

SUSAN WADE

INTRUDERS

The man was in her house again when she came home, standing still and shadowed on the landing at the top of the stairs. Julia Ogilvy glimpsed the tall figure through the window over the stairs as she went up the walk. Her key was in her hand, poised for the lock, but she stopped ten steps away from the porch when she saw him. Just as she had every other time, she stared at the window, watching the unmoving, clearly human shape of him there on her stairs, waiting for him to move, or for the light to change. Waiting for some random happening that would reveal him as real and solid, or as nothing more than an odd pattern of light that collected on her landing.

Dusk was approaching, though not yet arrived. It was spring, and the air outside was warm and moist and tasted green. Julia stood there and let the light fade, her key in her hand, as she watched the tall, thin figure inside her house. The light shifted and changed around him; his figure grew more shadowed. But it was still clearly there, still a man. Julia knew as soon as she dropped her gaze, as soon as she unlocked her front door and dashed up the stairs, the thread of his existence would snap. He was never there when she got to the landing.

This was the first time she had seen him in over a month, since before her three-week vacation. Once or twice she had seen him by the sliding glass doors that opened onto the balcony from her bedroom. One time he had been standing downstairs, waiting for her, staring out at her through the window next to the breakfast nook. But almost always he waited for her on the stairs. She wondered about that as she stood on the walk, about his preference for the landing about his stillness. He never moved at all, not even a shift of his stance or a twitch of his hands as they dangled awkwardly from his long arms. The huge pecan tree in her front yard cast moving shadows over him, patterned like bars by its long thin leaves. But the man never moved. He simply disappeared every time she went inside.

It had grown dark as Julia stood on the walk, occasionally scraping a shriveled pecan catkin off the walk with her shoe; now and then easing her leather briefcase from one hand to the other. But she never took her eyes from his tall figure.

He was gone when she went in, as he always was. Julia slipped off her shoes and padded upstairs to stand on the landing. If he had been there in his accustomed spot, they would have been face to face. She had an instant of longing for that,

to be able to reach her left hand to the light switch on the wall and press the rheostat flat with her palm. She wanted to hear the guttural click as the light came on, soft and dim, not strong enough to drive away the shadows. Only enough for her to see his face, to look at the fabric of his long dark coat and the shape of the big hands he kept so loose and motionless at his sides.

To see his face.

She had always lived alone, ever since college. Somehow, her affairs never seemed to progress to living together. All these years of dating, falling in love, and still she'd never found the right man. She had turned forty-six in February, on the sixteenth. Her mother had always called Julia her belated Valentine. But her mother had been dead for almost two years, and Julia had never known her father.

She had first seen the man in her house a week or so after her birthday. It had been frightening at first, when she thought he was a real intruder. It took three phone calls to the police -- three humiliating trips to her house during which they found no one on the premises and no sign of forced entry -- before Julia realized they never would find him. She wondered whether his appearance was related to her birthday. Imagining things so she wouldn't have to think about turning fifty?

But long after birthday twinges subsided into the compelling well-orchestrated chaos of her career, she would return home to find the man standing in that spot, waiting motionless for -- what? It happened most often near dusk. After the third time, she stopped racing to her neighbor Rob's house to call the police. The fourth time he appeared, she had gone straight indoors to try to capture him, to prove -- to herself, at least -- that he was really there. Not just a strange set of shadows that lived at the top of her stairs.

There was no one inside, no one there at all. She walked back outside and stood on the pavement staring at the window. No shadowy figure showed. He had been there. He had. And now he was gone. She gathered up her briefcase and left again, not even pausing to put on lower-heeled shoes. Ordinarily, she preferred not to eat in restaurants. She got too much of that when she traveled on business. But that night she found herself unable to stay in the house after seeing his figure so clearly. Not when she was utterly certain he had been there on the landing. Not when she could now find no trace of him.

She left the house and went to a Bennigan's because it was easy, and ordered Irish whisky on the rocks, along with a salad and boiled shrimp. Then she cracked her briefcase and settled into work. Three too many whiskies later, she shoved the advertising presentations her reps had prepared back into the case. She wasn't able to concentrate on them tonight and she was damned if she would let her standards slide.

