

Books by Robert Reed

The Remarkables

Down the Bright Way

Black Milk

The Hormone Jungle

The Leeshore

**Beyond the Veil of Stars*

**An Exaltation of Larks*

**Beneath the Gated Sky*

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ROBERT REED

**AN
EXALTATION
OF LARKS**

ROBERT REED



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK / NEW YORK

ROBERT REED

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

AN EXALTATION OF LARKS

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Old To Main, and the
professors who made me notice the
much larger world

THE END

Youth is a bird.

A simple and vivid wild bird. Quick to anger, and love, and hungry to forget, if only so that it can do everything again for the first time.

Yet this is not a time of birds.

It is a time of turtles.

In the bitter chill at the end of Everything, the great turtles gather at their traditional place, summoning the last of their energies as they wait. There are no stars now, just blackness. No emissions or radiations of note. No passion, certainly. Even simple atoms are scarce, and feeble, the ancient laws of the universe beginning to sputter and fail. Which is exactly as the turtles wish.

But every so often, beyond the ken of their senses, hoarded energies are cracking the Now, allowing others to leap into the remote past—to do what turtles alone should do. What is their logical, sober and immortal right.

Criminals, these are.

Selfish monsters, think the selfless turtles.

One particular turtle makes his last preparations, including a quiet reformulation of intricate security plans. His brothers and sisters may allow the occasional criminal to pass unnoticed. But he is different, he promises himself. Better than them, or at least more relentless.

Once he is ready, and without fanfare, the turtle focuses his precious energy on a tiny, tiny portion of fragile Space.

The Now is shattered.

And the turtle carefully, carefully leaps through Time, dropping all the way back to the hot and vivid realm of birds.

SULLY

The blizzard is ahead of schedule, the printers are running late, and Jesse's circulation manager—a noble title for a paperboy—has invented a fresh excuse, claiming stomach flu. Sorry, he told Jesse, but could they get someone else to make the rounds? Meaning Jesse. Meaning he's got to brave snow and arctic winds, making the trek to Hanover to pick up this week's *Chronicle*, then back again to deliver it by his lonesome. Wait too long, and the highway will turn impassable. Unless it's already too late. An enormous blizzard is promised; it'll be days before the state plows arrive, the week's news left stale and second-hand. So Jesse has to go now, this minute. A panicky ambition seizes him. He climbs into his stoplight red Mustang, pumping the gas pedal and turning the key, the engine making a low unlubricated sound, anemic and ominous, that trails off into nothingness. Into death.

Jesse sits motionless, cold hands on the cold steering wheel, wondering if Ben Bradlee suffers this way. A thousand paperboys call in sick some night, and there's old Ben, driving his Caddy through Washington D.C., folding *Posts* and flinging like a son-of-a-bitch.

The image makes him laugh, sort of. Then he tries the key again, just to make sure; this time there's a soft clicking sound but no engine, the Permian stink of unleaded gasoline coming up through the floorboards. "Son-of-a-bitch." Now what? Looking straight ahead, Jesse watches his breath cling to the windshield and freeze. "Shit, shit, shit. . . !" Eight or ten inches of snow are promised, with twelve-plus in spots. Of all the goddamn nights! Jesse opens the heavy car door and stands, squinting into the brutal wind. Snowflakes come at him in flat trajectories, feeling like sand as they slam into his handsome, boyish face. Ambition wavers with each gust. He grimaces, thinking that he should just give up. He'll hand the office keys to Jill Toon, his second-in-command, then walk away. It would be the fair thing.

Jill deserves the credit for this week's issue, and she deserves the fallout. . . and there will be plenty of both. Mountains worth. Standing out in the open like this, letting the snowstorm gnaw at him, makes Jesse hungry for little pleasures. Warm air, of course. And chilled beer. And a companion or two. Or more. And in his mind he conjures up a harem of nubile beauties, nude and glistening beneath a blazing blue desert sky.

Shutting the door, he marches north, straight between the two largest dormitories. Jill has an apartment just off campus. Her old pickup is a fifty-fifty piece of junk on its best day. But who knows? Maybe they can start it. She'll ride with him, what with her expose covering the entire front page. A long journey across a treacherous landscape. . . all in the pursuit of truth. That's what he tells himself, head down and smiling, the old snow crunching underfoot as his white breath sails off behind him, dissolving into the roaring cold. And he hears a voice, almost close. It says, "Hello?" Then his name. "Jesse? Jesse Aylesworth?"

He pauses and turns, eyes stinging. Blinking. A girl is watching him, wearing a too-thin sky blue jacket and knitted blue mittens but no hat, her face rounded and pretty and smiling at him. It takes Jesse a few moments to remember a name. *Sully*. Sully what? Neurons misfire. He's too pissed and self-absorbed to think straight. Then it comes to him: *Faulkner*, like the dead writer. She's a senior, like him. Pretty in a casual way. Smiling back at her, Jesse asks, "Aren't you cold?" Then adds, "Sully?" with a whiff of doubt in his voice.

Yet that's her. Saying the name makes him certain. Sully is shaking her head as if to say, "I'm not cold," but then confesses, "A bit," with her breath trailing off sideways. She stands on the frozen yard between the dorms, her feet planted in old snow that hasn't been tramped flat and icy by migrating students. Her pretty face has a nice mouth, big and full, with dark eyes and tea-colored hair falling to her shoulders. An English major, isn't she? But never part of the *Chronicle* staff. Something of a loner. More mysterious than peculiar. And well built, in a stocky fashion. A taste for tight jeans and a hip-rich walk that Jesse has noticed, off and on, maybe a thousand times.

"You look like you're going somewhere," she observes.

And Jesse explains, dressing everything in an adventurous spirit. The famous Aylesworth charm shows through his frustration. The moment's drama is enhanced by a fierce gust of wind. He describes that image of Ben

Bradlee delivering newspapers, and Sully laughs. Does she have any sort of car? he wonders, giving a wink and grin.

But he doesn't have to ask, even in a glancing way. "Maybe I could help," Sully offers, without prompting. "I mean, if that's okay. Because I could drive." She has bright teeth despite the general gloom. "I mean, I don't want the newspaper to be late."

"I wasn't going to ask," he lies, winking once more for good measure.

"Any earth-shaking news this week?" It's a joke. When did anything big ever happen here?

But he can honestly tell her, "It's just the biggest scandal of all time. At least for Warner College."

"Oh, fun," she says.

"Our printer is up in Hanover—"

"Fun!"

An eleven-mile drive, but it's an Escher eleven. Uphill both ways. Complete with blind intersections and serpentine curves.

"You're willing?" he mutters.

She nods, reaching into her coat pocket and producing keys on a big ring. "If my car starts, that is." A big brassy S hangs on the chain, and she twirls it as they head back to the student lot, snow curling around them. Jesse admires the hip-rich walk. Her car is less impressive—a mammoth hunk of steel and frozen grease still encased in the remnants of the last storm. An Oldsmobile; a retired family car, no doubt. But miracle of miracles, the engine takes hold on the first try. It gives a good solid rumble, unfazed by nature. Sully sits with her door open. Jesse volunteers to scrape the windows while she revs. Her scraper was broken off a flimsy wood-spined brush—a blue plastic wafer is what it is—and he has to smack the icy crust with a fist and forearm before he can make headway. But the hard work nearly warms him before he climbs inside. The defroster screams. Sully laughs. With a sideways wink, she announces, "Oh, this is going to be fun."

They're underway. The girl's driving style is not quite cautious and not quite slow. The power steering whines, and the machine itself handles like a tanker, changing directions with a sloppy majesty. She takes them through campus, past the old gym and the new fieldhouse and the two freshman dorms. Then a right turn onto Main Street and straight through the heart of

town. The mighty Warner River—in places narrow enough to piss across—passes below them. Leafless trees hug the shoreline, black and simple against the mantle of snow. The tiny downtown is very bright and bleak to-night. Hank's Cafe has closed. The Bijou is between attractions. The various bars each have their smattering of cars and pickups, all parked at the same sixty-degree angle to the high curb. A flashing red light marks the highway. Sully signals; nobody's following them. Two narrow lanes of brittle concrete begin to wind their way between wooded hills and tired fields. Hanover is just a theory somewhere over the horizon. The little Texaco is already closed; does she have enough gas? Half a tank, he sees. And the road seems only a little snowy, which is also good news. Sully asks, "Want music?" Jesse says, "Sure," as she flips on the radio. AM only. He hears the oldies station from the city, clear most nights but sputtering now. Jesse looks off into the darkness, defroster blasting hot air into his smiling face, and Sully says, "You're spoiled. You've got an eight-track in your car."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, girls talk." Then she makes sure that he sees her knowing smile, bright and amused. It's as if she's saying more, as if she's warning him that secrets are impossible. "Girls talk." Meaning that he can't bullshit her as he does the freshmen girls. God knows what sorts of stories she's heard about him . . .

But Jesse doesn't care. At least not too much. They've reached the open highway, headlights illuminating the snow that comes in an endless aggressive blur. Nothing else exists in the world. No traffic; no terrain. It's just the tilting road and the snow, plus the blackness between and the piercing cold. He keeps quiet, trying not to distract the driver. The Beatles sing about all they need, then comes the news at the top of the hour. A warm, self-assured voice talks about the Middle East and President Carter and the rate of inflation, but this larger world makes little impression, or even seems particularly real. Jesse has been at Warner since 74. The town gets two television channels, and a smattering of bad radio stations. There's just this one lousy highway leading out. Every storm and jackknifed cattle truck closes the highway at irregular intervals. There's this perpetual sense of being an isolated place where thirsty young minds can drink from the nipple of Truth, without distractions.

By contrast, Hanover is a thriving concern—ten thousand vigorous citizens and the county seat, plus printing shops and a better grade of bars—and the blizzard, as if out of respect, seems to diminish as they enter town. Jesse points out their destination. Downtown is expansive, open, and warm. Sully does a big-boat turn to park them at the curb, her rear wheels fish tailing for an instant. "Weeee . . ." Out into the chill, then into the printer's. Ink smells; machine smells. The old fart in charge—Jesse knows him and can dislike him without guilt—gives a growl, saying, "'Bout time." As if he wasn't running late to begin with. "Nearly gave up on you," he announces, red eyes focusing on Sully.

"Where are they?" Jesse asks.

This week's *Chronicle* is stacked in the back, tied into bundles. The old fart wipes his dirty hands on his dirty apron, not offering to help but happy to stare at Sully's ass. Eight bundles are taken to the car, and Jesse returns alone to sign the invoice. "Looks pretty," the old fart says. "A real nice tush."

"Thanks. I think I look sweet. . . ."

It slides right past. Gone. The guy gives a leering smile and says, "Gettin' any from her?"

Jesse says nothing in a conspicuous way.

"Maybe what she needs," the guy persists, "is someone older. Someone with seasoning, ya' think?"

For an instant, Jesse has a premonition that he will become this man, getting into his fifties with his looks gone and his charm worn down to a rude glare and some sapless one-liners. Ripping off his part of the invoice, Jesse says, "Next week," and leaves. He climbs in beside Sully, smelling piney shampoo. "Now home," he commands. The car's interior is almost hot, lumps of tracked snow melting fast. Sully has her mittens off, the *Chronicle* on her lap and the Beach Boys rattling on about sunshine. "Do you think he stole it?" she asks, her expression serious. Curious. "Do you really think Lloyd would?"

The school president, she means. Jesse slides closer, admitting, "Jill has the evidence that says so."

"All that money?"

"Her source says that he stole it." The headline reads: President Tied to Missing Funds. Jesse feels a reliable giddiness, a sense of being embroiled

in something important. "They're starting an official investigation," he explains. "We didn't have time to put it in, but the board of trustees has some bean counters counting."

She says, "Sad." Only that. "Sad." Then she shakes her head and halfway smiles, handing him the paper and backing them away from the curb. Their drive home goes faster. Jesse gives a thorough account of the scandal, including Jill's failed attempts to interview the crook. Clarence Lloyd—a cruel pairing of names, and perfect. He is a quarrelsome, unimaginative lizard, always at odds with students and the faculty. Sure, he helped lift the school after some tough years. He muscled money out of the alumni and various foundations; inelegant modern buildings sprang up across the dilapidated campus. But the professors still get nothing for their work. Pinrose, head of the Biology department, makes an anemic ten grand a year. "Which is one fat irony," Jesse points out. "Lloyd skimmed ten grand in a good month. More at times."

"You don't like our president," Sully observes, laughing quietly.

Jesse is raving. He decides to change the subject, asking, "Could you take me around campus? If you've got the time, I mean."

"Glad to," she replies. No hesitations. She glances sideways at him. Her face, illuminated by the dashboard, appears soft and simple. And Jesse recognizes her. He knows her, but not as Sully. She reminds him of someone else . . . which is a peculiar way to think, lending the moment a strangeness, a palpable bewitchment. . .

Suddenly they're almost home. Coming down the last long hill, Jesse tells a story. Last month, in early December, his circulation manager was hung over and useless, and Jesse did the rounds himself. The Tau House was dark, he explains, but the front door had been left unlocked; someone had been negligent. He entered and immediately felt people nearby. Very close. Then came voices, boys chanting nonsense about the ancient Tau ideals. Someone had hung a starched white sheet over the living room entrance; nervous voices answered together, a rough chorus begging to serve. And Jesse risked a peek, lifting the sheet far enough to see kneeling boys kissing the bare white butts of several upper-classmen.

Sully laughs and laughs. "I knew Taus were strange," she claims. "I always knew it."

Just before Christmas, Jesse had told that same story to a freshman girl. They were in her dorm room, and the girl, who looked all of fourteen, responded with a brief faraway gaze, then sidled up against him and spoke into his ear, asking, "Would you like to kiss mine?"

The memory is immediate, clear, and perfectly rendered. It makes him smile under a flat hand. They've reached the outskirts of Warner. Trailer homes surrender to the old folks' home, low and brick and suitably bland. Then come ordinary homes, fifty- and sixty-years-old, some with big front porches and hanging swings and one with its Christmas lights left up and burning. Then the Texaco and Main Street, and Sully nearly forgets to brake and turn. "Sorry." Her tanker skids for a moment, then grabs dry pavement. Fewer vehicles are in front of the bars; the snowfall seems to have worsened. Crossing the river, Jesse looks downstream, remembering exactly how it was to kiss that young ass; how the skin had felt cool with his first touch, then warmer. Better.

She was just a little freshman, quietly depraved; you never know about anyone. That's the lesson Jesse has learned ten thousand times. Anyone can look like anyone, but you can never know what exactly is in their head.

Their first stop is the Tau House, which is worth a good laugh. Jesse pulls out copies without counting and runs them inside, the lights burning and no pagan ceremonies to eavesdrop on. Then he grabs a bigger stack and crosses to the Fine Arts building—a fat new concrete bread box—and leaves them in the lobby. Then to the Gamma House, the top sorority of three in the Warner social circus. The front door is locked. He rings the bell, rings again, then smiles when the door opens. Except it's Martha West, which is bad luck. "Well, well," she says. Martha is an almost pretty girl, thin in a slutty, spent way, with a locally famous mouth. For the last couple of semesters, she and Jesse have had a running feud. He once said some honest, unkind things about her, and another Gamma told Martha the worst of it. *Girls talk*. He hands her the papers without speaking, and she looks past him, that famous mouth asking, "Whose battleship?"

Jesse tells.

"Not Sully. Not her." Martha throws the papers on the floor behind her. "She's a sweet girl, you shit—!"

"I haven't—!"

But the door is shut and locked again; he mutters, "Fuck you, too, bitch."

"Was that Martha?" Sully asks when he returns. "I haven't seen the old West in ages."

"Science Hall," he says. "Then Battles."

"O-kay." Sully accelerates, reading the new mood but talking about Martha anyway. She'd met her in Freshman English, in Dr. Harris' class, and Jesse realizes he was in that same class. Was Sully there? He remembers sitting next to the windows. They were on the top floor of Red Hall, the old administration building. That's where he met Martha. They went on exactly one official date, complete with burgers and grease at Hank's Cafe and a movie at the Bijou. *The Towering Inferno*, wasn't it? And afterward she invited him to her room. Martha played the prim young lady role until they kissed. At least that's the way he remembers the night. Time has its way of diluting and confusing memories, but he has a clear recollection of seeing her little tits for the first time, and her broad flat ribs, and how that vacuum cleaner mouth kept humming while it worked.

Sully keeps talking about their English class. Sweet old Dr. Harris, in love with Dante and Milton and the other dusty greats. She retired at the semester's end. Jesse asks, "Where is she now?" In the retirement home on the highway, says Sully. "How is she?" Sickly. She had a stroke last year. Sully visits her from time to time, but the poor woman can barely recognize her own family anymore. And isn't it sad . . . ?

Jesse says nothing.

Then Sully says, "You dated Martha, didn't you?"

He doesn't hear anything dangerous in her voice. Nodding, he replies, "Once or twice, I guess."

And she gives a strange smile, stopping the car and shoving it into Park. "We watched you. In that class, I mean. But you didn't look at me twice—"

"I saw you," he protests.

"—but that's all right. O-kay." She pats him on the knee. It's a reach, the Olds having a front seat like a sofa and Jesse sitting at a polite distance. Martha's *not her* crap is eating at him. Has he tried anything? Has he even fantasized about Sully? Unlike a certain skinny slut, he has rules. Maybe when he gets home he should call the old West, telling her to mind her own fucking business—

Sully touches his shoulder. "Let me deliver some papers."

He hesitates, feeling self-conscious about the girl's charity. But she offers again, pointing out, "It goes faster with two people working."

"O-kay," says Jesse.

And she laughs, telling him, "See? We just made our lives bigger."

Bigger how?

"By saving time," she says, giving his knee another light pat and showing him a big bright smile.

Science Hall's back door is unlocked for night classes, but the place feels empty, unused. Physics—the foundation of all science—is on the ground floor. Jesse leaves a few copies in its tiny lounge. Chemistry is on the top floor, closest to God. It gets a few more copies. Sandwiched between them is biology, the most popular science—its ranks swollen by premed and pre-nursing students. The bulk of the *Chronicles* end up in its long stale smoky lounge. Dr. Pinrose's office is down the hall, *New Yorker* cartoons and a message pad stuck on the locked door. Jesse pauses. "I stole every dime," he scribbles. And he signs it, "Pres. Lloyd." Laughing now. Heading for the back stairwell.

Locked, unlit labs line the hallway. In the general bio lab, inside an enormous air-filled aquarium, are box turtles—ornate little rocks with legs and brains; unofficial mascots to the department. Jesse thunks the window with his fingernails. Oddly, every turtle is awake, heads lifting, red-and-yellow-rimmed eyes tracking him as the mouths open, begging for scraps.

"Not tonight," Jesse apologizes. He zips down the back stairs, the cool concrete echoing his footfalls. His mind shifts back in time. With practiced clarity, he remembers his first love. It was on a dare—the girl's dare—and they did it on bare ground in a vacant lot, tall weeds surrounding them, moonlight wrestling with the shadows. Neither child was quite sure what was next or best. But his second time was better. It was the same place but a different girl, and Jesse's confidence was bolstered by reading *The Naked Ape*. Success is confidence's first bride. From there he won a lover three years his senior; she was wise and patient, and bizarre. She taught Jesse that girls were wonders, and sex held possibilities that couldn't be exhausted. Not in a million years, she assured him. In word, and in wordless joy . . .

Back into winter again. Jesse trudges toward the car, no one else in sight. He climbs in and sits in the middle of the front seat, counting newspapers. He came to Warner College because of his parents. They are sober, glandless people who were horrified to learn that Jesse was screwing a nearly forty-year-old neighbor lady. With a big-city naivete toward small towns, they sent him to the most isolated four-year school in the state. Warner was built by and for good Christians, and his parents hoped that he would find few amorous temptations here. Which was true, calculated as a function of possible lovers. But there are five hundred college women in easy reach, plus high school girls and their bored mothers, and each semester brings new faces and a wealth of new possibilities.

Jesse doesn't think of himself as obsessed. Nor does he intentionally mislead anyone. Weak souls don't interest him. Trusting, clinging lovers are taboo. In fact, he has more taboos than the average college man. If a date is too taken with him, then he has a dozen proven means to deflate her. That's where charm is most important, he has learned. When two people reach that place where the flaws appear, it's essential that one of them point out the obvious. Sad to say, they just aren't going to stand the test of time.

A sudden shriek of metal.

Jesse turns, startled. Sully climbs inside, sliding in behind the wheel. "I'm back." *Thunk* goes the transmission. "Onwards!"

He scoots closer to his door, looking at her face silhouetted against the vague shapes of houses and streetlamps and the endless swirling snow; he tries to imagine them on a date, at the Bijou, sharing popcorn and sometimes holding hands, then kissing for the first time. A light kiss, he envisions, and dry, and Sully wouldn't want more. He feels certain. She doesn't date, which must be by choice; she is a simple sweet girl, her libido kept in a jar somewhere safe. A good ass or not, she is not his type. And with that thought, Jesse turns forward and fiddles with the papers, almost satisfied.

The car radio, turned down low, gives a soft hiss, not unlike snow blown against cold glass.

They finish the deliveries at the Campus Center. Jesse shows Sully where to park, an angry sign warning: reserved for president, violators towed. And she jokes, "He won't care. He's probably halfway to Mexico by now."

Jesse laughs and laughs. She wrestles the transmission back into Park. A couple of bundles remain. Each takes one without speaking, and he leads them through the back door, using his pass key. The indoor air is a different flavor of warm, damper than the car's warmth. Fuller, somehow. The stink of leftover cafeteria food leaks out of plastic sacks. "Spooky," says Sully. He navigates down the gloomy hallways, through a swinging door and past the little campus bookstore. His bundle is set on a wobbly, blond-colored stand. Then comes a little lounge half-filled with an enormous television. The door beside the TV is engraved *The Warner Chronicle*. The lock is stubborn, always needing a couple tries . . . there . . . and he reaches into the velvet darkness, flipping a switch, overhead fluorescents igniting with a faint dry *click*.

Sully walks in and sets her stack on the first desk, asking, "Here?" He says, "Perfect." And that's that. The work is done. She nods at the news, walking in a careless circle, examining the office with a vaguely amused expression; Jesse asks, "Haven't you been here?" A shake of the head, her hair glossy and brown with touches of gold. It's simple hair, and it's not. It's smooth and fluid, and eminently watchable. He says, "I can't remember. Where are you from?" She glances over at him, saying, "God's country." Then she adds, "Colorado." Right. He remembers someone—it might have been him—teasing Sully, calling her a snow bunny and does she ski on her long bunny feet? He doesn't remember how she answered, if at all. It keeps striking him as odd that the girl doesn't date. A boyfriend back home? In her senior year? She hangs around with the Hurtney twins and some of the other girls from De Mortimer Hall, but not that part of De Mortimer where it's said that women sleep with women. Maybe she's religious. Maybe she's pledged her life to Christ. Not that Christ or even God can ever shut down biology, but still. . . whatever the story, he's intrigued, watching her as she walks around the room. And she looks at him as she comes past, close enough to brush against his arm, their winter coats slick and making respective slick sounds, nylon on nylon. Jesse feels a surge of energy, an authentic pulse of electricity. When he reaches for her hand it is waiting, the blue knitted mitten removed while he wasn't watching and her grip warm despite his own glove. The grip tightens, then relaxes. He removes his old leather-and-rabbit-fur glove and grasps again. He feels no callous. The hand is unmistakably feminine, small bones pulling on him with a sur-

prising strength; now she's flush against him, kissing him more than he kisses back, coats squeaking, and something damp touching his cheeks, pooling there, and Jesse jerking back in surprise. Sully is crying. Just like that her face is covered with tears, and she sniffs as if embarrassed, wrestling up a smile, then attempting a laugh as she tells him:

"This is a very ugly room, I hope you know."

Yes, it is. It's a tall and bleak office, and the *Chronicle* has been hammered together here for twenty years. The ceiling is a mile overhead, decorated with pipes wrapped in asbestos, the coldest pipes speckled with condensation. The furniture is as old as the Campus Center. The gray file cabinets are older. Ten-ton mechanical typewriters come from the Age of Bronze. There's a huge table at the back where Jesse and his crack staff assemble the paper every Tuesday evening. It's a solid platform, rubberized on top and scarred by razor blades and solvents. Possibilities occur to him .. . and he stops himself, remembering that she's a good girl, probably prone to sparkling eyes. He's eager to prove his decency, and Sully's crying jag means that they've already done too much. With resolve, Jesse stands back, watching her mop her face with the balled-up mittens. He's ready to say, "Good night," and leave it. He wants to stop. But then she smiles again, her nervousness dispelled in an instant, and that soft voice says, "I feel like someone's spying on us."

Jesse glances at the high window, then the open door. Walking for what feels like days, he reaches the door and shuts it and locks the knob with its gray metal button. The knob and the air feel cool against his skin, and he's aware of his own breathing and a multitude of details. The tile floor needs to be scrubbed and waxed. The walls are the blandest kind of concrete block painted with a cheap off-white enamel. The old desks will go from here to the town dump, probably soon. Ink and glue have left stains on every surface, but the stains have a kind of haphazard beauty, giving the place a dynamic utility.

Sully has removed her coat. Dark jeans lack a belt; a colorful green sweater shows dashes of red; that almost liquid hair frames a vivid smile. Again he thinks he knows that face, and it isn't Sully's. Then she's reaching for him, no hesitations, unbuttoning his old down jacket and laughing when a single white whiff of goose down swirls between them. "Got it," she says; it is trapped between a finger and thumb. Jesse continues with his coat,

peeling it back, and she says, "Don't worry, I'll get the window." Which he had forgotten. The window is overhead, at ground level, the Campus Center built into a slight hillside. She picks one of the dangling white cords and pulls, guessing right, and the dusty old shades close with a prolonged squeak, nothing left for even the most hypothermic voyeur.

Jesse breathes. Sully starts back again, walking with confidence, and there is motion under the sweater, unexpected and intoxicating. No bra. He assumed one of those reinforced models, and he was wrong again. And they kiss again, just like the first time but nobody crying, hands pressing at Jesse, backing him up against the big work table, the solid rubber trim against his hamstrings and Sully's hands dropping, fingers under his light sweatshirt and now rising, walking up flesh and pausing where his chest hairs begin, palms against him and pressing, and her whispering to him, "Sit."

He sits on the edge of the table, letting her pull his sweatshirt up, then off. Then he tries the same pattern with her, reaching down and doing the same finger walk until he feels her unencumbered breasts, the warm breast bellies, and he grasps the sweater down low and lifts until she says, "No." Bright dark eyes gaze at him, promising nothing. The soft hands stroke his bare chest, tweaking a pectoral muscle and then a nipple. This is all they will do, he knows. They'll kiss and she'll tease him, and that's fine. But now Sully presses against him again, saying, "Relax," and then, "Back." He lies back until his elbows touch rubber. Astonished, he watches her take hold of her sweater with crossed arms, lifting slowly, the navel and white belly and then the breasts illuminated by fluorescent lights. The breasts are substantial, firm. The nipples are huge and erect, an earthy brown. For a long moment her face is hidden by the inside-out sweater, her identity lost. Hair and fabric crackle with static as the sweater is pulled free. Then she folds the sweater and sets it on the desk behind her, giving him a profile. Jesse takes a breath and holds it. She walks toward him—Jesse counts her steps, one two three—and she reaches for his jeans, for the cheap brassy buttons, undoing the top button and the next one and the next one, white cotton underwear exposed. Jesse is still on his elbows, watching. The task seems to possess Sully, her silent face composed, focused. The last button is stubborn, but the pressure of her hand is perfect. A

single dark spot blossoms on the white cotton. Then she finishes, pausing for just an instant before she reaches past the elastic band, saying, "Yes," with a whisper and his prick emerging in a single motion. Blood-stiff, alive. She holds it in one hand, then the other. She passes it back and forth as if it is hot enough to scald flesh, and together they watch it, a long robust member, circumcised and leaking those first clear fluids. Using thumbtips, Sully smooths the fluids over the purplish head, making it shine. In this light the prick seems to glow, as it filled with irradiant blood, and together, in one voice, they say, "Yes," as Sully dips her head, hair spilling forward and hiding the pretty face and the breasts, flowing over Jesse and engulfing him, then followed by a warm and wet breathing heat.

Yates Hall is the newest dormitory, built by Lloyd's administration and designated coed. The building is a series of brick-faced towers standing just east of the De Mortimer Hall for Women. The tiny rooms are meant for individual students. The handsome brick exterior gives way inside to concrete blocks and mortar, the concrete floors dressed in institutional tiles. Each room has a closet and built-in desk with shelves and a small mirrored medicine cabinet; everything is built from particle board with a tough plasticlike veneer. The running joke is that the state penitentiary used the same architect, Lloyd hiring him cheap, and they even borrowed the same floor plans, wooden doors in place of bars, but that delicious penal ambiance maintained all the same.

Jesse has lived in this room for three semesters. Top floor; west side. He's made it comfortable, or at least he's accommodated himself to where he doesn't notice the room anymore. Its walls are painted a vivid and odd green that maintenance was giving away. The hard tiles are covered with pieces of shag carpeting, darker green and doubly padded with sponge rubber. His bed is tall, very tall, standing on pine legs and set flush against the outer wall, crossbeams anchored on the gray metal register. A lumpy sofa faces the closet, room enough for two. Although he once managed to shoe-horn the Hurtney twins in beside him, giggling and squirming, everyone a little drunk and him managing to kiss both of them. The Hurtneys are long lean handsome girls. Lusty along conventional lines. Nothing fantastic happened that night. He did paw them, probably too much; then some invisible twinly signal passed between them, and they stood, telling him, "Take us

home." Jesse walked them over to De Mortimer. They were drunk enough to sway, and he held them around their high waists, and they giggled, offering little dry kisses in thanks, then vanishing through the dormitory's back door. But some portion of Yates must have been watching. "Aylesworth bagged the twins," was the next day's rumor. And the Aylesworth legend was measurably enhanced.

Jesse sits on his sofa now, not moving, still wearing his coat and his keyed-up brain jumping back and forth in time. He thinks of girls and what he's managed with them, remembering faces and voices, positions and failures. He recalls details, like moles and birthmarks. Like fear. And there are secrets told in confidence, after sex, Jesse having trouble remembering which face is paired with which revelation. When he was younger it seemed as if every girl was unique, but at the wise age of twenty-two he sees his lovers as being more simple, inspirations based on the same proven themes. The Hurtneys are insecure girls alternating between wanton and prudish. Martha West is all wanton, but in a bitchy way. Jill Toon, dear sloppy Jill, is smart and self-assured in almost every circumstance. Each one has her quirks and taboos, rituals and self-centered moods. But under their differences is the same kind of bone. Females think long-term. They have goals, great and small. Even Sully has some plan, he tells himself with calm, cynical authority. What she did tonight, seducing him out of lust or love, happened with something else in mind. Some scheme. Some intent. Jesse can't feel any more sure.

On a high shelf is a clock radio. He squints, realizing that it's past midnight, Friday morning now, and he needs to sleep. But he keeps thinking of Sully, remembering her in classes and the cafeteria—with the Hurtneys, sometimes— or just sitting alone in the big lounge in De Mortimer, watching television. She was a stranger. They've been neighbors and classmates for almost four years, and all they've shared are glimpses and vacuous conversations. When did she become interested in him? And why? Her sudden aggressiveness is a surprise, but should it be? Jesse stretches, aware of his breathing and his heartbeat, a lingering arousal causing his prick to stiffen again. Closing his eyes, he tries to imagine her in his room, sucking him off again. But she refuses to accommodate him. Instead he remembers how she had kissed him afterward, then confused him by not asking for anything in return. A glance at Jesse's watch, and Sully announced, "I need to go. I've

got work to do." No embarrassment; no regrets. Her matter-of-factness acted like a counterpunch to the sex. Jesse almost told her that he would return the favor. Please. But she was suddenly dressed again, and he found himself half-walking, half-floating as they went out to the big Olds. One more kiss, and he remembered to thank her for helping with the paper, and everything, and could he ride with her back to the student lot?

She shook her head, saying, "Thanks, but you don't have to." Jesse has no idea what she was thinking just then. She started her car and turned up the radio, static washing over them. For a long moment, she seemed to listen to that raw noise, as if there was some message buried between the hisses and pops. Her mittens were stuck in her coat pockets. Her coat was hanging open, a white slice of her belly showing for an instant. It seemed like a reasonable question, Jesse asking her, "Aren't you cold?" He was. He was beginning to shiver, despite goose down and rabbit fur. But she just smiled up at him, almost laughing, telling him over the sounds of static and the blizzard:

"This isn't cold. This isn't even close to being cold."

A strange, strange girl. That's what Jesse decides, rising now. The only light burning is an incandescent bulb above the shelves—weak and blue and glowing inside a thick glass fixture—and he looks at it, then turns in a slow, observant circle. The stereo comes from Sears, bought with grass-clipping money. The receiver and turntable are stacked on the desk, his records beside them—a stew of rock and folk and cheap classical selections. Something for everyone. The shelves are stuffed full of discontinued textbooks, sci-fi paperbacks, and leftovers from literature courses. The name Faulkner leaps out at him. *The Sound and the Fury*. It was the strangest collection of words he has ever tried to read, and he had to write a five-page paper on it. Was Sully in his class? He does remember people joking about her name, asking if she'd call up her grandfather for them, please, and get that dead genius to help them . . . and now he touches the slick paper binding, touches her happenstance name, hearing the wind slam against the room's narrow window as he asks himself why Sully was outside tonight. He found her standing in the open, bareheaded in a blizzard. It seems an unlikely act and a little strange, and extremely fortunate, too. "I'll ask her why," he whispers. "Soon."

The tour of his tiny room resumes. Cheap posters are taped to the green walls. He bought them at the bookstore, after a good ten seconds of consideration, and it was Jill who pointed out the obvious to him. She had been lying on his floor, on her back, naked and temporarily satiated. The blue light colored her sweat and ample skin, and her blue eyes smiled when she said, "I get it." What? "What your art means . . .!" Which caused Jesse to stand, scratching himself as he examined the three posters. A Rousseau print. A Breton. And a Monet. "Shit, you don't know. Do you?" He had to confess ignorance. "Look at them, Jess. All showing women out in the open. Standing, sitting, and lying down in fields." Jill's voice is deep, roughened by tobacco. She lit a cigarette, making vigorous clouds of blue smoke, then told him, "You put women on your walls. Not exactly a big-league surprise, is it?"

Rousseau's subject was a woman, he realized then. He had selected them, undoubtedly, and maybe the unconscious mind had recognized the common thread. "You're shallow," he mutters, repeating Jill's hard assessment. "Shallow and predictable," she had told him. Not for the first time. He pushes the memory out of reach, bends over and steps under his bed, then gazes out at the storm. De Mortimer appears distant, half-obsured by the blowing snows. It is a long gabled structure, brick walls and wooden trim . . . and which room is Sully's? He can't remember, or even guess which is her floor. And suddenly that bizarre sense of familiarity has returned again, larger than before. He crosses the tiny room to study the Breton. Standing in a field, at dawn, is a strong peasant girl. She has her back to the ruddy sky. A curved knife blade is in her right hand. She is gazing off at nothing with an exalted expression. That face is Sully's face. He sees the similarity and his breathing stops, a chill lead weight resting on his chest. Mouth dry and his belly nervous, Jesse turns on the fluorescent desk lights. Or is it Sully? In good light, not quite. But there's a happenstance resemblance, including the buxom body and a quality visible somewhere behind the eyes. *The Song of the Lark*, he reads; the peasant girl is listening to birds singing. With fingertips he touches the paper, imagining cloth and flesh . . . and after an embarrassing long while, he turns and kills both lights, telling himself, "Go to bed."

Undressing in the dark, Jesse strips to his underwear. Then he climbs into the tall bed, one foot on the desktop and the other leg swinging up and

over. The touch of cold sheets makes him shiver. With the top sheet and blanket pulled over him, he looks outside again, between the institutional white curtains. The endless snow is brilliant and tireless, fresh only as snow can look. I should mention the painting to Sully, he thinks. Tomorrow . . . no, today. Then he remembers that he didn't pee before coming to bed, and maybe he should climb down . . . but before he can decide if it's worth the bother, he has fallen into a deep sleep, one hand pressed against the window glass and the other draped between his legs—one cold and its mate perfectly warmed.

It's almost eight o'clock when the clock radio wakes Jesse. Set for music, instead it emits a steady white hiss. He reaches over the plywood headboard, grabbing it and reading the plastic face twice, panic making him alert. His first class is in two minutes. Its professor is a sapless creature who doesn't like interruptions in his deep and dead philosophical monologues. But he's an easy A if you don't piss him off, which is why Jesse dresses in a blur, grabbing his notebook and keys, then racing down the south staircase with echoes swirling and dying around him.

Boom. He is outside, the wind hitting him sideways, and the blowing snow, and what began last night is at its height. At least seven inches of dry snow have fallen on ten inches of crusted old stuff, elegant powdery drifts curling around the end of Yates Hall. This is the Arctic, come to visit. He fumbles for his gloves, then remembers leaving his stocking cap in his room, safe and warm. But there's no time to go back. Half-running, half-wading, Jesse moves past De Mortimer and across the open ground north of the Campus Center. Red Hall emerges from the roaring snow, tall and ancient, the oldest building in the county and in this corner of the state. A figure appears from its back door, bundled up and sexless . . . struggling toward Jesse . . . and an arm lifts, waving, a wind-torn voice shouting:

"Hey, man!"

Shouting:

"Cancelled. Classes. Don't bother!"

That's why the campus looks deserted. Of course. Jesse pauses and turns his back to the wind, ears starting to ache. Warner College never closes for the weather; everyone lives nearby. Which means this must be an awful storm, or the storm is an excuse. Lloyd might want the place shut

down for a reason. In order to do damage control? Jill might know. He makes mental notes, his adrenalin falling off and leaving him colder. Watching the faceless student trudge past, he decides on breakfast, on warmth. The wind pushing him to the back door and through.

Like last night, he smells garbage. Unlike last night, Jesse goes upstairs, into the cafeteria, watching for a green sweater and the soft tea-colored hair. But Sully isn't here, not in any sweater. He stands in the short line, picking out a sickly yellow tray and some misshapen silverware, then pushing the tray along. Cold eggs and cold pancakes fail to seduce. He is barely hungry, he discovers. A big glass of Pepsi and a couple of banana halves, air-darkened and fragrant, look like a feast. Grumpy puffy old faces gaze at him. "You look cold," says one woman. "Ever hear of a hat?"

"No, thanks. I'm trying to freeze my head lice." Jesse laughs, sort of, and hunts for Sully once more. Not here. He settles on Alan Quill, the paper's business manager. Alan has the *Chronicle* spread out before him, reading it while he works on a big bowl of Captain Crunch.

"How's it look?" asks Jesse.

Quill is a business major. He looks fifteen, if that. His chin is waiting for its first genuine hairs to erupt, and his eyes seem huge behind his tiny wire-rimmed glasses. "I don't know about this," he confesses, shaking his head. With a soft grave voice, he says, "The more I think about it, the more I worry."

"Don't think, then." Jesse sips his pop, ignoring the bananas. "Didn't we go over this already?"

"President Tied to Missing Funds," Quill reads aloud, his voice trying for drama and one hand drumming on the photograph of Battles Hall. "He's going to be furious." Lloyd. Mein Fiihrer. "I don't know what to hope. I guess that these charges are true."

"They are," says Jesse.

Quill gives a pained, doubting sigh.

"Jill's got her source. An unimpeachable source."

Quill swallows, then asks, "Aren't journalists suppose to have two sources?"

"But we're in luck," Jesse counters. "We aren't real journalists."

The baby face reddens. The soft voice mentions advertisers being scared off by controversy. And Jesse ignores him, peeling one of the banana halves

and placing the fruit back on its grayish plate, then sipping more pop, enjoying the fizz and the sweet chill.

