."

More silence.

"You know where to find me if anyone comes by." Ariel nudged her daughter gently with her toe. "Okay?"

Moony sighed. "Yeah, okay."

She watched her mother walk out the door, sun bouncing off her hair in glossy waves. When Ariel was out of sight she hurried down the hall.

In her mother's room, piles of clothes and papers covered the worn Double Wedding Ring quilt, as though tossed helter-skelter from her bureau.

"Jeez, what a mess," said Moony. She slowly crossed to the bed. It was covered with scarves and tangled skeins of pantyhose; drifts of old catering receipts, bills, canceled checks. A few paperbacks with yellowed pages that had been summer reading in years past. A back issue of Gourmet magazine and the Maine Progressive. A Broadway ticket stub from Prelude to a Kiss. Grimacing, Moony prodded the edge of last year's calendar from the Beach Store & Pizza to Go.

What had her mother been looking for?

Then, as if by magic, Moony saw it. Its marbled cover suddenly glimpsed beneath a dusty strata of tarot cards and Advil coupons, like some rare bit of fossil, lemur vertebrae or primate jaw hidden within papery shale. She drew it out carefully, tilting it so the light slid across the title.

MARS HILL: ITS HISTORY AND LORE by Abigail Merithew Cox, A Lover of Its Mysteries

With careful fingers Moony rifled the pages. Dried rose petals fell out, releasing the sad smell of summers past, and then a longer plume of liatris dropped to the floor, fresh enough to have left a faint purplish stain upon the page. Moony drew the book up curiously, marking the page where the liattis had fallen, and read,

*

Perhaps strangest of all the Mysteries of our Colony at Mars Hill is the presence of those Enchanted Visitors who make their appearance now and then, to the eternal Delight of those of us fortunate enough to receive the benison of their presence. I say Delight, though many of us who have conjured with them say that the Experience resembles Rapture more than mere Delight, and even that Surpassing Ecstasy of which the Ancients wrote and which is at the heart of all our Mysteries; though we are not alone in enjoying the favor of our Visitors. It is said by my Aunt, Sister Rosemary Merithew, that the Pasamaquoddie Indians who lived here long before the civilizing influence of the White Man, also entertained these Ethereal Creatures, which are in appearance like to those fairy lights called Foxfire or Will O' The Wisp, and which may indeed be the inspiration for such spectral rumors. The Pasamaquoddie named them Akinikl, which in their language means The Greeters; and this I think is a most appropriate title for our Joyous Guests, who bring only Good News from the Other Side, and who feast upon our mortality as a man sups upon rare meats. . .

Moony stared at the page in horror and disgust. Feasting upon mortality? She recalled her mother and Jason talking about the things they called the Light Children, Jason's disappointment that They had never appeared to Moony. As though there was something wrong with her, as though she wasn't worthy of seeing Them. But she had never felt that way. She had always suspected that Jason and her mother and the rest were mistaken about the Light Children. When she was younger, she had even accused her mother of lying about seeing Them. But the other people at Mars Hill spoke of Them, and Jason, at least, would never lie to Moony. So she had decided there must be something slightly delusional about the whole thing. Like a mass hypnosis, or maybe some kind of mass drug flashback, which seemed more likely considering the histories of some of her mother's friends.

Still, that left Mrs. Grose, who never even took an aspirin. Who, as far as Moony knew, had never been sick in her life, and who certainly seemed immune to most of the commonplace ailments of what must be, despite appearances, an advanced age. Mrs. Grose claimed to speak with the Light Children, to have a sort of understanding of Them that Ariel and the others lacked. And Moony had always held Mrs. Grose in awe. Maybe because her own grandparents were all dead, maybe just because of that story about Houdini -- it was too fucking weird, no one could have made it up.

And so maybe no one had made up the Light Children, either. Moony tapped the book's cover, frowning. Why couldn't she see Them? Was it because she didn't

believe? The thought annoyed her. As though she were a kid who'd found out about Santa Claus, and was being punished for learning the truth. She stared at the book's cover, the gold lettering flecked with dust, the peppering of black and green where salt air and mildew had eaten away at the cloth. The edge of one page crumbled as she opened it once more.

*

Many of my brothers and sisters can attest to the virtues of Our Visitors. particularly Their care for the dying and afflicted . . .

"Fucking bullshit," yelled Moony. She threw the book across the room, hard, so that it slammed into the wall beside her mother's bureau. With a soft crack the spine broke. She watched stonily as yellow pages and dried blossoms fluttered from between the split covers, a soft explosion of antique dreams. She left the room without picking up the mess, the door slamming shut behind her.

"I was consumptive," Mrs. Grose was saying, nodding as she looked in turn from Ariel to Diana to the pug sprawled panting on the worn chintz sofa beside them.

"Tuberculosis, you know. Coming here saved me."

"You mean like, taking the waters?" asked Ariel. She shook back her hair and took another sip of her gin-and-tonic. "Like they used to do at Saratoga Springs and places like that.?"

"Not like that at all," replied Mrs. Grose firmly. She raised one white eyebrow and frowned. "I mean, Mars Hill saved me."