The brass rail behind the booth she sat in felt cool when she turned and leaned her cheek against it. The tang of the brass polish was sharp enough to taste. Her booth was in an alcove near the bar. A tall man sat there, drinking a Schlitz and watching baseball on the big-screen T.V. He wore a dark green

jacket
over a black T-shirt and jeans, with boots, and his big body managed to look loose and easy on the uncomfortable bar stool.

He glanced around, caught her eye, and smiled. Without considering Julia smiled
back. He was tall, a bit lanky, and his jacket was dark. She wondered what he would look like in silhouette.

He picked up his beer bottle and came over. "You in town on business too?" he asked.

Most times she would have said yes. These things went better if there were no complications, no phone calls next time he was in town and wanting company. But
this time she said, "I live here, actually."

He slid into the booth, facing her. "Fooled me with that briefcase."

She smiled. "Paperwork."

"I'd never have expected a classy looking lady like yourself to use bad words like that." He winked. "I save mine and do it on the plane going home."

"Yes, I've noticed the men who work for me like to party during week, and worry
about the paperwork later." She tilted her head back and lowered her eyes, feeling tension ease along her shoulderblades. "They call me a ball-buster because I review everything before and after it's presented to the client." She smiled slowly. "They may even be right. But I get results."

He picked up the last shrimp left on her plate and popped it in his mouth. His teeth were large and a little dingy. A heavy coffee-drinker, she thought idly. He didn't smell like a smoker.

"I'll bet you do," he said, and winked again. He added some remark about the weather that Julia responded to automatically, the same kind of small talk she always made with her clients. The liquor she had drunk had left her body warm and softened, and she realized she was saying more than she usually would.

"Can I drag you away from your work long enough to have a drink with me?" he asked.

She slapped a hand on the briefcase. "I've given up on it. Why don't we go to my
place for that drink?"

His eyebrows went up a bit. "Why, surely. I'd be much obliged."

"You'll have to settle for whisky," she said. "I don't keep beer in the house."

He smiled. "I can't turn that down. My daddy told me a long time ago, there's two things you never say no to. A free drink and a good-looking woman."

He looked around the living room while she went to the antique pine cupboard in
the dining room to pour the drinks.

"These are some nice pictures," he said, squinting at two of the enlarged

photographs that hung over the sofa. "Real nice. I like nature pictures."

"Thank you," she said as she handed him his drink. "I enjoyed taking them."

He turned and looked at her. "You took these?"

"Yes. I like photography. One of my little hobbies. I have a small darkroom down in the basement."

He studied one of the photographs, a picture she had taken of a small pond near Corsicana, limpid and green under a brilliant sky, gray moss dripping from the branches of the oaks along the bank. "Looks like you're awful damn good to be calling it a hobby." He took a long drink of whisky.

"Thanks," she said and drank off her own. "I like to capture things on film. It makes them hold still long enough for me to understand them."

The need to take him upstairs was urgent. Why? Not for the sex. That wasn't going to be any different than it ever was. But she wanted the polite preliminaries over with. She went to the rheostat that controlled the living room chandelier and lowered the setting until shadows draped the vaulted ceiling. "Let's go on up. You go ahead, I'll just top off our drinks."

He cleared his throat. "Why, sure."

She slopped liquor on the cupboard and didn't stop to wipe it up. She was right behind him when he got to the landing. The whisky burned in her stomach. "Wait," she whispered.

He paused, just where she wanted him to, and her heart pulsed against her ribs; for a second he looked -- his coat was long and dark, his figure tall and angular -- he looked -- as he turned, she blinked hard to hold back tears, not sure why.

The illusion snapped when he faced her. He was just a salesman she had picked up in a bar. Just a tall man in his late forties who happened to be wearing a dark coat.

Julia sagged against the bannister. This is all wrong she thought, this is not how it's supposed to be.

"You feeling shy all of a sudden?" he asked. He put his hand on her breast and squeezed it, hard.