Jill has been chasing this story for weeks, he could say. It's all her doing. She became curious about Battles Hall, about why it looks as it does—a mass of concrete and more concrete—and the answers got stranger as she dug deeper. The Battles family gave money for its construction, but the money had stipulations. The Battles owned a concrete business; it would be the sole supplier. The building ended up being a Pentagon wet dream. It was designed to weather a Soviet nuclear attack, went one joke. Jesse himself wrote an editorial claiming that President Lloyd was planning to be entombed inside the labyrinth of hallways and rooms, his body carefully mummified by the Chemistry department, his presence guiding the college for all time.

At first, Jill thought that the building was merely too big. The Battles had given money, and they got a customer and tax write-offs as a consequence. Nothing too abnormal there. But there were overruns brought on by the price of concrete. Warner College had to pay from its general endowments. Not criminal in itself, but later, when Jill found her mysterious source, what looked sloppy became something larger. Something ominous. Something fun.

"What if we lose advertisers?" Quill keeps asking.

"We won't, and you'll find us others." Jesse smiles. "Just use your high-powered charm on them."

"If our ad coverage drops, we'll be in trouble." Ads bring in cash. In theory, the *Chronicle* is a profitable business. "We barely pay our staff as it is."

"Our staff barely works, as it is."

Quill acts winded, nervous, and weak. "He'll come after us, you know—"

"Lloyd?" Jesse forces a laugh. "So what?"

"So he could close us down!"

"Which makes him look guilty as hell." What Jill found were missing monies. Someone with bookkeeping skills had deftly milked certain accounts. As much as a hundred thousand dollars is gone, and the board of trustees—a sleepy bunch of ass-lickers—can't ignore it anymore. Jill has shown them the evidence. The cranky gears of law and order are in motion. Jesse tells this to Quill, then asks, "What if Battles Hall isn't the only time?"

What if Yates and the Science Hall have also contributed to the Clarence Lloyd retirement fund?"

"What if it's not Lloyd?" Quill counters, trying to flatten the fold in his newspaper. "What if it's someone else?"

"Who else?"

Quill shuts his eyes and holds them shut.

"It's got to be him. He's the only one with access, unless you count that dweeb in the business office."

The dweeb. Lloyd's own man, and a dedicated incompetent.

"We're going to lose revenue," says Quill.

"Let's trim our staff now."

"Trim who?"

"Our circulation manager, for a start. You and I can share the job. I did it this week, you do it next."

"You know," says the baby face, "it could be the dweeb. What if he wanted to make President Lloyd look guilty—?"

"No way. No." Jesse picks up his glass and listens to it fizz, then sets it down without drinking. He looks around the cafeteria once again, spotting a couple ex-lovers in the mix. A quiet morning, considering that the weekend has started early. And despite himself, Jesse is wondering if Lloyd could be innocent.

A vigorous moan leaks out of Quill.

Jesse pushes the yellow tray aside. "Have you seen Sully?"

"Who?"

"Sully Faulkner."

Quill turns to look at the room, his expression a little lost. "I'm not sure, really. . . ."

"You know Sully, don't you?"

Quill faces Jesse, his mouth tightening. "Yeah," he mutters, taking a deep long breath through his nose. "I just don't know if I've seen her. I don't remember. . . sorry. . . ."

Jesse considers options. He has three days to finish his homework, and there aren't any pressing editorial duties at the moment. But Quill's paranoia has spoiled his mood.

What he needs is a productive distraction. Maybe Pinrose came in to work. He's been after Jesse to get his senior project underway, and this seems like the perfect chance. A planning session, mixed with shit-shooting. That decided, he sets off for Science Hall.

The warmest route is through Battles. Jesse steers toward the concrete monolith, one hand always rubbing his ears. The roaring storm diminishes on the stairs, replaced by an eerie, self-contained calm. He enters through glass doors, kicking off snow and crossing the Grand Canyon—a room two stories tall, faced with doors, each door leading to some vital office normally filled with vital bureaucrats. Today everything is shut tight, lights off. The only exception is straight ahead, at the top of the next staircase: the president's office is open, brightly lit, the *boom-boom* of a typewriter as regular as a metronome.

Jesse slips downstairs. The building has a presence, a palpable, steady pressure centered on him. It's as if Battles is angry with him. It wants to crush him. He actually hurries through the mailroom, then slows in the glass walkway leading to Science Hall, a steady warm wind pushing him along. Everything here is bright. Drifting snow lies on both sides, highest on his left, the school's modest greenhouse standing in the midst of the brilliant whiteness. Jesse has worked there in the last two summers. For Pinrose. Tropical plants rise out of the snows, the big banana tree tallest, appearing proud and confident in that arctic landscape. The wind gusts, roaring over glass, but not so much as a leaf stirs, the foliage happily ignorant about its perilous circumstances.

Science Hall is more open, more friendly. Jesse walks the length of the Physics department, then climbs two stairs at a time. The bio lounge has fresh coffee and dingy cups waiting. He serves himself, sips and burns his tongue, then decides that he doesn't want coffee and pours it into the sink. Pinrose's office is open, lit up. "Hello?" It is furnished with bookcases and a pair of desks, and it's decorated with a biology professor's sensibilities: maps and stuffed songbirds, odd bones and scenic photographs taken by Pinrose himself. "Hello?" Nobody is in the little lab/storeroom behind the office. Jesse pauses, looking at the message pad on the door. His joke remains, but someone has written over it in a fluid, almost artistic script. "Thank you thank you thank you . . ." Maybe fifty "thank yous" in all. Jesse has enough time to think: Odd. Then comes a little explosion, glass shatter-

ing somewhere nearby. A second crash follows, and he turns and starts to hunt for the source.

Pinrose is in the general bio lab, big hands wearing long black work gloves. He's dropping shards of glass into a metal trash can, muttering, "Goddamn," to himself.

He's a big man, old enough to be grandfatherly but blessed with the bones and soul of someone younger than his birthday tally. At one time, a couple of decades ago, Pinrose won a national award as the best and brightest science teacher in the nation. Once, as a freshman, Jesse made the mistake of asking why he had never left for greener ground. "Because," the professor said with a growl. "Because I didn't want to. Because bigger schools make you do research and publish results, and you don't get to teach. And because, frankly, I'd be a tadpole among bullfrogs in that kind of pond." A big shrug of the shoulders and a menacing stare. "Just because, and do me a favor? Don't ask again."

He hasn't. He won't. Coming into the lab, he instead asks, "What happened?" The place stinks of formaldehyde. Cabinets are open. Bottles have been tipped on their sides and drained. But there aren't any puddles or stains. Which baffles Jesse, and he says so.

Pinrose answers the first question, saying, "Someone's been up to no good."

Jesse takes another long look.

"Shitty little kids." Into the trash goes a heavy shard. *Wham*. Then Pinrose coughs, the sound wet and tired. "They got in last night and had a little adventure, I think."

Set on a black lab table is a small cardboard box. Inside are three box turtles, all dead. Startled, Jesse looks into the aquarium, discovering that it's empty.

"See why I'm pissed?"

There were four turtles. Jesse picks up one corpse, thinking how the difference between death and life isn't much for them. The turtle feels cool, like usual. The eyes are as much open as closed, the head pulled partway into the shell. He remembers tapping the lab's window last night, all the turtles with their heads raised, begging for liver. Which one is missing? He looks into the box, saying, "The Old One—"

"Stolen."

"They took it?"

Pinrose removes his gloves, tired of this work. "Crazy as it sounds, yes. I've got an ax handle for these boys, when I find them."

The Old One—it has no other name—was found years ago by some local do-gooder. It had wandered up onto the highway in order to sun itself. No one knows its age. Pinrose uses it as an example in vertebrate zoology, showing how life has worn its carapace smooth, no growth rings left to count. A male; red-rimmed eyes imply the sex. It might be forty years old, or one hundred and forty. If it's still alive, it might be the oldest animal in the county. Or maybe the state.

"How'd they die?" Jesse asks, touching a second turtle.

"Not a mark on them," says Pinrose.

"What else is missing?"

"Blood agar. Specimens. A lot of stuff."

Jesse opens his notebook and coaxes his pen into writing, "Specimens," followed by an arrow. There are supposed to be big jars up on the high shelves. Some jars have been thrown to the floor and others merely drained dry. Worms and pale fishes and a couple aborted fetuses have vanished, and Pinrose can't imagine how the bastards managed it. "This lab was locked up. Last night and this morning, too."

Jesse watches the face wrinkle. The professor looks like an old movie star; his student envies his looks most of the time. But not today. Today he looks worn down, the skin waxy and yellow. Has he lost weight? In the face, maybe. A little bit.

"Locked," the man repeats.

"So they had keys."

Pinrose grimaces.

"A frat prank," Jesse offers. "I'd guess the Taus."

"Could be." Pinrose makes himself smile, forcing it until it doesn't look forced. "So how are you, anyway?"

"Good enough."

He gestures at the notebook. "Are you a reporter now?"

"And always." Jesse imagines the Taus using tapeworms and carp in some bizarre ritual, the human fetuses propped up on the mantel, pasty and calm, wearing crowns and their wormlike umbilical cords dangling. That old black magic, he thinks; anything for an A.

"How's this week's issue?" Pinrose pushes a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "I haven't had time to look yet. Sorry."

Jesse picks up the third turtle, count eight rings. "The usual," he says. "Scandal and intrigue, and a crossword puzzle, too."

The professor isn't quite listening.

Jesse wiggles one of the stubby dead limbs.

"I know it's crazy," says Pinrose, "but I'm worried about my old turtle. I feel responsible for it."

"Sure."

"And now I've got to suspect everyone." The strong face puckers as if he tastes something bitter. "That's the worst part. I can't trust anyone until I know the truth."

"I've borrowed your lab keys," Jesse confesses. "Several times."

"Did you make copies?"

"Planning ahead. Sure." Jesse grins and sets the turtle back with its pals. "Book me, Dan-o."

"When I find out who did this," Pinrose growls, "they'll wish their mothers had aborted them. I mean it."

"I believe you."

"Old things deserve better."

In his notebook, Jesse writes, "Rare biological specimens," after the arrow. Then he shuts the book and says, "It's a very lucky turtle. I don't think you should worry too much."

Being editor is a conspiracy of coincidences. Jesse became a reporter last year. He dated the previous editor, a fifth-year senior who picked him as her successor. Without warning him first. Jill was the more logical choice, but she has never liked the grind of making assignments and doing layouts. She loves the challenge of a prime story, or whatever passes for prime at Warner. For Jesse, the job has status. He gets to charm people into doing what they don't want to do. And there is a modest salary—an effective bribe to find editors in a school that has no Journalism department.

What astonishes Jesse, now and always, is just how important this pitiful enterprise has become to him. Like now. Pinrose isn't in the mood to discuss senior projects, and Quill's needling fears keep haunting Jesse. That's why he heads out the back door, marching toward Jill's apartment.

She lives north of campus, just across Belcher—a snow-choked avenue—and he uses his notebook as a shield, imagining being lost in a whiteout. It doesn't take much imagination. But out of the blizzard come houses, old and massive. Jill lives upstairs in one house, the entire second floor to herself. He climbs unshoveled wooden stairs, no other tracks visible. Then he stops on the tiny porch and stomps his feet in a conspicuous way.

The inner door opens. Jill, wearing lumpy gray sweat-clothes, stares out the storm door, giving him a knowing smile. Her great skill, without doubt, is her effortless capacity to read faces at a glance, then convincing anyone that not only can she see through them, but they'd better fess up now and get it over with. That's why Lloyd won't talk to her, they've joked. He knows that he'll spill the proverbial beans.

Jesse opens the storm door and steps inside.

"You know," says Jill, "some people use hats in snowstorms."

"Weenies."

A scalding hand touches one ear, and she asks, "When do you know flesh has frozen?"

"Frostbite?"

"No place important."

It's very familiar, very casual. They have three years of history, and if he didn't see Jill for fifty years, they'd probably start up in the same way, remembering every dance step.

Reading his face, she asks, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he lies.

They're in her kitchen. Jill's apartment is vast and rundown, the air always too warm, stinking of cigarettes and tired wood. The kitchen itself is spartan, populated with old cabinets and appliances held together by inertia. Her roommate is a tabby cat, an old fixed female that hides from everyone, including her. The furniture has been recycled through countless garage sales, the ancient upholstery shredded by the same cat. Jesse envies her room and freedom, but the truth told, he likes owning little while having his meals prepared by mostly clean, mostly human, cafeteria workers.

"Breakfast?" asks Jill.

A half-eaten piece of toast is on the kitchen table, next to a full glass of milk.

"I'll burn more toast, if you want."

He says, "No thanks," and sits at the table. He looks at his friend. Jill is pretty in a big-girl sort of way. A lot of chest, a lot of ass. A waist and legs not yet fat but showing the tendencies. Her smoking, she boasts, helps her rule her weight. Corpulence is in her genes. Jesse once met her mother—a massive and careworn woman barely able to climb those outside stairs—and Jill's greatest fear is to end up the same way, in size or in spirit. Or in the mind of her own future daughter.

"You're worried," she says.

He says, "Maybe."

"About my story, aren't you?"

"Sure." Worry is a lump inside him, a great muscular lump. Talking just seems to make it flex and bunch up even more. He tells her, "I know you've got a source. And I haven't asked, trusting you and all. . . but just convince me that he's a good source. Every word true, and all that."

Pursing her lips, she nods. She has a strong jaw that keeps her from being a beauty, but the jaw gives her an easy authority. "It's someone near Lloyd, like I said. Someone who should know *everything*."

"The dweeb in the business office. Right?"

"Maybe." She pulls a cigarette from a nearly empty pack, lighting it with her butane lighter. "Maybe so. But I can't tell you who. I promised. And I've substantiated whatever I could."

But he craves reassurance just now.

Jill is enjoying his tension, sitting next to him and blowing smoke at the ceiling. He takes a deep breath, waiting for it to grow hot and sour at the back of his mouth. Then he exhales, asking, "Why doesn't the man come forward?"

"I don't know. Guilt?"

"Why doesn't he go in front of the trustees?"

"Fair questions," she admits, twirling the long cigarette in the air. "Because he doesn't want to be a public snitch. Because he has a family. And maybe because he's known too much for too long, and people might ask why it took him until now—"

"Why tell you?"

"Maybe we're lovers," she snaps, pale eyes staring at him. "That's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

The dweeb is a wisp of a man, perpetually red-faced and incapable of lust. "Don't be gross," Jesse warns her.

"He was here ten minutes ago, Jess. He took me right here, right on top of the table."

"Where are his tracks in the snow?"

She gives him a good hard look, then says, "It's like I told you. My source contacted me. Told me about Lloyd's stealing. Gave me copies of the bank statements and phone records, and so on." With her cigarette, she makes several quick little loops of smoke. "What's your problem, Jess?"

He's imagining Jill naked on this linoleum table, a pencil-dicked clerk pounding away. It seems very earnest and silly until he pictures himself in the man's place, and Sully is stretched out on the table, arching her back as she stuffs a fist into her screeching mouth—

A touch. "Jess?"

He blinks and sits up, startled.

"You look odd somehow. Feel okay?"

"Probably not. I don't feel like eating, and I haven't."

"Neither have I." She glances at her toast. "I bet it's nerves."

"I've got those, all right."

She sits back and smokes, asking between puffs, "What have you accomplished today?"

He describes breakfast with Quill, then the vandalism on the bio floor. "I'll write an article," he promises. "Unless of course you think it's the tip of something enormously wicked."

"Vandals have such a bad rep," she offers. "The Romans were a pack of pricks, the way I see it." Jill has had countless majors, including history. She loves the odd, unexpected side of an argument.

Jesse smiles, shifting his weight on the hard yellow chair.

"So you're in favor of trashing labs. Right?"

"Maybe I am." She works on her cigarette. "Science Hall was built because an arms manufacturer put up a bloody million. During Vietnam, I might add. Which implies a political statement."

"Right-wing turtles died?"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

He laughs, thinking what a piece of work Jill is. Smart and bawdy, and fun. He doesn't daydream about marriage, but she'd be his sort. Except for

the smoking and the weight, of course. And because she's as opposed to the institution as is Jesse. Come graduation, Jill plans to travel the world, thoroughly alone, visiting the mysterious corners that Americans never see.

"What are you thinking?" she asks.

"Nothing. Go on."

"I'm just wondering if you'd heard the forecast." She crushes her cigarette, exhaling a thin rope of smoke. "How much snow?"

"A thousand feet."

"My, aren't we sarcastic." She stands and turns on an old radio beside the stove, waiting for it to warm up, a rich white static emerging. "Huh." She cranks the knob to the right, then back again. Nothing. The static is smooth, seamless. Almost comforting. With the flat of her palm, Jill pops the radio, growling, "Pile of shit . . .!"

"Hey, it's not just yours. I noticed it last night, and this morning, too. Something's screwing up the signals."

"The blizzard?"

"I can't see how. There's no lightning in these clouds."

She clicks it off and leaves the kitchen.

Alone, Jesse feels an unexpected sadness. He won't again sleep with Jill. Never. Where the premonition comes from, or why, isn't clear. But the sense of loss is genuine. Unnerving. She's been his steadiest lover; they've had stretches where they've been almost monogamous, two like-minded souls enjoying each other. But lately the fun has fallen off. Jesse blames working together, a new kind of familiarity spoiling the lust. But why have the premonition now? And just like that, he knows, whispering to himself, "Sully."

There's only so much room in his mind for women—a finite amount of desire—and already, on the strength of one interlude, Sully is stealing what was Jill's emotional ground.

"Nothing."

He jerks, a little startled. "What's nothing?"

"Nobody's broadcasting. I couldn't get anything on my stereo." She seems more curious than anything, frowning at nothing and saying, "Are you sure it can't be the storm?"

He doesn't see how. No.

"What would do it, Jess?"

"Maybe the cities were nuked last night." He tries laughing. "A surprise Soviet attack—"

"I think not."

Yet he rattles himself with those words. The possibility hangs in the air between them, defying their skepticism. It takes him several moments to find a good reason not to worry. "We've still got electricity. And we wouldn't, if we were at war."

"You're sure?"

Sure enough, yes. He nods and looks at Jill, again feeling that sense of loss . . . and she stands in the kitchen door, watching him with her famous I-can-see-through-you expression.

"Stop that," he warns.

"Who is she?"

He doesn't answer. Instead he flicks his finger, sending Jill's cold piece of toast twirling across the tabletop. "I've got to be sick. I'm not even a little bit hungry."

"Or maybe you're in love."

"Like I said, I'm sick."

She's laughing, sitting again and hunting for a fresh cigarette. "I know you, Jess. You've got that stupid grin on your face. Some poor girl is in for hell."

He glances at his watch. Maybe Sully will come to the cafeteria for lunch, he's thinking.

Behind Jill, in the hallway, a streaking cat moves between hiding places.

"Jesse in love," Jill sings. "And the moon is blue."

"Maybe that's the reason," he mutters.

"What's the reason?"

"A blue moon, or some other cosmic event." He pauses, then says, "Solar flares," with a sense of authority. "They'd make a mess out of the broadcast bands."

"You don't believe that either." She laughs, lighting a fresh cigarette. "Quit trying to fool me, Jess. Because you can't. . . ."

The cafeteria is halfway crowded, and it's not even noon. But no Sully. Jesse accepts a warm burger and cold fries—out of habit and decorum—then settles across from one of the Hurtneys. "Ah, the pretty twin. Hi. Ruth!"

Tina says, "Pig," and giggles. It's an old game, but they're simple girls. Reliable girls. She smacks him with a bony hand, asking, "How do you like this day off, Pig?"

Shallow girls. In his freshman year, Jesse was sitting with Jill over in De Mortimer, watching the fall of Saigon on TV, and one of the twins marched in, growling, "What's this shit? Can't we watch something fun?"

"What have you been doing?" he asks. Then he thinks to add, "Have you listened to the radio, by any chance?"

She shakes her head. "I slept through the morning. Why?"

"No reason." It has to be nothing. If something was genuinely wrong in the world, people would know. Wouldn't they?

He is facing the kitchen. Tina smiles—a big smile—and waves, saying, "Hey, Sull!" over the low rumble of voices. A sideways glance, and Jesse sees the tight jeans and the sky blue coat. Every joint in his body locks up. Then Sully glances back at him, showing a little smile that can mean anything, a mittened hand giving a half-wave.

Jesse feels a sudden preposterous guilt for sitting with a Hurtney.

"She's so neat," Tina announces.

He chews mechanically as he watches Sully's walk.

Tina says, "Don't you think she's neat?"

"Yeah." Have the two girls been talking? Is this some kind of trap? "She's wonderful."

Sully stands in line, moving slowly into the kitchen and out of sight; he misses her. He finds himself counting bodies, waiting for her to reemerge. This is crazy. It's puppy lust, that's all. He can barely hear Tina rattling on about her studies, the semester just begun and boy, she's already behind. Boy, she wishes she could knuckle down and study this afternoon. Except her friends were talking about building a snowman, or maybe she'll go sledding behind the football field. She'll steal her lunch tray; it would make a fair toboggan. Sully comes back into view, and Jesse feels better. He can breathe again. He's not in love, but he is fourteen and infatuated. That's exactly how it feels.

"Want your fries?"

"No." He gives Tina his entire plate.

"Thanks, Pig."

Sully has nothing on her tray but a glass of punch, red and sparkling; Jesse is framing what he will say to her first, then second. But then someone else shouts, "Sully!" A table of freshman girls wave her over. She gives Jesse a half-look, but then starts to talk to the girls. Then sits. She sits to stay, he realizes. And now he feels like a little boy, jilted in front of the world.

"What are you doing this afternoon?" asks Tina.

He blinks and focuses. "A shower. And a nap, I hope." Is she giving him an opening? Or laying out a trap on Sully's behalf? "In fact, I should be going," he promises her. "I'm beat-up tired."

The girl stuffs fries into her indelicate mouth.

"Tell Tina hi for me."

"Sure, Pig." Masticated potato blurs that last insult.

And Jesse is leaving, up and walking, then pausing in the lobby for a few moments, allowing himself a backward glance. Sully has her back to him. Her coat is on her chair, and she's wearing a different sweater this morning. Darker, heavier. Her head nods while she talks, the golden brown hair almost shimmering under the institutional lights. Jesse allows himself the theater of fumbling with his gloves, giving himself a reason to delay. Only later, wading into the blowing snow, does he realize that he could have walked up and spoken to her. That would have been permissible.

Maybe that's what Sully was wanting, for Jesse to prove something, and he didn't do it, which proved something else altogether.

Inside his dorm room, beside the door, is a metallic panel adorned with a simple switch and a speaker and a glowing red light. That light means there is a message, or messages. One of his ace reporters must be trying to weasel out of an assignment. He flips the switch. "Hello?" No answer. Someone is supposed to work the phones, which means nothing, and he has no choice, starting back downstairs.

Last night, Sully said that making time enlarges a life. So wasting time must have the opposite effect. . . right. . . ?

The switchboard is in the central tower, next to the TV lounge. It's in a tiny room, perpetually hot, with a gray metal board linked to every tiny room. Nobody but Jesse has messages. But he has a little stack of them, each one repeating the same essential message:

"LLOYD WANTS TO SEE YOU!!!"

He steps into the lounge, trying to think. He is alone. The television is off, the silence a little unnerving. But then the phone rings—screams—and Jesse's heart kicks and races. He walks back into the warm room, lifts the heavy black receiver. And he takes a moment to wet his mouth. And he manages to say, "Yates."

The voice is glancingly female and familiar. "Ring Mr. Aylesworth's room, please. President Lloyd's office calling."

"Right away." Jesse presses the mouthpiece against his heart, waiting for a few moments. Then, "Sorry, ma'am. No answer."

"Do you know where we might find him?"

"Gosh, no. I don't."

"Has he picked up his messages?"

"Sure hasn't, ma'am."

The line is perfectly clear. Lloyd's secretary might very well be speaking into Jesse's ear, the sound so true that he can practically feel her exhaled breath along with the words. "Imperative," she says. "He *must* come *now*," she says. And again, for emphasis, "Now."

Does she recognize his voice? But he decides that he doesn't care, waiting for an instant before he says, "Tell the truth. Did Lloyd really steal all that money?"

Silence.

An hour's worth of silence is compressed into seconds, then comes a soft, final click and a high thin whistle.

Jesse takes the stairs one at a time, returning to his room while wondering what he should do. Call Jill? Ignore the messages? Or go now? "Get it over with," he mutters to himself. Looking outdoors, he makes sure that he puts on his stocking cap. De Mortimer floats against the white world. The rest of the campus has vanished. An ice age is arriving, spring still ten thousand years away. Everything important is about to be crushed beneath sudden blue glaciers, he thinks; then he pauses and shakes his head, wondering where that odd image came from.

The secretary has served the last three presidents. She is married to the college, as loyal as a scar. Reading glasses ride low on her pugish nose, and she glares over them as Jesse arrives, watching him drip snow and stuff his cap

into a coat pocket. She has a chin to match the nose. Jesse has never seen her not wearing black. "Go right in," she says. Then she adds, "*Mister Aylesworth*." And the eyes drop, but not quite far enough to read whatever is written in the file folder on her desk.

"Thanks." His mouth has gone dry all at once.

A phone is lifted. And with a palpable disgust, she tells someone, "He's here."

Jesse opens the door to the inner office, finding Lloyd waiting for him. Perhaps he has been sitting like this all day, waiting. The president is a small man, bald and average, yet somehow he intimidates. It's the linebacker eyes, in part. It's his voice, strong and sharp. That voice asks quietly, "Will you please shut the door?" Then it says, "Thank you," as the latch clicks into place. What surprises Jesse, knocking him off balance, is the way those last two words sound. They are a little slow and soft. They imply fresh wounds. He can practically smell vulnerability as the man says, "Sit. Please."

Since Jesse became editor, it has been a struggle between them. A low-grade war. Last fall Lloyd threatened to fire any homosexual employees and expel every student of the same persuasion. Jill wrote the story, including an outraged interview with a nameless lesbian; Jesse had an inspiration, running a photograph of Truman Capote over Lloyd's name. There is a resemblance between the men. Rumor had it that Lloyd never noticed, and it took some bold little underling to point out the joke. Afterward Jesse was called in for a verbal whipping. Lloyd demanded an apology, saying that he wasn't some little faggot and resented the impression. Jesse apologized in the next issue, in a boxed editorial, asking Capote's forgiveness for being linked with an intolerant ass.

But this isn't the same Lloyd. His hard eyes look scornfully at his foe, but the voice has lost its fire, saying, "Well, well," for several moments. "Well, well, well."

The office is large, and gloomy in a majestic way. The windows are slits. Dark wood paneling extrudes a false sense of age, of hallowed traditions and continuity. Hung behind Lloyd is a framed poster showing every Warner president, small portrait photographs dating back to the 1880s. Lloyd's portrait was taken in the late fifties. It's always a shock to see the man with vigorous black hair and that boyish, almost infectious smile—a kind of

naive energy captured in the chemical image. By contrast, the present Lloyd seemed tired, older than he should be and much older than he was just last week. He seems to have lost more of his hair and some essential spark. This won't be a normal whipping. Jesse hadn't expected to hear a little old man saying, "You have no idea what you've done, son." A pitiful creature sighs, then says, "You just don't comprehend, do you?"

Jesse is sitting in one of the chairs facing the enormous desk. He grasps the leather armrests, trying to gather himself. Pity is tough. It doesn't vanish with a few careful thoughts or a dose of humor.

"One person makes wild accusations, and you print them." Lloyd shakes his head, disappointed to his core. "Lies. Bitter, vengeful lies."

"It's a credible source," Jesse manages.

That causes Lloyd to rise, hands spread on polished walnut, eyes blinking and blinking as he shivers. "Name your source. You owe me that much, at least."

The words are colorless, without weight or heat.

"I won't," Jesse mutters.

"Do you even know who it is?"

He winces, saying, "Of course." Why lie? Because he wants power over this man. "I sure do—"

"Tell me."

"No."

Lloyd's suit is the usual well-tailored masterpiece, but it has acquired a sudden rumpled quality. The voice is nearly soft and caring, saying, "Son, I deserve a name. I won't let you leave until I know who's trying to ruin me."

"And I won't tell you."

Lloyd wipes his damp forehead, once and then again. Then he asks, "What do you want?"

What does that mean?

"My misery? Is that what you're after?"

Jesse says nothing, offering a vague smile.

Then Lloyd is saying, "For the name, I can offer you . . . a gift—"

"A bribe?" Jesse is startled. He laughs out loud, glancing over his shoulder as a reflex, eyeing the thin glimmers of light seeping in around the heavy sealed door. "Shit, you mean it. Don't you?"

"How much?" The man finds some of the old resolve, leaning forward, glaring at his opponent. "Name your price."

"Ten million dollars."

Lloyd does nothing, acting deaf and oblivious, shutting his eyes and holding them shut for a long while. Jesse watches him, fascinated. Perhaps the man's mind has gone somewhere else. Mexico, maybe. Then with a certain gravity, Lloyd settles back into his chair, its leather creaking and his eyes coming open again. Jesse says:

"No, I want twenty million. In quarters."

Lloyd sighs.

"And I'll give you a name."

Laughter. Sudden, insane laughter. "Jess, my boy," he says, which is perhaps the first time he hasn't called him Aylesworth. "You've been a child your entire life. Right? You consider yourself clever. You believe that you understand the world. Corruption is something perfectly black, drawn in neat squares on our clean white world, and there you stand, feet planted firmly on decency and honesty and truth. Am I right?"

Jesse braces himself, trying to guess what comes next.

Lloyd coughs and swallows phlegm. Then he says, "Naturally you've never stolen a dime or cultured a false trust. You've never felt an ounce of bitterness or envy toward those around you. And nobody has ever been burned or bruised by your actions. Or inactions. Is that true?"

"What do you want?"

"A name," says Lloyd. "Haven't I been making myself clear?"

Jesse breathes faster, pressure on his chest as his mouth turns dry again. This is worse than the usual dressing-down, but he refuses to appear cowed, or to make even the smallest concession.

Linebacker eyes soften, and the caring, almost compassionate voice asks, "Can I make it even clearer, son? What happens to this institution when your news spreads? Think. Alumni stop giving money, naturally. The blue-chip foundations laugh at our applications. Parents tell their high school seniors, 'Find an honest, solid school instead.'" A long pause, then he adds, "Believe it or not, what I'm trying to do here is save the college. I want this business kept as low-key as possible and broker some reasonable arrangement among the parties—"

"With who? The trustees?"

"In part, sure."

"Except I'm not going to tell you. I won't."

"Corruption," says Lloyd, the word rendered slowly. Then he asks, "How can *you* be so ignorant about its workings?"

A cold steel bar slides up Jesse's spine.

"Corruption," Lloyd says again, a vague smile forming. "Oh, you're doing nothing but good. You're making as much noise as you can, tying up the trustees' hands in the process, leaving them no choice but to hold public executions. Axes to the necks, everyone butt-deep in blood. And do you honestly believe that this ridiculous little school can survive these disclosures?"

He hasn't given it any thought, the truth told.

"Leave," says Lloyd.

Jesse has gone numb all over.

"Good-bye, son. Perhaps we'll talk later." The hands on the walnut desk are shaking. There's an unnerving emptiness in the man's eyes, a sense of ultimate defeat, the small wispy voice now saying, "Leave. Will you? Please."

Jesse obeys, rising to his feet. "You're not going to make me tell. Not with money, or threats . . ."

"Thank you. You've already proven that well enough."

Jesse nods and starts to retreat, then pauses, hunting for some last words. But the president has turned his chair, the slick top of his head just visible. He appears to be gazing up at the framed poster with its hallowed faces. He is whispering—a tiny, almost inaudible voice—speaking to the dead, or maybe to himself.

The outer office is cheerless in a different way. Bright fluorescent lights make him squint. The door shuts itself behind him, and the secretary gives him a quick glance. Jesse looks away, walking with deliberation. By tacit agreement, neither speaks. Then he is in the hallway and she begins to type. *Boom-boom-boom*. The sound of the electric typewriter makes him stiffen and walk faster. *Boom-boom-boom-boom*. The roar of it seems to swell with the distance, not lessen, making his flesh shiver as he struggles with his legs, fighting the urge to break into a run.

Outside again, walking through trackless drifts, Jesse tries to concentrate on delicious things. He settles on Sully. He considers stopping by her room unannounced . . . although maybe that would be a mistake, he realizes. Maybe she regrets last night, which is why she didn't sit with him at lunch. "Nobody has ever been burned or bruised by your actions," Lloyd said to him, with scorn. And the words have their intended effect, gnawing at him, creating paranoia. If Sully regrets last night, then he intends to win her back. But how? The problem consumes him so that he barely feels a sudden gust of wind lashing at him . . . and slowly, dimly, he realizes that the wind is warm, a soothing warm mist against his bare upwind cheek.

Jesse pauses, his back to the wind. The air around him turns still. A perfect calmness forms, which is strange enough, but then he looks north and sees a stranger standing in the lee of a massive ash tree. Long black hair falls over the man's broad shoulders, and the skin is a taut brownish red, resembling clay more than flesh. The features have an Indian sharpness, high cheekbones beneath a dark all-seeing gaze. Lean like a runner, and tall, the stranger wears a plain white T-shirt and ragged jeans, worn basketball shoes and no socks. The wind chill must be forty below—when it blows—but there he stands, absolutely unconcerned, almost smiling as the eyes stare at Jesse.

He is drunk. He has to be.

There's a meat-packing plant near Hanover. This fellow must live in Warner, and the storm has kept him home today. Maybe he's been enjoying his holiday too much. It's a brutal day to be walking around without a coat . . . but his concern is leavened with a dose of anger. Jesse doesn't have any more room for challenges. He can hold only so much oddness, thank you, and with that he starts to walk away.

"I know *you*. . ."

The wind resumes when the stranger speaks, his words precise and a little slow.

"A public servant, you are. . . ." The stranger pauses, his face amused. Calm. "An editor, you are. . . ."

Jesse stands motionless, managing a half-nod.

"You control the local news machinery . . . ?"

"What do you want?"

"An audience. Please."

"A what?"

"To explain. I must explain *my* purpose." The voice is not drunk so much as it seems inept, the mouth achieving each word as a flat lifeless unit. "Very busy now, I am," he explains. "I apologize. But when I have the opportunity . . . soon . . ."

"What are you talking about?" Jesse growls.

An arm extends, the bare hand reaching as if to grab Jesse. They're fifteen feet apart, yet he feels the urge to leap out of the way. And the stranger says, "Everything is changing. Now. Everything is being made over again, and improved. . ."

A crazy drunk—

"Tomorrow," says the Indian. "I will come visit you tomorrow. I will grant you an interview."

"I'm awfully busy, actually."

"Jesse Leonard Aylesworth." The voice gains velocity. Competence. "Born May 15, 1956 to Marge and Phillip Aylesworth. Eight pounds and no ounces."

Startled, Jesse turns and halfway runs. He kicks his way through the drifts, heading for the dorms. De Mortimer stands before him, red bricks with yellow-white trim, and Yates is behind and above it, the deeper red of its bricks glowing against the roaring snow. And he's thinking:

What if he does know my name, and the rest of it? So what?

He makes himself stop, turning around. The old ash stands alone. Jesse is the only person out on the snow, knee-deep in a long artful drift, his tracks leading back to where he stood talking to the drunk Indian. The madman. No tracks but his are visible, the winds already softening them.

Sleep, he promises himself. Only he cannot sleep or even pretend to relax. Lloyd still bothers him, as does the stranger. Maybe he should talk to Jill again. But what about? Then he's thinking about Sully as he lies on his side in bed, staring at the Breton. She's another issue to grapple with. The largest one, maybe. Reaching over to the highest shelf, he grabs the yearbooks that are propped against a dusty stereo speaker: '75; '76; '77. With curiosity and an imprecise nervousness, he opens the oldest book, whispering, "Sully." Whispering, "Are you in here, Sully?"

Dried glue cracks inside the binding, the pages already a little stiff and stubborn. Black-and-white photographs, staged and unimaginative, record next to nothing. Jesse's memories of his freshman year are full of motion and uncertainty, pressures and little sleep and countless adjustments to this end-of-the-world campus. It's his least favorite year, but these photographs barely remind him of it. He sees faces—of acquaintances and friends, and assorted lovers— and it is his mind that lends them heat, causing them to live. They smile up at Jesse, eager to look their best, hair combed and their postures too perfect and the camera's flash finding some way to make handsome features appear pasty or malformed.

He finds a cheerleader, a senior back then, tall and leggy and blond, very much engaged to a future doctor. They took psych together, and Jesse teased her about being a doctor's wife with a suburban home and all that boredom, her husband working long hours sewing gut and sinking putts. Back then you could still smell the sixties, and everyone, even cheerleaders, felt the pressure to prove their free-thinkingness. Screwing a freshman boy was her way of proving it: a last little fling before the shackles of matrimony. Now she is married, the proud and perfect wife, but there must be moments when she thinks of Jesse, using memories to spin secret affairs. A little delight amidst the humdrum. . .

He turns the page, watching for Sully but finding other girls instead. A few he slept with. Some went no farther than dry kisses and indifference. One spooky black-haired girl stares up from the spring musical. Dear Hanna. A kinky creature, a throwback to the sixties, and how she got to Warner remains a mystery. She was a fifth-year junior, not much of a student but full of deeply held ideas. She told stories of the antiwar days. She was part of the student contingent that took over Red Hall, protesting the war while drinking beer—Hanna despised the partying—and then Lloyd called in state troopers, the drunks arrested and the ringleaders expelled. That was Warner's countercultural high point, she would groan. And she let Jesse sleep with her whenever she grew angry at the world, the town, or their backwater school. He remembers her long black hair, ironed flat and hanging to her tiny white ass, and he remembers big nipples standing on tough little tits. All in all, it was a little like screwing Morticia Addams.

Hanna vanished after the spring term. Jesse got a single postcard from California. "Come see me," she wrote, but without real enthusiasm. Later,

through mutual friends, he learned that she was trying to get into show business, of all things. And then last fall, without warning, one of those fine lads at the Tau House claimed that he'd seen Hanna in a movie—one of those crisp silent cinematic events where some girl remarkably like her, save for the short, short hair, had calmly sucked on some overbuilt gendeman's steely prod. Poor dear Hanna. He has seen the film for himself, and maybe it isn't her . . . but in Jesse's mind, that's where she is now. Naked and giving head, forever.

He sighs. Turns the page. And Sully Faulkner stares up at him. The picture is from the spring of '75. She looks heavy, even fat, but it's definitely Sully, dressed in a dark gown and standing among the altos in the school chorus. Jesse's chest tightens, relaxes. He touches the round face. Did he touch her face last night? He can't recall. Flipping to the index, he finds her name and page numbers. The freshman class photo is unsparingly honest. She is genuinely fat, cafeteria food having swollen the pretty face. It remained attractive, but like a porcelain doll's face; despite it being nothing but pigment on paper, thin and unreal, Jesse nearly feels the living skin, hearing a soft, close laugh, those lips kissing his fingertips, tiny teeth giving him a playful nip.

Sully was in Chorus and Literature Club, and she's listed as a pledge to the Gamma House. She also appears in one random campus shot, her round body trying to hide behind a notebook and the stately, ivy-bound form of Red Hall in the background. It's that image that leads him to a memory of Sully. At that very place, he once spoke to her and Hanna. Idle talk, meanings lost. But then a second encounter comes to him: The cheerleader and Jesse were inside Red Hall, in one of its high long hallways. She was telling him that they couldn't see each other anymore—*see* meaning screw, not some selective blindness—and Sully emerged from a nearby classroom, without warning, buttery and doll-faced and strolling past them. The cheerleader had stared at the floor, suddenly silent. Sully had offered an embarrassed little smile, hurrying past. Disappointment and a sense of loss must have made him hyperaware. That's why he sees the moment with perfect clarity. Does Sully remember it? he wonders. And if so, how did she interpret what she glimpsed?

The second yearbook goes faster. Sully's sophomore presence has left fewer fossils. No Chorus, and in Literature Club she sits in the back, half-

way hidden. What he sees of her seems thinner, but in an unhealthy, unhappy fashion. A sour love, perhaps? Some flavor of misery makes her tired, the pretty eyes like pits. There's no sophomore class photo; she evaded that camera completely. But Jesse is shocked by his own appearance. He looks young. It's a boy's face, handsome and dark with an early spring tan, a wispy, experimental mustache, and his hair longer than now. He remembers the shirt, scratchy cotton made in an Asian sweatshop, and his necklace is a leftover from Hanna. It was an attempt to make him an official hippie; he can't recall why he dressed that way for the class photo. He shuts his eyes, trying to summon up old motivations—in humor, or was it in earnest?—but he can't even make a good guess.