Saved you for what? thought Ariel, choking back another mouthful of gin. She shuddered. She knew she shouldn't drink, these days she could feel it seeping into her, like that horrible barium they injected into you to do tests. But she couldn't stop. And what was the point, anyway?

"But you think it might help her, if she stayed here?" Diana broke in, oblivious of Mrs. Grose's imperious gaze. "And Martin, do you think it could help him too?"

"I don't thik anything," said Mrs. Grose, and she reached over to envelope the wheezing pug with one large fat white hand. "It is absolutely not up to me at all. I am simply telling you the facts."

"Of course," Ariel said, but she could tell from Diana's expression that her words had come out slurred. "Of course," she repeated with dignity, sitting up and smoothing the folds of her patchwork skirt.

"As long as you understand," Mrs. Grose said in a gentler tone. "We are guests here, and guests do not ask favors of their hosts."

The other two women nodded. Ariel carefully put her glass on the coffee table and stood, wiping her sweating hands on her skirt. "I better go now," she said.

Her head pounded and she felt nauseated, for all that she'd barely nibbled at the ham sandwiches and macaroni salad Mrs. Grose had set out for lunch. "Home.

I
think I'd better go home."

"I'll go with you," said Diana. She stood and cast a quick look at their hostess. "I wanted to borrow that book. . ."

Mrs. Grose saw them to the door, holding open the screen and swatting threateningly at mosquitoes as they walked outside. "Remember what I told you," she called as they started down the narrow road, Diana with one arm around Ariel's shoulder. "Meditation and nettle tea. And patience."

"Patience," Ariel murmured; but nobody heard.

The weeks passed. The weather was unusually clear and warm, Mars Hill bereft of the cloak of mist and fog that usually covered it in August. Martin Dionysos took the Wendameen out nearly every afternoon, savoring the time alone, the hours spent fighting wind and waves-- antagonists he felt he could win against.

"It's the most perfect summer we've ever had," Gary Bonetti said often to his friend. Too often, Martin thought bitterly. Recently, Martin was having what Jason called Millennial Thoughts, seeing ominous portents in everything from the tarot cards he dealt out to stricken tourists on Wednesday nights to the pattern of kelp and maidenhair left on the gravel beach after one of the summer's few storms. He had taken to avoiding Ariel, a move that filled him with self-loathing, for all that he told himself that he still needed time to grieve for John before giving himself over to another death. But it wasn't that, of course. Or at least it wasn't only that. It was fear, The Fear. It was listening to his own heart pounding as he lay alone in bed at night, counting the beats, wondering at what point it all began to break down, at what point It would come to take him.

So he kept to himself. He begged off going on the colony's weekly outing to the little Mexican restaurant up the road. He even stopped attending the weekly readings in the chapel. Instead, he spent his evenings alone, writing to friends back in the Bay Area. After drinking coffee with Jason every morning he'd turn away.

"I'm going to work now," he'd announce, and Jason would nod and leave to find Moony, grateful, his father thought, for the opportunity to escape.

Millennial Thoughts.

Martin Dionysos had given over a corner of his cottage's living room to a studio. There was a tiny drafting table, his portable computer, an easel, stacks of books; the week's forwarded offerings of Out and The Advocate and Q and The Bay Weekly, and, heaped on an ancient stained Windsor chair, the usual pungent mess of oils and herbal decoctions that he used in his work. Golden morning light

streamed through the wide mullioned windows, smelling of salt and the diesel fumes from Diana's ancient Volvo. On the easel a large unprimed canvas rested, somewhat unevenly due to the cant of a floor slanted enough that you could drop a marble in the kitchen and watch it roll slowly but inexorably to settle in the left-hand comer of the living room. Gary Bonetti claimed that it wasn't that all of the cottages on Mars Hill were built by incompetent architects. It was the magnetic pull of the ocean just meters away; it was the imperious reins of the East, of the Moon, of the magic charters of the Other world, that made it impossible to find any two comers that were plumb. Martin and the others laughed at Gary's pronouncement, but John had believed it.

John. Martin sighed, stirred desultorily at a coffee can filled with linseed oil and turpentine, then rested the can on the windowsill. For a long time he had been so caught up with the sad and harrowing and noble and disgusting details of John's dying that he had been able to forestall thinking about his own diagnosis. He had been grateful, in an awful way, that there had been something so horrible, so unavoidably and demandingly real, to keep him from succumbing to his own despair.

But all that was gone now. John was gone. Before John's death, Martin had always had a sort of unspoken, formless belief in an afterlife. The long shadow cast by a 1950s Catholic boyhood, he guessed. But when John died, that small hidden solace had died too. There was nothing there. No vision of a beloved waiting for him on the other side. Not even a body moldering within a polished mahogany casket. Only ashes, ashes; and his own death waiting like a small patient vicious animal in the shadows.

"Shit," he said. He gritted his teeth. This was how it happened to Ariel. She gave in to despair, or dreams, or maybe she just pretended it would go away. She'd be lucky now to last out the summer. At the thought a new wave of grief washed over him, and he groaned.

