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HERE WE COME A-WANDERING

Matt met the moss man on Christmas Eve.

She was sitting on a stone bench in a pioneer cemetery, a wall of ivy-covered brick at her back, and a brown paper bag full of past-their-expiration-date cellophane-wrapped sandwiches beside her. The short cool daylight was fading, mist breeding in the low spots and spreading. The damp in the air smelled like winter, dead leaves, iced water, chill and no comfort. Matt was glad of her thick olive-drab army jacket.

She liked the look of the old mossy gravestones, some tilted and some broken, but all mute against the wet grass and vanishing distance. The people who had come here to commune with the dead had all died, too; no fresh dreams troubled the stillness. This was as close to nature as she liked to get, a tamed wilderness only a short walk away from a town where she could go to find warmth and comfort after she had had her supper.

She unwrapped one of the sandwiches and sniffed it. Roast beef and yellow cheese. It smelled fine. She took a sample bite, waited to see if her stomach would tell her anything, and then ate the rest of the sandwich. The bread was dry and the edges of the cheese hard, but it was better than a lot of other things she had eaten.

Her stomach thanked her. She opened another sandwich, ham and swiss, tested it, and ate it.

She was sitting and feeling her own comfort when she noticed there was some dreaming going on to her left, a quiet swirl of leafy images emerging from the layers-thick ivy on the wall. She wondered if she were seeing the dream of a plant. She had never seen a plant dream before. This seemed like a strange time to start seeing them. She turned to get a better look at the dream, and it changed. The leaves wove together into green skin, the skin smoothed and formed a man, and then a man all green stepped away from the wall, shaking his head slowly.

Some texture in the sound and smell of him told her he was no dream at all.

Matt grabbed the loose cellophane on the bench beside her and asked it if it would cover the man's face if she threw it. It said yes. If he came at her . .

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she touched the bench she was sitting on. It was too old and sleepy to mobilize.

She put her feet on the ground and tensed to run.

The man blinked. His face looked like a mannequin's, no real expression, no movement of the tiny muscles, a polished and unreal perfection to the features.

He turned and stared at her.

"Who are you?" she asked after the silence had stretched.

"Edmund," he said.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Nothing? Why'd you move if you don't want anything? You could have just stayed in the wall." She had never met anybody who wanted nothing. She wondered if he were lying.

"It was time to move," he said. Something was happening to his skin in the waning light, the green fading, leaving tan behind. His clothes and curly hair stayed green. She hadn't noticed the clothes until the rest of him changed. T-shirt, pants -- green, mossy even; bare arms and face, hands and feet. And it was freezing, but he didn't look as though he felt the cold.

"Want a sandwich?" she said.

He stretched and yawned. He came closer. She had thought his expression was wooden, but now she saw it was more like ice, frozen . . . though thaw was coming. He blinked. He finally smiled. It changed her image of him completely: he looked friendly and almost goofy.

Still gripping the cellophane just in case, she scooted over, leaving room on the bench. He sat down.

She peered into the brown paper bag. "Looks like I got a tuna and a ham-and-cheese left. The tuna might be bad. Fish goes bad faster than cured meat."

"I'll try the ham-and-cheese," he said. "Thanks."

She gave him the sandwich. He struggled with the cellophane for a minute. She grabbed it back and unwrapped it for him. "How long you been part of a wall, anyway?"

"I don't know," he said. "I wonder if my car will run." He bit the sandwich and chewed, abstracted, as though he were listening to his mouth. "Hmm."

"It's Christmas Eve," Matt said when he had finished the sandwich and sat watching her, smiling faintly.

"Huh," he said. "Been a wall a couple months then, I guess. I'm not sure."

She peeked at his mental landscape. A forest clearing, with a single tree rising from the center, sunlight stroking one side of its trunk. Wind blew and the tree leaned into it as though its bark were skin, its core supple.

Not threatening, but not clear, either. "What were you doing in the wall?"

"Standing still."

"How come?"

"That's how the spirit moved me."