Sully reemerges in last year's book. She's back in Chorus, obvious in the pictures of the Christmas tour to Romania. An educational trip, that one. Students came home with stories of a police state, mind control, and spies. Ordinary citizens would risk reputations and their lives just to speak with ignorant Midwestern kids. It was another world, a different set of currencies in effect. Jesse remembers a party in De Mortimer—a year ago, almost exactly—and Sully was there. Just like in these photographs, she was thinner but not trim. Pretty but somehow not interesting to him. She told him about being tailed through Bucharest by a secret policeman. Whenever she paused, her shadow paused. One time she stopped to look into a store window, admiring a set of drab work boots, and she saw the cop gazing into an ancient stone wall, admiring its mortar. It was a funny anecdote—he chuckles quietly—and why hadn't he found her interesting? He can't remember even flirting, which leaves him feeling uneasy, even sad.

Sully's junior class photograph is striking. Light and film conspired to do one person justice. He strokes the image, fingertips circling the rich dark eyes. They gaze up at him, alive and full of honest compassion. Instinct tells him that she's a good person, contemplative and smart; he admires her without trying, as if his admiration has always been inside him, waiting to be released. One last caress of the image, then he shuts the book with a sense of ceremony, placing all three yearbooks back on their shelf. He feels genuine relief now, though he isn't certain with what, and desire mixed with a fat dose of infatuation. In the past, Sully must not have been apparent enough or convenient enough to suit him. The world is rich with women, he had believed. More beauties are born in a morning than he could bed in a

lifetime. Yet if this girl is different, and precious, then he has nobody else to blame for wasted time . . . three-plus years spent wooing girls whose main attribute is their disposability. . . and the only good being that he doesn't want to waste one more day!

Jesse rolls onto his belly. He tries to sleep, wanting to awaken rested, refreshed. But then he remembers what the crazy Indian told him. "Everything is changing. Now. Everything is being made over again, and improved. . . ."

The words scare him; he doesn't know why.

And even when he finally sleeps, it is broken and unrestful. Jumbled dreams stiffen his prick and make him toss and mutter aloud, no word making sense, and his chill body glistening with sweat.

Friday evening. The cafeteria is full of bodies and noise and pent-up energies, no other place to eat tonight with the storm still blowing and nobody quite ready to walk back to the dorms. No Sully, again. Jesse makes a thorough search, then decides to wait, watching the door. He isn't eating because he is nervous, he decides. A temporary condition, he hopes. Alan Quill has a healthy appetite until Jesse joins him, recounting portions of his day. He describes his meeting with Lloyd, then briefly mentions the Indian in the snow. "You didn't see him, did you?"

No, and Quill doesn't care about Indians. Lloyd is the issue, and he drops his fork., whispering and shouting in equal measures. "I know it! He'll kick us out of school!"

"No way," says Jesse. "No way."

But Quill is a creature without imagination. Thus when he sees his expulsion in his head, he takes it for a premonition from God. "I'll have to call home," he says in a pathetic voice. "Call and warn them."

"Nobody's going anywhere, except Lloyd." Saying it, Jesse believes it. "Trust me. You'll graduate with honors. You'll get your MBA and a bitter wife, and you'll cheat on your taxes. Which means prison." He laughs, promising Quill, "Today is going to seem like paradise. Particularly in those penitentiary showers."

"What's paradise?" someone says.

Jill. Behind Jesse, she bumps him with a tray. He turns and says, "Good. I've been trying to call you."

She sits beside him, facing the lobby. Nothing is on the tray but a tiny lettuce salad. Stabbing through the dressing with a bent fork, she asks, "When?"

"Before I came here." After he woke up. "Except the phones aren't working now."

Quill says, "He met with Lloyd today."

Jill takes a bite and chews with slow deliberation, as if her salad is medicine. After swallowing, she asks, "What happened?"

Quill tells the story. He takes twice the time needed, every detail dramatic and heavy with panic.

"First the radios, now the telephone," says Jesse, to himself mostly. "The phones were working earlier. I know that."

And Quill says, "Listen. He threatened us." The face is bloodless, eyes huge. "Aren't you listening to me?"

Jesse says, "Yeah, he threatened to make me rich."

"How rich?" asks Jill.

"I don't know. We never discussed figures."

"Too bad. It would make a nice detail for my next installment." Jill sets her fork down, then picks it up again. "Any other news?"

"I saw an Indian today."

"On a pony, or on foot?"

He regrets telling Jill, knowing how it must sound. "It was after I'd left Lloyd. I saw this fellow out in the open, and he was saying all this strange shit. . ."

"I know who he is," says Jill, grinning now.

Jesse feels an instant of hope. "Who is he?"

"A hitman." She nods with authority, almost laughing. "Lloyd hired him. We cooperate, or we die."

"Oh, God!" Quill gasps.

"She's fucking teasing," Jesse snaps.

"But doesn't it make sense?" She starts to laugh, the sound bubbling up out of her. "Corruption and the concrete business. There has to be a mob connection."

Quill leaks a pitiful, hopeless sound.

"What I should have done," Jesse offers, "was pick a name. Someone who might be our source."

"Maybe," says Jill.

"For some amount that we could split three ways. What do you think? Sixty thousand sound right?"

"As a bribe? That's ballpark, sure."

A thought occurs to him. "I could have given him what's-her-name."

Jill says nothing.

"What's his secretary's name? Hammerheart?" Eyes down, she stabs her salad.

"Miss Reinhart," offers Quill. "Is that who you mean?"

"Reinhart, the battle-ax. Sure." He makes himself laugh, saying, "I can give her to him, and the Indian can put a concrete arrow in her heart."

Jill chews, then with a certain pain, swallows.

"The battle-ax," he says again. And then he glances at Jill—at her set jaw and the eyes that avoid him—and he knows. Jill isn't the only person who can read a face. With a sudden surge of electricity, he straightens his back, thinking: A secretary would know about files and names, comings and goings. Wouldn't she?

He thinks:

Jill let me think that her source was male. But why not the secretary? Why the hell not?

Jill sets her fork down, tired of eating.

Jesse feels alert and very wise. Looking at his associates, he asks, "Does twenty thousand sound fair? For each of us, of course."

Jill says, "Tell me about the Indian."

"Don't change the subject."

Quill moans and rises to his feet, the motion dramatic. Overdone. With considerable gravity, he tells them, "I'm thinking of resigning."

"Did you talk to this Indian?" she persists.

"He's just a crazy man," Jesse promises. "The world is changing, and he wants to give me an interview. That kind of twisted shit—"

"I'll give you time to find a new business manager," Quill tells them, practically begging for attention.

Jesse says, "You aren't quitting."

Jill lights a cigarette, blowing smoke sideways at him.

Hurt by their indifference, Quill shakes his head and repeats, "I want to quit." Taking his tray, he makes his retreat.

The other two just sit, nothing said for a long while.

Jill has a portable ashtray, enameled and almost artful. She closes its lid after crushing her cigarette, saying, "I never told you." A last streamer of smoke comes from her mouth. "You guessed it on your own, Sherlock."

He nods, watching the lobby. Where is Sully?

And she asks, "Will you tell him?"

An insult, a slap at the face. Jill believes that he might actually give Lloyd what he wants—

"Jess?"

—and for money. Of course he says, "I won't. No!"

She watches him, studying his face.

He's angry about the accusation and surprised by how much it bothers him. "Do you really think I'd do that?"

"The truth? I don't know." She breathes and leans back. He can smell smoke on her breath. "Lloyd probably wants to buy her off. So you might figure there's no harm in telling—"

"Shit."

"Jess," she says, leaning toward him. "What would you do for sixty thousand dollars, Jess?"

And he discovers that he can't find an exact answer. He can't measure the precise dimensions of his greed, and it frightens him. Staring out at the lobby, he mutters, "Lloyd wasn't trying to bribe me."

"No?"

"He's just panicking, that's all."

"Maybe so."

A long pause, then Jesse asks, "Do you think this scandal is going to ruin the school?"

She opens her ashtray, lighting up again.

Jesse shuts his eyes, taking a deep breath and holding it. He waits for the air to burn his chest, fighting to be let out again.

"What are you thinking, Jess?"

That he has somewhere he wants to be. *Now.*

Which room is Sully's?"

De Mortimer Hall: old and never elegant; worn but incapable of appearing worn out. A pudgy sophomore has found Jesse poking around the inter-

com board, trying to read the scribbled names on yellowed paper labels. She has said, "Can I help you?" with a forced, overly polite voice. Now she squints, thinking hard before saying, "Sully? What's her last name? Yeah, she's up on fourth floor. I'm pretty sure."

"Here it is." A dim name; a room number. "Thanks."

This girl thinks like Jill. She shadows Jesse, not quite trusting him. They walk past the TV lounge, empty and dark, and he asks, "Why isn't anyone watching?"

A near snort, then she replies, "No stations are coming in."

Like with the radios, he thinks. A communal telephone is in the hallway, and as an experiment, Jesse lifts the receiver. No dial tone. Nothing but a faint, faraway hiss. That's how it was when he tried to call Jill earlier, yet he'd hoped it was just Yates' phones. And Lloyd managed to get through to me—

"It's the sun," the girl volunteers.

He looks at her, putting the receiver back in its cradle.

"Some kind of flare. A huge one." She is a picture of conviction. "Don't you know about it?"

"How do you know about it? I mean, if nothing works—"

"I just do," she responds.

Something is happening. He can almost feel it happening around him, but he hasn't the words to describe the sensation. "Someone must have told you about the flare."

"They must have," she agrees. And now she abandons him, heading downstairs with arms held high, surrendering to Jesse's stupidity.

What a day, he thinks. Taking two steps at a time, he heads upstairs. The fourth floor is the top floor, a kind of elite zone. Its small rooms are prized, tucked under the sloping roof and reserved for seniors who have earned a measure of solitude. It is familiar territory. He used to come here to see the cheerleader, on the sly. He passes her old room now as he walks to the end of the hallway. Room 421. It is in the northeast corner, just past the shower and toilets. He can hear water running. He knocks on the varnished door and waits, then knocks again. Then a third time, louder, the hope gone out of it. There's no hint of motion from inside, not even the tell-tale scrape of shoes or soft whispers begging someone to be quiet. Jesse waits a few more moments, feeling silly, then he turns and enjoys a sense of

relief. Sully isn't home. He has followed his desires as far as possible, at least for now. Old habits reassert themselves. This hall is vast, full of possibilities. Where should he go? He is trying to decide when the bathroom door swings open, Sully emerging on bare feet, damp tracks left on the hard old tiles.

He is almost as surprised as last night. Almost. Sully is wearing a terrycloth robe with her hair up and wrapped in a wet towel and her bathroom supplies carried in a mesh sack. She seems shorter. Eyes lock on eyes, and she says, "Lost?" He manages a laugh, saying, "No." A sudden nervousness dries his mouth. And she laughs, saying, "You look lost," as she opens her door.

It wasn't locked. Bright light flows over them; Jesse squints for a moment or two. Sully enters her room, then turns and asks, "Aren't you coming in?" Then she says, "I *adore* long hot showers." Another backward glance, and she says, "Shut it?" The doorknob is worn dull. The latch doesn't want to fit in the jamb. "It sticks," she warns with a fondness; his next try succeeds, and he hears a solid click. Then he turns, trying to absorb the room in a glance. "I know, I know. It's ugly and cramped, I know." It must be the smallest room on fourth floor. But he says, "No," and then, "It's nice. Fine. Bigger than mine, believe me."

Her bed is in one corner, a heavy white bedspread tucked smooth and an assortment of stuffed animals stacked against the wall in an orderly fashion. Behind the headboard is a single window—a bay window—tiny plants half-shriveled in tiny salt-stained clay pots. Condensed breath has frozen on the window glass, leaving it with an opaque sheen. The storm and cold seem remote otherwise, the atmosphere rigorously cozy. Set next to the bed is a tall chest of drawers, an artifact from home—durable, varnished wood scarred by several childhoods—and on top are photographs in handsomely oxidized silver frames. An older couple and an assortment of boys gaze out at Jesse. Her parents? And brothers? The couple look pleasant and domesticated, smiling through waxy faces while holding hands politely. The boys are less posed, more genuine. They resemble one another enough that Jesse isn't sure if there are two or three of them, or more. They have Sully's features plus a testosterone harshness, every scene littered with football pads and fishing poles. Two brothers dangle a dead trout, some mountain river behind them. They're big tough boys, the kind who protect sisters and

who will kick the shit out of their sisters' boyfriends, if only to see if they can take a good shitkicking.

"Where do you live?" he asks; and she says, "Denver. Do you know where that is?" Funny. Sully stands in front of a tall mirror, brushing out her wet hair and smiling at her reflection, her face composed, bright drops of moisture sliding down her neck. The incandescent light overhead is brilliant, almost harsh. Jesse watches her hand on the brush and the practiced motions, and he asks, "How many brothers?" She says, "Four." Then she adds, "One older, three younger. And you?" A younger sister, just turned fifteen. She's nothing like Jesse. He doesn't say it, but he thinks it. Kris is organized and prudish and very, very shy. "Sit, if you'd like," Sully tells him. She is done with her hair, turning toward him to say, "Sorry I look so gross." He sits on the edge of her bed, saying, "You don't. You look fine." There's a hitch in his voice, a little-boy case of nerves that keeps surprising him. And she smiles, starting to say, "Lies," as a telephone starts to ring.

A private phone in your room is a luxury. It's on the desk in the corner, and he didn't notice it until now. The bell is turned down, more buzzing than ringing. Sully lifts the receiver, killing the buzz and saying, "Hello?" almost before the mouthpiece reaches her lips. With a faraway gaze, she says, "No, no. It's fine." Then, "Not real busy, no."

Jesse listens, watches. Sully cradles the receiver on her shoulder, on the dull blue terrycloth. "Oh, I was just going to study. I've got a lot of French lit to read." She glances at Jesse, mouthing the word, "Mother." Then she says, "In the shower. Did you call?" Then, "Oh, I tried, but I couldn't get through. The lines were down, or something." A pause. "No snow at all?" Then, "Well, it's almost over here." She lifts the phone's base, asking, "How's Dad?" Then she walks toward Jesse, saying, "Good. And Phil's knee?" When she turns he sees how the terrycloth rides snug against her ass. And she sits without a backward glance, right into his lap. No hesitations. "What are their chances?" Jesse hears a busy voice living inside the earpiece. He remains silent and still, like a secret. "Oh, Howard'll hate that," Sully remarks. More motherly sounds. And the girl pushes back into him, ass to crotch, his prick beginning to respond. Carefully, almost tentatively, he places both hands on her hips; then with her hands she takes them and makes his arms encircle her waist. More voice sounds, and Sully laughs. "Oh, now, that's just Dad. Don't listen to him." More laughter. Jesse feels a

gap in the robe, damp heat leaking out of it, and he slips his fingers inside, surprised by the privilege, suddenly feeling skin. Sully takes his hand with one of hers, and he guesses that she will remove it. . . only no, she insists that he reach deeper, his entire hand into the robe, flush against the firm curve of her belly, warm from the shower and warm from life. "I can hear you fine," she says. "It's a great connection, really." And now he lifts his hand, touching the underside of her left breast and then the hard ample nipple, thumb and forefinger tweaking it; the girl straightens, breathes, and says, "No, I'm glad you called. But the storm's almost gone, and I'm fine. Everything's fine."

Jesse drops his hand. Sully says, "Love you," and cradles the receiver with a certain slow formality, its base balanced on her knees. Each motion has a precision, a satisfaction. She gives the floor a long dreamy smile, then stands abruptly, without warning, and carries the phone back to the desk. When she turns toward him again, her robe is partway open, the breasts very pale and smooth, soft blue veins glowing and the nipples hidden and the robe's V dropping to the deep, narrow belly button, a single bead of water rolling downward, leaving a snail's trail. "I tried calling home all day," she admits, "but nothing went through." Jesse says, "A lot of things aren't working." She opens her mouth, then hesitates. Then asks, "Did something happen on the sun?" And before he can answer, she claims, "My mother mentioned something about the sun." Why isn't he surprised? That's all Jesse can think about now. Why does it make sense that a Denver housewife and a sophomore here would believe the same inadequate explanation? "I'm glad you came to visit," says Sully. Warm hands run through his hair, thumbs touching the corners of his eyes. Then she pulls his face up between her breasts, holding it there as she shivers. And takes a huge breath. And composes herself, relaxing suddenly. Jesse kisses her sternum and the hard arch of her ribs, wondering what he should do now, what does she want? And the girl moves, a single smooth backward step with her robe falling away. It seems to dissolve. Legs parting, she straddles his legs and firmly pushes him back onto the bed. Jesse and the stuffed animals gaze up at Sully, none of them breathing, eyes big and glassy and incapable of closing. Her pubic hair is mink-colored and abundant. Placing a hand on his crotch, she pushes a little bit, making him ache; then she's unbuttoning his jeans, just like last night, saying, "Look at you." Saying, "O-kay." Then a pause and

her eyes lift, meeting his gaze, and she says with great care, "Jesse? I've got a favor to ask you, can I?" He answers, immediately and without hesitation, "Sure, anything—" And she says, "Can I unmake the bed, Jesse? For a second, will you stand up?"

When the day has no more room for strange things, strangeness happens. It is many things, and it is nothing that he can name at first. Sully is under him, the lights are off, and she knows exactly what to do and what to tell him, and she can't kiss him hard enough or long enough, her tongue half-way to his stomach. When he pauses, pulling a threesome of condoms out of his wallet, she takes one and unrolls it with an artfulness, dressing up his prick in a single smooth motion. Of the girls with whom he has slept, she reminds him most of the neighbor lady who outraged his parents—mature, secure, happily raunchy. Yet when he enters Sully, he feels a sudden resistance . . . and he almost stops, astonished by the sensation . . . and Sully grabs his ass and twists her face sideways, saying, "There," as she gasps, his prick piercing her hymen with an artless little thrust.

It's too strange, ruining her virginity as he discovers it. Then all at once she wraps her legs around his waist and begs him to move, please, fuck her, but he comes in a matter of moments, out of shock or fatigue or perhaps sheer runaway joy.

He grabs himself and withdraws, hoping nothing is spilled. And Sully says, "Wow," with a quiet, flat voice. That is part of the strangeness. In the same instant, she seems both involved and remote. Passionate, yet thoroughly practiced. Jesse is in bed with two women, he decides. One of the women says, "Oh, oh," and sits up, turning on the little reading lamp up on the chest of drawers. The blood is bright against the white sheets, and ugly, and a little painful to see. Jesse feels guilt and a vague panic, then more guilt because of his panic. "Here," she tells him, "why don't you get up and let me change the bedding. Please?" Suddenly everything is too matter-of-fact. The other Sully is in charge now. Jesse peels off the condom while she pulls off the sheets, no more blood flowing but a damp cloth needed to clean the pale insides of her legs. The fresh bedding smells of bleach. "Come back to bed, love." He kneels, placing the used condom beside the bed leg, out of the way. Then he joins her in the new sheets, not wanting to be anywhere else but unable to relax, thinking how this is the third time that he

has broken flesh . . . and how can that weak membrane of tissue have survived more than twenty years of an active life in the mountains . . . ?

They talk. Jesse practically begs her to tell him about her life, if only so that he doesn't have to do the same. Her home isn't far from the mountains. "My mountains," she says, "and I miss them." She's going back in May, after graduation, and spend the summer at the family cabin, taking long walks above the timberline. There's so much suffering in the world, she assures Jesse, and she might join the Peace Corps. Although Dad prefers that she choose a real job and a career. In what, she doesn't know. English majors don't have the fast-track anywhere. But she knows that she wants to settle near the mountains, snow and trees, and with that she stops talking, lifting her head from his chest, smiling as always but something else in her face now. A bittersweet quality, and more. Her features are illuminated by the weak, ice-strained light coming through the window. And it is an equally weak voice that begs, "Now you talk. Go on."

He won't discuss the future. Instead he tries to describe the day's adventures: How he met with Lloyd and the gist of what was said. How Jill and his business manager are coping. He forgets to mention Pinrose and the vandalism, but he does tell her about the crazy Indian. It seems like a harmless subject. Even funny, if he tells it right. But afterward, he senses a distinct and profound change in Sully. It doesn't show in her face, which appears gently amused. Or in the way her body presses against him, feeling happy and warm. The change is somewhere behind her eyes, and he can't decide what exactly he perceives. But it is undeniable. And he feels compelled to ask, "Did you see the Indian?" That must be the answer. "Do you know him . . .?"

She stares at him, her mouth open, and after a long moment says, "No," and then, "Love. Sorry." Then she kisses him on the mouth and cradles his head, whispering, "You don't know how glad I am to have you here."

In an instant, by reflex, he replies, "And I'm glad to be here, too." Then he adds, "Love," with a genuine dose of warmth.

Sully watches him for a long moment, then lets her eyes close. "The blizzard sounds done. Do me a favor? Check?"

Jesse climbs from the warm covers, up onto the window ledge. Some of the stuffed pets have been shoved here, and he gently moves them aside, peering through a high gap in the ice. Squinting, he can just make out

Yates, its tiny rooms lit or not, the clean brick sides lifting into a black sky. The snow has stopped falling. There is an audible wind and a brutal arctic chill, both typical after such a storm. Exhaling, his breath freezes against the glass, obscuring his view. With his right hand, he touches a window-pane, the bitter cold seeping into his blood while his heat seeps in the opposite direction, crossing skin and glass, mixing with the wind and slightly, ever so slightly, diluting this terrible winter.

From behind and below, Sully asks, "When did you become interested in me?"

The voice has changed. Climbing down, he finds her sitting against the wall, legs tucked up to her shivering body, the pretty face streaked with tears that shine even in the dimmest light.

"Pardon?" says Jesse, buying time. "I didn't hear you—"

"When did you notice me? Do you know?"

"A long time ago," he lies. And before she can respond, he asks, "When did you become interested in me?"

In Freshman English, he assumes. When she sat with Martha West—
—but she astonishes him, calmly confessing, "I never have liked you. Not particularly." With fists, she rubs her weeping eyes. Muscles in her forearms bunch up with exertion. A quiet, sharp-cornered voice says, "The truth? Until last night, I thought you were just this self-centered pretty-boy jerk. . . ."

Jesse feels exposed. Helpless.

She hugs herself now, not quite looking at him. "You've dated friends of mine. Martha. The Hurtneys. Others, too."

Jesse glances at the window, the print of his hand plainly visible, frost already formed on the long fingers, creeping down to the palm. "So what changed your mind?" he mutters. And when Sully won't answer, he glares at her and asks, "Just why am I here?"

A beleaguered smile. "I had this feeling about you."

"Yeah?"

"When I saw you marching through the snow last night . . . all at once . . . I realized that you're a good person." A pause. The smile brightens, and she comes closer. "Someone decent is inside you, Jesse Aylesworth, and I think you don't even know it yet."

He knows nothing; he can't feel more lost.

"I can trust you," she whispers, her mouth pressed to one ear. Then into the other ear, she tells him, "When the time comes."

When what time comes?

Warm, bone-dry hands cup his face, and she promises, "Soon." Then she kisses him, and strokes him, and asks, "Will you stay with me tonight?"

He hears himself say, "Yes. Of course."

They make love again, more slowly this time, and Sully seems to climax an instant after Jesse, and afterward, he can't quite remember what was said before, or that it was odd. He falls into a seamless black sleep, then wakes refreshed. As does Sully. And as a reward for staying all night, she lets him take her a third time, from behind, on her hands and knees as Jesse grabs her hips, looking straight ahead as he shoves and shoves.

Sunshine pours through the window glass.

The imprint of his hand is melting, the tissue-thin ice fracturing and flowing, gently collapsing back into vapor and tears.

THE TURTLE

Suddenly the TV outside the office door is roaring, and Jesse tries to ignore it for several seconds. Whoever is there will realize that there's no signal, no picture or sound, solar flares or whatever the cause still playing hell with communications. But the roar persists, and he can't even pretend to concentrate. "Fuck it." He leaves the typewriter, finding no one in the lounge. For a moment, he watches the electronic snow, his mind finding patterns in the randomness, but nothing is really there. No Saturday cartoons, sorry; and Jesse pushes the dial—*think*—and watches the gray roar shrink to black.

He returns to work, trying to collect himself. He is writing next week's editorial. A satire, really. The idea hit him after he left Sully's: It's a thousand years in the future, and Warner College is trying to dismantle Battles Hall. Lasers and nukes have no effect; the ghost of Clarence Lloyd confounds the robot workers. What Jesse wants is humor, but so far this piece is more bile than bite. He decides to start over, sitting back in the warm office chair, lifting his hands . . . and blinking. What happened to the paper? It was in the typewriter—

"This isn't the future," says a voice. "I hope you know, the future won't resemble this world at all."

Jesse turns toward the sound, his chair squeaking.

The Indian sits on the old sofa beneath the window, legs crossed, the bare ankles and shins brown and smooth. His face isn't exactly smiling. Dark pupils float on red irises. Jesse doesn't remember the redness, but the clothes are the same as yesterday, ragged and lightweight, and the hair is long and lustrous. This fellow had wanted an interview, a chance to explain

. . . but that thought is pushed aside by one more obvious, more immediate. How did he slip in here?

"I've been here all along, Mr. Aylesworth."

The voice is strong, almost normal.

"Because I'm free to use more of my resources now," the Indian explains. And grins. "I have more hands and wits at my disposal. And, of course, the time."

Hands and wits?

"And the time, yes."

It dawns on Jesse that this man is reading his mind. "Just what you show me of it. Of course I can."

"Stop!" Panic and adrenaline make Jesse hallway stand, legs rubbery. "What do you want? Who are you?"

The face grins. Its proportions are a little odd, a little wrong. It is as if he was battered in an accident, his skull bones set by incompetent hands. Did he look that way yesterday? But he must have—

"I want an interview," the man declares, his voice almost musical.

"Excuse me?"

"You publish the local news organ. Correct?" A red-rimmed eye winks. "Part of my mission is to explain myself to the local vertebrates. To help them comprehend and digest—"

"Vertebrates?"

"You don't know the term?" The gaze lifts, something changing. Some quality in the face seems fluid. The skin darkens and the red eyes seem to grow, and the deep musical voice—a Robert Preston voice—says, "Vertebrates. Chordates. The classification of organic machines that possess backbones and crude nervous systems."

"I know the word," Jesse snaps.

"Yes, you're a biology major. A three point one-two grade average. Of course you understand." A hand lifts, fingers spreading and the voice continuing. "As I said, I wish to explain myself. Then you can publish an account of my origins and my noble purpose."

What are you?

"I'm a sophisticated post-organic life-form." And he laughs, moving the hand from side to side.

"A what?"

"And a turtle, too, I am." He swallows, the neck compressing. The eyes seem to drop and shrink, and the face becomes more Indian again. "You can address me as the Turtle. Or Mr. Turtle, if you prefer."

Jesse breathes like a sprinter. Yet he doesn't move, and he manages to sound almost calm, asking, "Is that your name? The Turtle?"

"Oh, no." Again, amusement. "I cannot. . . my mouth is inadequate to express my true name, and you wouldn't comprehend it if I could. Which is sad. I have a lovely name."

Jesse glances over his shoulder, eyeing the closed office door. Then he looks at the remote, pipe-encrusted ceiling, trying to will himself to be anywhere else.

"A lovely name," the Turtle repeats.

"Where did you come from?"

"Where?" A long pause. Again the TV comes on, quieter this time. The only other sound is the muted rumble of a snowblower clearing a sidewalk. " 'Where' is not the best question, Mr. Aylesworth."

Jesse feels faint.

"First questions are vital," the Turtle maintains. "Since you must absorb knowledge at a creeping pace, you must ask inspired questions."

He shuts his eyes and groans.

"Perhaps the better question is 'When do you come from?' "

Eyes open. "*When?*"

"Though you really can't appreciate the answer's scope. No, it's too soon for 'when.' "

This is madness, pure insanity.

"It only seems so." The visitor shrugs and grins. "Perhaps that's my purpose, to confuse and clutter. But isn't confusion just another type of education?"

"Go away," Jesse whispers.

"The traditional first question is 'Why are you here?' And the answer is: 'I have come to deliver a great and wondrous gift.'"

"What gift?"

"Life," says the deep voice. "I am going to make you live!"

How sensible. Thank you.

And the Turtle laughs, and laughs. "You think of yourself as being alive, don't you?"

"So what?"

"Yet you aren't. Not truly alive, no." A quiet snort, then he adds, "You are too simple and small and unaware to live. Sir."

Jesse says nothing, trying to clear his head.

"All right, let me tell you *when* I come from. Are you listening?"

"No."

The Turtle winks and says, "I have traveled from the ends of time, the brink of space. By focusing energies and my will, I have crossed back to this time and place, bringing my gift of life. Certain selected vertebrates to be the beneficiaries. Each of you—yes, you too, Mr. Aylesworth—will be given glorious powers. Skills and senses that you can't imagine—"

"When is this going to happen?" Jesse interrupts.

"Now. I'm giving these things to you now, Jesse Aylesworth." A hand waves in the air between them. "Life itself is pouring into you, and it has been since the instant that I arrived."

"I'm not eating," Jesse mutters.

"But are you hungry?"

Not at all.

"And when, if I might ask, did you last urinate?" He can't recall.

"Yet the fear of renal failure hasn't given you a moment's pause. Odd, isn't it? A three point one-two average in biology, yet the changes in your physiology have occurred without mention. A natural, effortless process is underway."

"How do you know my grades?"

"Unlike you, I live. Life means awareness, complete and seamless." He pauses, then adds, "All college records are at my disposal, of course."

Jesse swallows. Then swallows again. "Okay," he manages. "Why do you call yourself 'the Turtle'?"

"That's one of your names for me."

"When?"

"But you know me!" The face shifts again, eyes pulled over to the sides of the head and the teeth receding, gums vanishing, a sudden clean beak emerging from the mouth as the flesh turns leathery, black hair evaporating in an instant. A giant turtle's head tilts sideways, a big red-rimmed eye centered on Jesse, a red tongue curling in that beaked mouth and a hissing voice saying, "Uuu owe ee, e-hee. Uuu owe ee!"

You know me.

Jesse remembers the damage in the bio lab, turtles dead and the oldest turtle missing—

"Ee, eee, ee!" the apparition screams.

—and here it is. Jesse knows it. That bizarre fact is implanted within his neurons, incontestable, and some cool calm part of Jesse is actually amused. It believes that this is nothing more, or less, than an hallucination. If he can just ignore the madness, maybe he can outlast it. Suddenly nothing seems as precious as that strict and clean little monster called *sanity*.

Shutting his eyes, Jesse prays for its return.

"I began my existence as a turtle," says the voice, human again. "By measuring my turtle's body—the mutations in its DNA, the corrosive effects of oxygen, and so on—I can estimate its age. I was conceived during your Civil War. When your ancestors came to this country, I was a child. When Red Hall was built, I was entering my randy teenage years. And left to the course of Nature, that body would have failed in just another two years."

Jesse opens his eyes. The Turtle's face is human, but the hands have turned thick and reptilian, making odd swimming motions over his lap. Jesse gives a low weak moan, then says, "You were old—"

"Not at all." The face laughs quietly. "I can remember some of my early existence. Certain flavors, certain sensations. But I have no real sense of time. Winter, sleep. Summer, food. And the occasional fornication." He laughs, then says, "No, humans have larger memories. Primitive minds, and inaccurate, but they're able to retain a hundred years of life in a half-organized state. Unlike my first mind." A brief pause. "In my initial incarnation, our good friend Dr. Pinrose was this vast godly shape whom I associated with food. The universe was bordered by glass walls and gravel, and it was a paradise to me."

Jesse mutters, "What do you want?"

"Too much, but isn't that the curse of life?" Paws hit each other, then drop. "Life envisions possibilities, too many of them. Oftentimes with conflicting, even antagonistic goals—"

"This is insane."

"I am most things, sir. But I am never insane." Eyes turn red again, and they close in a turtle fashion, inner lids first and then the leathery outer

lids. "Have I mentioned that turtles like myself are the preferred agents of *the Gift*? We aren't particularly mobile, which makes our journey here somewhat easier. Looking back from the remote future, I could estimate my position to a single square meter." Jesse swallows, saying nothing.

"And we are reliable agents." The red eyes give the double blink, his pride obvious. "Something in our nature makes us particularly trustworthy."

"Is that important? Being trustworthy, I mean."

"It is vital!"

Jesse nods. "All right. You've come from the future." Eyes smile, but the human mouth is emotionless. "So time travel is possible . . . ?"

"Not at this moment, no. Not at all." A dramatic sigh. "No one would be silly enough to attempt it today. It is that impossible. But if you wait until the universe is cold, dark, and empty, then a determined soul can pass through gaps in the failing quantum foam." A long pause, then he adds, "You'll learn what I mean. Trust me."

Jesse nods, too tired to doubt anything now.

"Time travel is a most difficult wonder. Even when it's done perfectly, as I have managed it, only certain rigid possibilities are allowed." The paws bump together again, becoming human hands with fingers interwoven. "A frigid old universe is your starting point, its death is your window, and the intrepid voyager—due to certain unforgiving principles—must connect with a suitable target."

"A suitable target," Jesse echoes.

"Your own past body, typically." The eyes brighten, and he says, "Think of a chasm. An enormous, bottomless chasm. Your mission is to leap over it in one good bound."

"Okay."

"But there's another difficulty. The far wall is almost perfectly smooth and shrouded in fog. You can't see where you will land." The human hands lift, fingers outstretched. "Your only hope is to be ready. And I'm not talking about simple hands and feet. Because what you are is much more complex, much more intricate, than any ancient primate."

"What if you miss?" Jesse asks.

"An excellent question, sir. What if?"

"So tell me!"

"Ruin. Obliteration. Death." A bleak laugh emerges from deep inside the Turtle. "When I made my magnificent leap, I was aiming for my own DNA. DNA makes for a nearly perfect target: Air and water and stone are chaotic, by nature. But in the midst of chaos are chains of nucleotide base pairs—laid out in my own personal code, of course— and repeated within several trillions of cells. Just imagine it!"

Jesse tries to imagine such a thing, and tries, and gives up.

"Yet nothing is ever assured, Mr. Aylesworth. Some of my associates—voyagers almost exactly like me—missed their intended targets. I am sorry to say, they are lost. They have died good brave deaths." The Turtle shakes his head and sighs. "Lives spent in the perfect cause."

"The perfect cause . . . ?"

Wiping his dry brow with a human hand, the Turtle smiles once again. "I arrived on Thursday evening," he claims, "and interfaced with my tiny cool self."

Jesse manages a weak nod.

"As you can see, I've remodeled the body. Made it larger. More practical." Hands move as if conducting a chorus. "I borrowed these materials from a variety of organic sources—"

The agar. The tapeworms and embryos.

"—and like any traveler, I have set out to make the best of my circumstances."

The Turtle's hands are held out to Jesse, the human fingers spread wide, details exact down to the callous pads and crisscrossing lines and even the delicate fingerprints.

Skepticism is battered but not beaten.

In a soft, doubting voice, Jesse inquires, "What about the other turtles? They didn't look particularly alive to me."

"My friends in the aquarium? Oh, no! For the very best of reasons, they don't receive the gift of true life."

"So you killed them?"

"I never kill," he replies, mildly outraged. "I honored them by storing them. I made perfect copies of their memories. Their bodies. Their essential selves." A self-congratulatory nod. "It was among my first official acts when I arrived here."

"Okay. . . ."

"Information, all information, is precious and will be stored away. Carefully, and without exception."

Skepticism feels beaten. Jesse offers a weak shrug, then says, "Fine. You've come from the future—"

"—yet in another truer sense, I am not."

"Why not?"

The Turtle giggles, asking, "Isn't this deliciously confusing?"

Nothing about this is delicious!

"You see," he explains, "*my* future has been erased. My appearance here has made tomorrow vague and unformed. You understand, Mr. Aylesworth. You enjoy reading speculative books—"

"How do you know?"

"I can see them in your room." The Turtle giggles.

"You see my room?"

"Always, yes." A wise nod. "And much else, too."

"Like what?"

"My point here, sir, is that my associates and I are altering a trillion years of existence. We have come to accomplish much good, but as a consequence we are also obliterating our own future lives!"

Jesse tries to breathe, a spike buried in his ribs. "A trillion years? Is that what you said?"

"Or more, perhaps. Let us just say that 'a trillion' is a nice number that leaves humans properly shaking their heads."

That's what this human is doing now.

"I am here," says the Turtle, "along with thousands like myself. We have come across time and space to transform a few selected organic machines. To make a few vertebrates live—"

"I still don't understand. Why vertebrates?"

"Why is this word such a stumbling block?" Red eyes squint. "We work with vertebrates because that's what we are. We are following a tradition, instilling our brothers and sisters with enough life to last each of them for a trillion years, or more."

Zeros crowd into Jesse's head, staggering him.

"I think your best question—if I may be so bold—is this: 'Why have *I* been selected for this honor? What makes Jesse Aylesworth so important

that immortal turtles will come all this way in order to give him the greatest imaginable gift?"

"All right. Why?"

"I am sorry. I can't tell you, not yet."

Jesse groans, sick of these games. "But what am I supposed to do with this 'life' you're feeding me? Tell me that much."

"Life is life. You do with it as you wish, within certain boundaries." The eyes close again, the clear inner lids glossy with moisture. When they reopen, the musical voice says, "This is not necessary or mandatory, what I am doing here. You'll learn everything in time. And the transformation is well underway. Unstoppable, in fact." A pause. "I just hoped that since you are in charge of an information outlet, a printed publication, and since your organic machinery is sophisticated enough to generate an imagination—*anemic as it is*—then you'd want to hear my story, and publish it—"

"Stop," he mutters. "Now. Just leave me alone."

The face changes again, becoming more turtlelike. Teeth dissolve into a beak; eyes pull to the sides of the dull bald head. The shape-changing is becoming ordinary. That new mouth says, "Umpannee!"

Jesse sits up straight, listening. In the lounge, with a *thump*, someone turns off the television.

"Ater," the creature promises.

"No. Stay away from me . . . !"

Then the figure dissolves into the concrete wall, without a sound or even a breath of wind. And an instant after he vanishes, someone opens the office door and walks toward Jesse from behind. He keeps still, trying to think, trying to digest some part of this elaborate hallucination . . . and a familiar hand touches him on the shoulder, Jill asking:

"What's going on?"

He gasps and turns, saying nothing.

She steps back, puzzled, then concerned. "That's a funny face," she offers. "What's happened, Jess?"

He decides on the truth. He has gone mad.

"And who was talking?" She glances at the walls, then the window. "I thought I heard a voice. . . ."

"Yeah," he whispers, "I had company."

"Who?"

"Pinrose's turtle. It came back from the ends of the universe, and now it's transforming us somehow."

"Which sounds fascinating," she says, chuckling for a moment. "But hey, wait till you hear some really big news!"

"My source called me. It seems that a couple trustees made it before the storm." She is excited, self-possessed. "They're up in Battles right now, meeting with Lloyd and some other high monkeys."

Jesse feels as though he is swimming out of a dream.

"They want Lloyd's confession. And a resignation. And maybe his ass on a big silver platter."

"The phones are down," says Jesse. "How did Reinhart get through to you?"

"Lucky, I guess." She practically dances with herself, then says, "I tried calling your room and here, but nothing worked for me. Isn't that weird?"

This is another life, and it's intruding on his genuine life without permission. Lloyd? The trustees? They have no consequence. Old causes have become trivial, obscured by the Turtle. Jesse opens his mouth, intending to laugh out loud—

—and Jill says, "Want to come with me? I'm going to spy on the meeting. Maybe I'll wrestle a quote or two out of the monkeys, if I can."

Jesse can't laugh; can barely breathe. He stares at the sofa, not so much as a butt-dent left by the Turtle. But he feels sure that the creature is still nearby, probably still watching him. . . .