"Oh, shit, shit, shit," he whispered. With watering eyes he reached for the can full of primer on the sill. As he did so, he felt a faint prickling go through his fingers, a sensation of warmth that was almost painful. He swore under his breath and frowned. A tiny stab of fear lanced through him. Inexplicable and sudden pain, wasn't that the first sign of some sort of degeneration.? As his fingers tightened around the coffee can, he looked up. The breath froze in his throat and he cried aloud, snatching his hand back as though he'd been stung.

They were there. Dozens of Them, a horde of flickering golden spots so dense They obliterated the wall behind Them. Martin had seen Them before, but never so close, never so many. He gasped and staggered back, until he struck the edge of the easel and sent the canvas clattering to the floor. They took no notice, instead followed him like a swarm of silent hornets. And as though They were hornets, Martin shouted and turned to run.

Only he could not. He was blinded, his face seared by a terrible heat. They were everywhere, enveloping him in a shimmering cocoon of light and warmth, Their fierce radiance burning his flesh, his eyes, his throat, as though he breathed in liquid flame. He shrieked, batting at the air, and then babbling fell back against the wall. As They swarmed over him he felt Them, not as you feel the sun but as you feel a drug or love or anguish, filling him until he moaned and sank to the floor. He could feel his skin burning and erupting, his bones turning to ash inside him. His insides knotted, cramping until he thought he would faint. He doubled over, retching, but only a thin stream of spittle ran down his chin. An explosive burst of pain raced through him. He opened his mouth to scream, the sound so thin it might have been an insect whining. Then there was nothing but light, nothing but flame; and Martin's body unmoving on the floor.

Moony waited until late afternoon, but Jason never came. Hours earlier, Moony had glanced out the window of her cottage and seen Gary Bonetti running up the hill to Martin's house, followed minutes later by the panting figure of Mrs. Grose. Jason she didn't see at all. He must have never left his cottage that morning, or else left and returned by the back door.

Something had happened to Martin. She knew that as soon as she saw Gary's stricken face. Moony thought of calling Jason, but did not. She did nothing, only paced and stared out the window at Jason's house, hoping vainly to see someone else enter or leave. No one did.

Ariel had been sleeping all day. Moony avoided even walking past her mother's bedroom, lest her own terror wake her. She was afraid to leave the cottage, afraid to find out the truth. Cold dread stalked her all afternoon as she waited for something-- an ambulance, a phone call, anything-- but nothing happened. Nobody called, nobody came. Although once, her nostrils filled with the acrid smell of cigarette smoke, and she felt Jason there. Not Jason himself, but an overwhelming sense of terror that she knew came from him, a fear so intense that she drew her breath in sharply, her hand shooting out to steady herself against the door. Then the smell of smoke was gone.

"Jason?" she whispered, but she knew he was no longer thinking of her. She stood with her hand pressed against the worn silvery frame of the screen door. She kept expecting Jason to appear, to explain things. But there was nothing. For the first time all summer, Jason seemed to have forgotten her. Everyone seemed to have forgotten her.

That had been hours ago. Now it was nearly sunset. Moony lay on her towel on the gravel beach, swiping at a mosquito and staring up at the cloudless sky, blue skimmed to silver as the sun melted away behind Mars Hill. What a crazy place this was. Someone gets sick, and instead of dialing 911 you send for an obese old fortuneteller. The thought made her stomach churn; because of course that's what her mother had done. Put her faith in fairy dust and crystals instead of physicians and chemo. Abruptly Moony sat up, hugging her knees.

"Damn," she said miserably

She'd put off going home, half-hoping half-dreading that someone would find her and tell her what the hell was going on. Now it was obvious that she'd have to find out for herself. She threw her towel into her bag tugged on a hooded pullover and began to trudge back up the hill.

On the porches of the other cottages she could see people stirring. Whatever had happened, obviously none of them had heard yet. The new lesbian couple from Burlington sat facing each other in matching wicker armchairs, eyes closed and hands extended. A few houses on, Shasta Daisy sat on the stoop of her tiny Queen Anne Victorian, sipping a wine cooler, curled sheets of graph paper littering the table in front of her.

"Where's your room?" Shasta called.

Moony shrugged and wiped a line of sweat from her cheek. "Resting I guess."

"Come have a drink." Shasta raised her bottle. "I'll do your chart."

Moony shook her head. "Later. I got to get dinner."

"Don't forget there's a moon circle tonight," said Shasta. "Nine thirty at the gazebo."

"Right." Moony nodded, smiling glumly as she passed. What a bunch of kooks. At least her mother would be sleeping and not wasting her time conjuring up someone's aura between wine coolers.

But when she got home, no one was there. She called her mother's name as the screen door banged shut behind her, waited for a reply but there was none. For an instant a terrifying surge raced through her: something else had happened, her mother lay dead in the bedroom. . .

But the bedroom was empty, as were the living room and bathroom and anyplace else where Ariel might have chosen to die. The heady scent of basil filled the cottage, with a fainter hint of marijuana. When Moony finally went into the kitchen, she found the sink full of sand and half-rinsed basil leaves. Propped up on the drainboard was a damp piece of paper towel with a message spelled out in runny magic marker.