"Huh?"

He shrugged. "I just wander around until something tells me to act. I happened to stop here a while back, and the wall spoke to me."

Matt felt a stir inside. She had been talking with human-made things for years.

She'd never met someone else who talked with them.

"What did it say?"

"'Come here.'"

She glanced back at the wall under its cloak of ivy. --Did you say "come here" to this guy?-- she asked it.

--Yes,-- said the wall.

--Why?--

--I wanted him.--

Nothing ever seemed to want Matt, though lots of things enjoyed meeting her, and most of them were nice to her. --Why?--

--He's a certain kind of brick. He's hot. He makes everything fit better.--Matt looked at Edmund. His eyebrows were up.

"You're a brick?" she said.

"A brick," he repeated, with a question in it.

"Wall says you're a brick. A hot brick."

"What?" He glanced at the wall. He reached out and placed his palm flat against it.

Seemed like he hadn't heard her conversation, then. Matt felt better. She had been talking to everything for a long time without other human beings hearing her. She wasn't sure how she would feel about being overheard.

His arm stained brick red.

--What's he doing?-- Matt asked the wall.

--Connecting,-- the wall said. --Are you talking to me?-- Its voice had changed slightly.

--Am I?-- Matt looked at Edmund. His mouth opened slightly, and his eyebrows stayed up.

--Yes, -- said the wall. "Yes," said Edmund.

Matt swallowed. --This is so strange.

--Yes.

-Slowly he pulled his hand away from the wall. His skin faded to tan again. He held his hand out to Matt. She stared at it without touching it.

"What do you want?" he asked her. "What do you need?"

"Me? I don't need anything," she said.

"I'm here for you."

"What?"

He dropped his hand to his thigh. "I follow as the spirit leads me," he said. "It led me to you. Let me know when you figure out what you want."

"I take care of myself," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"I don't need anything else."

"All right."

"What do you want?" she asked him again.

He smiled wide. "Nothing," he said again. "Guess that makes us a match."

"I don't turn into a brick," said Matt, unnerved. She hadn't realized until this moment how much she valued being different and special, even if no one else knew just how special. She knew, and that had been enough, until now. She didn't want this man to be anything like her.

He said, "Would you like to be a brick? I like it. It's nice being a part of something so solid."

"No." Matt shook her head. "No, no."

"Okay," he said. He pulled his legs up, bent knees against his chest, and gripped his feet.

She watched him for a while. His feet and hands started to gray to match the stone bench, and then the dark was too heavy for her to make out details.

"Uh," she said. "I'm going back to town now. Nice meeting you."

"I'll come with you."

"I'd rather you didn't."

"Oh. All right. Thanks for the sandwich."

"You're welcome." She stood and walked away quickly, chasing mist whenever she could.

She found a newspaper in a phone booth and scanned the page of church

services,
then picked an early one to go to. She liked churches on Christmas Eve, the pageantry, the carols, the candles and greenery, the warmth, the smells of hot wax and pine and incense and perfume and even mothballs from some of the fancy clothes people wore. She liked the idea that a kid born in a cave could be important.

She settled in a back pew and watched everything with interest. Children thought about presents, those opened and those still waiting, full of promises. Some of the grown-ups did too. Some people were thinking about the service, and some were thinking about going to sleep. Some were remembering their dinners. Some were worried because they hadn't finished wrapping things or they hadn't found the right presents, and others were happy because they had done what they could.

A woman in front of Matt kept thinking about washing a mountain of dishes. She would sigh, and start the task in her mind again, go through it dish by dish, each spoon and fork and knife, and sigh, and start again. Matt tuned her out and focused on a child who was watching the candles and listening to the singing and thinking about the words of the songs and making the flames go in and out of focus, flames, flat disks of light, flames. A child in another place looked at every scrap of red clothing, hoping to glimpse Santa Claus. A man cradled a sleeping child. When he looked down at her he saw his arms full of golden light. Another child looked at the priest and saw angels behind him. Matt wondered if maybe the angels were really there. They had beautiful smiles and kind eyes.