And suddenly her hands were shaking too much to hold the whisky glasses, and the heavy crystal went thudding down onto the carpeted stairs, and rolled and thudded again on the step below, and again; one glass after the other in a rolling thunder of sound like someone beating on a door in great slow deliberate gongs. The sound twisted itself through her head in unceasing cycles, booming, "Not you, not you, not you, not you. . ." And the pain inside her exploded,

was
blown everywhere, all around her, hammering at her in time with the high
screaming voice that sobbed, "No, not you, not you, no, no --" and she struck
back, pounding her hands on the door she had to get through but could not open
--

-- until she was knocked sideways against the wall, and all the breath went
out
of her, and her head ricocheted so hard she tasted blood. She clenched her
fists, and they hurt, a sharp pain in her knuckles.

"God damn it, are you crazy?" he shouted at her. "If you changed your mind,
just
say so, you stupid bitch!" He shoved her against the wall again.

Julia blinked against the crowding shadows and saw him, one hand blotting
blood
from his mouth and chin with a handkerchief, saw him tall at the top of her
stairs, scowling face shadowed in the gathering dimness, looking for an
instant
almost as she had needed him to look; almost.

Then he was gone, and the huge, shaking sound of the door slamming was what
she
took with her into unconsciousness.

The next morning was a Thursday. It was difficult for her to move, but she got
out of bed when the alarm went off at 5:30. She had some codeine tablets she
had
never taken, left from when she had broken her wrist at Christmas three years
before. She took two of the pills, showered, and put on her favorite black
suit.
The worst bruise started below her collarbone, just above her heart, and
spread
upward toward her throat. She covered the part that showed above her collar
with
make-up, but there was nothing she could do about her scraped knuckles.

For lunch, she had two more codeine tablets, then went out and used her hour
to
buy a pair of binoculars.

After she got back, she found that the managing partner of the ad agency had
had
his secretary schedule a meeting with her for 4:20 on Friday. Richard Billings
always scheduled unpleasant meetings for late afternoon. One of his
much-mentioned management techniques: Always give employees time to cool down
after getting bad news.

The next afternoon, Julia walked into his suite of offices at 4:19. She
carried
her leather portfolio in case she needed to take notes. Richard's assistant
had
her mouth cocked open to a precise angle and was applying burgundy lipstick
with
a small brush. The lipstick exactly matched the flawless polish on her
inch-long
fingernails. She uncooked her mouth when she saw Julia. "He said for you to go
right in, Ms. Ogilvy."

"Thank you, Barbara." Julia gave Richard's door an abbreviated knock and opened it.

He was looking out the big window behind his desk while he talked on the phone, his chair turned away from the door. It gave her a good view of the patch of pink scalp that showed through the dark hair at his crown. "Great, great, Bob. Let's do that soon. Sure. So long." Richard spun his chair around and hung up the phone in one practiced movement. "Julia, right on time, as always. Let's sit over here." He moved to the work table against the wall and gestured her to a seat.

Julia took a tighter grip on her portfolio. She didn't need this trap, today of all days. Her body ached all over. "Barbara didn't tell Lannie what you wanted to see me about."

"I didn't discuss it with her," Richard said. His face assumed its sincerest good-manager look.

Julia studied him. He had been in love with her once, back when she was a struggling account rep. In the past fifteen years his features had grown softer:

His chin and cheekbones had plumped up, even though his face wasn't round. She knew he worked at keeping a lean figure; the partners were fond of reminding people that this was a youth industry. His fair skin, always tanned and smooth in her memory, looked thin and mottled. It was odd to remember now the way he had always been after her to make a commitment; he had even cried once when he begged her to marry him and she had said no. He had left his wife anyway, but it wasn't enough to change Julia's mind. By then, she had known that men always faded when she needed them most. Eventually he and Carrie had reconciled.

Julia sighed and pulled out the chair he had indicated. "Just give it to me straight, Rich. Is it the Carruthers account?"

His expression became even more concerned and sincere. "Why, no, Julia. Nothing like that. This really isn't about business, except in a peripheral sense. I just wanted to speak to you as a friend."