*

Moony: Went to Chapel
Moon circle at 9:30
Love love love Mom.

"Right," Moony said, disgusted. She crumpled the note and threw it on the floor.

"Way to go, Morn."

Marijuana, moon circle, astrological charts. Fucking idiots. Of a sudden she was filled with rage, at her mother and Jason and Martin and all the rest. Why weren't there any doctors here? Or lawyers, or secretaries, or anyone with half

a brain, enough at least to take some responsibility for the fact that there were sick people here, people who were dying for Christ's sake and what was anyone doing about it? What was she doing about it?

"I've had it," she said aloud. "I have had it." She spun around and headed for the front door, her long hair an angry black blur around her grim face.

"Amanda
Rheining, you are going to the hospital. Now."

She strode down the hill, ignoring Shasta's questioning cries. The gravel bit into her bare feet as she rounded the turn leading to the chapel. From here she could glimpse the back door of Jason and Martin's cottage. As Moony hurried past a stand of birches, she glimpsed Diana standing by the door, one hand resting on its crooked wooden frame. She was gazing out at the Bay with a rapt expression that might have been joy or exhausted grief, her hair gilded with the dying light.

For a moment Moony stopped, biting her lip. Diana at least might understand. She could ask Diana to come and help her force Ariel to go to the hospital. It would be like the intervention they'd done with Diana's ex-husband. But that would mean going to Martin's cottage, and confronting whatever it was that waited inside. Besides, Moony knew that no one at Mars Hill would ever force Ariel to do something she didn't want to do; even live. No. It was up to her to save her mother: herself, Maggie Rheining. Abruptly she turned away.

Westerling light fell through the leaves of the ancient oak that shadowed the weathered gray chapel. The lupines and tiger lilies had faded with the dying summer. Now violet plumes of liatris sprang up around the chapel door beside unruly masses of sweet-smelling phlox and glowing clouds of asters. Of course no one ever weeded or thinned out the garden. The flowers choked the path leading to the door, so that Moony had to beat away a net of bees and lacewings and pale pink moths like rose petals, all of them rising from the riot of blossoms and then falling in a softly moving skein about the girl's shoulders as she walked. Moony cursed and slashed at the air, heedless of a luna moth's drunken somersault above her head, the glimmering wave of fireflies that followed her through the twilight.

At the chapel doorway Moony stopped. Her heart was beating hard, and she spat and brushed a liatris frond from her mouth. From inside she could hear a low voice; her mother's voice. She was reciting the verse that, over the years, had become a sort of blessing for her, a little mantra she chanted and whispered summer after summer, always in hopes of summoning Them --

*

"With this field-dew consecrate Every fairy take his gait And each several chamber bless, through this palace, with sweet peace; Ever shall in safety rest, and the owner of it blest."

At the sound, Moony felt her heart clench inside her. She moved until her face

pressed against the ancient gray screen sagging within its doorframe. The screen smelled heavily of dust; she pinched her nose to keep from sneezing. She gazed through the fine moth-pocked web as though through a silken scrim or the Bay's accustomed fog.

Her mother was inside. She stood before the wooden altar, pathetic with its faded burden of wilting flowers and empty bottles and Jason's cigarette butts scattered across the floor. From the window facing the Bay, lilac-colored light flowed into the room, mingling with the shafts of dusty gold falling from the casements set high within the opposing wall. Where the light struck the floor a small bright pool had formed. Ariel was dancing slowly in and out of this, her thin arms raised, the long heavy sweep of her patchwork skirt sliding back and forth to reveal her slender legs and bare feet, shod with a velvety coat of dust. Moony could hear her reciting. Shakespeare's fairies' song again, and a line from Julian of Norwich that Diana had taught her:

All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.

And suddenly the useless purity of Ariel's belief overwhelmed Moony.

A stoned forty-three-year-old woman with breast cancer and a few weeks left to live, dancing inside a mined chapel and singing to herself. Tears filled Moony's eyes, fell and left a dirty streak against the screen. She drew a deep breath, fighting the wave of grief and despair, and pushed against the screen to enter. When she raised her head again, Ariel had stopped.

At first Moony thought her mother had seen her. But no. Ariel was staring straight ahead at the altar, her head cocked to one side as though listening. So intent was she that Moony stiffened as well, inexplicably frightened. She glanced over her shoulder, but of course there was no one there. But it was too late to keep her heart from pounding. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and turned, stepping over the sill toward Ariel.

"Mom," Moony called softly. "Mom, I'm --"

Moony froze. In the center of the chapel her mother stood, arms writhing as she held them above her head, long hair whipping across her face. She was on fire. Flickers of gold and crimson ran along her arms and chest, lapped at her throat and face and set runnels of light flaming across her clothes. Moony could hear her shrieking, could see her tearing at her breast as she tried to rip away the burning fabric. With a howl Moony stumbled across the room-- not thinking, hardly even seeing her as she lunged to grab Ariel and pull her down.

"Mom!"