"Are you okay?"

He swallows and says, "I'm not eating."

"That makes two of us," Jill confesses. "We're just too worked up and busy, I guess."

"When did you pee last, Jill?"

She is puzzled by the question. But instead of making fun of it—her first instinct—she hesitates, giving no answer.

"Something's different about us," he assures her. And himself. "I think we're changing. Don't you?"

She ignores the subject. She dismisses Jesse, saying, "Rave all you want. I'm going over there by myself!"

The scandal is nothing. The largest story in human history is with them now. It's in their blood and flesh . . . and he doesn't dare say another word about it. Instead Jesse tells her, "Good luck," and conjures up a weak, distracted smile.

"Will you be here?"

No. He doesn't want that enchanted reptile to find him alone again.

"You poor boy," says Jill. "She's wearing you out, whoever she is."

He doesn't understand for a moment.

A thin smile, and she says, "That tramp wouldn't let you sleep a wink, I bet. I bet."

He bristles but says nothing.

"What's this?" Jill kneels and picks up a piece of paper. It's the half-written satire. "Do you want this?"

Jesse gives it a quick glance before crumbling it. Hallucination or not, the Turtle is right. This isn't the future. People are lucky if they can imagine tomorrow. "Walk me out, Jess?"

"Sure." He tosses the wad into the trash, then locks the office out of habit. With a certain resolve, he announces, "I think I'm going to try to pee."

"Good luck," says Jill brightly.

As they walk past the big television, he stares at their reflections, dark and distorted, swimming across its opaque screen.

The men's room is silent and quite useless. Jesse stands before the urinal for several minutes, straining until a few drops of clear liquid fall free, mixing with cigarette ashes and genuine piss. He flushes anyway, out of habit, and tucks and zips and pauses in front of a long mirror. Does he appear different? Not that he can tell. Is he ill? If so, nothing shows. The face before him is the same strong face that he remembers, the same brown hair starting to thin, and just a hint of crow's-feet clinging around the tired dark eyes.

The cafeteria is almost as quiet as the men's room. No Sully, but no Turtle either. *Good*. Someone waves at him, a little wave, then brightens as he approaches. "Hi, Jess."

"Lana. . . ."

"What's happening?" She's a nervous, neurotic wisp of a girl, and a god-send. She asks him to join her, then makes sure that he sees her smile before she asks, "Hey, keeping out of trouble?"

"Trying to."

"Haven't seen you in a while."

They haven't spoken; everyone sees everyone on this campus.

"Been busy?"

"Very."

"Yeah," she says, as if imparting some grand wisdom, "me, too. Me, too!"

Jesse looks at her tray, three white plates scoured clean. The girl has the metabolism of a lab mouse.

"Earth to Jesse," she says.

They had some fun last semester. Suddenly in perfect detail, he remembers the bar in Hanover and Lana having three beers—he can count them and even read their labels—and he drove her partway home before suggesting a detour. Off the highway, parked on a winding dirt road, they necked and groped one another, leaving the windows fogged over and his balls blue.

"You in there, Jess?"

He blinks. "Sure."

"Are you going to eat anything?"

He looks across the big room, trying hard to remember how it feels to be hungry.

"If not," she says, "why don't you walk me back to the dorm?"

He isn't eating, and Jill isn't. And Sully had just a glass of punch at lunch yesterday, and she never came to dinner—

Lana rises, remarking, "You're working too hard. That's what I think."

—and not once during the night did Sully go to the bathroom. She took that shower before, but that might have been only a shower. What would she say if he asked about her bathroom habits?

"Walk with me?"

He says, "Okay," and stands. Companionship seems precious. Side by side, they walk outdoors, the air cold but the north wind down to a light breeze from no particular direction. The bright new snow glitters beneath a high porcelain sky. It hurts his eyes to gaze at the snow. A tear forms in his

right eye, and he wipes at it with a gloved finger, then puts the finger in his mouth. Leather he tastes, and salt.

Lana moves closer. With a voice that sounds rehearsed, she says, "I just had a thought. Have you ever seen my room?"

In the women's tower of Yates. "No, I don't think so."

"Come visit. Why not?"

They did it twice last semester. Jesse remembers both times, in his room and in the backseat of his Mustang. He discovers that he can replay every word, every gesture and touch, and how hard he had struggled to make her relax. She means well, but after each adventure, he promised himself not to try it again.

"Want to?"

They are between dorms, in a place where Sully might see them from her window. He feels guilty, but it's more than guilt. His emotions are complicated, shifting. Suddenly, in a razor-sharp vision, he remembers how Sully told him that there was this decent person inside him. He can see her plainly. Everything is in tighter focus than a human eye can manage, and he can smell sweat and drying cum; and once again, in a whisper, Sully says, "I can trust you." Then, "When the time comes."

Trust me about what? he wonders. When what time comes—?

"Would you look at that?" says Lana.

An arm is pointing. He looks up, finally noticing what is in plain view. A small crabapple tree is in the yard, its branches full of birds. Drab sparrows and juncos, mostly. But some blue jays and a pair of meadowlarks, too. A strange mixed flock, probably improbable. In a quiet, private voice he says, "Vertebrates."

"What-a-bits?"

Shaking his head, Jesse mutters, "They're exhausted. By the storm."

"I bet so," the girl replies hopefully.

Not one bird moves, save for their staring dark eyes. They follow the humans' progress. No, they're only watching Jesse. And as he turns on the shoveled walk, following Lana indoors, he feels a tingle of electricity and a sudden gust of blood-warm air.

"Anyway," she says. "Coming up for that visit?"

What he wants to do is find Sully, then ask her what's happening. But when he tries to muster up the courage, he can't. He is nervous. Tentative.

On the edge of genuine fear. And it's not just some postcoital regret, although that's part of the emotional stew.

Lana leads him through the main lounge, heading for the women's tower. But he stops at the TV, turning it on and checking each channel, nothing to see but snow.

"Why doesn't it work?" he asks.

Immediately, without apparent thought, Lana says, "Flares on the sun."

"Who told you that?"

The girl pauses, trying to recall.

"Did anyone tell you?"

A little laugh. "Yeah. Why?"

"Did you see an Indian today? Or yesterday, maybe?"

"A who?"

"How about a turtle?"

She giggles, saying, "You've got a weird sense of humor, Jess." Then, scared that she might offend, she touches an arm and adds, "But I love it."

A thin lie.

"I'm glad you're coming up," she assures him.

Again, a lie. Lana won't enjoy herself. She never does. To her sex is something done in hopes of some accidental emotional attachment. It's an act, passionless and sometimes painful, but when the boy asks if she's enjoying herself, she can manage the right words, almost smiling until he thankfully looks away again.

She isn't smiling now, reading his face. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," he hears himself saying. "I forgot. I've got an appointment, sorry."

Lana swallows, trying to stand taller. "Oh?"

"An interview, actually. For the paper."

She won't believe him. Her expression and stance tell him that much.

"I'll come by later," he lies. "Soon."

"I guess."

"I will." And he retreats, escapes, trying to decide where to go. Another public place? Anywhere, he tells himself. Then he is outside, not bothering to button his coat, walking past that crabapple tree, not one bird in sight. The flock has vanished. They must have flown off together, and he wishes he could join them. Pausing now. Looking at the bright clean new snow be-

neath the tree. Thinking about all those birds and isn't it strange how none of them took a shit. . . ?

The library is another Lloyd project, concrete and glass married into a bleak edifice that is named for two benefactors— the Grass-Pinchet Library and Research Center. It's full of the comforting buzz of people. Magazines and journals are on the ground floor, set out on gray metal shelves. Indoor/outdoor carpeting and some institutional chairs create a reading area. Jesse finds an old *National Geographic* and sits, paging through it. Kids are clustered around a nearby table. Freshmen, mostly boys. Two of them start to arm wrestle, their audience applauding when there's a winner. Then a stout humorless librarian marches over and demands quiet. "Or else," she threatens. Jesse feels safe here.

From where he sits he can see the stairs, and in a little while he sees long legs descending them. Their slow pace implies age. He has a feeling, a premonition; Pinrose appears, spotting him and strolling over to ask, "Have you found my vandals yet?"

"Not yet."

"Too bad." The professor sounds tired, and he looks it. "You're frying bigger fish, from what I've been reading."

A shrug.

"How's it feel, having Lloyd's balls in your hands?"

Jesse says, "Nice?"

"My opinion?" says Pinrose. "I'm sad. I mean, not that I like the man. Not that I haven't thought about running him down some night, making him road kill. But this isn't pretty stuff, you know?"

"I know."

"It's ugly. Dangerous. No telling where it ends."

"I realize that."

"Anyway." Pinrose hesitates, the big hands making fists and big veins showing through winter-paled skin. "So have you given any thought to your senior project?"

"Some."

"Bullshit." He laughs and says, "Next week. We'll stamp something together next week."

"Okay," says Jesse.

"And get some rest," Pinrose advises. "You're not a kid anymore, god-damn it!"

They laugh, drawing a steely gaze from the librarian.

"I'll be fine," says Jesse, tasting a lie.

But Pinrose says, "I know," and seems satisfied. "Take it easy." And he excuses himself, walking to the exit and through the swinging gate that scans for book thieves; while Jesse watches him, trying to think about nothing, another figure steps inside and walks past Pinrose. They aren't two yards apart. Pinrose gives the Turtle a little nod and smile, noticing nothing odd. The Turtle returns the smile, then glances over at Jesse. He's wearing his Indian body. Everything is the same, with the addition of a worn book bag. He could be a student—he looks young enough—and he waves at Jesse as if they're pals. But one of the freshman boys waves back, shouting out:

"How's it going, Chief?"

Silence. The other freshmen are stunned and probably a little envious of their friend's recklessness. Suddenly they explode into bright loud laughter. The librarian has had enough. She storms past the Turtle without so much as a sideways glance, her shrill voice saying, "Pack up and go. Get out of here. Now, now, now."

The Turtle starts up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Jesse remains in his seat, trying to clear his head. The magazine in his lap is opened to an article on Africa, big colorful pictures capturing the wild animals. "Vertebrates," he whispers. A landscape full of them. A leopard looks triumphant, gazing down at him from the crotch of an acacia tree, a limp young gazelle hanging beside it, dead eyes dull and cool. At peace. A sudden chill spreads along Jesse's back, and he shuts the magazine and puts it aside. Then with a soft, tired voice he says, "So leave. Get up and go somewhere else."

Nobody is nearby. He stands and walks toward the exit, but now the freshmen are outside, the same two boys wrestling in the snow as the others shout encouragement. Jesse doesn't want to cross that barrier of noise. He pauses, thinking that the Turtle was noticed—the Turtle is real—and being in a public place doesn't keep it away. If it wishes to speak to him, it will. Which is why he makes himself turn and start upstairs. Watching for long black hair and the chiseled face, he explores the library's top floors: acres of

dull linoleum, miles of metal shelves, and maybe five students pretending to study.

"Where are you?" Jesse whispers.

No answer.

Little rooms are on the top floor, set behind the stacks, furnished with single desks and chairs and meant for solitary study. Almost no one uses them. They're cramped and stale . . . just where a turtle would hide, Jesse reasons. But the doors are locked. He walks slowly, twisting knobs, then hesitates before the corner room and again asks, "Where are you?"

Somewhere a chair is moved, scraping against linoleum with a harsh, startling sound.

He shudders, gasps. Then he tries to compose himself, forcing his hand to close on the last knob. It is warm and unlocked. Pushing open the door, he finds the lights on. But there's no Turtle waiting. Jesse pauses, confusion bleeding into relief. . . and only then does he notice the book set out on the tiny desk, a straw-colored cover and something about it familiar. He knows that binding. Stepping inside, he twists his neck, touching nothing as he reads and rereads the title.

The Warner Chronicle: 1977-1978

Jesse sits as much out of weakness as interest, his legs nearly useless. After a minute, he pulls the chair up to the desk, metal legs shrieking against the linoleum—a woman's sound, pained and far off. His hands are shaking, he discovers. His heart is beating slow and hard. Time itself feels compressed. He consciously breathes and breathes again, then lifts his hands and opens the book to the first page. He is sick of being astonished, but this volume shouldn't exist. Not yet, it shouldn't. Yet this is his newspaper. Issue One. And he makes himself swallow, then turns the pages, eyeing photographs and reading the random sentence, everything exactly as it should be.

This is the past. Last semester is here, recorded for the eons. Jesse Aylesworth, Editor. Alan Quill, Business Manager. Jill Toon, Assistant Editor and Chief Reporter. Sully is in one early photograph, wearing black, gazing up at him from the chorus. This year she stood at the front of the altos, very pretty and peppy; and this isn't the same girl he slept with last night. He

feels sure of it. Shutting his eyes, he remembers going to the fall performance. He went with Ruth Hurtney. He tries to see Sully in the front row and can't. But why should he see her? Because when he thinks about Ruth, he recalls exactly what she wore and how she smelled and how her voice grated on him. It was her idea to come, but she was bored inside of two minutes. When the performance was done, she sprang to her feet, saying, "At last." And she pulled on his arm, saying, "Let's go get a beer, huh? Like now?"

Memories are thick and sturdy, and abundant. He moves through the last semester, his pace slowing. With a scholarly eye, he studies the Christmas issue—the issue he delivered to the bizarre Taus—then passes into this semester, this week. Word for word, everything is as it should be. There even seems to be a water mark on the sports page, possibly from the snow that melted inside Sully's car. He lingers over a pointless set of basketball scores, knowing that the crossword puzzle and personals are on the opposite side, kissing the future. *Next week.* He shivers, deciding not to look. To close the book and leave. He actually begins to stand, then hesitates and drops back into the chair. Obviously the Turtle wants him to see something specific. He will see it one way or another; there's no choice in the matter. And with that dose of fatalism, Jesse sucks in a breath and holds it, turning the stiff paper in one smooth motion.

The date, February 4, 1978, shouts at him. He focuses on it, then allows his eyes to wander. Nothing important is going to happen in the next couple of days, surely. For a moment, it's as if he has forgotten how to read. The bold black headline might as well be in Cantonese. Then single words impinge themselves on his consciousness. "SCHOOL," he perceives. Then, "PRESIDENT." And then, "SHOOTS."

Jesse closes his eyes and rubs them with both fists. Then he looks again, absorbing the entire message.

PRESIDENT SHOOTS SELF, SCANDAL ROCKS SCHOOL.

He feels hot. Weak. Too much alive. Hands tremble, even when he wraps them together, and he carefully reads Jill's first paragraph. "At between three and four o'clock on Saturday afternoon, Clarence Lloyd, 58, shot and killed himself in his office in Battles Hall. This was in apparent response to allegations of corruption, including the illegal transfer of large sums into bank accounts in the Bahamas—"

And he pauses, remembering to breathe. Between when? Three and four? He lifts his left arm and stares hard at his watch. It isn't quite three o'clock now. Perhaps he has time to act; is that what the Turtle wants? But why? he keeps asking himself. Why in hell why? And suddenly Jesse feels himself falling, tumbling through space, spinning wildly as a chill voice screams *Why?* in his ears.

He blinks; breathes; blinks.

A photograph is beside the article, taken at night with a flash. The sheriff's Blazer is parked in the snowbound driveway behind Battles, next to the freight entrance. A pair of deputies are carrying a bundle, a corpse, neatly sealed inside a smooth gray body bag.

Jesse swallows and reads. "President Lloyd is survived by his wife, Laverne, and three children, including Matthew, class of 72."

What time is it?

He can't remember. He has to look again, watching the second hand make its jerking orbit, a dab of white luminescent paint riding near its tip. It's a diving watch given to him by his parents on his fifteenth birthday; he suddenly remembers the wrapping paper—green with delicate white stripes—and the sentimental card more suited for a ten-year-old boy. For a few moments, Jesse feels the watch's gears and flywheel working, relentlessly and gracelessly banging off the seconds. And then someone whispers, "Three minutes to three," and he jerks his head around, expecting to see the Turtle .

But no one is there; his own voice was urging him to action.

This time he manages to stand, shutting the book and slipping it under his coat, his skin and sweatshirt both thoroughly soaked with icy perspiration.

He passes someone on the stairs who says, "Hi, Jess."

No face registers. He moves faster, wondering if the swinging gate will lock on him, if the sensors will identify him as a thief. Is he going to have to wrestle that librarian to escape?

But the gate is compliant. No alarms; no delays.

He bursts into the open, sprinting. The boys are now having a loud little snowball fight, and they fling a few his way. A dry white projectile hits him on the back, shattering. And he keeps accelerating, moving faster than he has ever run, then faster than any living human being who has ever lived.

The outer office door is shut, not locked.

Jesse opens it with care, pausing and listening. The inner door is not quite closed, and after a moment he hears motion—a soft shuffling of papers, a slight wet gasp—and he sets the book and his coat down on Miss Reinhart's desk, trying to rehearse a little speech about not taking the coward's route.

"Who's there?!"

Jesse pushes the inner door open, then says nothing. He can't produce a syllable, much less a coherent argument. But he feels a bizarre sense of responsibility for what hasn't happened, and he resolves to look assured, stepping into the office, squinting at the little bastard.

Lloyd seems genuinely startled. "What are you doing, Aylesworth?"

It's a sharp, bitter voice.

"Get out of here," he says, "and shut that fucking door."

An easy man to despise, but Jesse belongs here. The Turtle wants him here. Closing the door behind him, he asks, "How did your meeting go?"

Lloyd's head practically glows with perspiration, the skin ruddy and taut. One wet cough, a fist covering his mouth, then he looks at whatever came out of his throat with mild interest.

"What did the trustees say?" Jesse inquires.

The hand drops behind the desk, wiped clean on his pants leg. The questions seem to have been lost crossing the room. Eyes gaze at Jesse, their old fire lost. Lloyd looks wrung out. Sleepless. He waits for a long while, then coughs again. Then he says, "No." Just that. "No."

"Listen . . ." Jesse's own voice falters, his throat struggling to wet itself. "I just wanted to tell you . . . I was hoping. . ."

And again Lloyd says, "No." With authority. With certainty. "No, I want you here. It does make sense, of a kind."

Jesse can feel threads of blood coursing through his fingers.

"Tell me something, Aylesworth. Will you?"

"What. . . ?"

"Why are you such a moral person?" Jesse can't respond, a powerful weight suddenly set on his chest.

"I mean you and your whole fucking generation. When exactly did you make yourselves saints?" He laughs, the sound mocking. Desperate. Teeth

shine in a mad smile, and he says, "That's what you think of yourselves. I can see it. It's in your words, your songs. God, it's even in the way you strut around this campus. This world is some ugly mess that you're going to personally untangle and prettify. Isn't that right?"

Jesse has never been called a saint. He certainly never thought that the word would be used as an insult. He halfway laughs, shaking his head in astonishment.

"You think you're the best things ever born!"

"No. . . ."

"What? You're telling me that you're not saints?"

"I'm not," Jesse confesses. And again he laughs, the whole idea ludicrous. Absurd. "You don't know anything about me—"

"And what do you know about me, Aylesworth?"

Jesse isn't sure how to respond.

With a grave, solid voice, Lloyd asks, "What's my reputation, boy? When you hear my name, what's the first word you think?"

"Prick," says Jesse.

A big laugh, bilious and cold. "Good. Perfect." Lloyd shakes his head for a moment, then says, "Let me warn you of something. All that matters in this world is your reputation. Your image. It defines what people see and think . . . and I'm a prick, am I? A tough, contemptible boob, no doubt. Bloodless. Devoid of imagination. A little shit in a suit and tie, working his ass off for this buttfuck of a school . . . and as much as you despised me, I bet you never once thought of me as being a thief. Am I right?"

"I didn't," Jesse confesses.

"And nobody else did either." Lloyd wipes his brow, then says, "That's why I could take what I wanted, when I wanted it. From the first day I strolled into my office, frankly."

Jesse says nothing.

"What's incredible, if you ask me, is that I'm even in trouble. For taking money, of all things. Something the world is full of." Again he wipes his brow, then the top of his head. "Try being a college president for a week. You'll see what I mean. Money is everywhere. This planet's sick with the stuff. And there's no telling who's got it. Saints and shits are both rich, and stupid people get born to it or stumble into it. . . and all of them will come to you, practically begging your school to take it. Usually when they're an-

cient, of course. Dried up. Death lurking in their shadows." He suddenly laughs, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. "Some last grand gesture to enhance their reputations . . . that's what they want. A million fucking dollars, if you'll just please name the new athletic center after them. The one you really don't need, but shit, how can you say no to anything that seems free?"

Jesse has nothing to offer. Not a word, not a sound. Not even so much as a neutral shrug of his shoulders.

Lloyd opens one of the desk drawers, then with one hand lifts something heavy. A substantial black revolver appears. Probably a .357, Jesse realizes. He had expected something smaller, more elegant. . . something suitable for a college president. . . and he remembers when he was a kid and an older cousin let him fire a .357. The gun's kick had almost lifted him off the ground, and an empty beer can was torn into two jagged crowns. An impressive, fearsome weapon . . . !

Lloyd now uses both hands, also respecting its kick. "I suppose I could kill you." The voice is so light, so matter-of-fact, that the words don't quite register. "They'd chalk it up to revenge, I'm sure."

Jesse feels a chill but no real fear.

"But cutting you down in your prime, making you a martyr . . . no, that's too easy. I think I'll just leave you alone."

A sudden inexplicable urge to sleep comes over Jesse.

"You asked about my meeting with the trustees." The little man changes his expression, his face becoming simple, his eyes blank. "It went well, all things considered. I can resign and pay back the stolen funds, and to save the college further embarrassment, I am expected to plea bargain and put up no credible defense."

"Okay," Jesse whispers.

"Fuck them."

The gun drops a little bit, becoming heavier.

"Know why I got caught, Aylesworth? Not enough moderation in my greed." The old leather of his chair squeaks as Lloyd leans forward. "It's funny. All that good Christian advice about moderation and composure applies to thieves, too." A pause. "You know, sometimes I think God isn't talking to good people, since they're no challenge. His audience is pickpockets

and second-story men. 'Take a fair share,' says the Lord. And I should have listened!"

Jesse watches the gun, wondering why he's come here. What is he supposed to do?

"A favor, son?"

He blinks. What was that—?

"Write a good honest account of this. What I told you, what you see. A nice ugly slice of reality for your readers, please."

"Don't do this," Jesse whispers.

The revolver moves, the end of its barrel kissing the thin graying hair above Lloyd's right ear. Then with a certain flourish, he pulls the hammer back, a solid *click* from the machined parts and both hands coming to rest on the grip. A finger curls around the trigger. No pause. Curls and begins to squeeze—

"Don't!"

—and the explosion pushes Jesse backward. It's a tremendous sound, and lingering. The man's head shatters into blood and brains, mixing with pulverized bone, a homogenized mass splattering across the dark wood paneling.

Jesse has his hands on his head, fingers tugging at his hair.

And he screams.

And he can't hear himself against the gun's tireless roar, even as his throat tears because he screams so hard.

The dead man's head has been halfway removed. Yet Lloyd remains nearly upright in the big leather chair. What do I do? Jesse keeps asking himself. Finally, in desperation, he reaches for the telephone on the desk. Maybe it's working, he thinks. He punches 0 and lifts the receiver, but then something moves, startling him. Jesse leaps backward as the corpse slumps forward in a lazy smooth motion. It must be unbalanced, or maybe the chair is moving under it. Then he realizes, in horror, that it isn't just falling. It jerks, too. The ruined head twists to one side. One of the hands actually is lifting into the air, closing into a weak little fist before opening again, its palm shiny and pink as a baby's.

Jesse steps backward, too numbed to feel amazement. The man's eyes blink and clear themselves, pivoting in their sockets, regaining life. A hand

gropes for the desk's edge, grabs and shoves. The eyes focus on the floor. The mouth opens, closes. Opens again. Then the man bends forward, twisting with an eerie delicacy, the free hand plainly reaching down for something near the feet.

Again, the revolver.

Lloyd must think that he's botched the job, that he's inflicted an inadequate wound. Jesse watches the impossibilities grow. The little man grabs the trigger and aims once again, this time setting the barrel over his heart. The explosion is less impressive, more expected. The impact tears through ribs and muscle and perhaps the spine, then punches a hole in the fancy chair. In response, the body leaps back, then rebounds, its head slamming against the desktop, exposing its own ragged hole. Meat and fluid create an elaborate blossom. Brutal, captivating. And Jesse forces himself to circle the desk, taking a closer, more studious look. He never hears the office door opening, and he doesn't notice the janitor until the poor man groans:

"Good golly."

This time the body recovers faster. Maybe the voice inspires Lloyd to heal. He rises, sitting upright in one slow motion. Jesse can see how the holes are filling themselves. What looks like tapioca is growing in them, plugging gaps, beginning to resemble flesh even as the janitor—a thin old man who himself looks dead—moans in a pained way, as if he's the one who has been shot.

Again the gun is found. Lloyd is nothing if not persistent. But this time the bullets only lend momentum to the body, flinging him backward four times, punching smaller and smaller holes into the rebuilding meat. Then the gun says *ckck-cleck-ckck*. Lloyd's head is nearly healed, the healthy eyes thoroughly astonished. He says, "Shit," as a clear viscous fluid fills his mouth, then drips onto his torn, ruffled suit. Jesse reaches for the gun, gripping warm metal, pulling it free and turning to find the janitor gone. There's a leftover sense of motion in the room, like in a cartoon. Both doors are open, and shoes can be heard in the hallway, the old man flying in a blind panic. "Give me . . . gun, me . . .!"

If anything, Lloyd looks rested. Death was a sweet little nap. Jesse recalls the Turtle's promised transformations. Maybe it's his imagination, or maybe it's the healing process, but doesn't the skin have a glow to it? As if a forty-watt bulb is burning inside him?

Lloyd reaches into the open drawer, finding a heavy box of bullets. And with his old bark, he says, "Give me my gun. Now."

The man can't harm himself. Jesse knows it, and he shrugs and says, "Sure," as he hands over the revolver. He feels empty now. Past bewilderment. Exhausted by everything and glad of it.

"Now. Get out!"

The voice is clear, and loud, and somehow changed.

"Why aren't you dead yet?" Jesse asks him.

A grimace, then Lloyd snorts, "Old bullets. Bad powder." A misaligned eye finds him, then once again he shouts, "Get out!"

Jesse retreats, remembering his coat and the straw yellow volume in the front office. There he pauses, watching the little man concentrate, shoving fat cartridges into the chambers. "Good shooting," Jesse whispers, and he walks away, not quite hurrying. No one else is visible. Each blast of the gun is more distant, echoing through the enormous building. Six determined blasts, then a pause. Then Lloyd is firing once again, but Jesse is outside, in the open air, the sun clipping toward the horizon but the air warming against his sweating face.

"Do you believe me?"

He asks the question several times, both during his story about the Turtle and then the one about Lloyd, and Jill dips her head each time he asks, pursing her lips and squinting at the coffee that she has poured for herself, but still hasn't drunk.

It's evening. Through the kitchen window, they watch both of the town's police cruisers pull up behind Battles Hall. Unlike the photograph in the paper, the sheriffs Blazer is missing. As is the body bag. Two local officers help the frail janitor walk to the nearest cruiser, one of them climbing into the back with him. There is no trace of President Lloyd. Jill suggests that they investigate, but nothing much comes of it. Together they step outside, watching the cruiser churn its way through the deep snow. No one notices them. Every sound is muted. Dreamy. The janitor is visible for a moment, his expression confused and weary. But what Jill notices—what makes no sense at all—is that nobody else comes out to watch. This is a small town, everybody's business being news, yet it's just the two of them. From what she can see, not a single curtain lifts with curiosity.

They return to the kitchen. Jesse's tired of talking, of trying to explain the unfathomable. . . and again, with a genuine desperation, he asks, "So do you believe me?"

She swirls her cold coffee, saying nothing.

"It's bizarre, I know." He admits it, knowing that he has one more proof waiting. "Crazy, and I must sound crazy to you."

"I'm not hungry, and I don't pee." Jill stares at the tabletop. "Does that mean your turtle friend is transforming me?"

"Maybe."

"Why me?"

"I don't know."

"Not even a guess?"

"Not really," he lies.

Jill sets her cup down.

"Most people seem pretty normal." He tries to reassure, but the words have an ominous tone. "It's just a few of us. Maybe we're the chosen ones, although he didn't explain why us—"

"And your turtle warned you? About Lloyd?"

"Before it happened, yeah."

"How?"

The *Chronicle* is propped against a table leg, out of the way. But before he shows his trump card, he asks, "Do you happen to know Sully Faulkner?"

Eyes lift. "Why wouldn't I?"

Jesse breathes and says, "Anyway, I don't think she's eating . . . which makes three of us. . . ."

"Vertebrates," Jill whispers.

"That's what the Turtle told me." He bends and lifts the book with both hands. It weighs more than it should. The *thud* is too loud, both of them jumping back in surprise.

"Take a look," he exclaims. And with a flourish, he opens it to the front page of next week's issue.

Jill fights with the cellophane on a fresh pack of cigarettes. A stony face reads the entire story—she has more discipline than Jesse showed—then she turns to page two.

Again he asks, "Do you believe me?"

"Where'd you get this thing?"

He tells the story.

Jill halfway laughs, setting her cigarettes aside. An idle hand scratches between her breasts, through her sweatshirt, up and down on her sternum. Then she lifts her eyes, bright with moisture, asking, "What else? Have you read the rest?"

"No."

Jill has small hands for a big girl, both of them on the book as if to keep its pages steady.

On the floor, next to the refrigerator, is a steel dish filled with cat food. Canned food. Desiccated to the point that it looks like a crumbling dirt clod.

"How's your cat, Jill?"

"Fine."

"When did she last eat?"

She hesitates, her concentration wobbling.

An idea comes to Jesse, and he stands. "Where is she?"

"Leave her alone."

"I wonder if Lloyd was eating." Intuition carries him along. "What if he wasn't? And your cat isn't? You know, we could try a little experiment, Lloyd-style . . .!"

"I believe you, Jess."

But this isn't about what Jill believes. This is for Jesse's own sake, and where is her cat? He walks into the hallway, asking, "Is she hiding in the bedroom?"

"Leave her alone. I believe you."

He imagines the cat fighting him, clawing him. And a new option presents itself. Coming back into the kitchen, he opens a drawer and finds a newish paring knife. Clean enough? He washes the blade, delaying his experiment. Jill is reading, oblivious of him. Jesse sits and tries to muster the courage. He doesn't know what's harder, watching those upside-down pages turning or holding the sharp little blade against his hand. Finally Jill tires, sighing and lifting her eyes, a solemn voice saying: "Oh, Jess."

He moves the knife, cutting his own palm. He makes one slice, then a deeper parallel one. The rich red blood spreads, a pond forming in the bowl of his hand. His pain is weak, but he can't decide why. Anxiety, or is it the transformation? Jill jumps up and grabs a towel, running cold water over it

as she curses him. "You're an idiot. What are you doing? You want sympathy, is that it?" Yet by the time she returns, ready to mop and make bandages, the wounds have nearly closed themselves. The blood is being reabsorbed, and the skin turns an unnatural shade of white.

"How's it feel?"

"Tingles," he allows. "But not much."

"Can I touch it?"

He holds out his hand, looking at an upside-down front page. An April issue. The news must be scant that week; there's some kind of filler story about exchange students. Without controversies, his paper looks naked.

"Does that hurt?"

"Not anymore." Offering Jill the knife, he says, "Have a whack."

"Maybe later."

She sits and prepares to read again. Lifting the corner of a page, she admits, "It even feels genuine."

"The Turtle does good work."

"Do you know how much Lloyd stole?" A pause. "A little short of a million dollars, they think."

"Will think," he corrects her.

"Yeah."

He watches her turning the pages, then looks at his palm, remembering the odd glow that seemed to come from within the remade Lloyd. Is it the same for him? Jesse moves to a cupboard, kneeling and shoving his arm inside, then shuts the door as tight as possible. Squinting, he can make out a very faint, almost bluish light that vanishes when he makes a fist.

Jill says, "Fuck."

He stays calm, waiting.

"Jess?"

He pulls his hand back out and opens it. "Come see," she says, her voice too calm. "Come right now."

It's a long walk to the table, Jesse fishhooking around Jill and not quite looking over her shoulder. Her no-nonsense voice says, "I always look at the date first. Always. And my first thought here was that we screwed up and missed an issue, because of this date—"

He is looking at the back of her head, at the uncombed mouse-colored hair.

"—and then I read the headline, which explains everything."

FOUR STUDENTS KILLED IN HIGHWAY CRASH, EDITOR INCLUDED. Jesse reads it twice, and his first thought is that the type is too small, and the page looks crowded, a fuzzy photograph showing someone's car wrapped around a tree trunk. Who took the picture? Ames, probably. His stuff never is in focus. And only then does Jesse feel anything like surprise, followed by a muted sort of horror. He is very distant, very much in control. Reading the lead paragraph, he learns that both of them are listed as dead. Sully Faulkner, the driver, died en route to the hospital. Ruth Hurtney lingered for a full week, in a coma, before passing away. "Passing away." Alan Quill wrote the article, choosing that inadequate phrase for this sorry business of dying. Neither of them would have used that "passing away" crap, and Jesse sure would have made the headline bigger, too.

"None of the passengers were wearing seat belts," Jill reads aloud. "They were returning from Hanover sometime after midnight. Sully Faulkner's automobile lost control, striking the tree in excess of seventy miles an hour."

Jesse has to laugh. This situation is too strange, and this article is almost meaningless. None of these events will happen now. The Turtle has come to transform them, giving them the gift of genuine life—whatever that means—and now it's obvious why that reptile selected them.

"I know what happens to my cat," says Jill. Sitting back, she shakes her head, saying, "My mother doesn't like cats. She'd rather put it to sleep than find it a new home."

He imagines the frustrated veterinarian pumping toxins into an angry, unkillable cat, and laughs again, feeling almost giddy.

Jill is turning through the pages, examining the issue in detail. It's mostly ads. There are big salutations to the graduating seniors from the Bi-jou and Hank's Cafe and even the printers in Hanover. There's one brief editorial, unsigned but reeking of Quill; it speaks in vague strokes about tragedies and consequences and strength through suffering. No staff is mentioned. No crossword puzzle occupies unpaying space. It's a profitable rag; he keeps laughing, telling Jill, "Next time I see Quill, I'm kicking him in the ass."

She turns back to the front page, whispering, "Poor Sully."

It is Sully's big car wrapped around the tree. But she won't die, he thinks. Isn't that the point of all this?

"Poor Ruth," Jill adds. This is the last issue of the *Chronicle*; she shuts the volume with finality. "What do you think we were doing? Some end-of-the-year fun?"

"He should have run our pictures. Don't you think?"

Jill watches him for a moment, reading him. "So," she says, "is Sully the new girlfriend?"

He is aware of her gaze, the aroma of cigarettes riding on her breath. "Sort of," he admits. "Of late."

"I've always liked Sully."

"Have you?"

"Why? Haven't you?"

He swallows, unsure what to say.

"I just thought she didn't care. You know?" Jill runs her hand through her hair. "About men, I mean. She claimed she was waiting for the right guy. And if he didn't show, he didn't show."

"Did she ever mention me?" Jesse asks.

A shrug of the shoulders. "Not that I remember, honestly."

"How well do you know her?"

But she doesn't seem to hear him. A quiet sigh, a little laugh. Then she says, "Your Mr. Turtle has come here to save us, hasn't he?"

"I guess so."

"And anyone else who is about to die . . . right?"

"Maybe."

"Which makes me wonder." An old and reliable suspicion shows in her expression. "Why? What's in it for him?"

"I don't know," Jesse confesses.

"Well," she says, "ask him, then."

"How?"

"God, Jess. If the son-of-a-bitch can travel from the ends of time, I think he should be able to hear a pointed question or two."

"What do you mean?"

"This." She tilts her head back, then shouts, "What's in it for you, Mr. Turtle? Huh?"

Jesse is about to warn her that she looks silly. His mouth is open and the words framed. But then the kitchen phone is ringing. Roaring. There aren't the normal breaks; it's just one long *RRREEEEEEEE!* And Jill stands and leaps, her grace and speed surprising both of them. Her big body seems to float for an instant. Then she settles and laughs, smiling over at Jesse while she lifts the receiver.

"Hello? Are you the Turtle?"

A sense of propriety comes over Jesse. That's not how to talk to him!

Jill says, "Yes."

"Yes what?" asks Jesse.

She lifts a hand, glaring at him.

"Is it *him*?"

She says, "Now?" Her face is empty and simple, save for a wry little smile in the corner of her mouth. Then, "What about Jesse?"

"What. . .?" he mutters.

Without a good-bye, Jill hangs up the phone.

He watches her for a moment, then snaps, "What?"

"You're invited, too."

"To what?"

"He wants to talk to us, to explain things." She seems remarkably controlled. Thoughtful, careful. Remembering her cigarettes, she picks up her pack, stuffing it in her coat pocket and then putting on the coat. Every motion is precise. Her nervousness is betrayed only by a delicate unsteadiness in her small hands.

"Where are we going?"

"Don't know." She peeks through the door's old lace curtains. "Our guide is supposed to be waiting for us."

Jesse puts on his coat, hat, and gloves. Then Jill opens both doors and steps out on the landing. Nobody is there. "Are you sure?" he asks. And as he follows, there is motion. Something yellow streaks between his feet, then shoots down to where the stairs zigzag, pausing there. It is Jill's cat, but those aren't cat eyes gazing calmly up at them.

"Hello?" Jill manages.

The eyes are too large, too bright. Too aware. The oddness is magnified by the animal's obvious lack of fear. When they take a step, it does nothing.

When they almost reach it, the cat simply picks itself up and trots down to the snow-packed earth.

It is a still, quiet night. Even for Warner.

Their guide moves in an uncatlike fashion. A steady pace, almost military in its bearing. Tiny birds flit here and there, but they offer nothing of interest. "This is strange," is Jill's verdict. "But it's not strange. You know? Not like it should be."

"Like a dream," he offers.

And she says, "No. Not exactly."

They move along the north edge of campus. There's no traffic. The homes on their right are lit up, drapes drawn. There's no television, Jesse reminds himself: so what are people doing? Battles is huge and dark. Is Lloyd still inside, haunting its cold corners? Odd as it seems, he really wishes that he could speak to the man, just to be sure that he's alive in some fashion or another.

Leaving campus, they slip between two professors' houses. Beyond is open ground that in good weather serves as a haphazard park, grassy and lush but prone to quick floods. The cat halts in the open, sitting on her haunches. Jill comes close and asks, "Where now, Gorgeous?"

Their guide looks down at the river until they comprehend. It never makes a sound, not even a simple purr. "Thank you," Jill tells it, and she kneels long enough to stroke its indifferent head a few times. "Whatever happens, Gorgeous . . . good luck. . . !"

Jesse feels warm. He removes his hat and gloves, turning in a slow circle. The only lights come from distant homes and streetlamps. Nothing is visible that hints at great events. The universe seems calm and contented.

Jill starts for the river, her sweatpants white below the knees.

But Jesse hesitates, glancing at the cat's eyes . . . sensing something . . . a thread strung between them, a new type of communication trying to find its voice. . . .

"Are you coming or not?" Jill calls out.

The old cat tells him to hurry, tells him with a thought.

And Jesse halfway runs, catching Jill at the edge of the trees.

The Turtle stands in waist-deep water in the middle of the little river. Springs and the steady current keep the pool ice free, the water black, al-

most oily. The familiar voice has its own watery quality, saying, "Jill Margaret Toon." He wears the Indian body, and he appears to be nude. "Born February 29, 1956, to Harriet and Donald Toon, seven pounds and three ounces."

"How do you know?" she sputters.

"I'm smart," he says, tapping his forehead.

"And immortal, too, I hear."

The Turtle laughs, shaking his head. "Not at all, my dear. Honestly speaking, no. No, no, no."

Jill glances back at Jesse. He's easing his way down the icy bank. "He claims that you're billions of years old."

"Older," says the liquid voice, with pride.