Her stomach muscles tightened, but she kept her face still. "Why, thank you, Rich."

He cleared his throat. "We -- the partners and I -- wanted to suggest you take a vacation, now, before the summer hits. When it starts getting hot, everyone's temper frays. And, frankly, Julia, yours has been a bit short lately. You've got a lot of vacation time you've carried over, and now would be a good time, logistically speaking, for you to use some of it."

"Logistically speaking? Rich, for Christ's sake, the Carruthers account is worth ten million over the next eighteen months. The negotiations are at crisis point, and Carruthers likes dealing with me."

"Yes, yes, of course he does. There's no question that you have a way with the clients, Julia."

His unspoken implication hit her like a shock wave, about ten seconds after he stopped talking. You're a raging bitch with your own staff, though.

Julia swallowed. "When did you have in mind, Rich? The Carruthers thing really is hot right now."

He beamed at her. "That's the spirit! We just want you at the top of your form for the next big account. You told me last week you thought the Carruthers deal would be settled by the end of the month."

She nodded, feeling like an obedient child. Reluctantly obedient. But she was slated for partnership by the end of the year, nearly two years ahead of schedule. Time to play nice. "By the twenty-seventh, I think."

"Fine, fine. You've got plenty of vacation, how about taking three weeks now, and --"

His gaze slid to her collarbone. She had used make-up on the bruises again today, but they were too dark to be completely hidden. "

-- and maybe take some more time in the fall, we'll see how things are going, okay? You know, Carrie and I went to New Mexico last spring, to the mountains. Lovely, cool, all those trees. Why don't you think about it?"

"The mountains would be delightful this time of year," Julia agreed evenly, as she rejected the idea. She spent too much time in airports and hotels as it was.

"Three weeks, starting the first of the month?"

"Sounds like a great idea!" His tone was congratulatory, as if she had come up with a brilliant proposal.

"Great," she echoed and stood up. "Then, if there's nothing else you needed to discuss --"

"Not a thing, not a thing," he assured her, standing also. He reached over and squeezed her shoulder; she managed not to flinch, although it hurt. "You really relax and enjoy that trip, you hear? No calling in to see how things are going. Don't even think about this place."

"I won't," she said. It was true, she had more important things to think about.

She would let Richard pat her on the head if he insisted, but she was damned if she would let him pack her off to summer camp. She would stay right here in town and relax.

Before her vacation started, she took to timing her arrival home for dusk. She would park farther up along the street, where she could sight the binoculars past the curve of her walkway to the window over the stairs. If she waited until the light was just right, she thought she would be more likely to see him. It was a way to show him that she was waiting too, waiting for the same thing he

waited for. They each kept a vigil for something she without knowing what it was.

But she hadn't seen the shadow man since the night she brought the stranger home from the bar. Once she was on vacation, she began leaving the house every afternoon and returning just before sunset, but it was no good. It was as if the focus of her attention created too harsh a condition for him to come. Or maybe it was that she was in the house too much now, her presence there most of the day dispelling that other, more shadowy presence.

She wanted to know who he was. By the second Friday of her vacation, a dusky day made gray with rain, the longing to understand her visitation was unassuageable. She paced restlessly through the rain-prisoned house and could not soothe herself. No drink, no twenty drinks, no hobby, no affair could solace this.

Julia pulled on old sweats and mushy sneakers and fled into the rain. She walked without caring where she went. The air was slick and soggy in her nostrils, and her wet clothes could not distract her from the twisting need, the emptiness in her middle where something essential had been amputated years ago.

She walked. The streets were grimy with rain and occluded light. Julia passed houses, office buildings, and cars on the streets; but all she saw was their desolate reflection on the glistening charcoal-colored cement.

The sky bulked bigger and darker, then rolled and spat huge angry drops at her, stinging splats that struck her face like insults before they solidified into a hammering downpour. She covered her head with her arms and ducked into a doorway of arched pale bricks. The rain swept in and pounded at her. She dragged at the dark wooden inner door and went through. It was only after she was inside that Julia recognized the vestry of a church. She peered into the gloomy chapel and saw the red-flickered glimmer of prayer candles off to one side.