The church was full. It lived and breathed, a big organism full of different cells and tissues, everything cooperating.

Matt kept an eye out for the moss man. What did he want from her? He wasn't a normal human. She couldn't guess which way he'd jump.

She didn't see him again until she left the church. She was walking through a quiet neighborhood talking to houses she passed, asking if any of them would like some extra company tonight, and listening to their stories about the festivities they had hosted, the lighted trees they held inside, the way their humans had dressed them in jewelry of lights, when an old rest-blotched station wagon pulled up beside her, its engine surprisingly quiet considering its exterior, and Edmund leaned along the seat and said out the rolled-down passenger-side window, "Want a ride?"

"What?" she said.

"Want a ride?"

"No," she said, wondering if she should run.

He pulled the car over to the curb and turned off the engine. "Want company?" he said, climbing out. He had shoes and a coat on now.

--What's with this guy?-- she asked the car.

--He won't hurt you,-- the car said. Its voice was gentle and warm and somehow

feminine.

--Do you know what hurts?--

--Yes,-- said the car. --At least I know some of the things that hurt people. Edmund won't hurt you.--

"What do you want?" Matt asked Edmund for the third time.

He rounded the front of the car and stood near her. "I want to walk around with you. I want to take your hand. I want to make sure you're warm enough tonight, and safe."

"Why?"

"Because that's where the spirit is leading me."

She reached out her gloved hand and he took it, his own warm through the leather of her glove, his grip firm without being threatening. "Thank you," he said.

"I don't get it," she muttered.

"That's okay." He moved to stand beside her, still holding her hand, and said, "Would you like to walk?"

"All right."

They walked without speaking for a while. Matt watched the way their breaths misted in front of them, and the way the real mist globed around the orange streetlights, as though fires floated on air, or small clumsy stars dipped low.

He was tall beside her, his hand warm in hers, his footsteps almost silent. It took a while for her defenses to gentle down, and then she realized that it felt good to walk with another person. She couldn't remember the last time she had done it like this --if ever.

"Sometimes I feel like I might just float away," he said presently. "I have a sister. I visit her once in awhile. It keeps my feet on the ground."

"I saw my sister last spring." Matt had talked to her sister last Christmas for the first time in years. In the spring Matt had hitchhiked across the top of the country from Ohio to Seattle, catching rides sometimes from people and sometimes from friendly trucks, who opened their back doors to her at truckstops and let her out at other truckstops when they were about to turn away from her route.

Seeing Pam had been strange and difficult. Matt and her sister had started out from the same place and gone such different directions that they had almost no common ground left. Pam and her husband had offered Matt a room to stay in and help finding a job. Matt fixed the broken dishwasher and repaired a reluctant vacuum cleaner and a tired clothes dryer, and then she had hugged Pam and left.

"Mostly I just wander from one place to the next," said Edmund, "waiting to be needed for something, then trying to figure out what it is."

Matt wandered too, always looking at things. Sometimes she helped people, but she didn't go around looking for people to help. "What about what you want?"

"I don't know," he said. They walked farther. "I used to do what I wanted, until I started getting mean, and wanting things other people cherished. Scared me. Wasn't the person I wanted to be. So I decided to try the opposite."

"And things want you?"

He nodded. "Sometimes it's nothing urgent. The cemetery wall had been failing to pieces for ages, for instance, and it could have gone on disintegrating without disturbing the integrity of the local space-time continuum." He grinned and she looked up at him. "I know, I can't believe I talk like that either. Especially when I'm not used to talking at all. But that wall wanted to be pulled back together. I wasn't busy with anything else, so I kind of melted in and helped the wall collect itself and strengthen its bonds with its pieces. Then just as I finished, there you were."

"What makes you think I'm your next project?"

"That's the way the spirit usually works, I guess. I finish one task and then comes another."

"So what are you supposed to do about me?"