But before she could reach Ariel she tripped, smashed onto the uneven floor. Groaning she rolled over and tried to get back up. An arm's-length away, her mother railed, her voice given over now to a high shrill keening, her flapping arms still raised above her head. And for the first time Moony realized that there was no real heat, no flames. No smoke filled the little room. The light

that streamed through the picture window was clear and bright as dawn.

Her mother was not on fire. She was with Them.

They were everywhere, like bees swarming across a bank of flowers. Radiant beads of gold and argent covered Ariel until Moony no longer saw her mother, but only the blazing silhouette of a woman, a numinous figure that sent a prismatic aurora rippling across the ceiling. Moony fell back, horrified, awe-struck. The figure continued its bizarre dance, hands lifting and falling as though reaching for something that was being pulled just out of reach. She could hear her mother's voice, muted now to a soft repetitive cry-- uh, uh! -- and a very faint clear tone, like the sustained note of a glass harmonica.

"Jesus," Moony whispered; then yelled, "Jesus! Stop it, stop --"

But They didn't stop; only moved faster and faster across Ariel's body until her mother was nothing but a blur, a chrysalis encased in glittering pollen, a burning ghost. Moony's breath scraped against her throat. Her hands clawed at her knees, the floor, her own breasts, as her mother kept on with that soft moaning and the sound of the Light Children filled the chapel the way wine fills a glass.

And then gradually it all began to subside. Gradually the glowing sheath fell from her mother, not fading so much as thinning, the way Moony had once read the entrance to a woman's womb will thin as its burden wakes to be born. The chiming noise died away. There was only a faint high echo in Moony's ears. Violet light spilled from the high windows, a darker if weaker wine. Ariel sprawled on the dusty floor, her arms curled up against her chest like the dried hollow limbs of an insect, scarab or patient mantis. Her mouth was slack, and the folds of tired skin around her eyes. She looked inutterably exhausted, but also somehow at peace. With a cold stab like a spike driven into her breast, Moony knew that this was how Ariel would look in death; knew that this was how she looked, now; knew that she was dead.

But she wasn't. As Moony watched, her mother's mouth twitched. Then Ariel sneezed, squeezing her eyes tightly. Finally she opened them to gaze at the ceiling. Moony stared at her, uncomprehending. She began to cry, sobbing so loudly that she didn't hear what her mother was saying, didn't hear Ariel's hoarse voice whispering the same words over and over and over again

"Thank you, thank you, thank you! --"

But Moony wasn't listening. And only in her mother's own mind did Ariel herself ever again hear Their voices. Like an unending stream of golden coins being poured into a well, the eternal and incomprehensible echo of Their reply --

"You are Welcome."

There must have been a lot of noise. Because before Moony could pull herself together and go to her mother, Diana was there, her face white but her eyes set and in control, as though she were an ambulance driver inured to all kinds of terrible things. She took Ariel in her arms and got her to her feet. Ariel's head flopped to one side, and for a moment Moony thought she'd slide to the floor again. But then she seemed to rally. She blinked, smiled fuzzily at her daughter and Diana. After a few minutes, she let Diana walk her to the door. She shook her head gently but persistently when her daughter tried to help.

"You can follow us, darling," Diana called back apologetically as they headed down the path to Martin's cottage. But Moony made no move to follow. She only watched in disbelief -- I can follow you? Of course I can, asshole! -- and then relief, as the two women lurched safely through the house's crooked door.

Let someone else take care of her for a while, Moony thought bitterly. She shoved her hands into her pockets. Her terror had turned to anger. Now, perversely, she needed to yell at someone. She thought briefly of following her mother; then of finding Jason. But really, she knew all along where she had to go.

Mrs. Grose seemed surprised to see her (Ha! thought Moony triumphantly; what kind of psychic would be surprised?) But maybe there was something about her after all. Because she had just made a big pot of chamomile tea, heavily spiked with brandy, and set out a large white plate patterned with alarmingly lifelike butterflies and bees, the insects seeming to hover intently beside several slabs of cinnamon-fragrant zucchini bread.

"They just keep multiplying." Mrs. Grose sighed so dramatically that Moony thought she must be referring to the bees, and peered at them again to make sure they weren't real. "Patricia-- you know, that nice lady with the lady friend? -- she says, pick the flowers, so I pick them but I still have too many squashes. Remind me to give you some for your mother."

At mention of her mother, Moony's anger melted away. She started to cry again.

"My darling, what is it?" cried Mrs. Grose. She moved so quickly to embrace Moony that a soft-smelling pinkish cloud of face powder wafted from her cheeks onto the girl's. "Tell us darling, tell us --"

Moony sobbed luxuriously for several minutes, letting Mrs. Grose stroke her hair and feed her healthy sips of tepid brandy-laced tea. Mrs. Grose's pug wheezed anxiously at his mistress's feet and struggled to climb into Moony's lap. Eventually he succeeded. By then, Moony had calmed down enough to tell the aged woman what had happened, her rambling narrative punctuated by hiccuping sobs and small gasps of laughter when the dog lapped excitedly at her teacup.