Her feet moved her forward until she stood beneath the crucifix above the altar. Rain dripped from her hair and ran down her face into her eyes. She blinked it away to look. On Christ's face was a look of such sparkling agony, of such joyous fulfillment, that, in that instant, she was certain He understood her need, understood what she herself did not.

So she sank to her knees before Him and clasped her hands together as her mother had once taught her. Not in a church, only at bedside, for saying little-girl prayers before sleep. But protocol was protocol. What she half-recognized in Christ's face -- surely He would see past the words to her emptiness and illuminate it.

Her palms were cold, pressed one against the other; and for a moment, she was that little girl: scraped knees pressed into a fluffy pink throw rug over

wooden

floors, the golden light of summer dusk just beginning to fade as she knelt before her narrow bed.

"I don't want to go to sleep, Mama. I want a story."

"No stories, Julia. It's bedtime. Be a sweet little girl and say your prayers so God will look after you."

"I want a story! Gina's daddy always reads her a bedtime story. Goldilocks. I want to hear Goldilocks. About the Mama bear and the Papa bear and the --"

"I told you, no story! Say your prayers."

"Gina's daddy doesn't make her say stupid old prayers."

"God won't look after Gina if she doesn't say her prayers. Do as you're told, Julia."

The chapel air was soft and dark and moist around her, the only sounds the crackle of hot candle wax and rain from her sweatsuit dripping on the floor. "Please," she said. No one answered. There was still no one who would explain things to her, only a statue.

She bowed her head. "Now I lay me down to sleep . . ." And then she had no more words, nothing with which to plead for the Christ's secret knowledge, no supplication by which her salvation might be drawn from His plaster face. She knew no prayer for respite from what dwelt inside her.

The sobs took her like the storm, the thunder of them quaking through her flesh in jagged sounds that scored her throat. She was crying shrieking words; she didn't know what words. The thunder of her storm was loud around her --

-- then suddenly she knew the words that tore her throat as she shouted them over and over: "Can you feel it in me? Can you feel it?" And raggedly, unspoken underneath, begged, Can you tell me what it is? Can you show me what I feel?

Beneath the thundering darkness of her screams, she felt perilously close to the salvation she had envisioned, deathly near either being safely captured, or safely falling. She could fall forever.

The lights went on in the nave, casting a spear of light into the womb of the chapel. Then someone caught her by the shoulders, and her storm was lost.

"Oh dear," he said in a deep, soft voice. "Let me help you sit down. You're quite soaked."

She let him raise her, allowed him to lead her to the first pew. Whatever answers she might have found here were gone, and inside her the loss wailed. But she could not give voice to it; physical voice was inadequate.

The priest brought a blanket and wrapped her in the shrunken scruffy wool. It smelled of camphor. She slid her lips along the tattered satin binding and closed her eyes.

His hands trembled as he tucked the blanket closer around her; he was old, older than this church, older than the plaster Jesus. He made small nervous clicks at the back of his throat that reminded her of the noise her car made as the engine cooled.

"Do you have no place to stay?" he asked.

Julia let her head sag against the back of the pew and swallowed. "It's not that," she whispered. Her throat felt as if it were bleeding inside.

He went away again, and she turned sideways on the pew, putting her back to the light. She laid her cheek against the polished wood and was still.

The crucifix was silhouetted by the light from the nave, its plaster face in darkness now. She could not see what was in His face, could not see whether He had felt what this was inside her. There would be no guidance given now.

The priest came back carrying a thick white mug with a spoon stuck in it. The spoon handle clattered against the side of the mug as he offered it to her. She smelled tea. He guided her hands around the cup, then tore open three small packets and poured a white crystal stream into the mug. She could feel the tremor of his hand as he stirred the tea.

He removed the spoon. A hot drop soaked through her wet pants to bum her thigh, like a solitary tear.

"Drink," he said.

The tea seared her throat and was thickly sweet, but spilled false warmth into her. So she drank it all, gulping at its heat and ordinariness. He took the cup away when she was done.