He shook his head and smiled. "Maybe nothing. I know you don't need me or anybody."

She stopped in the darkness between streetlights and stared across the street at a house draped with colored blinking lights, realizing that the lights blurred because her eyes had heated with tears. Something inside her tremored, small shakes at first, then working their way outward to her edges and turning into big shakes.

"What is it?" he murmured.

"I -- "She gripped his hand harder.

He stood beside her as she shook, and then he stepped closer and slid his arms around her. She held onto him, pressed her face into his chest, smelled his strange wood-smoke and spring skies scent, and felt the choke of sobs welling up in her throat. She fought them back down, wanting to not cry in front of this stranger or against this stranger or anywhere near this stranger. She held it all in. She had not cried in a thousand years. Especially not where anyone else could hear.

He stroked her back, a gentle rub up and down of his hand over her shoulder blade. He was warm and smelled like fire.

--What? What are you doing to me?-- she cried without voice.

--Just waiting,-- he said.

--Stop pushing!-- she screamed.

He stood quiet, his arms still embracing her, without force. She knew she could free herself with a step backward. He did not move except for the slow exhalations and inhalations she could feel and hear beneath her cheek and ear, and the faint bumping of his heart.

--Just waiting,-- he said.

Something was pushing. Something inside her. It pushed up from her chest into her throat. It hurt! Her head felt fever-hot. Then a sob broke out of her, and another, and then they were coming out, wave after wave, and the hot heavy pushing thing eased. She shook and cried, loud gulping embarrassing sobs, her nose running, her throat bobbing open and shut, and he stood quiet and just held her.

Once she stopped trying to stop herself from crying she felt much better; she just let the sobs and tears and snot come out however they seemed to want to. Inside her crying, she lost track of everything else, another luxury she hadn't had in all these recent years of hyperawareness of everything around her. She worried because she didn't know how to stop crying, but somehow she let that worry rise and fade like the others.

When at last the sobs died away and all her impulse to cry was gone, she couldn't understand where she was. She was warm straight through, and lying on something hard but not flat, more bumpy and falling away at the sides. She felt as limp as an overcooked noodle. She lifted her head. There wasn't much light, but she could make out a face below her, peaceful, sleeping, smooth as a statue's face. Arms around her. A blanket over her? She wasn't sure about that part. She felt warm all over.

She listened to their breathing and realized they were someplace small.

Her arms were down at her sides. She sneaked them up until she could push away from what she was lying on. The arms around her fell away. She looked down into the face, and realized it was that guy, Edmund, realized that yes, she was lying on him, on top of a guy, something she hadn't done on purpose since the zoned years. His eyes opened. He looked at her, his face serene.

"You okay?" he asked.

She rubbed her nose on her sleeve. "I don't know. What happened? Where are we?"

She looked around. They were in a small enclosed space, but she could see windows now. Car windows, all steamed over.

"We're in my car. I have a futon in the back where I sleep sometimes. It seemed like a better place for crying than the middle of the sidewalk on a freezing night."

"Let me out." She scrambled off of him and crawled over to one of the doors,

frantically searching for a handle, finding one, pressing pulling, twisting. Trapped. Everything in her screamed panic.

He was beside her. He edged his hand under hers and opened the door, and she fell out into the street. She jumped up and ran.

A block. She turned a corner. She scanned for a hiding place, saw a low fence and a dense tree, jumped the fence, hid inside the shadow the tree's branches cast. She slowed her breath and tried to catch up to herself.

Nothing followed her.

Usually she found a refuge for the night in something human-built that welcomed her, someplace warm, but tonight she curled up on the cool damp ground in the treeshadow, stilled her mind, and searched out sleep.

She lay hugging her knees to her chest for a long while, her knit cap pulled down over her ears. Her neck was cold, and her ear, with only a layer of cloth to protect it from the earth, was freezing. Cold air inched up her pantlegs past her thick socks. Usually she could shut those sensations off one by one and feel comfortable and safe, and then she could sleep.