"Ah so," said Mrs. Grose, when she first understood that Moony was talking about the Light Children. She pressed her plump hands together and raised her tortoiseshell eyes to the ceiling. "They are having a busy day."

Moony frowned, wiping her cheeks. As though They were like the people who collected the trash or turned the water supply off at the end of the summer. But then Moony went on talking, her voice growing less tremulous as the brandy kicked in. When she finished, she sat in somewhat abashed silence and stared at the teacup she held in her damp hand. Its border of roses and 'cabbage butterflies took on a flushed glow from Mrs. Grose's paisley-draped Tiffany lamps. Moony looked uneasily at the door. Having confessed her story, she suddenly wanted to flee, to check on her mother; to forget the whole thing. But she couldn't just take off. She cleared her throat, and the pug growled sympathetically.

"Well," Mrs. Grose said at last. "I see I will be having lots of company this winter."

Moony stared at her uncomprehending. "I mean, your mother and Martin will be staying on," Mrs. Grose explained, and sipped her tea. Her cheeks like the patterned porcelain had a febrile glow, and her eyes were so bright that Moony wondered if she was very drunk. "So at last! there will be enough of us here to really talk about it, to learn --"

"Learn what?" demanded Moony. Confusion and brandy made her peevish. She put her cup down and gently shoved the pug from her lap. "I mean, what happened? What is going on?"

"Why, it's Them, of course," Mrs. Grose said grandly, then ducked her head, as though afraid she might be overheard and deemed insolent. "We are so fortunate -- you are so fortunate, my dear, and your darling mother! And Martin, of course -- this is a wonderful time for us, a blessed, blessed time!" At Moony's glare of disbelief she went on, "You understand, my darling -They have come, They have greeted your mother and Martin, it is a very exciting thing, very rare -- only a very few of us --"

Mrs. Grose preened a little before going on, "-- and it is always so wonderful, so miraculous, when another joins us -- and now suddenly we have two!"

Moony stared at her, her hands opening and closing in her lap. "But what happened?" she cried desperately. "What are They?"

Mrs. Grose shrugged and coughed delicately. "What are They," she repeated. "Well, Moony, that is a very good question." She heaved back onto the couch and sighed. "What are They? I do not know."

At Moony's rebellious glare she added hastily, "Well, many things, of course, we

have thought They were many things, and They might be any of these or all of them or-- well, none, I suppose. Fairies, or little angels of Jesus, or tree spirits-- that is what a dear friend of mine believed. And some sailors thought

They were will-o-the-wisps, and let's see, Miriam Hopewell, whom you don't remember but was another very dear friend of mine, God rest her soul, Miriam thought They came from flying saucers."

At this Moony's belligerence crumpled into defeat. She recalled the things she had seen on her mother -- devouring her it seemed, setting her aflame -- and gave a small involuntary gasp.

"But why?" she wailed. "I mean, why? Why should They care? What can They possibly get from us?"

Mrs. Grose enfolded Moony's hand in hers. She ran her fingers along Moony's palm as though preparing for a reading, and said, "Maybe They get something They don't have. Maybe we give Them something."

"But what?" Moony's voice rose, almost a shriek. "What?"

"Something They don't have," Mrs. Grose repeated softly. "Something everybody else has, but They don't --

"Our deaths."

Moony yanked her hand away. "Our deaths? My mother like, sold her soul, to -- to --"

"You don't understand, darling." Mrs. Grose looked at her with mild, whiskey-colored eyes. "They don't want us to die. They want our deaths. That's why we're still at Mars Hill, me and Gary and your mother and Martin. As long as we stay here, They will keep them for us -- our sicknesses, our destinies. It's something They don't have." Mrs. Grose sighed, shaking her head. "I guess They just get lonely, or bored of being immortal. Or whatever it is They are."

That's right! Moony wanted to scream. What the hell are They? But she only said,

"So as long as you stay here you don't die? But that doesn't make any sense -- I mean, John died, he was here --"

Mrs. Grose shrugged. "He left. And They didn't come to him, They never greeted him. . .

"Maybe he didn't know-- or maybe he didn't want to stay. Maybe he didn't want to live. Not everybody does, you know. I don't want to live forever--" She sighed melodramatically, her bosom heaving. "But I just can't seem to tear myself away."

She leaned over to hug Moony. "But don't worry now, darling. Your mother is going to be okay. And so is Martin. And so are you, and all of us. We're safe --"

Moony shuddered. "But I can't stay here! I have to go back to school, I have a

life --"

"Of course you do, darling! We all do! Your life is out there --" Mrs. Grose gestured out the window, wiggling her fingers toward where the cold blue waters of the Bay lapped at the gravel. "And ours is here. " She smiled, bent her head to kiss Moony so that the girl caught a heavy breath of chamomile and brandy. "Now you better go, before your mother starts to worry."

Like I was a goddamn kid, Moony thought; but she felt too exhausted to argue. She stood, bumping against the pug. It gave a muffled bark, then looked up at her and drooled apologetically. Moony leaned down to pat it and took a step toward the door. Abruptly she turned back.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. Like, I'm going. I understand, you don't know about these-- about all this -- I mean I know you've told me everything you can. But I just want to ask you one thing--"

Mrs. Grose placed her teacup on the edge of the coffee table and waved her fingers, smiling absently. "Of course, of course, darling. Ask away."