Wood creaked as he sat down on the pew next to her.

"What can I do to help you?"

She was facing away from him. That and the fact that her own voice was a stranger's rasp made it easier. It was like listening to two strangers talk in the dark. "I don't know. I don't know what's wrong with me. This crazy thing's been happening to me -- if I told you, you wouldn't believe me -- I don't understand it. But instead of just scaring me, it's made me feel --" she broke off.

He waited without moving or speaking.

"I'm not sure what's going on with me. I have this feeling there's a part of me cut out. . . I feel," and suddenly her throat clenched with the simple truth of it, "sad."

She cried quietly for a moment. He didn't interrupt.

When the sound of her sobs softened, he said, "Tell me this crazy thing that's been happening to you."

"You won't believe me. Nobody does."

"Who doesn't believe you?"

"The police. The neighbors. None of them."

He shifted in the dark, and the pew creaked again. "Priests are a strange breed.

We base our entire lives on the faith -- the belief, if you will -- that there is more to existence than just that which can be seen or touched." He said nothing more, only waited.

Silently. In darkness.

It was that, she realized, the connection the priest shared with the shadow man, that let her speak of him. So she told the priest of the figure that waited in her house on the landing of her stairway. Of how she had been afraid at first, of attempting later to confront her fear. . . . She paused then.

"And now?" he asked.

She moved restlessly on the pew, pulling at the scratchy blanket. "Now I don't know. I'm confused. I feel strange and sick. No, I feel --"

She hesitated, not sure how to put words to the strangeness inside her.

"You feel . . .?"

"It's more like . . . like I've been wounded."

"Wounded? In what way?"

"Wounded -- to death." She paused again, groping for comprehension, not at all sure where the words were coming from. "For a long, long time. And I've only just now realized it. Like being shot and not feeling the pain until you see the blood. And now it -- hurts." Her voice ended on a squeak as her throat tightened again.

"So seeing this shadow man has made you realize your . . . injury?"

She nodded.

"Who is he?"

"If I knew, everything would be all right. If I could see his face, I know I would understand all this. But I can't. He won't wait for me."

"Whom does he represent to you then?"

She shrugged and clutched the blanket close as it started to slip.

"A brother?" he suggested gently.

She shook her head. "I'm an only child."

"Lover? Ex-husband?"

"No, I've never been married. No," she hesitated a second, "no serious affairs."

"You're an attractive woman." His inflection made it a question.

"Yes. Attractive. Attractive and successful."

After a moment, he said, "I see your point . . . I suppose. Your father, then?"

Julia hunched her knees up to her chest and wrapped the meager blanket around her toes. "I never knew my father," she said in her stranger's voice.

"Oh?"

The darkness was kind around her, a secure tomb of secrecy and protection and silence. "He died in Korea before I was born. At least that's what my mother always told people."

"You don't believe your mother told the truth?"

"She had a photograph of a nice-looking man in uniform. She kept it on her nightstand. It was there until the day she died."

He said nothing.

"The man in the picture had blonde hair, like my mother's. Blonde hair and gray eyes, just like she did. They looked a lot alike."

"And?" the priest said after a moment.

She shrugged again and leaned her forehead on her knees. "And I have dark hair, almost black. Brown eyes."

"So you think your mother was unfaithful--"

"Or that she was never married at all."

"And the picture . . .?"

"I've thought -- he might have been her brother," Julia said. "But I don't know!"

That's the point of everything in my whole life, can't you see? I can think about who he was, what he was like, but I'll never really know!"

He was silent then.

She turned eventually to look at him. He was gazing abstractedly at the shadowed face of the Christ. "Excuse me," she whispered. "I didn't mean to raise my voice."

It took him an instant to respond. Watching his face, she had the feeling he had

been drawn back from a far place.

"It's quite all right, my dear. An emotional subject, naturally." He straightened his back and folded his hands in his lap. "There's always exorcism, you know."

"What?" She had been thinking for some reason, of the silver filigree frame on her mother's nightstand, the faded photograph with its secrets hidden behind the young-man smile. Both had gone with her mother to the grave.