"To me, that's immortality." She takes a deep and thoroughly impressed breath, then tells Jesse, "*This is fun.*"

The Turtle turns his head, squinting at something in the water. Then with a sense of theater, he dives sideways and vanishes, a flash of a bare muscular ass followed by the black shine of the water. Jesse can't see far in any direction. Both banks are steep, the river curling beneath tall trees. Yet he has the impression that eyes are watching them from the opposite slope, some kind of audience gathering . . . and now the Turtle bursts back into view. Splashes. Leaps. And lands on the shoreline beside them. He is nude, and tall, and in one strong outstretched arm is a long fat catfish. "Touch it," the Turtle recommends.

Jill obeys. Jesse follows her lead. The fish feels oddly warm. Whiskers drip and the dull dark eyes appear lost, gills pumping, fins lashing at the alien air.

"It needs to learn," says the Turtle .

"Learn what?" Jill asks.

The handsome face grins. "And so do you, friends. You're falling behind the rest of them."

"The rest of who?" she presses.

But he doesn't respond. Instead he says, "Now, both of you . . . hold your breath." With a flick of the wrist, he throws the catfish against the bank. A black diver's watch appears on the same wrist—identical to Jesse's birthday gift—and he says, "Now. Don't breathe. I'm going to time both of you."

Together, they inhale—

"Unnecessary," the entity chides them.

—and Jesse waits, anticipating the familiar burning sensation as carbon dioxide builds up in his blood and tissues. Only it doesn't happen, even after several minutes. He is uncomfortable because it's unnatural not to breathe, and that's why he finally exhales, Jill following his lead.

"Four minutes, and an assortment of seconds," the Turtle reports. "Not good. In your present state, you don't need oxygen at all."

"Why not?" Jesse asks, doubtful.

"Because," laughs the Turtle, "I have freed both of you from the tyrannical demands of a glucose metabolism."

"What's that?" Jill asks.

"A primitive system of energy exchange. Many organic machines use similar tricks."

"Machines?"

"Us," Jesse informs her.

"I'm not belittling," the Turtle promises. "It's just that your old system was crude and sloppy, and weak. This universe of yours is fat with energy, free and sweet."

Jesse glances at the catfish, its gills pumping so hard that they almost blur.

"Matter is energy," says the Turtle. "Even humans realize that. But there are things you can't see that have even more energy for the taking. Dark flavors of matter. Rich rains of neutrinos. And best of all, the vibrant energies in the quantum foam within each of us." He laughs and dances, then cries out, "Darlings! This universe is built of milk, and it's practically begging to be drunk."

"But we've stopped eating," says Jill.

"On the contrary, you're eating as you never have before. Right now, you are suckling on a billion tiny nipples . . .!"

Jesse feels a sudden warmth under his skin. "You've made us immortal," Jill mutters.

"You won't die for another trillion years." The Turtle winks, grins. "I can promise you that much, yes."

"Immortal," she whispers.

"Because we would have died soon," Jesse offers. "That's why you selected us, isn't it?"

"It's our tradition, yes."

"But why?" Jill needs to know.

Jesse doesn't care why. He tugs on her arm, chanting, "Gift horses, Jill. Gift horses!"

"No, you deserve an answer." The Turtle drops to a squatting position, his meaty, uncircumcised penis almost kissing the ice. "If you give me your undivided attention, please—"

"Shouldn't we get the others?" Jill asks. "Sully, I mean. And Ruth Hurtney."

The Turtle says, "No," with a firm clear voice.

"But don't they need to hear this—?"

"Not them, no." A palpable anger comes with the voice. "I won't talk to either of them. Not now."

Between the words is a rage, vivid and unexpected. Jill grasps Jesse's hand, squeezing with a wrestler's strength. And Jesse asks himself:

What about Sully? What's wrong?

But suddenly the Turtle smiles again. Happy again. And he winks and says to them with that, big Robert Preston voice, "Now, my friends. Please listen!"

"Life is a continuum, and you two are so far down the continuum that I see you as simple organic machines. Crude and short-lived. But if I gave you ten billion years, then you'd evolve into cousins of mine. My equals." A pause, and his eyes glow red for a moment. "That's what happened in the universe's first incarnation. Simple organic machines arose on the earth, and elsewhere, too. They populated space, found pathways to intelligence and immortality, then ruled the universe until it was empty and cold. All the nipples went dry, in effect. And reality itself unraveled, then perished."

Behind them, the catfish quietly slaps at the bank.

"Time travel is a symptom of this grand death. In the end, ancient rules fail along predictable lines. An entity like myself, given courage and the resources, can make his leap to an earlier age." A grim little smile emerges. "He cheats death, if only temporarily."

Illuminating the riverbed is a bluish glow that comes from nowhere. The dark water slides gracefully past them. Snow and ice creak when anyone

moves. And again, for an instant, Jesse can feel others watching from that far bank.

"But cheating death is never cheap," the Turtle warns. "That dying universe is starved for energy. Only a tiny portion of its citizens may attempt the leap, and those left behind are sure to die even sooner as a consequence." The grim smile has become a grimmer frown. "One last bellyfull of milk brought me here, and everything that I left behind has evaporated into nothingness . . . as if it never was. . . ."

A bittersweet sadness washes over them.

Then Jill says, "But that was the first incarnation of the universe. Right?" She glances at Jesse, squeezing his hand again. "How many others have there been? And why are *you* the one who has come *here*?"

"Fair, fair questions," says the Turtle.

"So answer them," she snaps.

Red eyes focus on Jesse. "This morning, I described time travel as a leap across a great chasm. But ask yourself this: What makes the chasm this wide or that wide? In other words, why am I obliged to leap such a precise distance?"

Jesse shrugs, unwilling to guess.

Suddenly the Turtle turns and jumps, effortlessly crossing twenty feet of icy water. Then he draws an imaginary line on the far shoreline, and he announces, "This is the future. You are in the remote past. The first incarnation of the universe is drawing to its close, and I'm going to try my best to escape its death."

Again, he jumps.

Where the ground meets the river, he lands with a distinct thud. His momentum causes the cold earth to deform. Ten clear toe prints are visible after he steps away.

"The river," he says, "is almost a trillion years wide. And like water, it's almost transparent. Time travelers pass through it. Only where it turns to mud does the journey end."

Jill beats Jesse to the obvious question. "Why is it transparent?"

"Look here." The Turtle kneels, and like a professor on a field trip, he explains himself with a practiced voice. "Here, right here, is the moment when life first learned to milk the universe for its vast energies." A large smile shines up at them. "Those same technologies are what make the long

leaps possible. They change the quantum structure of the universe. By removing energy on a vast scale, they open up fissures through which the brave soul can slip. . . ."

Each toe print is partway filled with water.

The Turtle returns to the far shore, then says, "This is the second incarnation of the universe coming to its end."

Again, he lands on the shoreline, each print made a little deeper.

"The third incarnation!"

And a moment later:

"The fourth!"

And a fifth, and sixth. And a twentieth. And a fiftieth. The pace accelerates, but the energy of impact seems unchanged. The Turtle is a blur, cartoonish but somehow compelling, and his voice is loud and rapid, shouting out numbers without pause or any time to breathe.

Finally, with a flourish, he says, "One hundred," and stops playing his game. The original toe prints are erased. He stands in a little pool, the river almost a foot wider.

Quietly, Jesse says, "I understand, I think."

"Very good." The Turtle steps toward him, muddy water flowing into the fresh hole. "Of course this is just an illustration. Complex matters have been rendered into a palatable form, I hope."

"I don't understand," Jill confesses. "Explain it to me, nice and easy."

"Each jump is longer," Jesse says. "Momentum, or something like it, carries the turtles farther back into time."

"How much farther?" she wants to know.

"In human terms," says their mentor, "approximately fifteen months. In other words, *I* was transformed into my glorious state in the spring of 1979. I lived for a trillion years, as you will live. Then I packed my essential belongings and made the long leap home again. My transformation is the previous riverbank, and the fifteen months are the dents made by my toes. All so that I could stand here with you, my friends, and help accomplish another little portion of this vital, vital work."

"Why is it vital?" Jill asks. Then she glances at Jesse, adding, "I suppose you already know that, too!"

But he doesn't, and he admits it. Turning to the Turtle, he says, "All right, we live for a trillion years. And then what?"

"You perish, and the universe perishes with you." Suddenly, Jesse shivers.

"And citizens like myself leap back once again. Back to late 1976, as it happens." The Turtle's red eyes wink, one after the other. "And they transform organic machines like yourselves. Who live to the end of time, then send a few heroes back to 1975—"

"But why?" Jill growls. "You keep going farther and farther back . . . but to *when* . . . ?"

Jesse knows. All at once, he anticipates the Turtle's answer.

But the catfish behind him speaks first. A strange yet robust voice says nothing intelligible, but Jesse turns and Jill follows his lead, both of them startled by the transformation. The gills have stopped pumping. Something about its color is different, a strong blue glow seeping from the ordinary pale skin. And its eyes are different—there is a watchfulness to them, a palpable sense of purpose.

This isn't a mere fish anymore.

Jill gasps and says, "I know what you're doing."

Jesse turns forward again. High on the far bank, a human shape moves, vanishing behind an ancient cottonwood.

Jill pokes Jesse in the side. "The turtles are trying to give each of us a shot at immortality," she speculates. "They jump back in time, find the people and other vertebrates about to die . . . and do the fancy transformation business. . . ."

"In a sense, you're correct," the Turtle replies. His Indian face grows plastic, a hint of beak protruding for a moment. Then he stares at Jesse, asking, "What is the logical endpoint? If we keep jumping farther back into time, *when* do we reach?"

With a whisper, Jesse says, "The beginning."

"Indeed!" The Turtle seems pleased, grinning with a human mouth, telling both of them, "For what you are, you're doing remarkably well!"

"**W**ish I had a cigarette," says Jill, nervously shifting her weight from side to side. "And a cold beer, too."

The catfish emits a thin hiss. It sounds as if it's agreeing with her, or at least trying to be polite.

Then their teacher says, "The universe," and waits for their undiluted attention. "The universe began as a quantum event, a minuscule bit of something arising from nothing, then growing explosively in a multitude of ways. The Big Bang, you call it—an accurate, inelegant name. Simply told, every motion and position, every natural law and basic principle, arose from all that heat and noise."

Jesse gives a little nod and waits.

"For an instant, at the start, the universe held infinite possibilities. Out of them came gravity and electromagnetism, protons and turtles." An amused pause, a tiny wink. "You and I stand inside a limited universe. By definition, there's no escape. It is our house, our shell, and we have to make the best of it."

Jesse comprehends more than the words. His mind fills with intricate equations and fierce images of the Creation.

"You're right, my dear." A nod in Jill's direction. "We turtles are marching back in time, just as other trusted agents do the same on other worlds." With a human finger, he draws parallel lines on the riverbank, marking his progress. "Eventually we'll reach the Triassic, then the first turtles, and then perhaps their ancestors will continue our glorious work."

Preposterous images crowd against one another. Dinosaurs are transformed—dimwitted giants lent brains and vast powers; sauropods and tyrannosaurs suckling on the universe's milk.

Then Jill says, "You'll run out of vertebrates, eventually."

"And we'll use their ancestors, of course." The eyes grow larger, redder. "We'll follow the phylogenetic tree back to the protozoans, then the bacteria. Hard work, I'll grant you. Building a compelling mind out of inchoate slime takes patience. . . ."

Jill interjects, "But there won't always be life on the earth."

"There isn't any life now," the Turtle reminds them. And he giggles, drawing more lines in the snow. "Yet I see your point. My ancestors will have to be especially clever, yes. Perhaps they can target the organic compounds that form inside interstellar clouds. Aim for likely molecules, then use them and the dust as raw materials."

The time traveler needs a highly specific target, Jesse recalls. And it has to be within a limited space, like a box turtle in an aquarium. "In the very

young universe," he remarks, "you won't have organics, or even molecules. How can you find your perch on the chasm wall?"

"Ah, but the young universe is denser. Hotter. Souls like mine will aim for likely breaths of hot plasma." His finger clips Jesse's shoe, one more line being drawn. "The dangers shouldn't be much higher than today, I believe."

Jesse steps back, out of the way.

Then Jill says, "Enough," with genuine frustration. "Just tell me the point in all of this. Why go back to the beginning?"

"The point?" A grin emerges. "I should think it's obvious, friend. At some point, agents like me will transform clouds of radiant energy into life-forms, and they will thrive for a trillion and fifteen billion years . . . and then a chosen few will fling themselves back through the transparent ages, past their birthdate, and into that very first instant of the Creation. Remember? Back when the universe was malleable, when no laws were set. . . ? They can then monkey with the machinery. Out of that uncivilized quantum wasteland, they can fashion the perfect universe."

Jill says, "Perfect," with a cold disbelief.

The Turtle doesn't seem to notice, nodding as he says, "An immortal, thus endless universe."

Nobody speaks, save the catfish which says, "Squish."

Then the Turtle adds, "I brought blueprints. You'll see. It's going to be a tireless, ageless universe. Infinite in terms of time." He circles Jesse's heel print, marking the Big Bang.

Then with an enormous sense of satisfaction, he asks, "Can you think of any goal as worthy or glorious? Can you name a more perfect quest?"

Jesse feels sucker punched, numbed by everything.

"In this new universe," he hears, "the two of you will be born endless times, follow every possible existence, and will even enjoy the occasional transformation into a higher state. The Creation will never stop. The cosmos won't die or even degrade, not even after a trillion trillion trillion years." A hand lifts, becoming a paw. "Infinity means exactly that. Infinite. Unbounded. Everlasting."

Suddenly Jesse thinks of Sully.

But it's Jill who asks, "Why not tell this to Ruth and Sully? Why don't we include them?"

The Turtle says nothing, but his gaze is fierce. "Something is wrong with them," Jill guesses. "Is that it?"

The voice deepens, slows. "Only turtles and other chosen souls can leap back in time," he informs them. Then with a careful fury, he adds, "There is the possibility—just the possibility—that someone else has come with me. In our midst, a criminal. A cheater. An entity of the very worst kind."

Sully, or Ruth. Closing his eyes, Jesse makes a wish. "But don't worry," the Turtle continues. "Criminals are my concern. Never yours."

"Who is it?" Jill demands.

Jesse opens his eyes. Again the Turtle is changing, pulling himself into a turtle's rounded shape. The human penis shrivels and vanishes as the suddenly toothless mouth says, "I have work now. I have details to mother." A weak laugh. "My last days of life, and I'm too busy to enjoy them."

Startled, Jill says, "Your last days—?"

"This is part of my solemn pledge, my friend. I have come here to transform and to educate, and to die. . . ."

Where is Sully now? Jesse asks himself.

"I have no right to a trillion years twice, even if I am a turtle." The plastron seems polished. The body stands tall on ludicrous pillarlike legs. "We will talk again. Soon . . .!"

"Soon," Jill echoes. "I hope so!"

"Alk! A-in!" says the freshly beaked mouth. Then the Turtle falls backward into the river, its black waters barely stirred by an almost silent impact.

"He's got a lot of ham, doesn't he?" asks Jill.

A figure appears on the river, its dim ruddy glow reflected up at Jesse. He sees a human shape. Distinctive and very familiar.

Quietly, Jill says, "I hope I make a good god."

Too slowly, Jesse looks up. Clarence Lloyd was there, but he vanishes too. Little gobs of cold light mark smaller entities. Mice and lizards, frogs and songbirds. Like the two of them, the creatures are being transformed. Like them, they must have been doomed to die in the next fifteen months . . . and then he corrects himself, thinking how nothing here has ever been genuinely alive. . . .

"Come on," says Jill. "Let's get back to my place."

He nods, turns.

The big catfish is trying to grow arms and legs, and it's doing a poor job of it. Feeble limbs flop against the melting snows, accomplishing nothing. But the vivid eyes have pulled themselves forward on the fishy face, gazing up at them, something rather like envy making them glow like clean hot coals.

R"Remember our first time?"

She asks, and he does, in an instant. Jill smiles at him, sitting on the far side of her living room. Jesse has put on Pink Floyd, thinking that it's as close to appropriate as they'll find here. The dreamy, surreal noises flow out of the tiny speakers. A long scratch marries badly with the strong rubbery beating of a heart.

Again, she asks, "Do you remember our first time?"

"Sure."

"Come here," she tells him.

He walks closer, feeling odd and unable to find words to describe the oddness. Part of him is remote, watching events from somewhere above. Yet he isn't detached, running on autopilot. He feels the strong sure touch, Jill's hand familiar against the inside of his thigh. She strokes him, smiling as if she is ready to laugh. "Immortality," she says softly. Then, wetting her lips, she wonders aloud, "What do immortals do for fun?"

"Anything they want," he ventures.

She says, "Sit." Her old sofa is mushy and drab and very long, Jesse sitting beside her but not close. "It's all a dream," she claims. "I'm going to wake up and forget everything before my morning coffee."

"Why did you ask about our first time?"

Eyes close. She smells different, not so much like smoke, or anything else he can name. Her touch is too warm. Heat bleeds through the denim, into his muscle, and she says, "My room."

Her roommate was gone for the weekend.

"You invited yourself upstairs . . . remember?"

A succession of details occur to him, rich and immediate. There was talk of tea. But first she had to give him the tour, and they were standing in front of a poster, looking at a gorilla nibbling on some tropical grass, and they brushed elbows, then kissed and hugged until neither act felt strange. Then Jill locked the door and met him back at her bed; he remembers her

voice and face, how she struck him as almost pretty and absolutely fearless. She undid his pants without ceremony, then reached into his underwear—an old white pair with a ragged waistband—and said in a loud, bawdy fashion, "My, my. Look who wants to play."

Again the current Jill touches him, and she asks, "What was it that you promised me?"

"When?" he sputters.

"That first time . . . what did you tell me?"

He bulldozes his way through images and sensations.

"Hey, Jess?" She prods him with a warm finger. "Remember?"

And he thinks he does, smiling and saying, "I promised to give as good as I got."

"You did, and you did. But that's not what I mean."

Shutting his eyes, he remembers slipping down between her legs, doing the salty work. That was something the boys in her drab little hometown wouldn't do for her, and she'd appreciated the gesture. Afterwards, resting comfortably, Jill had asked him, "Can we do this again?"

" 'Can we do this again?' " she repeats, whispering into his ear. "And you told me—"

" 'Always,' " he says. " 'Forever.' "

She moves closer, the warm hand working under his sweatshirt, her teeth nibbling at his ear, then his jaw. " 'Always. Forever.' " The words seem to fall from some great distance, slowly, acquiring not velocity but a potent chill that bleeds into him, leaving him brittle and tired and painfully saddened. As she touches his crotch, Jesse finds himself easing away.

"What? What?"

Placing a hand on hers, Jesse mutters, "Not now. Sorry."

She watches him. He expects anger or disappointment— some workable emotion—but all he finds is a vague amusement mixed with curiosity. When Jill says, "You promised. Always and forever," she means to tease him. The entire seduction is a tease, perhaps. Because she's laughing now, asking him, "Would you have said the words if you'd guessed that I could hold you to them?"

Never. No.

"Hey, Jess," she purrs. "Relax."

Where is Sully? He finds himself reaching out with a new, unnamed sense, attempting to place her on campus. Peering through a plaster wall, he sees the girl sitting between the Hurtneys, in the Hurtneys' room—

"Why can't you be happy, Jess?"

—and he thinks of "cheaters," the Turtle's scorn and the blunt implication that Sully is involved. How could a cheater operate? How could they hope to hide?

"This has been one fucking fine day," is Jill's verdict.

Suddenly breathing is work, a primitive burden set on his chest. But of course he doesn't need to breathe; it's a habit, like thumb sucking. With Jill watching him, he sucks in enough air to speak, telling her, "I can't stay. I've got to find someone."

"No. Don't." Anger flares, at last. "Stay here tonight. We'll celebrate our good fortune."

What he needs is to find Sully.

"Just one little night. . . ."

Find her, then warn her that a godlike entity suspects that she is some kind of criminal.

"Tell me 'yes.' " Again the hand caresses his thigh, and with her mouth on his ear, Jill promises, "Anything. Any wild thing you want, Jess."

He stands.

"Not interested? *You?*"

Not tonight, no. He shakes his head and looks back at Jill, saying, "I think I'm in love."

"No, you're not. Not you."

He avoids the cutting gaze.

And she reads his mind regardless. "So go find her," she tells him. "Do what you think is best."

I can trust you, Sully had told him. *When the time comes.*

Then Jill says, "I like the girl. I do. But I think that our Mr. Turtle has her figured out." A pause, then a harsh laugh. "Just like she figured you out, darling."

What does that mean?

"Go," Jill insists. "Go find her. Have your fun now. Because I doubt she's got much more fun in her."

Crossing campus, half-running in the heavy snow, Jesse uses his new, nearly perfect memory. In the last four years, he and Sully shared cafeteria food more than a thousand times. And better still, he can recall which meals were eaten at the same long table, exactly what dishes were selected, and what, if anything, was said between them.

Sully has to be genuine; he has no doubts.

Again he tries to find Sully, only this time his fledging sense misbehaves, giving him little help. Entering De Mortimer, he climbs first to her room, hoping to catch her alone. Nobody answers his pounding. Pushing open the bathroom, he calls out her name. "Not here," replies another girl. "Go away."

He moves two stories down. What time is it? After midnight, but not late. He knocks on the Hurtneys' door, making their slick pink memo pad jump. Slippers swish on the floor. A lock turns, the door opens. Ruth wears a long T-shirt and dog-headed slippers, and she squints while saying, "What's your problem?" The room behind her is dimly lit and overheated; a tall BeeGees poster is hung above her sister's bed. Tina is sleeping, her face soft. Composed. Suddenly Jesse can see differences between them—details always present; details visible to an improving mind—identical genes skewed by their placement in the womb, by injuries, by the chaotic grind of life. For an instant, with a new eye, he actually sees their genetic coding, as if he can lay their DNA on the floor, side by side.

"What do you want?" Ruth growls.

"Where's Sully?"

She gives the room a long look, mocking him. "Not here, sorry."

"Was she?"

"A while back, yeah." Tina stirs, and Ruth glances at her, her face worried. Then a big sigh, and she says, "We know about you two. We know everything."

Girls talk.

"We told her about you. What she can expect, and not." Ruth throws him a warning glance. "The girl doesn't seem to care."

"Where is she?"

"In her room, I thought."

Panic begins. Jesse imagines that something has happened, that he won't see Sully again. He stands in the open door for an age, panic dissolv-

ing into a general suspicion; finally, in a firm voice, he asks, "How do you feel, Ruth?"

The girl doesn't answer. She tries, then discovers she hasn't the words.

"Tina looks tired," he mentions.

"She's fine. Just tired." Ruth hugs herself, trying to smile but settling into a grimace. "A lot of people are. It must be the weather."

"Are you tired?"

She isn't sure how to respond. Am I?

"But you feel strange." A pause, then he says, "Your head's full of bizarre thoughts. Right?"

Ruth backtracks. "We like Sully. Treat her nice."

"How long have you known her?"

Eyes narrow, but she doesn't respond.

And he decides that it must be Ruth. Ruth is the cheat. He perceives it with such clarity, such absolute certainty . . . *you are the one* . . . that he wants to warn the Turtle, somehow. . . .

The cheat says, "Night, Jess."

What should he do?

"Get," Ruth advises, shutting the door and locking it. Then she talks through the heavy wood, warning him, "She really thinks she loves you, you shit."

Jesse retreats, down another flight and out the rear fire door. Maybe Sully left a message on his own door, he reasons. The outside air is warm and damp, water running vigorously in drain pipes and beneath the snow. Yates Hall appears empty, every room light off and no one in the lounge or stairwell. There's not even a quiet evening's mishmash of stereo noise, some kind of powerful curfew now in effect.

Jesse wonders what happens to ordinary people.

To those not transformed.

And answers offer themselves, in generalities and technicalities. A swirling white fog fills his head, then flows into new and larger places that he cannot yet name.

A premonition dispels the fog. Mounting the last stairs, he suddenly feels unalone. The heavy fire door seems made of balsa. Entering his tower, his eyes track over the ugly little lounge. The rooms themselves are hidden behind showers and bathrooms. Echoes are bright and loud, and abundant.

The fire door slams shut and bounces, then closes itself more gently. Jesse pauses, one hand against the concrete wall; he needs a moment to gather himself. Breathing entirely out of habit, he steps and stops, then moves again. Turning the corner into his little hallway, he sees his room door and Sully in front of it, smiling, sitting on the floor with her legs crossed and her face forward, eyes half-closed and the smiling mouth saying, "I knew it was you. I don't know how."

He feels relief mixed with terror and the blind urge to flee.

"Help me up?"

Taking the offered hand, he lifts her, the girl standing in a smooth effortless motion. "Hi, there." She kisses him. Jesse barely returns the gesture, yet she acts undaunted. Giggling, pressing against him, she places both of her hands on his ass and says, "I've been hunting for you. Tired?"

Not at all.

"So, want to show me your room?"

He finds his keys, then the right key, opening the door and turning on the dim blue overhead light. It feels as if he's been gone for weeks. The air is too warm, dry, and profoundly stale. Laundry begs to be done. Dust rules in every corner and shadow. Yet the girl seems desperately happy, saying, "The famous room," as she grabs him from behind, arms encircling him, her fine warm hands crossed on his belly.

Why worry? Ruth is the criminal; he has the rest of eternity with Sully, and tonight is just the beginning.

They kiss again, with mutual feeling. Then they undress each other in a rush. "The famous floor," she says, laughing lightly, without malice. Her body is warm and dry, firm and colored blue by the light. Kneeling, she says, "The famous cock," and holds him by it, one hand stroking, something radiantly wicked about her expression.

"We should do something different," she announces. "Something new. Something you've never, ever done."

Jesse stands motionless, eyes straight ahead. Standing in her field, holding that knife in her strong right hand, the peasant girl listens to the singing of unseen birds, her face enraptured.

"Ruth told me . . . you once asked her to . . . you know . . . Greek . . .?" The living girl beneath him tugs and licks, then says, "She told me. She wouldn't let you. But then, I'm not Ruth."

He looks at Sully, at the softly blued face. And he breathes, then hears himself saying, "Fine."

"Fine." She rolls backward, then sideways, sprawling out on her belly. Arching her back, she smiles up at him, then asks, "Maybe if you've got some . . . I don't know . . . Vasoline . . .?"

Everything is inevitable, and every motion unfolds without haste. Standing in the middle of his tiny room, Jesse looks at the mirror on the medicine cabinet, searching for visible signs of his transformation. There is a smoothness to his skin, a genuine glow meaning health and energy. Although he has done nothing conscious to enhance his appearance, he notices that his hair is full and lustrous and his teeth are bright and too straight.

"Stop admiring yourself," she teases.

He looks down at Sully. She waits on the carpeted floor, her back lovely, ribs and muscles and that beautiful spine— her key to immortality; her precious notochord—ending with her fine full ass, strong and pale and perfect.

"Are you losing your will, love?"

"Never," he whispers. Then he opens the medicine cabinet. The jar of Vasoline is old, something leftover from childhood. Its metal lid wears a dignified coat of rust and chipped paint, and the white petroleum jelly has oxidized on top, turning yellow. Jesse digs deep and applies fresher stuff. Sully watches the procedure with curiosity and a fearless, intoxicating longing. He kneels behind her, working on himself. And she calmly adjusts her ass, looking forward and saying:

"Ready?"

Yes.

"How do you want me?"

Right there, like that.

Then she says, "Gently," and takes a breath.

He has done this before. Just once. Jill let him one night after she drank too many beers. She had laid out on her own floor in that same position, uttering that same cautionary word. Not once, but twice.

"Gently," Sully repeats.

Which means nothing. It is a coincidence, nothing more. This girl has seduced him for simple, old-fashioned reasons. And just to prove that to himself, he asks, "Last night. . . what did you mean . . .?"

"Mean?"

"You said you could trust me."

Sully keeps her face forward, unseen. "I can, can't I?"

"When the time came, you said. Soon." He waits for an instant, then asks, "What time? What are you expecting?"

"I don't know. I really don't." She turns to look back at him, her expression nothing but trusting. "I just felt odd, I guess. Crazy. And I still do, only I'm getting accustomed to it." And she smiles brightly, using both hands to pull apart her cheeks, telling him with more than a little urgency, "Now. Do it now. . .?"

Jesse obeys, pressing the greased head against the clean little pucker, realizing that both ass and prick are as out-of-date as breath itself; and with as much delicacy as he can manage, he pushes into her; and with all of his will, he fights the sudden, inexplicable urge to weep.

Jesse sleeps, only it's not sleep anymore. Hunger is gone, and the need for rest has mutated into something richer than simple sleep and dreams. Then he wakes, abruptly and thoroughly. Sully lays quietly beside him. The old blanket has worked its way off him, but he isn't even a little chilled. Even with the register off and the window open, he feels perfectly comfortable. So why did he wake up? Sitting up, he feels a presence. They have company. There is a gap at the bottom of his door, light seeping in from the hallway. There should be an unbroken glare coming off the slick linoleum, but instead he sees two shadows that imply two legs. Someone is standing outside his room. The stranger doesn't move, nor does he make any noise. But when Jesse tries to look past the wood, fumbling with one of his new senses, the stranger turns abruptly and retreats, shoes thumping on the hard floor, Jesse following them by old-fashioned sound.

He stands and dresses, putting on sweatpants and the same sweatshirt that he wore all day. Sully twists and sighs, wrapped up tight in the blanket. Jesse unlocks the door and slips into the hallway, then shuts it with a soft click. The Turtle is waiting; he knows it. On bare feet, he walks around to the little lounge, trying to think of new questions, promising himself that he'll learn everything possible as fast as possible. If he ever has to help the girl, he needs to know a lot more about this crazy shit.

But the Turtle isn't waiting. Standing before him is a radiant figure, smallish and human-shaped, a simple face where a face belongs but possessing a cartoon character's exaggerated style.

The creature wears a suit and tie and fancy leather shoes.

Jesse swallows.

Smiling, the creature seems genuinely amused. Particularly when Jesse says, "Lloyd?"

"How do I look?" It's Lloyd's voice, perfectly rendered. "Since this afternoon's adventure, I mean. Do I look recovered?"

Jesse steps closer, saying, "Different."

"Our mutual friend intended to be here, but he couldn't make it." The apparition is composed of flesh and shaped light; the mouth bleeds sunshine and sound. "The poor critter's overworked, if you ask me. I'm here as his intermediary. Ask questions. I'll do my best to explain."

"You were spying on us—"

"Easily, yes. And let me tell you, I'm appalled. What the youth of America finds entertaining . . . well, it's a puzzler." A brief pause, then he adds, "I'm bored, Aylesworth. Ask a useful question."

"You look so different—"

"I'm farther along in the transformation, that's all."

"Why so fast?" Jesse fights the urge to touch him. "Because you shot yourself?"

"In part." Lloyd nods, saying, "Damaged tissues heal along improved lines, which is part of it. Plus the Turtle goosed up my timetable, knowing I was about to suicide."

In a firm voice, Jesse tells him, "I would have let you."

"Kill myself? And why, pray tell?"

"You're a crook." He swallows, grunts. "Why should you be transformed?"

"Murderers are, too. And sociopaths. And every other truly disgusting shit." The man grins, happily admitting, "All that matters is dying in the next fifteen months. I'm afraid these turtles aren't Saint Peters strapping angel wings just on decent Christian backs."

Jesse tries to respond.

"Think," Lloyd interrupts. "What harm could the very worst killer do now? Yes, he's immortal. And powerful. But his neighbors are just like him."

Indestructible. Supremely intelligent. The killer's transformed self inherits a killer's nature, yes. But consider this: The fires and passions of misspent youth might serve an immortal being well. Name one child who doesn't torture at least one unfortunate animal. Or for that matter, name a soul who never imagines murdering his boss or spouse. Yet don't we make fine citizens, for the most part? Aren't we integral cogs in our communities, worshiped in turn by our own cruel offspring?"

Jesse breathes out of habit, saying nothing. "Ask about genuine criminals, Aylesworth. That's what interests you, so go on."

"The cheaters," says Jesse.

"Ask."

"Are there people who sneak back in time? Who try to live for another trillion years?"

"Not just people. All kinds of creatures try to cheat the system." The cartoon face snarls with conviction. "Ancient rules are being subverted, my boy. It's obviously and painfully unfair to allow anything to live again. One time, or a thousand times. You surely must see that."

"Not really," he confesses.

"To come here, they have to steal energies meant for the turtles." Lloyd shrugs his shoulders. "But even if there was plenty of energy at the end of time, it would be unforgivable. Surely you see why! The poor past would become engulfed with cheaters. There wouldn't be room here for the younger, more deserving entities. Like me, to name one."

"But what if someone is absolutely essential? Extra worthy?"

"Nobody is. The turtles pride themselves on being the best of the best, but they *never* live past the transformation." Lloyd gives a shrill laugh, eyes brightening. "You think stealing money is bad, Aylesworth? Well, money is a child's crime. Stealing a trillion years of existence is the ultimate thievery. No doubt about it."

"Worthy," Jesse says again, in a whisper.

"What do you know about being worthy?"

He moves his bare feet, then asks, "Who cheats?"

"Sneaky, clever fucks."

"How? How do they?"

"There are several tricks, but one is easiest." Lloyd nods and says, "Suppose I want to try it. What I'd do is select a place and a false identity. I

would make it appear as if this false self had died before the last transformation. Much of what the turtles are doing here is making records. They store memories and plot out physical locations, then leave the mess to their replacements. But records can always be doctored. Always."

"Stored memories?"

"That's what becomes of the people and catfish who aren't going to be transformed. What, did you think they got to remain as they were? No, not possible. First of all, the earth itself is about to change. Protoplasm won't stand a chance here. And secondly, they've already had their chance to live to the end of time. Just like the people who died last week will eventually have their chance to do the same. See how fair fair can be?"

"Tell me about that fake identity."

"Gladly." Another laugh. "What you and I know now is going to be with us always. But what if some selfish prick has doctored with our minds? We have some pretty low-tech brains, frankly. Water and fat and a lot of slow electric impulses . . . and can you be absolutely positive that what you remember is true?"

Jesse shakes his head, muttering, "Not always—"

"Think," Lloyd growls. "I'm a cheater. I come back in time and take the identity of a bird. My first act is to cook the local books, adjusting the universe to believe in me. There's a certain female meadowlark. I convince her that she's my mother. She remembers laying an extra egg and raising this strapping young lad. Me. But it's been a hard winter, and when the Turtle arrives, I'm thin and sickly. Doomed to die before spring, I am."

"But the Turtle . . . wouldn't he realize that you don't belong here? If he's such a good record keeper—"

"No, no, no." An emphatic sigh. "First of all, I did my best to cook the books before I came here. Turtles aren't perfect. They won't know just what records are tainted, and even if the records don't match, can they arrive at the proper conclusions? Which set of records will they believe?"

"And secondly?"

"Turtles are busy, busy animals. You can't imagine it. In just their first hour here, they've got to start milking the universe for power, plus protect however many millions of vertebrates that should have died in the same hour. And they need to start making fresh records, of course. And nudge the rest of us into the transformation process. And so on, and on." He shakes

his head, hands tugging on his suit's lapels. "Damn, they are the hardest working little soldiers! You don't know!"

"And what about you?"

"If I was a cheat, you mean? All I have to do is brew up a false lark, then tinker with the brains that might recognize me. Other larks. Hawks. All pretty simple work, really."

"You build a lark from scratch?"

"A child's job. Believe me."

Jesse says nothing.

"It takes planning, of course. And a certain vulgar artistry. But the goal is a baffled turtle. Maybe the turtle knows that something is wrong, but the clues are conflicting. The mystery is impenetrable. He does his best, but maybe that's not good enough. I mean, how would you find the cheater, if it was your job?"

"I don't know."

"Turtles have rules. Laws. Codes of conduct." Lloyd shakes his head, sighs. "They have to be certain about a cheater. There has to be a genuine confession or perfect evidence. Which is best for us, I think. Imagine if the turtles came into your neighborhood, and everyone was a suspect . . . and so they offed us on the theory that at least they got their bad guy—"

"It wouldn't be fair," Jesse protests.

"And it would be lousy on morale." A pause, and he stares at the ceiling with brilliant white eyes. "No, I think the turtles are fair. The process is fair. Or at least it's fair enough that the occasional cheater is allowed to escape, at least for an incarnation or two."

"Does it matter what kind of animal he becomes?"

"You're a sharp lad. Obviously one of Warner's finest." Lloyd shakes his head. "Hiding your true self is never easy. I'm not going to bore you with technical details, but brains are good camouflage. The bigger, the better. Which leads to the question: What earthly critter is the most prized in this work?"

"Humans?"

"Wrong. Sperm whales." Hands show the dimensions of a whale's brain. "Nice and big, and full of confusing electrical impulses. But the trouble is that they're rather scarce these days, and tripling their population is going to be pretty obvious—"

"What about people?"

"Good solid choices. Not as abundant as birds, but not scarce. And if a turtle suspects one of us, then he has to pretty much bust his ass to find the criminal inside."

"Someone here is cheating," Jesse whispers. Lloyd is silent, staring at him.

"I think it's Ruth Hurtney," Jesse adds, his voice solid. Certain.

"Pretending to be someone's twin is a fine old ploy. You get this identical sibling who can vouch for you, and who thinks all sorts of intense, sisterly thoughts—"

"Am I right? Is it Ruth?"

"Most likely not," Lloyd replies. "Our turtle is of many minds, but that girl does seem rather obvious, even to me."

"Then who?"

Silence.

And Jesse remembers Sully's sudden appearance and her volunteered help. And the quick seduction, leaving him infatuated—

"Ah, yes!" Lloyd shrugs. Grins. "Nothing wins a young man's fancy quite like a competent blowjob."

Jesse feels sick and weak, his body trembling.

"Yet if it is Sully Faulkner, she didn't manage a masterful job of camouflaging herself. Our turtle has found flaws in her biography. Fuzzy spots that defy and deny the general picture."

"Name one."

"That dorm room of hers. There's at least one photograph that shows it as a closet, not a room. A home for buckets and brooms."

Jesse swallows, then asks, "Where's the photo?"

"In a scrapbook barely two hundred miles from here." A pause. "Oh, yes. Turtles have the most remarkable eyes."

"What else is wrong?"

"That family in Colorado, for instance. They're genuine enough, yet their memories are imperfect. Sully is in their thoughts, but not quite to the proper degree. Not as you'd expect from an only daughter and treasured sister." He shakes his head solemnly, adding, "Isn't it always the truth? Criminals never leave ample time to erase every clue. . . ."

Jesse shuts his eyes, seeing the Faulkners looking up at him from their family portraits. "Her mother called—"

"—while you were in the broom closet. Yes, our turtle told me." A deep slow laugh. "That call was an experiment. If there's an entity inside your girlfriend's skin, then it must have been rattled."

Jesse replays the phone conversation—in full, in an instant—then says, "Sully seemed fine."

"To you. To you."

He opens his eyes. "She's not the one."

"And your opinion is worthless, my boy." A faster laugh, then he adds, "Questions, on the other hand, are quite welcome."

What's the greater shock: that Sully is fictitious, or that mimicking an entire life is so simple? Jesse shudders, hugging himself as he asks, "Why shut down the phones and TVs?"

"That's just interference from the transformation. It's the same for electrical generation, too." He glances at the overhead light, remarking, "What an ugly fixture. Did I allow it to be installed? Well, anyway . . . every power plant went off-line within minutes of the turtles' arrival, but they've been keeping us warm and well-lit. Not to mention happy. That business of the solar flare is their own little ruse. A wave of the forelimb, and suddenly everyone believed the same comforting lie."

"Your secretary managed to call me," Jesse points out. "Did the Turtle arrange *that*?"

"He had to."

"If it's simple to put ideas in a head—"

"—why bother talking to you? Because your mind is growing, and it's getting harder to manipulate. Not to mention the fact that our friend seems to prefer more personal means of education."

"Why coax me into seeing your botched suicide?"

"Are you sure that's what he intended?"

Jesse isn't sure of anything. But if the Turtle is as powerful as he seems, then why doesn't he just look inside Sully and see what's true?