"How old are you?"

Mrs. Grose's penciled eyebrows lifted above mild surprised eyes. "How old am I? One doesn't ask a lady such things, darling. But --"

She smiled slyly, leaning back and folding her hands upon her soft bulging stomach. "If I'd been a man and had the vote, it would have gone to Mr. Lincoln."

Moony nodded, just once, her breath stuck in her throat. Then she fled the cottage.

In Bangor, the doctor confirmed that the cancer was in remission.

"It's incredible." She shook her head, staring at Ariel's test results before tossing them ceremonially into a wastebasket. "I would say the phrase 'A living miracle' is not inappropriate here. Or voodoo, or whatever it is you do there at Mars Hill."

She waved dismissively at the open window, then bent to retrieve the tests. "You're welcome to get another opinion. I would advise it, as a matter of fact."

"Of course," Ariel said. But of course she wouldn't, then or ever. She already knew what the doctors would tell her.

There was some more paperwork, a few awkward efforts by the doctor to get Ariel to confess to some secret healing cure, some herbal remedy or therapy practiced by the kooks at the spiritualist community. But finally they were done. There was nothing left to discuss, and only a Blue Cross number to be given to the receptionist. When the doctor stood to walk with Ariel to the door, her eyes were too bright, her voice earnest and a little shaky as she said, "And look:

whatever you were doing, Ms. Rising -- howling at the moon, whatever -- you just keep on doing it. Okay?"

"Okay." Ariel smiled, and left.

"You really can't leave, now," Mrs. Grose told Martin and Ariel that night. They were all sitting around a bonfire on the rocky beach, Diana and Gary singing "Sloop John B" in off-key harmony, Rvis and Shasta Daisy and the others disemboweling leftover lobster bodies with the remorseless patience of raccoons. Mrs. Grose spread out the fingers of her right hand and twisted a heavy filigreed ring on her pinkie, her lips pursed as she regarded Ariel. "You shouldn't have gone to Bangor, that was very foolish," she said, frowning. "In a few months, maybe you can go with Gary to the Beach Store. Maybe. But no further than that."

Moony looked sideways at her mother, but Ariel only shook her head. Her eyes were luminous, the same color as the evening sky above the Bay.

"Who would want to leave?" Ariel said softly. Her hand crept across the pebbles to touch Martin's. As Moony watched them she felt again that sharp pain in her heart, like a needle jabbing her. She would never know exactly what had happened to her mother, or to Martin. Jason would tell her nothing. Nor would Ariel or anyone else. But there they were, Ariel and Martin sitting cross-legged on the gravel strand, while all around them the others ate and drank and sang as though nothing had happened at all; or as though whatever had occurred had been decided on long ago. Without looking at each other, Martin and her mother smiled, Martin somewhat wryly. Mrs. Grose nodded.

"That's right," the old woman said. When she tossed a stone into the bonfire an eddy of sparks flared up. Moony jumped, startled, and looked up into the sky. For an instant she held her breath, thinking, At last! -- it was Them and all would be explained. The Fairy King would offer his benediction to the united and loving couples; the dour Puritan would be avenged; the Fool would sing his sad sweet song and everyone would wipe away happy tears.

But no. The sparks blew off into ashes, filling the air with a faint smell of incense. When she turned back to the bonfire, Jason was holding out a flaming marshmallow on a stick, laughing and the others had segued into a drunken rendition of "Leaving on a Jet Plane."

"Take it, Moony," he urged her, the charred mess slipping from the stick. "Eat it quick, for luck."

She leaned over until it slid onto her tongue, a glowing coal of sweetness and earth and fire; and ate it quick, for luck.

Long after midnight they returned to their separate bungalows. Jason lingered with Moony by the dying bonfire, stroking her hair and staring at the lights

of

Dark Harbor. There was the crunch of gravel behind them. He turned to see his father, standing silhouetted in the soft glow of the embers.

"Jason," he called softly. "Would you mind coming back with me? I there's something we need to talk about."

Jason gazed down at Moony. Her eyes were heavy with sleep, and he lowered his head to kiss her, her mouth still redolent of burnt sugar. "Yeah, okay," he said, and stood. "You be okay, Moony?"

Moony nodded, yawning. "Sure." As he walked away, Jason looked back and saw her stretched out upon the gravel beach, arms outspread as she stared up at the three-quarter moon riding close to the edge of Mars Hill.

"So what's going on?" he asked his father when they reached the cottage.

Martin

stood at the dining room table, his back to Jason. He picked up a small stack of envelopes and tapped them against the table, then turned to his son.

"I'm going back," he said. "Home. I got a letter from Brandon today," -Brandon was his agent-- "there's going to be a show at the Frick Gallery, and a symposium. They want me to speak."

Jason stared at him, uncomprehending. His long pale hair fell into his face, and

he pushed it impatiently from his eyes. "But --you can't," he said at last. "You'll die. You can't leave here. That's what Adele said. You'll die."