Tonight she felt strange. Her head felt floaty. Lightness was all through her, as though she had taken an unfamiliar drug. The cold, which she knew from broad experience wasn't enough to kill her, kept telling her it was there. She put her gloved hands up around her neck. The smooth outsides of her gloves were cold against her bare skin, and woke her more than cold air had.

She sighed and sat up. She did her best to take good care of herself. She loved her life, even though some of it was difficult. She wanted to be warm.

She remembered how warm she had been inside Edmund's car, and how strange that warmth had felt. His arms around her, not tight, but enough to let her know she was being held. She thought of being his project and didn't like that at all. Who was his spirit, to decide that he should work on her? She knew that everything had spirit -- she talked to the spirit in many things -but she had never felt like spirit was ordering her around, making her decisions for her. Maybe Edmund was deluded. Maybe his spirit only applied to him.

Even if he was deluded, he had been nice to her.

She stretched and edged out from under the sheltering branches. She crossed the lawn, hopped the fence, and knelt on the sidewalk. She pulled off her glove and touched the cold cement. --Edmund?-- she asked it. --Moss man?--

--No,-- said the sidewalk.

--Do you know the one I'm talking about? Do you know where he is?--

--I'll ask.

The thread of question rippled out around her. She sat down, waiting while cold seeped through the seat of her jeans. She had asked long-distance questions before, and gotten answers. She wasn't sure how the sidewalk would recognize Edmund when it found him, though.

The mist made the night seem quiet, almost dead. Porchlights and Christmas lights and streetlights blurred and hazed only a short way from her. She reached out and touched the fence beside her to make sure it was still there.

She couldn't even hear his steps, but she saw him come out of the mist. He knelt in front of her and smiled gently. "Hi."

She opened her arms and he edged forward and scooped her up, then rose to his feet. Carrying her, he walked for a while. She clung to him, for a moment trying to remember the last time she had been carried, had reached for the one carrying her, had leaned against his warmth and felt so safe and strange. Her mind blanked. She didn't need to know.

He stopped, and loosed one of his arms to reach for the back door of his car. It opened without sound. He leaned and set her on the mattress. It was warm. The inside of his car smelled like mountain pine and desert sagebrush. She crawled into the shadowy hollow and he came in after her, pulling the door shut behind him.

She crept up toward the front of the car and leaned against the back of the passenger seat, tucked hat and gloves into her pockets and waited for the warmth to thaw her edges.

"Thirsty?" he asked after a little while.

"Guess I am."

He opened what looked like a dark box and pulled out an oblong something that gurgled, then edged closer to her and held it out.

"What is it?"

"Water."

She reached out. Her hand touched his. "You're so warm," she whispered. "How do you stay so warm?"

"Spirit," he said. He shifted the bottle until she got a grip on it.

She screwed the cap off and sipped cool fresh water. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. I'm glad you called."

"Why?" She drank more water, then capped the bottle and handed it back to him.

"I wanted to see you again."

"Why?"

"I don't know." He sounded frustrated. "I don't know. I need -- I don't know what it is, but I need something."

"You need something from me? I thought spirit gave you everything."

"I thought it did too, until you left." He was quiet for a while. "There's an ache inside me now that wasn't there before."

"Oh, no. No." She remembered the void that opened within her sometimes when she left behind people she had liked. Often they invited her to stay. They showed her how she could live and be with them. She found comfort and friendship and warmth and a future, soil ripe for roots. The instant she thought of staying anyplace longer than four or five weeks, though, panic burned through her. The bottoms of her feet itched until she moved on. Distant roads called and carried her away.

Once the miles were behind her she remembered how nice the places and people had been. She yearned for them. She mourned lost moments, orange marmalade on English muffins on someone's back porch on a summer morning, an old man reciting Robert Service poetry beside a crackling fire late one winter night, rubbing shoulders with a pack of wild dirty kids as they all hid in a hayloft together and watched confused grown-ups running below, sitting alone on grass and watching peoples' dreams during a concert of classical music in a park, stadium fireworks with an older couple one Fourth of July. Losing them hurt. But she never went back.