"Because," says Lloyd, reading his thoughts. "Because power is relative. Because his opponent is very nearly his equal. So much so that poor Mr. Turtle is obliged to recruit a local boy to serve in his little militia." The

glowing figure grins and bows with a flourish. "And if I don't miss my guess, he wouldn't mind you among his ranks, too."

Jesse almost speaks, then hesitates.

A sound . . . ?

There is a presence, yes.

Lloyd says, "Your girlfriend is on the move. She's wondering where you went. Can you taste her concern?"

Briefly. Maybe.

"Here she comes," says Lloyd, winking at him.

A door opens with a soft click.

Jesse calls to her, saying, "Wait. Wait there!"

"Darling?" She steps into view, his old blanket wrapped loosely around her. "What are you doing—?"

Lloyd says, "Hello, Miss Faulkner."

She sees the glowing figure and gasps, letting the blanket fall stiffly around her feet.

With a quiet, certain voice, Jesse says: "They know."

Panic pours from the girl, bitter and thick.

Again, softly, Jesse says, "Wait. . ."

But she turns and runs, her nude body full of motion, strength, and a remarkable grace. Jesse hears his door slam shut, and he gives chase, rounding the corner as the Turtle emerges from the ceiling, his beaked face acquiring a little grin and one fat paw reaching for the doorknob. Thick blue sparks leap at him. His plastron absorbs brutal, withering energies. Momentarily stunned, then visibly angered, the Turtle leans physically against the wood, wrenching it off its hinges with a bright, unwoodlike screech.

Sitting beneath Jesse's bed, perched on the narrow windowsill, is a brilliant figure bathed in lavender light. It isn't Sully, or anyone else. It glances at Jesse with strange, widely spaced eyes, pain and terror bolstered by a fierce determination. And the Turtle decides to act, clucking softly as he steps closer, one paw extended and those clucks meant to soothe . . . but the criminal turns and steps through the open window, and steps once again . . . vanishing. . . .

A momentary silence.

Compressed; chilled.

Then Lloyd mutters, "Shit," and pushes Jesse aside. The Turtle passes effortlessly through the concrete wall, then hovers. "Shit, shit, shit," Lloyd chants, fitting himself through the window. Then they fly, twin booms rattling the glass and furnishings; too late, Jesse looks up at the stars and the blackness between.

Never has he felt so helpless.

He closes his window and steps back, turns and finds his door shut and locked. The only light is the weak incandescent bulb above the bookshelves. The Sully-creature must have escaped, he reasons. For now, she has. He crosses the room in three steps, pausing in front of the Breton and touching it with his fingertips . . . carefully, carefully outlining the girl who stands there listening to the lark . . . a peasant girl, simple as dirt yet wearing that expression of supreme awe . . . and now he pulls the poster from the wall and slowly, in long precise strokes, tears it into a hundred colored shreds.

FOREVER, ALMOST

Again he dwells in what passes for sleep, immersed in what are not dreams. A radiant glob of colored light, he sees himself swimming in an ocean of scorching plasmas—a rich, perfect, god-suited broth—entities like himself on all sides. Everyone sings, voices lovely and perfect; he knows them, knows each unpronounceable name and their long intricate histories. He feels an intimacy that startles. The resemblance to Heaven is passing, and useless. This realm belongs to the living, not some carbon-paper shadow of life. This is the future: a carefully prepared glimpse of what he and everything will become. His joyous, perfect fate. And that's when Jesse wakes, in an instant, finding himself in a cold simple place. Where? He feels as if great parts of himself have been stolen. He's stupid and slow, his cold mammalian heart beating against ribs and the mattress, the bed wobbling gently in response, a single exposed nail in the frame tap-tapping against the concrete wall.

He lifts a leaden head, looking at a tiny slice of the world through liquid eyes. This is no non-dream. This is constricted, chilled reality. He remembers his genuine name and the room, and Sully . . . and Jesse suffers grief and sorrow, unable suddenly to blame her for any supposed crime. So she wanted to live . . . ! Now that he's had a sip of what life will become, he finds a ready compassion for any soul like hers.

The transformation is progressing nicely.

Ready-made instincts are eager to give advice and guidance.

Lifting a hand, Jesse tries to change its size. Larger, then smaller. He can't be sure if he does either, but there's a distinct cool tingle in the simple bones. An electric hint of possibilities.

His heart keeps beating, rocking the bed. A superfluous organ, it seems eager to prove itself just the same. Jesse feels the squeezing chambers and the rush of blood carrying unneeded oxygen. Concentrating, he manages to slow the beating, forty strokes each minute and then thirty. Then fifteen. Then, nothing. Silence in his chest; no desire to breathe. He feels his body calmly dying, enzymes denaturing and tired membranes exploding and the spinning bacteria beginning to feast on this windfall. Too soon, his instincts warn him. Too much. And he brings his heart back again, cleansing himself with a single conscious wish, then rolls onto his side and looks out the window with old-fashioned eyes.

It is still night, every campus and town light, small or not, left a little out of focus. He sees the lights as radiant fuzz and as entities—as friends—each with an unpronounceable name and immeasurable biography, all drifting against a hard, chilled blackness. And something else rises from his non-dream. He has a glimpse of what happens when the plasmas are consumed, the universe enormous and empty and almost dead.

Cold . . .

A powerful, scorching black cold. . . .

Curling up under his blanket, Jesse shivers, closing his eyes and forcing himself back into nonsleep.

Have you seen her?"

Jesse wakes, sitting up in surprise and bumping his head against the plaster ceiling. It is day. Morning. The Turtle stands beside his bed, one hand shaking the frame while the deep musical voice asks:

"Has she come to visit you yet?"

"No. I haven't seen her—"

"No matter," the entity announces. "I've alerted the other turtles. We are watching for her. She's certainly not the most clever criminal running free today."

The Turtle wears the Indian body and a determined expression. His T-shirt is tight-fitting, ribs straining against the smooth muscled skin. The long black hair is sprinkled with gray strands, thick and vivid.

"What if she finds me?" Jesse asks.

"Warn me. At once."

"How?"

"Imagine me," he says, "and think, 'I have her.' "

"And she'll read my mind."

"Maybe not. You're becoming less penetrable." The Turtle gives a little wink. Their faces have never been this close before. "I'll do everything possible to reach you and capture her. Don't worry. Cheaters are our first priority now."

"Who is she?" Asking the question, Jesse realizes how difficult it is to answer. "Was she, I mean. Do you have any ideas?"

"She is any of the vertebrates transformed in the last incarnation." A pause, then he adds, "Identities aren't important. Her presence is."

There must be billions of suspects, Jesse decides.

"More," the Turtle promises. "Just count the fishes in the sea."

"And you think she'll come to me?"

"Almost certainly."

"Soon?"

"Today."

Jesse turns and looks out the window, sunshine making long soft shadows. It's a little after eight o'clock. He glances at his watch, takes a breath out of stubbornness, then hears the Turtle telling him:

"She will ask for your help."

"Why me?" he wonders aloud.

"Because she knows you thoroughly, and she trusts you because she knows you." A pause. "She'll ask for your help when she most needs it."

"But what can I give her?"

"Quite a lot, eventually. Your powers are growing. And she's benefiting from the changes happening around us. When pressed, she'll attempt an alliance. Together, you might be able to fend off every Turtle, our energies and time running out—"

"Stay longer." *Live longer*, he might have said.

"I cannot. No."

"But if you wait, then catch her later—?"

"I'm pledged to die, and I will." Pride, then nervousness show on his angular face. "Besides, she'll soon be able to flee this world. Once she has grown strong enough, she'll race to some distant place. Nobody could catch her. The entire universe will lie at her disposal, and nobody will be as talented as her—"

"But what does she hurt?" Jesse counters. "One person, one entity . . . can she matter?"

The Turtle shows a tense smile, nodding now. A dark brown hand reaches for Jesse, touching his face, fingers dry and oven-warm. "She matters. As a failure, she proves the difficulty of success. As a success, she proves that in one fundamental way the universe is unfair."

In secret, Jesse wonders how many cheaters escape.

The Turtle doesn't seem to hear him. "Fairness," he repeats. "What is life without some measure of fairness?"

Jesse nods.

The hand is withdrawn. "I must thank you. You've already been a substantial help to me."

"Have I?"

"You had doubts about her identity. Intuition spoke, and when you told her that we knew, she panicked. She fled. Giving a full confession, in essence." He grins and makes a fist. "A confession helps. Now I'm free to do whatever is necessary, and in perfect confidence."

Jesse says, "You're welcome."

"Remember. When she comes, you must call me." The brown hand covers his red-rimmed eyes. "Otherwise I might not notice. She has ways of blinding me now and again."

Jesse nods and starts to say, "All right." The Indian body folds up and evaporates, without sound, the air left stinking of ozone and old socks.

The morning is warm, but the heat doesn't come from the sun. Old and new snows melt from below, and in places the ground lies exposed, flattened brown grass and mud surrounding pools where little bubbles of gas form and burst, then form again. A pair of girls stand beside one pool, watching the bubbles, saying nothing. Jesse joins them, asking, "Do you know what's happening?"

Vague expressions; syrupy reactions.

"Do you know where you are?"

Giggles. And one of them says, "Sure."

"What day is this?"

More giggles. They're thinking that Jesse is strange, or that they must be stoned.

"Look at that mud," he persists. "Was it here yesterday? And where does the heat come from?"

One girl turns solemn. Lips purse, and she says, "From geysers. Like in Yellowstone, right?"

No. What's happening is that latent energies are being orchestrated. The planet's interior is being rebuilt. Jesse can see the process with a new eye. But more amazing is how these girls are being prepared for an eternal storage. Useful behaviors and protective buffers keep them from hurting themselves. They are passive, awaiting the moment when they are dismantled, the position and energy of each atom duly recorded.

"You know," he tells them, "in a million years, if I want, I could wake you and talk to you. We could do anything you want. And you won't be even one day older."

More giggles, then the first girl says, "I think not."

Her friend says, "Oh, we know about you."

Right. Girls talk.

Habit makes Jesse want to flirt, if only for the false normalcy, but he hears their simple thoughts, and it would be like flirting with fence lizards. He and they have next to nothing in common. An unexpected sadness wells up. They aren't the same species as Jesse, and he can't even feel sorry for them . . . they've already had their chance to live forever. . . .

"We've been warned about you," both girls claim.

Jesse feels a cutting loss. Without warning, human sex has lost its charms. He leaves them, not listening to their prattle—in words or thoughts. The muddy pools bubble faster, and the warm air smells like fresh agar. And suddenly, he has to wonder how Sully felt when they made love. Because she couldn't have enjoyed herself . . . not with cold, simple me. . . .

Jill listens to part of his story, up to where Sully emerges from his room and sees Lloyd. Then she nods and says, "I know already."

But Jesse continues, describing Sully's escape and how he had ripped up the poster, and how exhausted he had felt after all that insanity. He wants to tell it, to hear the events in some semblance of order, if only to make them fit into his still inadequate mind.

"I know already," Jill repeats with force.

He blinks. "How?"

"He told me."

"The Turtle did?"

"No, Lloyd." She enjoys watching the surprise, then says, "He came by this morning. About three or so."

"Lloyd was here?"

"Knocking on my door, believe it or not." Her face is changed. A delicate prettiness clings to her eyes and mouth. "Except for that glow, he looked like his old self." She leans against her sofa's armrest. "You notice? This god business hangs well on him."

"I guess I hadn't."

"Oh, and here's something funny. We were talking in the kitchen, and he gave me a twinkling look. Very coy. Then said, 'It was Miss Reinhart, wasn't it? She roasted my nuts, didn't she?' " Jill smiles with that new face. "So I asked, 'What'll you do? Torture her?' "

He shudders. "And?"

"Lloyd laughed. A good long belly laugh." She pauses. "What does he care now? Things worked out for the best."

Jesse waits for a moment, then admits, "I don't trust him."

"The Turtle must," she replies. "What exactly did he tell you?"

"About the chase. How they followed Sully into the air, then down again. Underground. Did you know that the Turtles spun a transparent roof over the earth? For security purposes, and temporary." She looks through him, clicking her tongue before adding, "Sully slipped away from them. I don't know what's happened since."

Jesse describes the Turtle's visit this morning.

Jill listens, shakes her head. "It's too bad about Sully. I liked her."

"But there's no such thing as Sully," he replies. "She could be someone's goldfish, for all we know."

"And I still like her." A big shrug, then Jill says, "When we were freshmen? She made Christmas cookies for everyone on our floor. And when my mom got sick—remember her phlebitis?—Sully told me that she was praying for her. Which was nice, I thought. In my pagan sort of way."

"And none of that ever happened," he counters.

Another shrug. "Still, I can't help but be fond of the girl."

They sit without speaking, Jill throwing a leg up on the worn-out sofa, concentrating as she touches him with her curling toes.

"What are you doing?"

"Quiet," she warns.

"Why?"

She kneads her thigh through her gray sweatpants, then says, "Better." The other leg joins its mate. "After Lloyd left, I started to play games."

"What games?"

"With me. With my dear old husk." She flips her hair, and Jesse notices how it has become a bright rich brown. It resembles Sully's hair, gathering light and glittering. "What's wrong, Jesse? Haven't you fiddled with yourself yet?"

"I made my heart stop," he confesses.

She stares at him, then snorts. "Darling, that's strange."

She shakes her head, remarking, "You've got all kinds of possibilities, and you kill yourself? You are one sad case, I think."

He doesn't respond.

She touches both of her legs, saying, "Here, have a grope."

Nothing to feel but hard muscle. "Why did you do that?"

"I don't know. A childish whim?" She smiles. "The sad, sad truth? I've never been happy with my body." He takes back his hand. "Try something for yourself," she suggests.

"Like what?"

"Improve something." She leers at him. "Hey, here's your chance. Concentrate. Make it *huge*."

"I'm not in the mood," Jesse protests.

"Except you can be," she counters. "Moods, my love, are just another flavor of meat."

Disgust bleeds into a flickering passion.

"Look here. See what else I've managed . . . ?" With a single motion, Jill removes her sweatshirt, breasts swaying for a long moment. They are large, as always, but unmarred by veins, the nipples huge and an earthy reddish brown. And the belly is taut, smooth and narrow, twenty pounds moved or removed. "So?" she says. "What do you think?"

"Good. Nice."

"You like my critters?"

He says, "Always," and feels his stomach twist. Then she moves closer, telling him, "Now you concentrate. Remake something for me."

Jesse reaches for the buttons on his jeans.

"No, no," she warns. "Do it blind." She challenges him with a smile and the tilt of her pretty face. "Make it a surprise, darling. For both of us."

The strangeness comes from the utter lack of strangeness, a potent sense of them doing what is normal. They've been blastulas all their lives, but now they waken and find themselves to be embryos complete with new limbs and powers. These tricks are like the first tentative kicks inside your mother's womb: graceless, weak, harbingers of what will be.

"Something's happening," he decides.

"Use your mind," she coaches. "Picture what you want."

He remembers Hanna in the blue movie, sucking hard on a cock that needed a quart of blood to achieve an erection. Flesh moves in response. Conjured blood pools. And Jill absently scratches one of her centerfold breasts, saying:

"My, my. This is going to be fun."

Jesse strokes one of her hard calves.

"Here," she says. "Come here."

He leans toward her, his weight on his arms and her hands pulling his face to her chest; with a soft *whoosh*, twin streams of milk splatter against his face. Warm. Sickly sweet. With force.

Jesse jerks back. "Hey—!"

And Jill laughs, mopping up the milk with her sweatshirt. "It's a joke, love. Did I *git ya*?"

Anger falls into embarrassment.

"It's funny," she demands. "What's wrong with you?"

He wipes his face dry with his sleeves. His mouth was open, and he can't get the taste out of it. "Not funny."

"Is."

"No," he promises.

"Don't be the shit." She pulls off her sweatpants, then tiny lemon-colored panties. Her forest of pubic hair has diminished to an artful line, pink showing between the strong new legs. "Now don't pout. Just get over here, will you?"

Jesse takes a breath, then starts to slide along her nude body.

"Gotcha!"

One stream of hot milk hits an eye, the other arcs and splatters along his back. He tells her, "Fuck you," and stands.

And she says, "Someday, perhaps." Sprawled out on the sofa, she is the grinning image of carefree. "I can read you, Jess. I'm staring right through you."

"Yeah, what do you see?"

"Fear." She shakes her head, suddenly serious. "And you're lonely. And too self-absorbed for your own damn good, I think. But hasn't it always been that way?"

He turns and walks.

"Come on back here, Jess."

He refuses.

"Stay here," she insists. "We'll wait for Sully together."

And he hesitates, for an instant. Then he picks up his coat and steps outside, pausing on top of the stairs long enough to wipe the milk out of his eye. The flavor is rich, sweeter than frosting on a wedding cake, and utterly useless to any man who can nurse from the universe's fat, innumerable teats.

He wanders east, thinking that he might stop at De Mortimer or Yates, but he passes both of the dormitories, and only then does he realize his destination. How can he be lonely? He's on the brink of forever, and the universe is about to be filled with gods like those in his nondreams. And what can possibly scare him? Sully? But she's a quandary, not a threat. If she wants his help, then he will or won't give it. Of course, if Sully is a genuine criminal, giving her aid might taint him, too. And what if those gobs of light learn about his crime and blame him, making him an outcast? Jesse shudders, contemplating a trillion-year banishment, his fellow gods unable to forget or forgive him for what he has done.

An immeasurable enigma, Sully is.

On the edge of campus is the baseball diamond. Jesse stops and threads his useless coat into the chain-link fence, then removes one of his rabbit fur gloves, realizing that in one or two more incarnations of the universe, the rabbit will itself be transformed. Provided that it is alive when the turtles arrive, that is. Rabbits and mice and huge numbers of fish must be born and then die in that fifteen-month window. As well as a lot of human in-

fants, too. Here and gone. Lost to the ages. But of course when the turtles—or whatever—finally reach the Creation, the universe will be made infinite. And every possible rabbit and child will be born. Not once and not a billion times, but infinitely, leading to an infinite series of gloves and gods.

Reaching the east edge of town, he turns up a side street, then through a tired and squeaky gate, climbing onto the wide front porch of a certain house. He has come here many times for parties and bullshit sessions. *Pinrose* is painted on the mailbox in bright red letters. Jesse pauses for a long moment, then rings the bell, hearing the solid metallic tones and then nothing. But he senses a presence. One more ring, then he'll force the door. Except this time someone notices him, the weathered old house creaking as that someone begins to move. Jesse could use a friendly face. Smiling, he turns and watches the field and woods across the street, watching the snow melt and the vapors rise from the pools of mud and a big flock of not-quite-birds flying in the distance. Real birds would flap their wings. And they wouldn't skate along at impossible speeds, nor throw those little loops and sudden climbs into their show.

The door opens behind him.

"Yes?"

It's the wrong voice. Jesse turns and snarls, "Why are you here?"

Martha West gazes at him for a moment, then pins a name to his face. "You?" she says. "Again?"

That sexy bastard, he thinks. Martha is wearing an old bathrobe tied snug at the waist, something grandfatherly about it. She has a decidedly unkempt air about her, sniffing once, then opening and closing her mouth as if testing its taste.

"Is Pinrose here?"

"Pinrose." She seems momentarily confused. "Yeah, in bed. I think."

Jesse slips past, then takes the stairs three at a time. That old goat, he keeps thinking. Not a number-one choice, but Pinrose surely knows where to get industrial-strength antibiotics. He has to laugh, reaching the top stair and calling out, "Hello? Doc? Hello?"

Someone moves on his right in the bedroom at the end of the hall. "Hello?" he says again, walking at a good clip.

"Who's there?" Pinrose mutters.

Jesse slows, entering the room with a measure of decorum. The goat is sitting up in bed, shirtless but wearing pajama bottoms, his exposed body pale and thin and too old.

The sight of it unnerves Jesse. Some new sense is engaged, reaching painlessly beneath the sallow skin, and with a mixture of astonishment and sadness, he mutters: "Cancer."

"Just a touch of it." Pinrose offers a shrug and little grin. "How did you know?"

"I don't remember."

He coughs into a fist. "Goddamn prostate."

Jesse stands motionless, a deep chill moving through him. But he doesn't shiver. He doesn't allow it. Judging by the tumor's progress, Pinrose can live for another year plus. Maybe several years . . .

Pinrose holds up an empty box of Kleenex. The thick voice says, "Prostate," once again. "My doctors wanted to rip it out. Clean me like a brook trout."

Jesse's throat closes tight.

With something other than eyes, he watches cancer cells riding in the bloodstream, dividing as they move, one of their vibrant colonies already thriving inside his clavicle.

"Knife-wielding butchers," says the goat. Then he laughs, adding, "I told them, 'Like hell you will. It grows slowly down there, and I'm not letting you touch me.' "

"You should have let them," Jesse offers.

"Why's that?"

But Jesse isn't sure why. If Pinrose had lived another twenty years, his transformation would have been long forgotten. As it is, he most likely was transformed in the last incarnation of the universe.

"You see my robe anywhere, Jesse? I've got Kleenex in the pocket."

"Martha's wearing it."

Pinrose blinks, eyes watering. "I wondered what happened to that gal!"

"She let me in."

"You are in, aren't you?" He shakes his head, scratching his balls in a casual fashion. A long gray pecker emerges for an instant, bloodless and nearly lifeless; then the goat readjusts his pajama bottoms, saying, "You know,

it's good you stopped by. Something happened. It's crazy, but I wanted to tell you—"

"What?"

"I woke up last night. So did Martha." The man laughs as if nothing could be funnier, then says, "There was this turtle standing *there* . . . where you're standing, pretty much . . . and it was huge and up on its hind legs, this big bright shell giving me an awful headache . . . !"

Jesse says nothing.

"And it wasn't just a turtle. It was a talking Turtle." Another big laugh, then he asks, "You know what it told me?"

"No."

"Thank you for taking good care of me." "

Jesse remembers the *thank yous* written on the professor's memo pad. He swallows and says, "Some dream."

"But there's more." The face grows puzzled as he tries to reclaim the precise wording. " 'I'm sorry,' he told me. 'I am afraid that I will have to kill you.' "

"Not kill," Jesse says. "They don't kill. You'll be perfectly preserved—"

"What? Like fetuses in formaldehyde?"

Jesse hesitates.

"Sounds like being dead to me." Again Pinrose starts to hunt for Kleenex, picking up the same empty box and making small frustrated sounds. "I remember shaking his hand. The paw. Whatever you call it. And you know what? I think it was that old turtle from the lab. I don't know how I know, but I'm almost positive. . . ."

Martha wanders into the room.

"Hey, hon?" Pinrose brightens. "That turtle said he was going to kill me, didn't he?"

She nods nonchalantly. "Why?"

Jesse steps out of her way, almost unnoticed.

"Miss me, hon?" she asks the goat.

"I need that robe," he answers.

She says, "Here," and lets him take it from her. He digs into the pockets, and Martha is naked, that wiry little body with no tits worth mentioning and that big fine dangerous mouth. Wringing her hands, she turns and sees

Jesse watching her. The mouth tightens. "What are you doing here?" she snarls. "How did you get in?"

"I thought you let him in," Pinrose says.

"Why would I?"

Their short-term memories are sputtering; it is a natural part of the preservation cycle.

"You're a shit," Martha proclaims.

Pinrose finds an old Kleenex, uncrushing it and blowing with an old man's practiced vigor.

"Did I tell you the story, hon? Aylesworth here . . . he spread lies about me, and everyone heard them—"

"I know."

"—and I nearly transferred to another school, no thanks to him."

On the other hand, long-term memories are perfect. Quietly, with a most genuine sorrow, Jesse tells her, "I'm sorry for what I said, and did . . . all of it. . . ."

And Pinrose defends Jesse, in a fashion. "Honey, all men are shits. Isn't that what we agreed on?"

"Good-bye," Jesse says.

Neither of them seem to hear him.

Suddenly Martha is calm again, smiling at the sick old man. "Feel like anything, hon?"

"I feel like *everything*," he replies, giving a huge grin.

Jesse retreats, down the stairs and outside again, half-running and looking back with a variety of new senses. They've already forgotten him, he discovers. He sees that famous mouth working, doing miracles with the old plumbing; and he eavesdrops on their thoughts, realizing that neither of them, not even in the smallest way, brings him to mind.

The cafeteria is nearly empty; a few of the students are dressed for church. Jesse wonders what kinds of services are being held today. What ceremony suits the very last Sunday? A skeleton staff have set out sandwich makings, cold meat and petrified bread. The whole place feels exhausted, or supremely indifferent. The only alert face belongs to Ruth Hurtney. She waves and shouts, "Here!" And he nearly runs, relieved to find someone else from their outrageous club.

Tina sits across from Ruth. They aren't related anymore, save in the most glancing fashion. Tina's face is washed out and bland, the big eyes profoundly empty. But Ruth is radiant in many ways. Her eyes hold new, unnamed colors; her skin is worthy of an angel, translucent and lovely. In one angelic hand is a cheap butter knife, and with her fingers she tears off a piece of the blade—as if tearing paper—then quickly works it into an intricate little sculpture. Of a bird, he realizes. Dozens of sculpted birds are arranged on the tabletop in a neat line, each in a slightly different pose, a nest of flames rising from beneath them as the eye tracks left to right. A phoenix on its funeral pyre, of course. And with a voice filled with genuine astonishment, Ruth confesses, "I don't even know how I'm doing it."

"Magic," Jesse offers.

Tina moans complacently.

Sitting beside Ruth, Jesse asks, "Do you know what's going on?"

"Drugs. I must have taken a lot of drugs." She sets the knife on a pile of mutilated silverware. "Except I had a bizarre encounter . . . a conversation with an actual animal, just this morning—"

"A Turtle?"

"No, a poodle." She laughs. "A turtle would have been too strange."

He says nothing, waiting.

"A big black poodle," she tells him, "although he used to be a miniature. Blind and deaf, he claimed. But the future is sending some of us these incredible gifts."

"That's true," Jesse replies.

And she laughs again. "We're taking the same acid."

"What about Tina?"

She glances at her sister, something like pain in her face. Tina lifts her sandwich and takes a little bite, chewing with her mouth open. Nobody speaks. Then Ruth stares at the ceiling with her new bright eyes, saying, "I don't want to change."

"You don't have any choice."

She sighs and looks at him. "It's just drugs. That's what I believe, thank you."

He can't offer her anything.

"For as long as I need to," she tells him, or herself. Then she gives her twin another look, sorrowful and helpless.

Jesse considers leaving. Suddenly he's impatient with his steady transformation, and he considers various solutions. A gun. A car crash. Or he could stuff himself into the incinerator at the power plant, phoenix-style. Swirling flames would digest his meat and blood, leaving his newborn self free of its outdated parts—

—and Ruth reads his thoughts, saying, "Yuck! Quit that!"

"No, I won't do it," he promises.

Tina gives a delicate little belch.

Shutting his eyes, Jesse tries to empty his mind.

"I was going to ask . . . you ever find Sully?"

He opens his eyes and looks at Ruth.

"Remember? You were looking for her last night?"

He says, "I found her."

"How is she?"

What can he say?

"Because she's like us, isn't she?"

He says, "Sure."

"I had a feeling." An angel's mouth puckers. "You know, Sully's got me worried. Is she all right?"

"It's complicated," he replies.

"When you see her, tell her to come talk to me. Okay?" Ruth looks down at her empty hands. "You know what she said to me last night? She said, 'Think of me. Now and again, just think of me.' "

Jesse sits quietly, careful not to even move.

"I don't know why . . . I'm just worried about the girl. . . ."

"Don't," he advises her.

"If I want to, Jess, I will."

Tina sighs, then says something too soft to understand.

Ruth gives her another sorrowful look, crossing her arms and saying, "My head's full. I keep having all these crazy, crazy thoughts."

"Me, too."

"They aren't my thoughts." She looks at her phoenixes, a lot of work remaining before the mythical bird is consumed, then reborn. "I really do miss my old life, Jess."

"No, you don't," he says, trying to sound confident.

Ruth gives a long gasp, then asks no one in particular, "When did I ask for this? When, when, when?"

Ruth decides to walk her sister back to their room, to put her to bed. The ground has grown even warmer, a few patches of slush in the cool places, but nothing left of the snow. The air is summery, damp and close. Jesse walks as far as De Mortimer, then cuts across the yard, between large pools of bubbling black mud. There is something rhythmic and vaguely musical about the bubbling. He remembers the family vacation to Yellowstone and its sulfurous boiling goo. Against the rules, he had shoved a stick into a mud pot; his sister, always the voice of law and order, had screamed, "You can't!" She told him, "That's illegal." Then she told Mom and Dad, "Jesse's going to be arrested!"

He pauses beside the largest pool, staring at the mud in a dozen ways. In these hours between ice and fire, the soil-bound bacteria are eating and dividing at a phenomenal rate, generations created and then dissolving into new generations. If bacteria had voices and a culture, he reasons, they would speak of *now* as being the golden age. The nearly infinite winter would be forgotten. Suddenly the universe is vast and perfect, created for bacteria and apparently eternal.

On a nearby tree roost a pair of blue jays. They watch him and whisper between themselves, spreading their wings with pride.

"What have you done to yourselves?" Jesse asks.

They make proud sounds, half squawks and half voices. Tiny cigars are fixed to each wing, thin ropes of smoke coming out of them. Suddenly they launch themselves, dropping and rising again, coming over him with a clean sharp whine of jets. They're emulating jet planes, or mocking them, one or the other, and he promises himself to ask which it was someday.

Jesse kneels, placing flattened hands close to the mud. The vivid stink is even richer down low—a primordial flavor caressing the tongue and nostrils—and he holds one rich breath deep in his chest, then exhales, and says in no particular direction:

"I want to talk to you, Turtle. Now."

Nothing happens. No figure appears; no voice responds.

What will I become? Jesse asks himself. These changes will obscure what they don't obliterate: heart and lungs, human lust and human love,

too. He thinks of his rebuilt prick, juvenile and ardess; with a mixture of relief and embarrassment, he shrivels it down to normal proportions. Yet is anything truly lost? In a future age—he *knows* this—he will have the capacity to rebuild this body, every follicle in place. And into that lump of primate meat, he could insert his original soul . . . if he should ever find a reason, that is. . . .

Rising again, Jesse says, "I see her. I see Sully."

"You do not." The Turtle is behind him, wearing the Indian body. "And I don't think you appreciate my rules, Mr. Aylesworth. I'm not your servant, and I won't be teased."

The long black hair is shot full of gray; flesh hangs loose on a very middle-aged face and neck.

"What do you want, Mr. Aylesworth?"

"I'm afraid," Jesse says with a low, certain voice.

"And I am angry, quite frankly."

He doesn't care. "I saw you over there, the first time." Gesturing at the ash, Jesse asks, "Why did you appear like that? Because I was thinking about Sully?"

Lines deepen on the face, but there's no other reaction.

"She came here and sought me out. For some reason, she picked *me*." He waits for a nod, getting nothing but a slight dip of the head. "You arranged for her mother to call. Lloyd told me—"

"A test," the creature admits.

"What did you learn?"

"The woman was entirely natural, but there was a force or a presence within her. A criminal entity, perhaps."

"So why didn't you grab both her and the entity then? Why wait?"

"Because I had suspicions, not a confession." The teeth have begun to yellow. "For all I knew, I was being misled."

"Misled how?"

"False clues might have been left by the real criminal."

"But you could have captured her as a precaution—"

"No, no." A knowing smile emerges. "It is better, believe me, to wait and see how events unfold."

"Why did you clear the phone lines between Lloyd's office and Yates? And why warn me about Lloyd's suicide?"

No response.

"Did you suspect Lloyd, too?"

"Perhaps," the Turtle allows.

"And me," says Jesse. "Right?"

The Turtle shrugs, promising, "I have suspected every organic machine. And there have been many, many tests already."

Jesse says nothing, trying to think.

"You are important, yes."

"Am I?"

"Vital."

Jesse blinks and takes a little breath. "But why?"

No answer.

"Because of Sully? Because she singled me out?"

A vague nod and grin.

"Is it because she'll come to me for help?" He asks the question, then intuition gives him a partial answer. "It's something else, too. You have another reason. . . ."

Nothing.

"What's your plan?"

"Something clever, you can be sure." The new smile is sly and appreciative. A brief songlike laugh, then the Turtle says, "I have to return to work now. I have to concentrate—"

"Have you seen Sully?"

"Glimpses only. She keeps taking different forms, gathering with young life-forms. As camouflage and as shields."

"You look old," Jesse observes.

"I've always been that," the Turtle replies. "But I'm becoming very, very tired."

"And she's getting stronger."

"There's a wealth of energy here for the taking." Red eyes glance at the bubbling mud. "But she's running out of hiding places. And believe me, I will have her in custody in a very little while!"

The Turtle begins to vanish, without sound or fuss.

"But what if Sully escapes?" Jesse asks. "Is that so terrible?"

The Indian face becomes solid again. Eyes flare with a fresh anger.

Jesse presses him just the same. "Sully lives a second time, and how bad would it be?"

"Think," the Turtle advises.

"I am thinking."

"No." A solemn shake of the head, then he says, "An entity cheats. Cheats and wins. And what does she do when the universe ends again? She cheats a second time, this time blessed with more experience, and she wins again. Ten times she wins. A million times." He pauses, then inquires, "Do you see where I'm pointing, Jesse Aylesworth?"

"The Creation."

"Yes."

"But you or some other turtle will eventually catch her—"

"I hope so, yes." The Turtle seems genuinely frightened, his face stiff and his gaze remote. "Whoever she is, she's selfish. Selfishness is a fundamental flaw, or it's a gift, depending on your vantage point. But imagine that we allow just one of her kind to leap back to the beginning—"

"—and monkey with the machinery," says Jesse, in horror.

"Exactly. Yes." The turtle's human hands are trembling. Behind the eyes are vivid, barely restrained emotions. "A criminal could influence the new universe in dangerous ways. But imagine the Creation thick with criminals. What kind of tyranny would they try to implant? Unless they fought among themselves, of course . . . meaning that chaos would reign over everything, and for all time!"

Jesse hugs himself, imagining just a sliver of what was possible.

"Good," is the Turtle's response. "Finally, at last, I think you almost understand."

Looking at the mud, Jesse feels empty. And frail. What was a minor debate between gods has been enlarged, the shape and fate of the universe suddenly in doubt.

"Now don't ask for me again, Mr. Aylesworth. Not unless you find the criminal, of course." The Turtle grows pale, sunlight shining through him and the voice matching his appearance, becoming thin and airy as he says, "And not unless I can count on your help, please."

And again Jesse finds himself where he doesn't want to be, alone and very much aware of it.

A squadron of blue jays pass overhead, jets roaring, their tiny bodies propelled past the sound barrier with a sudden jarring *crack*.

Jesse starts to run, holding to a steady pace. He crosses the campus and passes the Gamma House—very white and elegant in the early afternoon sun—and he speeds up, every motion neat, effortless. The Warner River simmers, threads of vapor beginning to rise. Downtown is closed and empty, no reason left for commerce. What would have happened to the future town? To the college? How long would both have survived? Questions trigger some new talent; images pile on images, the future given to him in one enormous and vibrant package: local events, national news, the dance of nation states, an ocean of details drawn from billions of frantic lines. All of it has been brought back by the Turtles. Jesse can see fifteen months into the future, right up to the last transformation. Then, a wall. Black and ignorant, and infinitely strong. Each transformation erodes another fifteen months; why retain what won't be and won't ever matter again? The turtles are too pragmatic to cart around a complete history of the planet, particularly when all they want is to make every possibility into a certainty. . . .

Who succeeds Carter? Who wins the race to Mars? And is there ever a war with the Soviets? (Nuclear Armageddon would give the turtles a rich transformation, the planet left half-dead in an instant.) And what about his family? And his species? Jesse can imagine a million years of expansion, science and space colonies embracing the stars . . . but that's another epic that's been destroyed in fifteen-month bites. Which is sad. Mankind will never go to Mars through his own cleverness. Soon, in a matter of days or hours, Jesse will be able to travel there, but he won't take credit or feel any special pride. He's riding on someone else's genius, becoming someone else's ideal. . . .

Not even the turtles know who those first immortals were; nothing is left of them but this spectacular game.

This rigorous, uncompromising process.

Transformation brings life; life lasts to the end of time, then comes death and an even longer leap into the friable past.

Jesse feels as if he's standing on a beach, watching a wave bear down on him. It will erode another few feet of sand and soil. The beach is the present, and behind him is the past—once a great continent, now an eroded

island—where sauropods still live, and trilobites, and the first suns, and the newborn protons.

Eventually that island will vanish.

He knows.

A single grain of sand, incandescent and innocent, will stand above the sea, one last wave sweeping toward it. . . and what shall it become . . . ?

The town is silent, in stasis, but the nursing home out on the highway is bustling. Jesse sees young bodies wrestling in the front yard in a pit of bubbling mud. They are men, stripped naked and laughing as they toss one another about. Muscles are enormous. Big white eyes show against the spattered goo. Their audience are half a dozen young women wearing old-fashioned gowns, elegant and brightly colored; they sit primly, straitlaced in every way except for the palpable seediness in each of their pretty faces.

Ten newborn immortals, he counts. It would have been a deadly year-plus at the nursing home.

"Why, hello!" says one woman brightly. "Now pull off those clothes and climb right in there."

She gestures at the mud.

But before Jesse can refuse, a second woman says, "By any chance, do you know what's happening?"

"Do you?" several others echo.

He explains their circumstances in simple terms; no one interrupts or shows any doubt. Even the wrestlers pause long enough to listen, Jesse's words triggering an assortment of planted memories. But what impresses them most is what they already know: their youth has been reborn, then enlarged. They can't stop reveling in it.

The closest woman grabs Jesse by his wrist, saying, "Others aren't like us. What happens to them . . . ?"

Another explanation. Jesse finds the idea of preservation cold and clinical, yet these are old people who have seen plenty of worse deaths. "A damned good solution," is one man's verdict. Then he giggles like a little boy, turning and shouting, "Pile on Johnny!"

Indestructible bodies slam into each other, scrambling for position. The muck flies farther than before, and the women retreat, shouting encouragements to their favorites. Jesse has to work to be heard. He asks about

Dr. Harris. She taught at the college, someone told him that she was living here—

"Another one of her students," says one woman. "I wish my children were as devoted to me."

Everyone enjoys a hearty laugh.

Then another woman answers his question. "That old witch is inside, dear. In the cafeteria, I'm sure."

The home's front doors have been propped open. Old untransformed people sit about the lobby, indistinguishable from the furniture. Jesse lets intuition lead him to a long sunny room filled to bursting with earnest young students.

Not one student is human.

But Dr. Harris is exactly as he remembers her: the same pillar of snowy hair; the same piercing green eyes. Wrinkles lend her long face a kind of dignity, and if anything, her voice is firmer and more impressive than ever.

"You are late for this session," she growls, "and besides, I have no more room, as you can see."

Her students are stray dogs and raccoons, opossums and creatures less easily identified. A huge catfish sits along the aisle—the same catfish that the Turtle threw out of the river—and to use the chair it's grown an ass and human-style limbs. Its broad pale face is strangely handsome, fat whiskers accenting the lipless mouth. Beneath its hands is an old literature text, and judging by the steady flipping of pages, the creature is reading at a prodigious rate.

Dr. Harris approaches. "Young man, I must ask you to leave—"

"I was in your Freshman English class," Jesse interrupts. "Perhaps you remember me."

"Of course I do." Her transformation has taken a very different route. "Mr. Aylesworth. An A- on your term paper, but otherwise a B student. Late to class eight times. Absent five times. And too interested in the young ladies, for your good and for theirs."

"I'm looking for one of those girls. Sully Faulkner?"

Emotion flickers behind the imperious gaze.

"Have you seen her, ma'am?"

The professor turns without warning, tugging on a small furred head. "Read to yourselves, class. Heads down and read!"

Jesse holds himself motionless, waiting.

Dr. Harris seems to grow taller, then steps up to him, speaking in a hard whisper. "Miss Faulkner has visited me twice since this business began. I don't believe that I'll see her a third time."

"No?"

"The school president has contacted me. I know the situation, in full, and I expect that the young woman will soon be no more."