Martin remained silent, before replacing the envelopes and shaking his head.

"We

don't know that. Even before, we--I-- didn't know that. Nobody knows that, ever."

Jason stared at him in disbelief. His face grew flushed as he said, "But you can't! You're sick -- shit, Dad, look at John, you can't just --"

His father pursed his lips, tugged at his ponytail. "No, Jason, I can."

Suddenly

he looked surprised, a little sheepish even, and said more softly. "I mean, I will. There's too much for me to give up, Jason. Maybe it sounds stupid, but I think it's important that I go back. Not right away. I think I'll stay on for a

few weeks, maybe until the end of October. You know, see autumn in New England and all. But after that --well, there's work for me to do at home, and--"

Jason's voice cracked as he shook his head furiously. "Dad. No. You'll--you'll die."

Martin shrugged. "I might. I mean, I guess I will, sometime. But--well, everybody dies." His mouth twisted into a smile as he stared at the floor. "Except Mrs. Grose."

Jason continued to shake his head. "But-- you saw Them -- They came, They must've done something--"

Martin looked up, his eyes feverishly bright. "They did. That's why I'm leaving."

Look, Jason, I can't explain, all right ? But what if you had to stay here, instead of going on to Bowdoin? What if Moony left, and everyone else -would you stay at Mars Hill? Forever?"

Jason was silent. Finally, "I think you should stay," he said, a little desperately. "Otherwise whatever They did was wasted."

Martin shook his head. His hand closed around a tube of viridian on the table and he raised it, held it in front of him like a weapon. His eyes glittered as he said, "Oh no, Jason. Not wasted. Nothing is wasted, not ever." And tilting his head he smiled, held out his arm until his son came to him and Martin embraced him, held him there until Jason's sobs quieted, and the moon began to slide behind Mars Hill.

Jason drove Moony to the airport on Friday. Most of his things already had been shipped from San Francisco to Bowdoin College, but Moony had to return to Kamensic Village and the Loomises, to gather her clothes and books for school and make all the awkward explanations and arrangements on her own. Friends and relations in New York had been told that Ariel was undergoing some kind of experimental therapy, an excuse they bought as easily as they'd bought most of Ariel's other strange ideas. Now Moony didn't want to talk to anyone else on the phone. She didn't want to talk to anyone at all, except for Jason.

"It's kind of on the way to Brunswick," he explained when Diana protested his driving Moony. "Besides, Diana, if you took her she'd end up crying the whole way. This way I can keep her intact at least until the airport."

Diana gave in, finally. No one suggested that Ariel drive.

"Look down when the plane flies over Mars Hill," Ariel said, hugging her daughter by the car. "We'll be looking for you."

Moony nodded, her mouth tight, and kissed her mother. "You be okay," she whispered, the words lost in Ariel's tangled hair.

"I'll be okay," Ariel said, smiling.

Behind them Jason and Martin embraced. "If you're still here I'll be up Columbus Weekend," said Jason. "Maybe sooner if I run out of money."

Martin shook his head. "If you run out of money you better go see your mother."

It was only twenty minutes to the airport. "Don't wait," Moony said to Jason, as the same woman who had taken her ticket loaded her bags onto the little Beechcraft. "I mean it. If you do I'll cry and I'll kill you."

Jason nodded. "Righto. We don't want any bad publicity. 'Noted Queer Activist's Son Slain by Girlfriend at Local Airport. Wind Shear Is Blamed. '"

Moony hugged him, drew away to study his face. "I'll call you in the morning."

He shook his head. "Tonight. When you get home. So I'll know you got in safely."

'Cause it's dangerous out there." He made an awful face, then leaned over to kiss her. "Ciao, Moony."

"Ciao, Jason."

She could feel him watching her as she clambered into the little plane, but she didn't look back. Instead she smiled tentatively at the few other passengers -- a businessman with a tie loose around his neck, two middle-aged women with L.L. Bean shopping bags -- and settled into a seat by the window.

During takeoff she leaned over to see if she could spot Jason. For an instant she had a flash of his car, like a crimson leaf blowing south through the darkening green of pines and maples. Then it was gone.

Trailers of mist whipped across the little window. Moony shivered, drew her sweatshirt tight around her chest. She felt that beneath her everything she had ever known was shrinking, disappearing, swallowed by golden light; but somehow it was okay. As the Beechcraft banked over Penobscot Bay she pressed her face dose against the glass, waiting for the gap in the clouds that would give her a last glimpse of the gray and white cottages tumbling down Mars Hill, the wind-riven pier where her mother and Martin and all the rest stood staring up into the early autumn sky, tiny as fairy people in a child's book. For an instant it seemed that something hung over them, a golden cloud like a September haze. But then the blinding sun made her glance away. When she looked down again the golden haze was gone. But the others were still there, waving and calling out soundlessly until the plane finally turned south and bore her away, away from summer and its silent visitors -- her mother's cancer, Martin's virus, the Light Children and Their hoard of stolen sufferings -- away, away, away from them all, and back to the welcoming world.