"You say no, but the ache is still there," Edmund murmured.

"I'm sorry." She reached for his hand. Held it. His fingers were warm, and gripped hers back.

"You feel it."

"Yeah," she whispered. "But I don't know what to do about it."

He slid closer to her, let go of her hand and put his arm around her shoulders. Feeling strange, she leaned against his chest. She pushed her hand down between the futon and the side of the car. --What does he want? What does he need?-- she asked the car, since Edmund had never given her a straight answer.

--He needs four flat tires and no spare,-- the car said.

"What!" A laugh startled out of her.

"What?" Edmund asked.

"Car says you need four flats and no spare."

He didn't say anything for a little while. Finally, he said, "Maybe I do. Do you ever feel like that's what you need?"

She shook her head. "No. No. I'd go crazy if I was stuck in one place."

"Are you sure?"

Yes. "No."

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe it's time I stopped following the spirit around.

The spirit's all over the place anyway. Maybe I'll stay here for a while."

"Here? A little three-syllable town in the middle of nowhere?"

"Why'd you come here if you thought that?"

"Because there's always something new and interesting everywhere I go."

"Yes," he said. "Here there's a wildlife preserve that needs some preserving.

I saw it this evening after we split up. Earth that needs revitalizing, water that

wants unpoisoning, plants that need encouragement, animals that need better cover and more things to eat. I could work on that." He paused, then said,

"Why don't you help me?"

"I don't do stuff like that." There was nothing she could talk to in a landscape like that, except maybe Edmund. She got along very well with appliances and machines; plants and animals were total mysteries.

"What do you want to do?"

"Right now, or tomorrow?"

"Right now."

"Go to sleep, I guess."

He laughed; she could feel it and hear it. "Merry Christmas," he said. He gripped her shoulders gently and edged her over, then eased her down onto the mattress so she was lying on her back, and she let him do it. He leaned and reached for something toward the back of the car, pulled it up over them - it was a quilt -- and lay down beside her.

"Merry Christmas," she whispered.

During the zoned years she had awakened next to strange men as often as not, her head full of hangover, her body marked with bruises she couldn't remember how she had gotten, her psyche battered with scratches and aches that she would drink away before the next night fell. That was before things talked to her. Back then, even when people talked to her she mostly didn't care or understand what they were talking about. The important thing was to get as close to drowning as she could, because that was where oblivion lay. Everything else hurt

too much.

This was the first time in the unzoned years that she opened her eyes from sleep to morning light and looked into a man's face so near hers. His eyes were closed. His breathing was slow and deep and smelled like mint.

It was also the first time she had gotten a really good look at his face. He looked . . . beautiful.

Pretty much everything looked beautiful if you studied it long enough, but he looked beautiful at first glance: clear tanned skin over clean planes of cheek and jawbone, straight narrow nose, heavy domed eyelids fringed with dark lashes, neat dark arched brows, a high clean forehead, brown curls touched with gold. His mouth smiled in his sleep.

One eye opened, the other squinting shut. His eye was green. "Hi."

"Hi," she said, and looked away. He was warm and near, but not touching.

"Did you dream?"

"I don't remember. Did you?"

"Yeah. I dreamed about when I was a kid."

"A different life," said Matt. Her mother had taken her shopping for dresses for the junior prom. "Try this one, Matilda." Matt had tried a lot of them, and every one produced a stranger in the mirror, a young woman with wavy shoulder-length brown hair and shaved legs and armpits, and sparkles down her front. She had looked at herself and wondered what her future would be. Would there be a prince? Would there be a glamorous job? College? Parties? Adventures?

Never in a million years had she imagined this future.