The words have an impact. . . . *will soon be no more.*

"I don't like having my memories manipulated, frankly. I was touched by the girl's visits. My mind still wasn't working properly on Friday, when she first came here—I suffered a stroke at Christmas—but even with that impairment I certainly remembered her. . . ." She shakes her head for a moment, then adds, "Miss Faulkner was my favorite student, and what is she? A device. A ruse. Elaborate camouflage for some kind of demon, in truth."

Pages rustle under newborn hands. Otherwise, there is no sound.

"But now why, Mr. Aylesworth, are you interested in the demon? Perhaps you can explain that to me."

Quietly, he says, "She asked for my help."

"As she asked for mine. With both visits, in slightly different ways." She pauses long enough to turn, grabbing the catfish by its lower jaw, shaking its head and warning it, "The subject is Milton. Not other people's idle gossip. I feel you eavesdropping, young sir. You won't make much out of yourself if you cannot learn to concentrate."

The fish makes a low wet sound in apology.

Dr. Harris releases her student, then fastens her gaze on Jesse. "My impression? That demon has asked several of us for help, and you shouldn't feel too important."

Jesse isn't sure what he feels.

"My advice? Spend today reading the classics. Allow the authorities to do their work." She smells like old books, towering over Jesse and shaking her head. "Blood and passion, Mr. Aylesworth. Blood and passion. That's what you'll find in the classics, and if you read them properly, as I have, you'll understand that the good life denies both. Believe me."

He leaves the home. The old men outside have progressed from wrestling to fistfights, laughing as they pummel each other, the blows rapid and powerful enough to shatter stone. Jesse ignores them and the cheering women, trotting along the empty highway. He struggles with his thoughts. Without intending to run faster, he does, climbing the first big hill outside Warner, his pace cartoon-swift until the highway suddenly comes to an end.

Some creature or creatures have piled up a mass of earth bolstered with tree trunks. They built some sort of fortification, he realizes. Long tracks imply enormous mice or rats working together. They must have worked all night on it, then just as swiftly abandoned it. Probably when they realized they were invulnerable. A rodent's innate paranoia is no longer required in the new order.

Unsure what sense is leading him, Jesse wanders into a dark tunnel.

There, behind a wall of sharpened limbs, he finds a tiny chamber, the stink of the rich earth almost obscuring a faint, familiar odor. Sully was here. Not for long, but recently. Pressing his nose against the warm damp floor, he inhales, drinking in her scent, his entire body shivering for a long, long moment.

In a whisper, he asks the silent fort, "Where now?"

He returns to Warner at a scorching pace. To campus. Intuition leads him to the Gamma House. He rings the bell and waits, nobody answering the far-off tones. But a lock is just metal and precise angles, easily jimmied, and he concentrates, forcing the door open on his fifth try.

Jesse has been inside the sorority more than a hundred times, yet the entranceway and living room seem changed in the daylight. What is normally subdued and formal has become shabbier and friendly. An old excitement surges. This is the realm of women, and not just any women, but chosen young ladies at the peak of their fertility. The biology of this place is suddenly obvious. It's a human convention that these ladies should be segregated, their lives full of rituals and honored traditions. Pledging the Gammas is a prize that most can never earn—that lifetime tide of *sister*—and in Warner's tiny world, at least in some minds, nothing is as honored as sleeping under this roof.

One girl sits at the baby grand piano, dressed for church and hitting a single key again and again.

The sharp tone rises through the old building. Jesse follows, unnoticed. Upstairs is another world, as uncharted as the moons of Jupiter, and he feels a vague excitement with each step, following the stairs up and to the left and up again, sunlight pouring down a long hallway lined with rooms that genuinely reek of womanhood.

Pausing, Jesse savors the moment. He sees no one, but when he sniffs the air he discovers myriad odors, each one connected to some new and elaborate dictionary of scents. Perfumes and farts; menstrual blood and lost eggs. Here is the center of the universe, if you are a human male in your early twenties. This is the very purpose of existence. Each step takes Jesse deeper into this protected sanctuary, and some simple part of him closes his eyes, drinking in his surroundings, blessing his considerable fortunes.

Doors stand open on both sides of him. Which door first? He pauses, then turns right, seeing a large room with three beds, three girls in various garb and sleeping soundly. There is a feminine disarray to the place. If awakened, they could have the room clean in three minutes. Books and underwear and the various etceteras would be sorted and swept away, all in a cooperative effort; Jesse envies them, has always envied women for their social sensibilities. His girlfriends have always astonished him with their capacity to join in with others, to blend into any social chaos. Men cannot. Openly and gladly hostile, their overdesigned bodies laced with testosterone, men will spend the first moments of any encounter making certain that their opponents see them as opponents, as men to be reckoned with. Cooperation, by definition, is a peace treaty written in a perishable script.

Someone here is awake. Jesse returns to the hallway and finds the correct room. A lone girl sits on the floor, nude. Her knees are in the air and her back is against a large throw pillow. He doesn't recognize the face. No name emerges from any of his internal libraries, which is odd, but then again, she could be someone's sister caught here on a visit. Or he does know her, and this is just her disguise. . . .

"I'm looking for Sully," he whispers. "Have you seen Sully?"

The girl looks at him, and blinks. A wistful smile emerges.

"I need to talk to her," Jesse explains. "If you see her, will you tell her? Please?"

A whimper.

Then, silence.

The girl bears a glancing resemblance to Sully. She isn't as pretty, and the body is too thick. . . but there's a familial resemblance, shared complexions and proportions . . . or is he imagining it? Does his new supercharged imagination have the power to mislead him, singling out traits on a stranger's face just to serve some subconscious desire . . . ?

"I want to help," he confesses, reaching for her, intending to caress her face. "I don't care about Turtles or the end of the universe, Sully. Or whatever your name is. I'll help anyway I can."

In the corner of his left eye—motion.

Too late, Jesse turns, nothing to see. But his hand absently drifts forward, meeting the barest resistance, and his first warning of trouble is a sudden sharp moan.

He looks back again.

The girl arches her back in agony. She tries to scream, her mouth convulsively opening and closing, but Jesse's hand is buried like an ax blade deep into her ghostly neck.

"No, no . . . !"

He pulls back his hand, in panic. "Oh, fuck."

The wound is vicious, ragged. Her head is almost severed from the body. Blood spreads across the carpeted floor, then stops abruptly, drying into a shiny red-black varnish. Moments later, the corpse begins to rot, darkening and swelling, angry gases bursting through the skin and the rancid meat shriveling away. Bones emerge. Unseen worms clean them to an elegant, well-polished white. Then the skeleton falls apart at the joints, fingers and toes vanishing now and again, presumably spirited away by tiny scavengers. . . .

Panic tumbles into curiosity.

The girl was placed here for a reason. Someone intended Jesse to find her, and this horrific show is a lesson. He can't feel more certain. But who's responsible, and what does it mean?

With every sense—old and new—Jesse studies her weathered remains. Teeth grin up at him, and the empty eye sockets seem to accuse him of stupidity. Or worse, of indifference.

Expanding his search, he peers at the floor and furnishings, the plaster walls and high ceiling. He finds a modest omniscience. The work is exhausting and thrilling. Suddenly he knows each crack and water spot, every roach

dropping and mote of dust. In the north wall is a hole, patched by an amateur and hidden behind a heavy dresser. But within the wall, down where a knowing hand could reach, is a book. A diary. Small and feminine, locked with a useless brass clasp, it wears twenty years of dust; with the softest of voices, it begs to be read.

Jesse obeys.

Then after a moment's pause, he reads it again, more slowly and much more carefully this time . . . and when he comes out of his trance, he finds that someone has taken away the bones . . . the skull's grin and eyes existing nowhere but within his own vast mind. . . .

"Sully?"

The office door is ajar, no need to coax the balky lock. A small cold presence is inside. Sully is not. Yet Jesse says her name twice, hoping to elicit a response.

Nothing.

He steps inside, the newspaper office bland and familiar, and suddenly tiny, and comforting for all those reasons. Alan Quill lies stretched out on the sofa, resting in a deep hypothermic coma. Little time is left: before everything is preserved; the pace of change is accelerating. Once again, Jesse calls out for Sully. There's a taste of a presence, brief and probably imagined. Then he turns and focuses on the old gray file cabinets, deftly reading every inconsequential word in them, the entire project done in the time it takes a heart to fill with blood, then squeeze itself dry.

Where else? he asks himself.

Bills, paid and not, are set in neat piles on Quill's desk.

Jesse studies the contents of every desk, in a glance, reasoning that useful scraps of paper might have fallen into crannies years ago. None did. But through the concrete wall, in the yearbook's office, are photographs and dates and other bits of data that help confirm what he read in the diary. A noise interrupts him.

An enormous shriek of a ring, then silence. Then a second, even more obnoxious ring that reflects off the high ceiling and the pipes, echoes twisting around him until he musters the strength to lift the telephone's receiver, cupping his left hand around the mouthpiece and listening to the distant, electron-washed sounds of a voice.

"Hello? Is that you, Jesse?"

It's his mother's voice. Confused, but obstinate.

"Hello, hello? I want to talk to my son. Jesse Aylesworth. Do you know him?"

He hangs up, then thinks better of it. For an instant, he feels a runaway panic, as if he has actually done something wrong . . . but then an obvious and easy solution bursts out of his new pool of talents.

In the little lounge outside the office, standing on four solid legs, is the big old Zenith. Jesse touches its glass face. Suddenly some invisible new portion of his hand crosses into the vacuum tube. Nerve endings dissolve into various wires and electronic contraptions only slightly more sophisticated than rocks. He finds his way, navigating at light-speed. Power lines supply the roadway; his energies swell to match his needs. He finds part of himself inside a second television, looking out at the correct living room. "Mom?" he says. Then, "Here I am, Mom."

A pause. Then someone out of view asks, "Where are you?"

"In here. Look here."

She appears, shuffling lazily toward him. She looks as if she has been sleeping, the eyes baggy and her handsome face puffy. But she seems in control, a varnish of hard indifference keeping her sane as she finds her own son inside the television. In fact, the old gal comments, "You look so clear," before adding, "I just tried to call you, Jess."

"I know," he confesses. "But I thought this would be better. Seeing each other, I mean. Before."

"Before what?"

"How are you, Mom?"

"Worn out, a little. I don't know why."

He doesn't offer explanations.

"But such a clear picture," she tells him. "Your father wants someone to come adjust it, but I don't see why."

"Where's Dad? And Kris?"

The woman shuts her eyes, two questions too much to handle. "We had some snow, not much. A few inches."

"Could you get them, Mom? I want to see them, too."

"It was melting." She rises and shuffles to the window, then comments, "No, the snow's gone. I didn't notice. . . ."

"Where's Dad?"

No answer. For a wondrous moment, Jesse wonders if his father would have died this year—he has never been a man of sterling health—and it thrills him to think the old guy might come with him. They aren't close as father and son, but as gods they might find common ground.

Jesse starts to smile, joy building until she says:

"Your father's asleep. I really shouldn't disturb him."

He winces, sadness passing. Then without any anticipation, he asks, "What about Kris? Is she there?"

"Upstairs." Mom sits on the sofa with an invalid's care.

"You look different. Do you feel all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sleeping enough?"

"Don't worry about me."

She solemnly shakes her head. "I can't get over this picture. I really should show your father."

"Go get him, Mom. I'll wait."

She struggles to her feet and vanishes, and suddenly Jesse is sorry, alone again and depressed. Where else can he go? Following the house's internal wiring, he moves upstairs, up to his bedroom, feeling limits as he works. A cumbersome black-and-white portable supplies another interface, and he rebuilds its guts and looks out at the room. Everything is as he left it after Christmas. The double bed is made. A pair of sports posters are on the walls above it: Bob Gibson and Bart Starr. Jesse feels a runaway fondness for this sterile corner of the universe. He hasn't stayed here for more than a few days every year; the posters are leftovers from high school. But every part of the room brings out memories in perfect, transfixing detail.

"Jesse? Where'd you go?"

"Upstairs, Mom."

"Well, come back down. Your father wants to see this picture."

He returns, the process taking several seconds and his new talent beginning to tire. His parents sit on the sofa, watching his magical appearance with only the dimmest amazement. Dad gives a little laugh, announcing, "It does work." He's a big man, handsome in a last-gasp way. "A real sweet picture. You're right."

Jesse studies them, trying to find an appropriate emotion. In another few minutes, or hours, they'll be broken down, encased in force fields and tucked into a null-chamber already set at the earth's core. But who's being lost here? The two of them will remain middle-aged souls, a little fat and befuddled, sitting on their lumpy brown sofa for an eternity. And their son will be utterly changed, living among the stars, capable of great things that he can't yet imagine.

"I won't stay long," he warns them.

"How's school going, dear?" Mom wants optimistic stories, as always. "Are you doing well in class?"

"Fine."

"And your newspaper? How is it?"

"Fine too."

"And your friend Jill. . . ?"

The question is a tiny surprise. "She's doing well, Mom."

"We like Jill." A strange pronouncement, since they've met her only twice. She's prepared to say more, but Dad interrupts, asking:

"Hunting for work?" A thick hand adjusts the thin gray hair. "Get an early jump on it. Like I've told you—"

"I have a job," Jesse replies.

"Yeah?"

Mom turns to Dad. "Darling, you know. He's going to graduate school." She's eager to defend him, saying, "Bachelor degrees don't get the good jobs anymore, darling."

"Oh, shit. More school," the old man grouses.

Then Jesse says, "Actually, I've got work. I'm going to be a god. Starting now."

"And we're proud of you, dear." Mom smiles. She always looks very brave and put upon when she's like this, defending her affections for her son. "Both of us are proud. You know that."

Dad squirms, then asks, "Got enough cash?"

"I'm fine."

Yet the man makes a show of pulling his wallet from his back pocket—the shabby leather wallet Jesse bought him on his fiftieth birthday—and he pulls out two twenties. Shuffling to the TV, he pauses to consider the ob-

vious problem, then decides to place the bills on top of the cabinet, out of sight, almost strutting with pride as he returns to the sofa.

"He said he didn't need any."

"He always needs money. You know that."

Jesse can't recall being a leech. He nearly debates the point, then hesitates. There's a new voice, a girl's voice, asking:

"Who are you talking to?"

"Your brother, dear." Mom straightens her back, smiles and says, "Come see. He's on television."

His parents make room, scooting apart and leaving a gap between them. The girl sits and stares at Jesse, and he stares at her. He can read her face, anticipating her next words, and before shock or fear can grab hold, Jesse feels an effervescent amusement that shows itself as a giddy laugh. Some new part of him wonders how this trick was done. Because it is trickery. This is someone's joke. And Kris, his only sibling, blinks and clears her throat, then says, "I don't know him." She says, "What brother?" She looks left, then right, asking, "What are you talking about, my brother?"

"This is Jesse," says Mom, patient but firm. "He's your brother."

Dad has little patience for games. "Stop being funny. I mean it."

"There's no brother. It's just us here." The girl flips her head to one side, blond hair jumping. "Who are you?" she asks. "And get out of our TV."

Now Jesse feels shock, at last, and a mild horror.

"It's Jesse," says Dad, pointing for emphasis.

"His room is upstairs," Mom offers hopefully. "Next to yours, darling."

And Kris says, "That's our guest room, Mom."

"No, our guest room is over the garage."

"That's your sewing room, Mom."

Jesse feels himself falling, an abyss opening beneath him.

"I don't have a sewing room."

"Of course you do."

"Do I?" Mom halfway grins; the possibility has its charms. "Where did you say—"

"Quit teasing us," Dad snaps.

"But I'm not! I'm not teasing!"

Everyone looks uncomfortable. This isn't how Jesse intended his good-byes.

The girl takes action. She stands and steps toward the TV, bending and squirming, Jesse just able to feel her hand behind the set, grabbing and pulling on the plug.

"Got it!"

He retreats along the copper wires, then returns to the bedroom set, a powerful exhaustion tugging at him. In these last moments, in endless ways, the bedroom has been altered. The posters are gone, replaced with drab needlepoint. The bedspread is a cheap gray thing. Who's responsible? He wishes he could physically transport himself, employing his new senses in earnest; a thorough examination might give him clues.

"There you are!"

The girl appears, already reaching for the cord; Jesse screams, "No, please. Please don't!" She hesitates, then steps back.

"Do me a favor, Kris. Just open the drawers, show me what's inside. Please?"

Their parents shuffle into view, winded by the stairs and propping themselves on the edge of the bed. "Another clear picture," Mom declares. "How does he do that?"

Kris opens the top drawer of the chest, hesitates, then spills its contents on the floor. Jesse expects his extra socks and sees instead an assortment of Dad's summer clothes. The second drawer is filled with rags. The third is empty, save for a pair of pants.

"Where are my clothes, Mother?"

She stares at the heap, puzzlement fading into resignation.

"Hey," Dad cries out, "those are my slacks."

The girl shakes a finger at Jesse. "See? You don't belong here."

"I thought you threw out this shirt, Marge." Dad is a happy man, lifting a torn, paint-stained relic up to the sunlight. "You told me that you chucked it."

"Didn't I?" Mom mutters.

Suddenly his parents seem unsure about their mysterious son. They glance at him, then elsewhere, trying to hide obvious trains of thought.

"Those are your clothes," Mom agrees.

"Sure are," the old man concedes, unfolding his slacks.

A fresh instinct warns Jesse: memories can be altered, but the most intense, painful memories last longest. He speaks in a panic, choosing a likely incident. "Mom? Remember when I had Clara Smith up here—"

"Now I know Clara," Mom replies, glad for the common ground. "A sweet young lady."

"You caught us. You came home early and walked in on us." Jesse was sixteen. Clara was a young fourteen, more curious than eager. He remembers how Mom stepped into the bedroom, baffled by the scene, then stunned. Her face turned pale, and she bent over as if in misery. But she never spoke, retreating downstairs into the kitchen and banging every plate until the girl was gone. "You found us on the bed. You've got to remember that. . . !"

The old woman rises and turns, gazing at the crime scene with a lost expression. "I'm really not sure, dear."

She had protected Jesse. Dad pestered her for days, demanding to know what the hell was bothering her, but she never said a word. "Don't you remember me with Clara?"

Eyes bright, she bends and smooths the bedspread.

"I don't get it," Dad growls. "You know what he's talking about?"

Mom shakes her head with great care.

Again, Kris reaches for the cord.

"Let me say good-bye," Jesse begs.

And Mom turns to face him, making herself smile. "Come home soon, dear."

"Yeah, give us a visit," says Dad, shaking out his slacks.

Jesse is halfway glad that someone is excising their memories. He doesn't like thinking that his mother will spend Eternity with the vision of Clara and him. And now Kris mutters, "So long, impostor," and breaks the connection. Jesse tumbles hundreds of miles, and three feet, his butt hitting the hard floor and his eyes gazing at the television's dead gray screen, seeing within it a distorted reflection that may or may not be him.

Alan Quill has died.

In the last few minutes, the corpse has dried up, shriveling like a lost peach. Its pale, simple soul has been taken to a safer place, and Jesse actually misses Quill. He never liked the boy, but now he wishes him well . . .

touching the face with just his fingertips, the skin collapsing to dust, the pale flakes swirling in the faintest breeze. . . .

Jesse wishes he was in his dorm room, then he is. There's no sense of motion or time. And it is his room, everything exactly as he left it, but a brigade of new senses coming into play. He reads every textbook and novel, then his own earnest and clumsy scribbles . . . but more interesting than the words is the paper on which they are printed, every sheet intricate and unique. And baffling. What truly fascinates him are the ordinary pine boards that he used to build his bed. Within each is a wealth of information. Growth rings tell epics about the past. He tastes sunlight and rain, fire and rot. The wood has died, but some new part of him can read the battered DNA—a text more complex than every work of human literature—and wielding this knowledge, he builds mental images as real as any tree, wood and sap wanting nothing but to transform light and air into new sap, new needles, and a rain of seed.

He blinks, turns. The mirror on his medicine cabinet shows his reflection, the face unchanged in shape and otherwise scarcely human. Like Lloyd, he gives off a distinct light, but that light's character extends into places and qualities that he couldn't have perceived before. No mirror of glass could reflect what he sees here, and it occurs to Jesse that he must have remade the mirror when he looked at it, on the strength of expectations. Leaning forward, near enough to kiss himself, he pulls a radiant hand across his scalp, a last few wisps of dark hair vanishing. "You look good bald," he mutters, then laughs, neither the voice or laugh familiar. A giddy joy surges through him, and again he blinks—with every sort of eye—and turns.

He infiltrates the yearbooks on the high shelf, lending their contents depth and color, then a kind of life. Girlfriends are recalled in full, one after another, as he takes a rapid inventory of his conquests. Dozens of times he pulls away bras, exposing stiff little breasts and big pillowy ones, the nipples reaching from the faintest blush to pure anthracite. Bellies move underhand. Skin sweats. Denim is warm, brass buttons cold. And with a patient voice he tells the girls, "Trust me," until that is exactly what they do. Not because he deserves their trust, certainly. And not even because he's a master at manipulation. He isn't masterful, in truth. What he does with his dates is simply an inevitable consequence of life. Lust and curiosity are ho-

norable, ancient qualities; trust itself may well be older still. Even the first asexual cells were built out of trust: DNA and proteins and lipid membranes struggling together for simple survival. Trust is easy, Jesse realizes. All it takes are words and persistence, and he coaxes those girls out of their jeans, then their panties, and pulls apart their warm shaved legs, and with a sense of ceremony, he kneels, laying his mouth on each of the trusting pussies, drinking in the rich old salts of a Cambrian sea.

Finished, Jesse removes himself from the yearbooks and thinks of salt. He tastes it in the juices and sweat and in tears, too. Hanna would cry at unpredictable moments, without sound, never appearing particularly sad but leaking tears with a silent dignity. He used to envy that dignity, in secret. Quiet, uncomplicated grief is a skill still beyond him, even now. But every woman has some trait worth envying. Like Jill, for instance: her self-assuredness, her frankness, her spectacularly clear vision. If their transformations build on old strengths, then Jill will make a wonderful friend for the next trillion years . . . which leads Jesse to wonder what are his genuine strengths. . . .

He turns once more, intending to take one final look at his room. He looks at the Monet. The Rousseau. And then, the Breton. Intact. Its shreds knitted together. When he sees that last poster taped to the ugly green wall, his first thought is that he conjured it up by himself, by accident. *The Song of the Lark*. But he has no memory of any conjuring, nor any desire to see it again. Then who made it? Curiosity bleeds into caution and a dose of fear. Is it the same trickster who made his mother call? He steps closer, staring hard at the peasant girl, and she moves, turning toward Jesse while showing him the oddest little smile, then turning and walking away, that most pleasant ass swaying under the simple peasant skirt.

Of course it's Sully. He watches her cross the open field, making for the trees and buildings and the crimson sun. When she vanishes he takes another step, lifting a hand, fingers sinking into the paper itself. Now what? He could call for the Turtle, or not. He decides not to decide, to play along for the moment . . . leaning closer and touching the poster with his forehead, feeling the air change around him. An instant later, he finds himself standing on a rough plowed field, no entrance apparent, his reaching hands flesh and bone again. He's dressed in peasant garb, soiled and worn thin at the knees, and his bare feet enjoy a late-day warmth radiating from the

earth. The sun is setting. Clods break underfoot as he steps. Leading him are a woman's high-arched prints. In the distance, larks sing without showing themselves. "Hip! Hip! Hurrah boys!" they sing. "Three cheers!"

A wind gusts from the west, warm and a little damp. The last of the sun vanishes, leaving the sky salmon and hazy. Spring rains are coming, Jesse senses. A single weak light appears inside one building, flickers. Sully is waiting. He knows it. And he thinks to himself:

I have to warn the Turtle.

He does nothing.

What should I do?

On ordinary legs, Jesse walks toward the firelight.

A loaf of fresh bread is set on a rough wooden table, and the cheese has been cut free of mold. Sully has a place set for him, an empty plate and mug and a jug of wine in easy reach. Old straw carpets the foot-packed earth. A fire burns on a simple hearth, the wood steaming and smoking, too green to burn properly. Sully, or at least some portion of her, sits on a stool opposite him, rough hands folded on the tabletop, hair hanging loose, the firelight swirling around her and leaving her edges vague, imprecise. "Something to eat, Jess?"

He sits on a second stool, discovering that he's famished.

"Help yourself," she tells him, now smiling, her expression more than a little forced. "Go on."

He takes a mouthful of bread, chews, and pours the wine, then takes a long drink before he finally asks, "Why me?"

God or not, she looks exhausted.

"Why seduce me?" he presses.

Sully pours wine into a second mug, then holds the mug with both hands, forgetting to drink.

"I know everything," Jesse promises. "You invented this disguise, this identity . . . you used Sully to hide among us—"

"When did I hide?" she interrupts. Then she laughs in a quiet, self-mocking fashion. "All in all, I did an awful job of hiding. I mean, considering how soon the Turtle saw through this alleged disguise of mine."

"But why me?"

"You were easy. Or maybe you were worthy." She pauses, then adds, "Maybe I decided that a bad disguise and an alliance were better than any good disguise. What I wanted, maybe, was a champion. Someone to love me and protect me."

"You don't know why. Do you?"

She shakes her head, then finally sips the wine, a red fringe left above her upper lip. "I must have left parts of my logic behind. My rationales. Time travel has limits, and you can't bring everything along for the ride."

"The Turtle told me."

"Good then." Another sip of wine. "Or, I suppose, I never planned to use you in the first place. I could have arrived and gone to work, but I ran out of time, or I made too many mistakes . . . and finally, out of desperation, I had to reach out for the first likely candidate. . . ."

Jesse takes another mouthful of bread, chewing fast and concentrating on the flavor and the simple motions of eating, realizing that he has sorely missed these prosaic acts. Finally, he swallows, breathes in the smoky air and asks, "Who were you in the last incarnation?"

She sips and turns to one side, watching the flames. "Whose DNA did you target?"

"Honestly, I don't know." She hesitates, eyes narrowing. "I must have blanked out those first few minutes."

"I think I know," Jesse says. "Who you were. Are."

Yet she appears indifferent, tilting her face upward and changing the topic. "Do you understand the universe that the Turtles and their ilk want to build? Have you accessed the plans for it, Jess?"

"Can I?"

"Easily. They aren't deep secrets." Again she laughs, a dirty calloused hand grabbing a kerchief, then wiping an eye. "The new universe is infinite, of course. And perfect. Nobody knows just who designed it, but even among gods, it's pure genius. Elegant and everlasting, yet scarcely any different from the universe we know today."

He nods, saying nothing.

"Suns and worlds will form again. And organic machines, including humans. And eventually gods will evolve from them, and rule, and milk the universe dry. And the gods die, at last. But the universe itself will persist. The godly corpses will begin to fall inward, gaining momentum, and after

another trillion years they'll slam together and reignite everything. Not another Creation, no. It will be a remix, a reformation. Matter and energy will be redistributed, new organic machines will appear, and the whole extravagant dance begins again. And after that, again. And an infinite number of times after that. A perfect loop. No escape possible."

Jesse looks at his calloused hand, trying to imagine it.

"Death is temporary. A statistical contingency." Sully shakes her head, asking, "What does infinite mean? What is *forever*?"

Without effort, he summons a trillion zeros that stand in a perfect row behind a single stark 1.

"How many times are you born, Jess? In this new and endless universe, how many times will proteins and fats and water assemble to become *you*?"

"A lot," he mutters, in hopes of humor.

She groans, shaking her head.

He imagines a trillion Jesses—one for each zero—and of course they aren't anywhere near the true answer. An infinite number of Jesse Aylesworths will be born, living out every life endless times . . . and he just shakes his head, asking, "What's your point? Tell me."

"Why am I here?" She asks the floor the question. "If the turtles and their ilk can reconfigure the universe, then why should I care if I live another incarnation now?"

"Greed," he offers, with a hopeful voice.

"But I don't feel any. I've looked for greed, but I can't find it."

"What do you find?"

"Many things," she assures, and grins, no joy in her face.

"Maybe you don't believe the Turtles can do what they promise," Jesse says. "The universe can't be rebuilt, and that's why you want a second incarnation. Or a fiftieth."

"Maybe so," she says.

"And you don't feel greed because greed gets in the way. It's a muddy emotion, hard to hide and impossible to control, and you'll do yourself more good by being pitiful. Like you said, a bad disguise and a champion might do you more good than anything!"

She weeps, using the kerchief to wipe her face. "Or maybe I'm not supposed to escape from your friend, the Turtle."

"What's that mean?"

She won't explain. She shakes her head, her mouth clamped shut.

Wine and bread twist in his belly. He flinches, then asks, "Are you responsible for that business with my family?"

A sudden look. "What business?"

"Did you do that trick?"

Sully cannot appear more genuine, telling him, "I don't know what you're talking about. Honestly, I don't."

Coming here, Jesse anticipated another seduction. He had assumed that the criminal would offer him anything for his help. That's why he chased her around the town and countryside: he wanted to hear what a desperate god would promise the likes of him. It was the greatest seduction any human could endure, and he was never quite sure how he would respond. Jesse might say, "Trust me," with his very best voice, then calmly deliver her to the Turtle. Or he could attempt to save her. His final decision would rest entirely on her performance, and the truth be told, Sully has done a remarkably awful job of winning his heart and mind.

Coming here, Jesse intended to learn the truth about himself—*What kind of person am I?*—but the girl doesn't give a damn about his purpose.

Again, she says, "An endless universe." Then, "Every conceivable arrangement of matter. Of us. And it happens innumerable times."

Then she sobs, throwing the last of her wine into the fire. Steam rises with the smoke, and her tired voice poses the question:

"What's one life worth in that kind of universe, Jess?"

He can't see her point, and nearly says so. But then she contrives a smile, almost laughing as she tells him, "You're not becoming a god, Jess. Nobody is."

"What will we be?"

"Very clever, very scared mortals who only want to outsmart death."

"Is that so?" he whispers.

She throws her mug, throws it onto the hearth, clay shattering and crimson sparks leaping high, cooling as they fall, extinguished long before they land in the dried straw at her feet.

Suddenly, Jesse has to pee, the pressure like an old friend. He stands, looking at Sully. "The wine's gone through me," he confesses. "I'll be right back."

She sits motionless, oblivious to him.

He steps outside, into the perfect illusion of night. A stormy warm wind lashes at him. In the shelter of a massive cottonwood, he fiddles with worn buttons, then pees and shakes and rebuttons his trousers, starting back toward the house, a cooling drop of urine sliding down the inside of his thigh.

Sully remains seated at the table, her kerchief wadded up in one hand, forgotten, as she silently weeps.

Jesse pauses, watching from the anonymity of darkness. He feels pity, but not enough. Affection, but not genuine love. He has no intention of helping this creature, he realizes . . . and with that he takes a deep breath, then a very small step forward.

Sully rises from her stool, turns and walks out of view.

The rain strikes, a torrent of swollen drops accompanied by sudden thunder. Jesse moves to the open door, then hesitates. Sully is throwing wood on her fire, then she takes a long spoon, stirring whatever concoction bubbles inside an old black kettle. Her body has changed. The trim figure has regained some of its childhood weight. Turning toward him, she shows a rounder face, crow's-feet testifying to the corrosive effects of wind and sun. And this older woman smiles in the grimmest fashion, saying, "There's someone I'd like you to meet."

What now? he wonders, in horror.

Sully approaches, looking out into rain with an expression of genuine concern. "Can you think of anything simpler, Jess? Your sperm, my egg. The equivalent of a test-tube conception, then an enhanced development. Here, as it happens. I built this little world for him—"

"Who?" Jesse sputters.

Then she cups her hands around her mouth, shouting, "Lark!" at nothing. At the storm, seemingly. "Come inside, Lark!"

"Who's that—?"

"Our boy, naturally." She waits for a moment, concern bleeding into a motherly anger. "Facsimiles of you and me have been raising him. An hour in the outside world is a long, long month here."

Lightning blossoms, and in its blue glare, a figure appears, smallish and running quickly, bare feet happily splashing in every available puddle. Suddenly, without warning, Jesse feels love—a titanic, frightful love—and a mass of conjured memories well up from within. Lark is theirs. He was born in this simple house, on the small hard bed against the far wall. He

was named as much for his spirit as for any bird—named by his proud, wonderstruck father—and he is a source of constant panic, a fearless sort of whimsy driving the boy in every dangerous direction at once.

A fat bolt of lightning cuts the sky in two, and Lark jumps high in response, giggling and holding his arms above his head, daring the storm to strike him.

Jesse screams, "No!" He can't help himself, running outdoors and snatching up the boy, then bodily carrying him to safety. Their only child, and what was he thinking, tempting the Fates that way? Even when Jesse knows that this is just an illusion, he can't contain his anger, much less his love.

"Oh, Papa!" his son chides. "I'm fine, really."

He could very well be their son. The face is a blend of their faces, not quite as handsome as Jesse would guess, or hope, but with Jesse's easy smirk and Sully's dark-water eyes. Lark is a precocious three-day-old child, conceived last Thursday night and already indistinguishable from a bright, energetic six-year-old. He dances across the straw-covered floor, and giggles, and confesses that he was playing near the river when the storm clouds arrived. "But carefully," he maintains, rotating like a little tornado. "I was so very careful, Mama. I was!"

Sully says nothing, watching Jesse instead of her son.

It's his father who feels compelled to reprimand him. "Remember when I pulled you out of the water last summer?" Jesse remembers the moment vividly. The boy can barely swim, yet he courageously waded into a deep pool, chasing minnows until his head went under. "You stay out of there, son. Do you hear me?"

Lark acts amused and indifferent. "Oh, Papa," he keeps saying. "Oh, now, Papa . . .!"

"Get out of those wet clothes," Jesse commands.

The boy obeys in an instant, leaving everything but a skin pouch drying before the smoky fire. Then he races over to his own tiny bed and kneels, pulling some sort of stick cage out from its shadow. A simple thread and peg comprise the lock. With a happy cackle, Lark says, "And hello to you, my friend." Inside the cage is a box Turtle, or a facsimile. "I brought you a treat," he tells it. "A nice fat worm." And he pulls the treat out of the pouch,

watching it squirm for a moment, then cupping his small hand and offering it to his friend.

Outraged, Jesse asks, "Why are you doing this to me?"

Sully shakes her head, warning him, "Not everything that happens has to involve you."

"What's happening here?"

"Is he worth anything?" Her face is grave, and stony. "I mean, if Lark should die now, whatever the cause . . . is that wrong?"

Panic swells. Jesse blubbers something about it being wrong, and how could she think otherwise . . . ?

Sully shrugs, then asks, "In an infinite universe, is there death?"

"This isn't an infinite universe—"

"But it will be," she insists. "Which means the question is valid. Is a true death possible?"

He refuses to answer.

"And if death isn't possible, is there murder?"

He refuses to think, clamping his fists over his eyes, struggling to concentrate on the sound of rain striking the roof.

"Jess," he hears.

"Leave me alone—!"

"If something is endless, does it have worth?"

"Why do this to me?!" he cries out.

"You still don't understand, do you?" Sully is moving. Her voice seems to float away, then return. Then something chill and curved kisses one of Jesse's bare forearms, and he pulls back and drops his fists, discovering Sully holding the knife that she held in the painting.

It looks brutal and simple, green stains on the worn wooden handle and a keen edge catching the soft ruddy firelight.

"Jess," she whispers, in anguish, "all of this is for me. Me."

"But why?"

"I don't know."

"You had a trillion years to think—"

"Lark?" she calls out. "Son?"

"Yes, Mama?" The boy carefully sets his turtle on the ground, then stands, still happily naked and entirely unaware. With a wagging walk, he approaches, then asks, "Is it dinner time?"

"Don't," Jesse warns her.

Sully begins to weep, gripping the handle with both hands now.

"It smells good, Mama!" Lark skips over to the kettle, putting his face into the fragrant steam and smacking his lips.

"Is it murder?" Sully asks. "Is it?"

"You had a trillion years to decide," Jesse tells her.

But she steps forward regardless, and moans aloud, and begins to lift her arms as Lark finally notices her presence, looking over a bare shoulder and asking in a quiet, confused way:

"What are you doing, Mama?"

Jesse leaps, grabbing her from behind and shouting, "I have her! I have her! *Turtle!*" His voice is enormous, shaking this artificial world, and he pulls and pulls, screaming once again:

"*Turtle!*"

A bolt of scorching white light splits the world.

They're falling, mile after mile, Jesse locking hands and squeezing, desperately clinging to his prisoner. With a titanic *smack*, they land inside his dorm room. Fountains of plasma try to push him aside. Jesse holds his grip. In an instant, the green carpeting and bleak furnishings are burned to ash. The prisoner kicks and slithers and wails. Then the Turtle appears, at last, bleeding through a wall and calmly reaching out with some kind of magical restraint. Lloyd flies in through the shattered window and laughs. The prisoner panics, spitting more plasma, which rises up and then collapses, swiftly cooling. Everyone has a strong hold. Suddenly the creature cannot move or speak. Lying on top of it, Jesse gazes into that trapped face, sexless and inhuman; he finds himself weeping, in secret, wishing there could have been some other choice. Would Sully have actually slain the boy? But then again, if he'd waited and she hadn't.. . would that have made any difference?

Now the Turtle kneels, the Indian face exhausted but smiling.

And a soft happy voice whispers:

"Gotcha."

The criminal is bound up in force fields, no escape possible. Jesse stands and steps back, and with a thought clears the room of smoke. He had a good grip, no doubt about it. A real fight would have resembled an atomic

blast, which perhaps is why the Turtle has been so patient. Jesse was supposed to get close for him. It was a careful sweet plan, wasn't it?

"Enough," the Turtle decides. He's wearing a Turtle's body with the Indian face—an old face—white hair spilling onto a drab and worn shell. He shakes the hair and grins, saying, "A perfect job, my friends."

Lloyd rebuilds his original body. No clothes, this time. Naked, he looks pudgy and juvenile and small. "You came through for us, son. Thank you."

Jesse nods.

"Frankly? I didn't have an ounce of faith in you." The ex-president grins, adding, "Our mutual friend here told me to trust you. He claimed that you'd do what was right in the end."

Jesse looks at his own body, human in shape but radiant. Oven hot. "I'm happy to surprise you."

The little bald man laughs and laughs.

The prisoner jerks inside the cocoon and spits a brilliant blue light, accomplishing nothing.

They watch their prisoner for a moment, then the Turtle sags.

With genuine concern, Lloyd asks, "Are you all right, friend?"

"Splendid. I'm splendid." His energies are on the wane, obviously. "I have never felt so wonderful."

"What happens to *this*?" asks Jesse, gesturing at the cocoon.

"It dies," Lloyd replies. "Soon."

"My last official act," the Turtle admits.

"Let me help," Lloyd begs. He has a taste for this work. "If you're too tired to do it yourself. . . ."

The Turtle combs his white hair with a paw. "Thank you, no. I can manage."

No one speaks. A grim sense of duty hangs in the air.

Then the Turtle says, "Take her away." To Lloyd. "Will you do that for me, please?"

"Gladly." Lloyd glances at both of them, saying, "Thanks again, Aylesworth. I mean it." Then he dissolves into a pinkish fog, flowing over the cocoon, swallowing it and vanishing into the floor.

"You have been extraordinarily helpful," the Turtle claims, his voice sober. Spent.

Jesse says nothing.

"But you're bothered," the Turtle senses.

"I don't understand something."

"What?"

Jesse shakes his head. "She made a child. A boy."

"Is that so?"

"Couldn't you see me?"

"When you were inside the painting? No." A wave of the paw. "You vanished from my sight, then reappeared an instant later—"

"Lark, she named him. He's my son."

"Well." Red-rimmed eyes close, open. "I'm sure he's just another illusion. Probably meant to sway you somehow. I wouldn't worry about it."

"What happens to Lark now?"

"Normally we destroy everything we can of a criminal's work." A long pause, then a gracious smile. "But I'll make this exception for you. The boy and his world are preserved. Claim both whenever you like. Is that fair?"

Fair, yes. Yet genuinely chilling.

Jesse feels relief, but more questions continue nagging at him. "My sister didn't know me," he confesses with a stiff, slow voice. "And someone changed my old room—"

"Ah, yes. I should apologize for that incident."

"You did it?"

"Not myself, no. A colleague of mine is guilty." He laughs gently in a best-natured way. "As it happens, she came across some mild oddities in your history, and she decided to test you. Against my wishes, naturally."

"Oddities?" Jesse whispers.

"Minor inconsistencies in your life. Virtually undetectable, or they would have been noticed much earlier."

A sudden chill passes through him.

"My theory? Our criminal is to blame. It was just another one of her tricks, almost certainly meant to confuse us." A cool claw brushes against Jesse's shoulder. "Which it did, obviously. Sadly. I vouched for you, but Turtles are stubborn about their rules—"

"I passed your test, didn't I?"

That brings laughter. A long earnest laughing fit.

"Of course you passed," the Turtle finally replies. "You're not the one who's been imprisoned. Are you?"

"But what about the girl?"

"Which girl?"

"In the Gamma House," Jesse explains, guessing that the Turtle knows exactly who he means. "She didn't belong there. Someone created her and placed her in that room for a reason."

The red-rimmed eyes narrow for an instant.

"You did it." Certainty makes Jesse's flesh brighten, his voice booming. "You wanted me to find her—"

"And the lost diary, too." An amused pause, then he prompts his companion. "I should think the reasons are obvious."

"Pinrose is Sully." Again, Jesse brightens. "That's what you were showing me, weren't you?"

The Turtle nods. "It's an intriguing possibility, I think."

"Pinrose has cancer. But he would have lived for more than fifteen months, which means he was part of the last transformation."

"Very likely, yes."

"Sully resembles the girl in the Gamma House, and it's not an accident. Sully is based on her. That's the girl who Pinrose—"

"Yes! Sadly, yes!"

Jesse shudders. Hesitates. Then remarks, "Sully claimed not to know who she was in the last incarnation."

"That's very likely. Remember, my friend, she's a sophisticated kind of camouflage. A selective ignorance can be valuable, if you want your camouflage to seem believable."

But Sully did a poor job of hiding her true self, obviously.

"Why conjure up that girl for you? What was my design?" The Turtle chuckles for a moment, then says, "A compulsive ladies man is suddenly shown that his love began as a male—"

"I was supposed to be disgusted. Wasn't I?"

The Turtle grins, saying nothing.

"I wasn't. I was too busy being astonished."

A contented nod. "Perhaps you're more open-minded than I thought. Congratulations are in order."

"But Pinrose is the criminal. Right?"

"No, not at all. Your professor is just an organic machine—a failing organic machine—that would become our criminal when given the chance.

And he was given that chance, and did take it. But now, of course, he is safely in custody."

Machines cannot commit crimes, in other words.

"We have you to thank, my friend. You were instrumental in this sordid business."

"You're welcome," Jesse whispers.

"And I promise you, every Turtle in your generation will learn what you've done. They'll know your name and always make a place of honor for you in their homes, should you ever need shelter." He raps on his plastron with both paws, making it ring like a great iron bell. "Turtles have lovely homes, as you can imagine."

Jesse says nothing.

"And now, I fear, I must leave you." The Turtle gives a little bow and wink, then begins to dissolve into the heat-cracked remnants of the linoleum. "Have a good long wondrous life, Jesse Aylesworth. Please."

"I'll try," he meekly promises.

"Oh, we'll meet again, my friend. Once the universe is everlasting, we'll never stop bumping elbows. Am I right?"

Always, yes.

And without so much as a Cheshire smile, the ancient chelonian slips away. Gone.

Jesse learns to fly, first in the confines of his scorched room, then passing through the window to soar high overhead.

From the basement of the stratosphere, he watches the heat build beneath him. There's a resemblance to hell, happenstance and temporary. Heated earth drives off its water, then burns, and the low smoky flames spread to trees and homes and everything else organic. Smoke rises, bringing waves of superheated steam that penetrate his newest flesh, feeling lovely. Joining him in the clouds are a multitude of glowing, rapidly growing vertebrates. Thousands of them. Then, millions. Mice and toads and other enchanted vermin surely outnumber the few pathetic humans, yet every organism has been transformed until there's no hint of its origin. The past, with all its frantic, short-sighted passion, seems trivial; the present bows as One before the glorious trillion-year future.

Jesse grieves, for every reason.

He is sick of all this relentless change.

He misses being small and simple and innocent. Or if it wasn't innocence, it was at least a cozy ignorance.

Thinking of Sully—the camouflage, not the criminal— he wonders if she still exists. But the Turtle promised to erase all of the criminal's work, save Lark, and doesn't that mean that every false record and stored memory of Sully will be sought out and removed?

Except Jesse remembers her and will carry her within his mind for all time.

He makes the vow, not once but a thousand times.

Then he grieves for the world itself. Lloyd's gruesome buildings shatter and collapse, and Jesse grieves even for Battles Hall, its unlovely face lying among the fumaroles. Then the perishable crust melts and flows, hills flooding the river valley, a smooth orangish sea stretching to the horizon.

He grieves as happy life roars around him. And from out of those godly chatterings comes a familiar voice. Whispering into what passes for an ear, she says, "Hello." She says, "Howya' doin, Jess?"

He spins, throwing sparks. "Jill?"

"In the flesh. Or should I say, 'In the coherent plasma.' " An enormous laugh; a peal of thunder. "What do you think, Jess?"

She means herself, her appearance. But all that matters to Jesse is that he suddenly doesn't feel as alone. Gazing at her colors, reaching beneath the plasma, he finds a sturdy hint of the old Jill, and with her usual perceptiveness, she stares back at him and reads his thoughts.

"Damn you," she roars, "you can't be homesick. Already?"

True. He can't deny the feeling.

"And I was about to invite you on a trip. This bullfrog told me where there's good swimming on Saturn, although I'm not sure just how he knows—"

"So go. I'm fine here."

A second entity emerges from the clouds, equally familiar.

"I'm homesick, too," Ruth confesses. "A little bit."

Two offenders, and Jill moans in anguish.

"You're such fucking disappointments," she warns them, a thin good humor beneath the words. And maybe a secret delight, too. After a nanosecond's consideration, she adds, "Hey, I know something fun!"

What?

"If you feel nostalgic, I mean. We can take trips. Individually, in groups. Whatever you want—"

Trips where?

"The past, of course. Or the future." She gives the equivalent of a shrug. "Lloyd, the sweetheart, showed me how to plug into those big null-chambers down at the earth's core. We can use the library and set up any scenario. . . ."

"Sweetheart?" Jesse chides.

"How far into the future?" asks Ruth.

"Fifteen months' worth. That's what the Turtles brought back with them." Another shrug, and she adds, "Just every living memory, every physical clue. Every exact detail from the last transformation . . . which is all we've got to work with, of course."

Jesse stares at the sea of lava, contemplating possibilities.

Always practical, Ruth tells them, "We should pick a time when we're together. The three of us."

One future moment is as obvious as can be.

Jesse refuses to mention it, even in passing. Except the moment demands to be noticed, leaking out of him, then dancing and spitting before the others. A rude moment, it is, and Ruth cries out:

"No, no, no!"

Jill says, "You morbid little prick," and laughs in a bleak way.

"We could start long before it happens," he explains. "A couple of hours before, maybe."

"What, and leave before the finale?" Jill asks.

"You mean the wreck?" Ruth blubbers. "Oh . . . shit . . .!*"

A long, long pause.

Finally, Jill says, "What? Have we agreed?" Affirmative sounds.

Then Ruth asks the very reasonable, "How? How do we do it?"

"Like this," Jill instructs, then with a rainbow's elegant geometry, she leads them on a plunge down and down, through the apocalyptic clouds, knifing deep into the molten earth.

A different kind of smoke hangs in the stale beery air.

Music plays in the gloom, shrill and country. Lonely hearts and battered trucks are the universal themes of the moment.

Jesse is sitting where he might very well have sat, on the hard wood bench in one of the back booths, his feet stuck out into the aisle, a cold brown bottle in one hand. He's wearing jeans and a favorite bright shirt, plus the Adidas that his parents bought him for Christmas, his toes already poking through the threadbare nylon. Jill and Ruth are on the opposite end of the booth. This is the Cornerstone Bar—the largest, most prosperous joint in Hanover. Everything appears normal. The noise. The smells. The blurry sights. And the three of them, of course. Perfectly rebuilt; preposterously simple. Jesse admires the workmanship of his left hand. Jill has dropped a few pounds since winter, and she's smoking to ward off the fat, lighting up a fresh butt and snapping:

"Can I get some applause here? I thought I did a sweet job."

"You did," Jesse agrees. "It is sweet."

Ruth appears winded. "Is this exact?" she asks, her long arms wrapped around herself. "How can we know this is just how it would have been?"

"We don't, naturally. That's why we call it a facsimile." Jill takes a deep drag on her cigarette, then blows a rope of smoke at Jesse. "But do you see those red-necked brains walking around? They were boiled down by the last wave of turtles, every one of their dim recollections put into storage. That's part of what our turtle brought us. Our legacy, if you will. . . ."

Without warning, Jesse thinks of Sully.

His rebuilt stomach begins to ache. Invisible limbs and senses reach out, interfacing with the great library that surrounds them. There's no trace of the girl; her existence has already been thoroughly and permanently excised. The Faulkners in Denver have four strapping sons, but no daughter. Chorus and Literature Club and the Warner senior class are without Sully. She has no grades or social security number, and her cozy room is just a lowly closet once again. The perfect nonentity, Jesse realizes. Stalin himself couldn't make his enemies disappear this thoroughly. Won't that butcher of millions be impressed when it's his time to be transformed . . . ?

Again, the stomach aches. Jesse massages it with his left hand, and he sips the beer with his right.

The jukebox changes tunes.

"Remember when you heard this song the wrong way?" Jill asks him.

"Four hundred kids and a crop in the field," he sings, still preferring his version of this country classic.

"I'm bored," Ruth announces.

A shallow person in life, and now a shallow god.

"I'm calling my sister," she announces, climbing out of the booth with overdone drama. "Think she's in our room—?"

"She is," Jill reports. "Studying for her econ final."

Scanning the room, Jesse spots a familiar figure. She's walking from the bar, a mug of beer in each hand—skinny, bitter Martha West. Suddenly he can't recall why he doesn't like her. Their fights seem soft and meaningless now. And he was an ungracious asshole, as accused. A curing shame begins to coax him to stand and walk over to Martha and apologize, even if she is a mere facsimile—

Then he spies someone else. Someone who sits in another back booth, patiently waiting for his beer. Not a huge coincidence, this. A professor and a graduating student are tipping the bottle together . . . isn't that a hoary tradition . . . ? But Jesse knows better. The professor is an unborn criminal, nemesis of the Turtle and a threat to the universe's wellbeing. A visceral scorn makes Jesse's old-style heart slam against his ribs. A moment's consideration, then he turns to Jill, asking, "How free are we to rewrite your script?"

"Just don't spit fire or fly," she advises. "That would spoil the good-old-boy mood."

"I'll stay on the ground," he promises.

"Where are you going?"

"Just to see an old friend." That sounds perfectly reasonable. "Be right back."

"Please be," Jill laughs. "We've got an appointment with Fate."

Jesse can't make himself laugh at the grim joke. He rises and walks, noticing the gaze of others, nothing meant by it, but him feeling rather self-conscious just the same. With one hand, he combs his hair, discovering that it's grown long. Unkempt. He breathes too fast, practically panting by the time he arrives at the booth, then he hesitates before sputtering, "Well, hi. Buy you a drink, Doc?"

"Thanks, but I've got one." A slight smile; a distracted wave of the hand. "Another time, maybe."

Martha shoots him with a patented glare, trying to freeze him.

"And hello to you, Miss West."

She picks at her nose, saying nothing.

Jesse turns back to Pinrose, his face narrower than before. Worn down, but not yet beaten. "Actually, I'd like to talk for a minute. If we can."

The lovers exchange glances; Martha stands with her beer.

"Thanks," Jesse offers.

"Fuck you," Martha whispers.

The old goat just grins. Facsimile or not, his charm remains intact. Jesse peers inside him, the cancer hiding in a host of damp, secret places, but the old desires remain unabated, Pinrose saying, "Come back soon, Martha. I want to hear all about your plans."

"You will," she promises, vanishing with a wink.

Jesse sits in Martha's place, feeling her heat in the hard wood. "I just want to say thanks. For everything, thank you."

"Finish your senior project, then we'll both give thanks."

Jesse laughs—a flat, empty laugh—and decides on a plan. A course. "Actually, there is something else. A private business, if you know what I mean."

"How can I?"

"About a diary."

Pinrose waits, his face sober and composed.

"Some girls in the Gamma House were moving furniture, and they accidentally broke a hole in the wall. The diary was inside. And since I've been dating one of them—"

"Not all of them?" Pinrose teases.

"—I got a chance to read it. Which is how I found out." A careful pause, then he explains, "It belonged to a Sue Donner."

The worn face grows calmer, steadier. "I've read all of it, and I've done some checking. She was a student at Warner—"

"—in the fifties. I know."

There's an edge to the voice. A shrillness. A nearly omniscient part of Jesse starts hunting through the old records, delving deeper, piecing together data that weren't available to him before now. And at the same instant, he reaches into a back pocket, saying, "It's nobody's business. Not mine, at least." He carves the diary out of his imagination: pink and un-

locked, still a little dusty after its years of hiding in that wall. With a dramatic touch, he shoves it across the table, Pinrose eyeing the gift with suspicion, trying to pretend an utter lack of interest. "From what I can gather," says Jesse, "the girl was some sort of orphan. She dropped out of Warner after her junior year, never to be heard from again. At least, the school doesn't have any forwarding address"

Pinrose is silent.

"I thought you might know where to send it."

"I don't." The music dips and dies as he speaks, making his voice seem loud. He glowers at Jesse, then asks, "Is it good reading?"

"Parts are."

"Parts?" The man breathes through his nose, his chest rising and falling like a bellows. "What'd you learn?"

Not much, from the diary. The girl was immature and infatuated, writing in a neat feminine script about the handsome young professor who was in love with her. Everything was dressed in romantic language. The loss of her virginity was more purple than red. Reading that passage again, Jesse almost hears violins playing in the background.

"Just what do you know?" the professor growls.

"That you and her had a thing. That's all."

But he isn't believed. It doesn't take a superhuman to read the man's expression. Placing a hand over the diary, Pinrose seems to be trying to hide it. "Now how did you get this?" he asks.

Jesse repeats his story.

Pinrose barely hears him. He coughs out of anxiety, both hands trembling. His voice breaks when he asks, "What's this about?"

Jesse doesn't answer.

"One more scandal before you leave? Is that it?" Pinrose pushes on the table, then groans. "Tell you what. You've done enough work on the mice. You're project is done, you've got an A. Let's call it quits."

"I don't care what happened," Jesse offers.

"No?"

"It was a long time ago. What's there to care about?"

All these years, and suddenly—without warning—the past rears up its ugly head, demanding to be noticed. The man is close to tears. He struggles

to gather himself, to offer a stronger front. "Listen," he pleads. "Just listen to me."

Jesse waits.

"You know girls." Pinrose pauses, breathes, and says, "Tell them one thing, they hear another. Say the right word, and they find the wrong tone. And some of them— too many of them—are unstable. It doesn't end like they want, and they just go nuts."

"She went nuts?"

"Maybe." The man shows too much with his eyes. He lies, saying, "I haven't thought of Sue in years."

He thinks of her every day, the truth told.

"She was a strange one. Out of place in our little backwater, let me tell you." The man keeps trying to appear self-assured, but the voice wavers and the eyes can never quite meet Jesse's. "I did fuck up. In those days, you had to watch your prick. If you were a teacher, I mean." Another pause. "She left school, like you said. I don't have any idea where she went. Sorry."

Except he does know. He knows exactly where to find her.

"What are you looking at?"

Jesse swallows, feeling in absolute control. Until an instant ago, he was wasting his energies searching the shelves of the Turtle's great library. The source he needs is here, in arm's reach. With some newly fashioned sense, he peers through the skull, into that simple transparent mass of slow neurons. Every secret is there to be read, the past revealed to him in a jumble of razor-sharp images and blurred sensations.

A summer night. Sticky. Moonlit.

Sue Donner arrives at Pinrose's home without warning, having hitched her way back to Warner to confront her old lover. She's a less attractive, less poised version of Sully. In plaintive tones, she begs for his love, then threatens to end his young career. And Pinrose, thinking to call her bluff, welcomes all disclosures. "Tell the world," he shouts. "You can't hurt me, bitch!"

Sue panics.

Grabbing a cleaver from the kitchen, she charges him. And screams. And takes clumsy swipes at the air.

Pinrose manages to wrestle the cleaver from her hands. But she uses her nails, raking his face—enraging him—and he gives her one good blind

whack that nearly removes her head. To his credit, Pinrose does struggle to plug the gaping wound with towels and curses. Yet she dies, in moments. And now both men remember how he wrapped the corpse in blankets and buried it in the woods. The hole is dug throughout the night, then refilled. And for months, Pinrose thinks of little else, waiting for someone to miss the girl . . . expecting the state police to arrive at any moment, removing this burden at long last. . . .

But nobody wonders about Sue Donner. Certainly no one ever comes to Warner to investigate her disappearance.

Eventually Pinrose dates again. He even dates students, though with much discretion. Gradually, he distances himself from the murder, telling his conscience that it was one moment, and a fluke, and he grows comfortable with the idea that he's capable of awful deeds.

That's why Pinrose is terrified and furious. Twenty years of personal peace are threatened by that diary; there is no way to be sure what it says, or what people might ask as a consequence.

"I don't know anything," Jesse lies, making certain that he looks insincere.

Pinrose opens the diary to a random page, trying to read the neat little words in the lousy light. "Which girls found it?"

Jesse ignores him. Searching the woods outside Warner, he finds the body: a few water-softened bones, rotted fabric, small teeth.

Pinrose asks, "Why come over here? In public like this?"

"To warn you," Jesse admits.

The professor stares at him, one hand closing the pink book with an audible pop.

"You won't get away with it," Jesse promises. "You won't."

He means Sully. He means trying to cheat and live through another incarnation. But of course Pinrose thinks of a different, much smaller crime. "I don't know what you know," he says. "Or what you want. But you've got no goddamn right to judge me."

"You know," Jesse allows, "I've always liked you."

The thin old face is full of blood. Pinrose doesn't dare utter another word. He's afraid of his temper, afraid that he might admit too much in a careless outburst. . . if he hasn't already. . . .

"See you in a trillion years," Jesse tells him.

The words have no impact. None.

Jesse walks back across the room, rejoining Jill, and she watches him with a vague amusement.

"What?" he snaps.

"Nothing," she replies, shrugging her shoulders.

He doesn't want to stay another minute and says so.

"It's early," Jill warns. "We've got more than an hour of drinking before we've got to leave."

"I'm going," he threatens. "Now."

And she laughs and laughs. And crushes her cigarette into her portable ashtray, saying, "Fine, then. Why not?"

They came in Jesse's car, in the red Mustang. Out from under the snow, it's a little rustier after the winter and wearing an ugly dent on the passenger door. The night itself is warm, summery and smelling of recent rains. Ruth walks on one side of Jesse, telling them, "She wouldn't talk about anything important. Just her econ test. I tried to tell her that I'd come see her, often . . . but she called me silly and hung up. . . ."

"Have a nice chat with Pinrose?" Jill asks.

"All right."

"It looked kind of heated, actually."

"Did you eavesdrop?"

"No. I'm playing this game fairly. No enhanced powers."

The printing shop is dark. Closed up tight. Jill hands him keys, freshly minted. "Don't forget these."

"Thanks." The Mustang is parked at an angle to the high curb. He unlocks the passenger door, then walks around as Ruth and then Jill climb inside. Jill opens his door for him. Behind the wheel, he pauses, pretending to examine the dashboard for flaws. Fingers poke at the eight-track while he thinks of Sue Donner, seeing her neck slit open and a bloody river flowing . . . in Pinrose's mind, it's a broad bright living river. . . .

"Earth to Jess! Earth to Jess!"

He breathes, and breathes, and turns, saying, "Sorry."

Jill sits beside him, giving him a careful look.

The engine starts on the first try—a rough gassy idle; time for a tune-up—then he backs out and starts for the highway and Warner. Only then, with a quiet stiff voice, does he ask, "Why do we crash?"

"The best guess?" Jill punches the cigarette lighter. "Deer use that area to cross the highway. One old buck remembers headlights and a loud crash. I'm guessing that you were a little drunk, you tried to miss it, and off we went, right into the trees."

Jesse grips the wheel with both hands.

The lighter pops; Jill lights a fresh cigarette. "Just a stupid accident," she promises, smoke filling the car. "And none of us wearing our seat belts. So no one cheat now, okay?"

Jesse feels distant, and cold, and very sad.

Jill touches his hand, saying, "My, my. You're practically trembling, Jess. And I thought you weren't playing this game seriously."

He swallows, saying nothing.

"Relax," she coaches.

And he says, "It's not. .. not this. . . ."

"So what's got you frazzled?"

They've passed the printing shop, no traffic whatsoever. He feels a sudden urge to find the old fart with the dirty apron, the one who had leered at Sully. Does his freshly recorded brain hold a residual memory of the girl? Or are the Turtles that relentless?

"Jess? What's wrong with you?"

He says, "Pinrose." Then he swallows, his throat painfully dry. "Pinrose is the cheater. He's the one."

"Oh, I know. Sure." Jill flips her head to one side, laughing calmly. "He dies next summer, and he spends eternity inventing Sully—"

"How do you know?" Jesse interrupts.

"Because. The Turtle told me."

"When?"

"Just this morning. Not long after you left my place, actually."

"The Turtle came to see you . . . ?"

"Hey, you don't have the monopoly on him."

He didn't mean it that way. It's just that the Turtle was extraordinarily busy, or at least that's what he'd claimed.

"After you left," she continues, "I thought up some questions. I walked around my apartment, calling for him." She pauses, then admits, "He was grouchy about being bothered, but he did show up."

The last stoplight changes to red. Jesse brakes and leans back, saying, "It's Pinrose, all right."

Jill watches him, exhaling smoke. "The two of you were pretty close."

He nods and says, "I guess."

"Yeah, well. . . as far as I could follow, the Turtle always knew it was Pinrose. Even before any turtles or cheaters jumped back in time." A pause. "It seems that our reptilian friends don't just sit on their bony butts for a trillion years. They spend a lot of time and juice deciding who might cause trouble and nipping it in the bud, if they can."

"I didn't know that."

"See? I've taught you something." She chuckles, then says, "Not that it means shit. Our Mr. Turtle had thousands of possible offenders to watch, and there's never been a perfect police state, has there? A trillion years and enormous powers . . . and a determined soul can accomplish all kinds of mischief, if he has the mind for it."

"I guess."

"What mattered most was to find Pinrose here. Now. To cut through his camouflage, catch him, and kill him."

He shivers. Winces.

"Hey, Jess," she says. "That light won't get any greener."

"Sorry."

"Hey, that's okay."

He accelerates, rolling through Hanover's modest suburbs. For just a moment, the sweet aroma of nicotiana reaches into the car. Jesse is aware of his breathing and little else, scarcely hearing his own voice as he asks, "What else did you talk about?"

"With the Turtle?"

"Yeah."

Jill waits for an instant, then remarks, "He did mention that your friend Pinrose once murdered a coed."

"Who?" Ruth asks from the backseat. "Pinrose killed who?"

"Nobody we know," Jill assures her. "Years ago, and nobody even suspected it."

The last of the houses are behind them, the countryside black, black asphalt illuminated by his misaligned headlights.

"Yeah," says Jill, "he's a secret shit. Every time the turtles come jumping back in time, they find that poor girl's body. A little fresher, but always waiting in that grave."

"And I thought the guy was cute," is Ruth's assessment.

Jesse contemplates the endless universe: Susan Donners born without end and murdered, every possible suspect guilty more often than even a god can count. What can it matter who kills her now? Why does it eat at him like this?

He coughs quietly, then asks, "So what about your questions?"

"What questions?"

"You said you wanted to ask the Turtle—"

"That's right, sure." She halfway laughs, admitting, "I know it sounds paranoid, but I had an idea. It struck me all at once, and I couldn't get it out of my head."

"What idea?"

"I like the new Lloyd," she admits, "but my reporter's intuition, or whatever, kept nagging at me. I found myself wondering if it wasn't poor Sully after all."

"What do you mean?"

Jill takes a deep breath, then exhales. "Suppose. Sully is real, and she's sitting in her room last Thursday night—reading her Bible, say—and *boom*, Pinrose arrives from the future. Arrives and changes her. His very first act is to give her a big head start with her transformation. He fills her up with hidden powers, and ideas, and false memories, and a plan of action. Suddenly the sweet kid is rebuilt, tremendous energies coursing through her, and all she can think—all she knows—is that her real life is some fiction, that she's come from the future because she wants to live forever all over again." A pause, then, "Can you follow my logic, Jess?"

"I guess."

"It was a guess. A bizarre little notion. Sully Faulkner is a total innocent, and she's being used as some kind of elaborate decoy. A tool meant to fool our Mr. Turtle."

"Huh," he whispers.

"That's what I asked the Turtle. 'What if she is? And what if Lloyd's the one you really should watch?' "

"What did the Turtle say?"

"That it was possible, sure. *Just* possible." She shakes her head. "I don't want to speak ill of the Great Entity, but our Mr. Turtle was pretty squeamish about my idea. In fact, just thinking about it made him look like he was ready to faint."

"I don't get it. Why?"

"Cheating comes in grades. Your run-of-the-mill cheater jumps back in time and makes room for himself, or tries to, and in almost every case, he's uncovered. But the kind of cheater I was talking about—someone that bold and talented—is about ten grades more dangerous. At least."

"Sully might not be guilty," he whispers.

"Think of the poor Turtle. His last official act is to kill some notorious criminal, except of course he doesn't have the right one. Imagine what that does to his reputation. Not to mention the reputations of turtles everywhere. . . ."

The highway is rising with the first long hill.

"Anyway," she says. "Anyway, he informed me that that kind of cheating is extraordinarily difficult. You've got to convince your victim that she's ten thousand percent genuine, and she has to keep acting guilty. And meanwhile, you've got to vanish. Totally, totally vanish." She tosses her hair, adding, "Of course if it's true, then Pinrose isn't just murdering another coed. No. What he's stealing is a trillion years of one god's life."

"Sully's life," he says, without sound.

"Oh, and I had this other problem. With Pinrose being Sully, I mean." She looks at him, saying, "I'm not going to poo-poo your talents, Jess. But don't you think Sully could have found a better champion? I mean, consider the possibilities. Lloyd was a lot farther along in his transformation. He was stronger than anyone else. Pinrose would know this. He had a trillion years to invent someone, so why not become Lloyd's secretary? Send Miss Reinhart off to some other job, some other life, then seduce that bald little thief. Now *he* would have made a worthy ally!"

They reach the sharp crest of the hill. A pickup truck approaches, flashing its high beams until Jesse cuts his highs. A blaring horn sounds as they shoot past each other, the Mustang shaking in the slipstream.

"Know what the Turtle told me, Jess? He didn't want to think about that sort of monster. Someone that cynical, that subversive and talented, was so much worse than your Kmart variety cheater."

"It might not be the first time," Jesse offers. "Pinrose, or whatever his name, could have lived through several incarnations—"

"Thousands, perhaps. Maybe millions," Jill adds.

"Jumping all the way back to the Big Bang, eventually." He feels nauseated, light-headed. "The Turtle warned me about that. . . what would happen if criminals would sneak all the way back to the Creation."

"I don't get it," Ruth says with a shrill, impatient voice. "What are you talking about?"

"The Creation!" Jill snaps. "Evil forces wrest control of the universe away from us, then build whatever fucking madhouse they want."

Jesse shivers.

"Now *that*," says Jill, "is the ultimate police state."

Ruth whines, "Don't talk about those things."

"Don't listen to us," Jill kids her, and laughs in a bleak fashion. Then she tells Jesse, "I suspected Lloyd, but it couldn't have been him."

"Why not?"

"Because," she says. "Because he's the very last person Pinrose would invent. The Turtle made me think it through. Transformations are like building bonfires. Except dear Lloyd got the early attention. He's like a piece of tinder pulled aside and put to the match first."

"I suppose so," he says.

Jill hesitates, then says, "Here's how it was explained to me. Pinrose comes back in time and creates his decoy— using Sully—then he promptly creates a phony identity for himself. He's got to stay nearby because there's no time to be fancy, and because he wants to keep tabs on everything that happens. And to make the scheme work—to have a good chance of getting away clean and easy—he's got to sink himself deep inside his camouflage. He can't give it *any* extra energies. No altered senses. If he shows so much as an omniscient butt hair, he's got every turtle watching him."

Jesse nods.

"The drawback there, of course, is that the genuine cheater is left weak and vulnerable."

Without sound or fuss, Jesse begins to cry.

Jill pokes him in the leg. "Hey! Drive faster. The accident report claims we were doing seventy-five."

He barely feels his foot, or the accelerator.

"Where was I? Oh, right. The cheater. He's riding around inside some invented dupe. Some fence lizard or human being who thinks that he or she is real . . . and that got me thinking of something else obvious."

"What?"

"That I'm him. I'm Pinrose." She squeezes one of his legs, sharp nails working into denim. "Me. Jill Toon. A constructed nobody. A swatch of professional camouflage."

"Did you tell him that?"

"He read my face, or my mind. Either way, I guess he did." She laughs and withdraws her hand. "Then he explained—he was kind of sweet about it all—that if Pinrose or any cheater was hiding inside me, then I was in the best position to find him. By this morning, I had the powers to manage it." A pause, then, "It's a nice thought, isn't it? I could betray my maker, turning my fledgling talents against his secret soul. . . ."

"Did you try it?"

"Sure." A long pause. "I mean, why would I want an innocent girl killed? If it wasn't really Sully—"

"It can't be you," he murmurs.

"It's not. Thank goodness." She sighs and says, "I looked and looked, but there was nothing inside me except blood and bowels."

The highway lifts and flattens, then starts a long steep drop.

"Imagine," she tells him. "You don't really exist. You're a purse that carries some kind of metaphysical monster."

"But why?" says Jesse. "Why make someone who could turn you in?"

"Good point, and you're right. You need to make someone reasonable, but trustworthy, too. Someone who's *just* selfish enough *and just* scared enough that she or he won't dream of looking too deep."

Jesse lifts his right foot, and the car slows.

"Hey! Concentrate!" She laughs and says, "We've got a car to crash in a minute!"

He takes a deep breath. "It is Sully."

"It is. You're right."

"She confessed, and the Turtle's satisfied."

"Actually, I never heard her say, 'I'm guilty,' in so many words. But you're absolutely right about the Turtle. Sure."

Jesse says nothing.

"What did she tell you? The two of you had that last little interlude, as I understand it. What did she say?"

He remembers Sully holding the knife in both hands, aiming for their son . . . and he straightens his back, gritting his teeth for a long moment, then admitting, "She was nothing like I expected."

"Crooks usually aren't," Jill maintains.

Jesse swallows, suddenly thinking about Sue Donner. He can't shake the image of her lying dead in her grave. She isn't far from here, he realizes. Green oaks stand a little stronger for having her bones beneath them. He sees her from Pinrose's eyes, her tilted face and the half-severed neck, dead eyes open, a perpetual scream rising from the eyes and mouth and from the wound itself, as if the drying blood is capable of emitting a pained roar. And finally, after swallowing twice with a dry throat, he hears himself asking, "What if?"

"What if what, Jess?"

"If she's not the criminal. Sully isn't. Can't the Turtle set her free now?"

"No, Jesse." The voice is distant, steady, and clear. "At this point, with Sully's kinds of powers, there's no way that she can prove her own innocence. It's too easy for her to falsify evidence, or emotions."

He says nothing.

And she says, "I'm in the Turtle's camp now. I don't even want to consider the possibility that he's wrong, thank you."

Jesse hears the car's steady motor and the hum of the tires, and after a long while, he makes himself ask the burdensome question once again. "But what if it isn't Sully?"

"Put yourself in the Turtle's place." Jill straightens and gives a smoker's wet cough. "He came here for a purpose. Life is marching back in time, on a mission to refashion the Creation—"

"I know."

"—and he has to kill her. Where's the choice? She's very likely guilty, and there's too much at stake for him to be cowardly."

"I know." He mouths the words, without sound. "I know."

"It would be ironic," says Jill, "if it were true."

"If what was?"

"If Pinrose was somewhere else. Someone else, and free." She laughs at the image of it. "An omniscient criminal rides around inside his own fictional human, but because of circumstances, he's forced to utterly trust his creation. He trusts it not to be too deeply influenced. He trusts it not to look inside itself. Regardless of what the turtles throw in its way, there can't be so much as one glance in an honest mirror."

Ahead, motion.

Jesse observes something on the highway, and he asks, "Are we there? Is this the place—?"

"I'm not sure," she cackles. "I forgot to pay attention."

Jesse watches a deer step out into their path—he expects to see a deer—and inside his shivering, miserable husk is a calm voice that tells him just to drive, to aim for that animal and simply run it over . . . !

"Poor Pinrose," says Jill, in a whisper. "A criminal for the ages, yet completely dependent on a simple sack of water and nucleic acids."

The deer changes, or Jesse simply recognizes what he truly sees. Suddenly what stands out on the smooth asphalt, in the wash of headlights, is upright and bipedal, wearing a blue winter jacket, her gaze distant and her eyes astonishingly unaware.

Time slows. Jesse wills it to slow, to become syrup—

—and Jill leans close, kissing his right ear as she whispers:

"Kill her."

Licks the ear, then with a chill delight says: "For all of us, Jess. Kill her."

And she places her foot on his right foot, and pushes, and the car accelerates, and time accelerates with it. And Jesse reacts, in an instant, jerking the steering wheel hard to the right and screaming. Sully passes on his left, close enough to touch, but still unaware. And now the car is airborne, nothing before them and no sound from the engine. A sudden winter seeps in through the steel and glass; Jesse pulls his hands from the wheel, and turns, weeping as he looks at Jill, telling her with a slow, choked voice, "It has to be me . . . I think . . . I know . . ."

"Thank you."

Jill hasn't spoken. Jesse turns halfway around and finds the Turtle sitting where Ruth Hurtney should be, wearing his carapace and his blunt paws and a great joyous look in his hard beak and the red-rimmed eyes.

Again, he says, "Thank you."

Lloyd emerges from the upholstery. He resembles the old Lloyd, complete to the shiny scalp and the fancy suit, and he makes a show of patting Jesse on the shoulder. "One crook to another?" he says. "You did a damn fine clever job of it, son."

Jesse's flesh shivers and bones ache.

"When did you suspect me?" he asks. "How soon?"

"I have always suspected you, and everyone else," the Turtle replies, proud of his paranoia. "But when I saw you walking in the blizzard—when I saw your preoccupied mind—I had a premonition. A turtle's intuition. You belonged to that particular place and time a little too well, if that's possible. Too perfect, you were. And from then on, I gave you my full attention and every sort of little test."

"These days have been one grueling interrogation," Lloyd informs him.

"No," says Jill, speaking into his ear. "No, think of it as a great seduction."

Jesse gasps, achingly tired all at once. These last days . . . *my only days* . . . have been an elaborate, finely wrought enticement. . .

"We wanted you to doubt yourself," says the Turtle.

"To make you sweat," Lloyd claims.

"To seduce you," says Jill, one warm finger playing in his shaggy hair. "The Turtle hoped you would do one very good and brave thing, darling. And he invited us to help."

"Help you did," the Turtle assures. "An admirable job, all."

Something vast and ill-defined moves within Jesse, disgorging a tiny bubble that rises and bursts against his consciousness . . . and with a genuine astonishment, he mutters:

"There was no murdered girl."

Silence.

"Pinrose didn't know any Susan Donner . . .!"

"The girl was an invention," confesses the Turtle. "She was Miss Toon's suggestion, in principle."

"I'm sorry, Jess."

He looks at Jill and waits.

"The Turtle wanted you morally outraged," she explains. "And the Jesse I know is far from perfect, but he adores the idea of women."

The idea of women. . . .

Jesse shudders, breathes. With his right hand, he finds tears on Jill's face, and quietly, almost inaudibly, he asks:

"What happens now? To me . . .?"

Lloyd giggles and says, "Death, naturally."

"In a few moments," the Turtle promises, "I'm going to slay the monster within you—"

And the rest of me?

"She wants to speak to Jesse Aylesworth."

Who does?

Jill tells him. She says, "Sully does," and takes his hand, kissing it once, then again. "She has asked for the chance to thank you for saving her life."

"All she gets is the human shell," Lloyd adds. "Nothing more."

"I'll eventually have to destroy that part of you, too." The Turtle pats him on the shoulder with a rough paw. "But enough of this grim talk. Until the universe is forever, my friend."

Jill surrenders his hand, then with a soft voice promises, "I'll think of you. Often."

"That's something," he says, without sound.

And an instant later—without any warning, without the simplest pain—all but a tiny, tiny part of him peacefully dies.

Dappled light, and a summer's warmth.

Jesse finds himself upright, barefoot, and wearing simple clothes; a familiar voice assures him, "You know where you are."

A forested bank leads down to a river—a slow and deep river, too wide to jump and as clear as weak tea. He knows where this is, seeing it for the first time. Someone walks up behind him, a small calloused left hand taking his right hand, and the voice tells him, "Thank you."

Jesse fully expects to die, perhaps at any moment.

He cries like a baby. Baby legs collapse beneath him, and he carries on for what seems like an age.

Then Sully kneels and touches him, using more than fingertips.

"Listen," she says. "I have to leave. Now."

He looks at her face, at the wise eyes and a wry little smile. His intention is to say something noble, wishing her well in her great new life. But all he can summon is a weary, half-hearted, "Good luck," that is barely audible over the murmur of the water.

"Lark is nearby, somewhere." Sully removes the kerchief from her head, smiles and adds, "Could you please watch him for me?"

Astonishment. "Watch him? For how long?"

She laughs, then says, "Until you die. Of old age, I hope."

What did she say? What was that—?

"Although you could drown, or maybe get kicked to death by a mule," she allows. "So be careful, Jess. For both of your sakes."

He can't seem to think, or move. Or make any sound.

"Fifty years here is less than a month on the outside." Sully winks and uses the kerchief to wipe his face clean. "It's a small payment for what you've done, I grant you. But this invented world isn't without its charms, I think. Or its challenges."

Jesse will live out his existence as the simplest of farmers.

This has been one damned busy weekend. . . .

He starts to laugh, softly, and Sully touches his lips with fingers and her salty kerchief, telling him, "One more thing, then I'm gone."

"What is it?" he asks, tasting cotton and salt and the fragrant oils of her hair.

"He wasn't a criminal."

Who wasn't?

"Pinrose," she replies. "You think he was evil, and so does the Turtle. But the truth is that he was better than any of us, I think. I pray."

He pushes away her hand, asking, "Why?"

"Think, Jess. There are criminals, yes. Selfish monsters of the very worst sort. Plus there are the Turtles and such— entities whose only goal is to reach the Creation to make it immortal." She pauses, smiling brightly. "But imagine entities of a third flavor. As driven as the Turtles, but in pursuit of different ends."

The value of life . . . Sully's obsession . . . !

"Simpler ends," she says.

"Simpler how?" he whispers.

"It will be just like this universe, in every simple way," she promises. "If we succeed. Stars will be born, and die. And species with them. And the gods will come, but slowly, and the galaxies and matter will fall apart. And everything will grow so very cold. . . ."

"But what will you change?"

"If our movement is successful—if souls like Pinrose can find enough recruits, like me—and if we can eventually outnumber or outmaneuver the Turtles—"

"You're an underground movement. . . is that it. . . ?"

"A quiet, secret revolution." She nods, then bends close and kisses him on the forehead. "We intend to make the universe exactly as it is now. Except in the end, it will end. When it is dying, there won't be any way to pierce time and leap back to here again."

Jesse closes his eyes, and breathes.

"What's life," asks Sully, "if it isn't bounded in some way?"

It isn't life, surely.

And now she kisses him on the lips lightly, and with his eyes still closed he hears exactly two sounds. A lark in a field, unseen.

And his son, crying out from below to come see, come see, come see what he's found, Papa, come see