"Yes. How did you know?" Edmund sat up and stretched, his hands flattening against the roof of the car. Matt sat up, too, and turned to sit crosslegged, facing him. He said, "Before this happened to me and I had to figure out what to do about it, I had three friends. We did stuff every afternoon after school, dumb stuff like going over to someone's house and watching cartoons and eating sugar cereal straight out of the box, or riding our bikes down hills like idiots, just for the rush of wondering whether we'd be able to brake before hitting something at the bottom. We'd spend whole afternoons gluing little model airplane parts into planes. I wonder who my friends turned into. I haven't thought of them in a long time."

"You probably wouldn't know them now."

He smiled. "I think I'd know them. We were really good friends."

"Would they know you?" Matt remembered knocking on her sister's door in Seattle, having a man answer. His face had shuttered over right away. Matt had understood. It had been three states since she had been to a Laundromat, but only a few miles from the barber where she had gotten her head shaved; her

last
ride had been in the back of an onion truck. She had a black plastic garbage
bag
containing her belongings over her shoulder. Her army jacket was a map of her
encounters with various kinds of dirt and grease. There were holes in her
shoes.

"What is it?" the man had said in an almost kind voice.

"Is Pam home?"

"Just a minute." He closed the door. It had opened a few minutes later to
reveal
a heavy, long-haired woman who wore blue-rimmed glasses, and a long green
dress
that made her look like a queen.

"Pam?" Matt had said.

"Mattie? Is that you? Oh, Mattie!" Her sister swept her up into an embrace . .
.
just the way Edmund had picked her up last night. Warmth, comfort, and safety.
With Pammy it had only lasted a little while. There had been too many
questions
afterward.

"I don't know if they'd know me," said Edmund. His smile widened. "Might be
fun
to find out."

"What about your preserve?"

"Maybe it's time to take a break from spirit work." A moment after he said
that,
his eyes widened, and he looked around at his car, at her, at the ceiling, as
if
waiting for a sign or a blow. Nothing happened.

"It would be hard to stop being a priest and then start again," Matt said.
"Wouldn't it?"

"I don't want to stop." He sat still for a moment, staring beyond her
shoulder,
a worry dent between his brows. "I would try to stay in that state where I'm
sensitive to signs of what needs or wants doing. But I would pick my path for
a
change, instead of drifting. I would ask questions because I want to know the
answers, instead of to find out what I should do next. Is that all right?" He
looked at the roof, at the steamed-over and frosted windows, toward the front
of
the car -- Matt glanced forward too, and saw that the dashboard of the car was
covered with dried leaves, curved driftwood, feathers, moss, acorns and seed
pods, sea shells, egg shells from wild birds, a sand dollar, a twisted silver
gum wrapper, a religious medal, small rocks, some smooth and some sharp-edged,
the shed skin of a snake . . .

The shed skin of a snake rose into the air.

Matt hugged herself.

The skin drifted over the front seats and came to wind itself around Edmund's wrist, clinging for a moment before dropping off.

"Thanks," he said, picking up the skin and pressing it against his cheek.

"That's a yes?" asked Matt.

He smiled. "Change and growth. Merry Christmas."

"So you're going to go find your friends?"

"Yeah."

What if he found them and they didn't recognize or remember him? What if he found them and they didn't like him? What if he had changed so much they were scared of him? When she looked at him and thought of him stepping out of the wall of ivy, it was hard to connect him with a boy who watched cartoons and ate sugar cereal. What if he and his friends had no places where their edges met anymore? What if he were heading for disappointment, all on a bright winter's morning?

He was a grown man and a magician or something. He'd been on his own for years, the same way she had. He could take care of himself.

She thought of how the crying had pushed up out of her last night, a lost river from somewhere inside, dammed for who knew how long, and how Edmund had waited by the waterfall, not asking questions or making demands or talking or judging or anything. What if he had a river like that inside him? Had he ever had someone to stand by while he let it out? Maybe his spirit took care of things like that, but maybe not. A spirit that sent you a snakeskin wasn't the same as somebody's arms around you when you were cold and sad.

"Can I come?" she said.

His smile widened. "That would be great."

That would be crazy. She'd never asked a question like that before. What did she think, she could help him?

Maybe she could.