"For your shadowy houseguest, my dear. An exorcism." When she didn't respond, he smiled briefly. "Exorcism is not limited to the supernatural, my dear. It can also dispel demons of a more personal nature."

What he meant penetrated only slowly. When she realized his intention, she stumbled to her feet. They tangled in the blanket, so she had to grasp the pew to keep her balance. Dispel him? She had thought this one was like the shadow man, silent, waiting. Not like the police and the others --

"No," she whispered. Then louder, "No. I thought you understood -- he's not trying to take something from me. He's come to restore it --"

He stood. "My dear --"

"No! No -- I won't let you -- I don't want him to go away!"

He reached out a gnarled hand to her, but she struck it away and dragged her feet free of the blanket. "No," she said again, and the word echoed loud in the darkness, echoed in her stranger's voice, and then she was running down the aisle, running from the sound of the priest calling after her.

She ran without direction until she couldn't run any more. Then she walked just as aimlessly. At some point, familiar streets presented themselves, and she wandered home.

The house was black and cavernous. It pleased her to find it so. She didn't turn on any lights, just felt her way upstairs and struggled out of her clammy sweat suit. Then she was falling into the deeper darkness of her dreams.

The man on the landing spoke to her in her dreams that night, calling to her in a resonant voice that held a touch of raspiness. He called to her and explained important things to her, things she needed desperately to know. Things she must understand.

But when she woke, twisting against sheets damp with her own sweat, she could not remember what he had said.

In some ways, it was easier for her, after the dream. Even though she did not see him again immediately, it was easier to believe he had not forsaken her.

The rest of her vacation passed; for the first time, Julia was not eager to return to the office.

Putting on her favorite suit, the black one with the wide polished gold buttons, was like donning a costume. Her briefcase felt strange in her hand. She locked the front door behind her and paused at the curve in the walkway to glance up at the window over the landing.

The frenetic energy of the office was muted for her now; it happened through a haze, as if she were watching a play through a scrim. Several of her reps commented on how relaxed she seemed, and Julia smiled and said the mountains had been wonderfully calming.

She stayed in her office until nearly sunset, filing her nails.

He was there when she got home. She stood at the curve of the sidewalk and stared up at him, straining to see his face in the shadows. Her binoculars were in her bedroom; she had forgotten to put them back in her briefcase after her vacation. She stood there watching him until it had grown full dark, scraping an occasional pecan catkin off the sidewalk with her shoe, easing the briefcase from one hand to the other. But she never took her eyes from his tall figure.

He was gone when she went in. Again, he had not waited for her, not long enough. She climbed the stairs and stood on the landing. She cupped her hand over the rheostat control, thought of how it would be to press it, to add a hint of light to the shadows here. Just enough for her to see his face.

If only he had waited for her.

She called the office the next morning and told them she had a migraine. No one questioned her; she never called in sick. At ten o'clock, she took her camera case and drove to the best camera shop in town.

It was early on a Tuesday morning, so she had all of the manager's attention. He looked at her a little oddly when she described the shot to him: A heavily shadowed figure photographed through a window while external light levels were higher than those indoors.

"You really need to increase the interior light level somehow," he said. "Or at least balance it. Otherwise, you'll never get any resolution of the image."

"Black and white film," she said. "That should help."

He looked doubtful. "Yeah, some. But not enough. Light the interior, that's all I can suggest."

"That's not possible," she said.

He shrugged and suggested she try calling the camera manufacturer's help

hotline. It seemed to cheer him up when she bought the most powerful telephoto lens they carried.

The man wasn't there that night. Julia smiled to herself as she thought about it, wondering if he were camera-shy. But she felt certain now that he would appear again, on his own schedule, something she could not force.

It took nearly two weeks before she saw him again. The camera was with her all the time now, its case slung over her shoulder like a purse. She dumped her briefcase in the grass, and removed the lens cap with hands that quivered. She slowed down then, and made the settings deliberately, keeping track of each exposure. Her timing had been good. She had almost three quarters of an hour of half-light, long enough to shoot three rolls of film.

When the light was gone, she hurried inside and changed clothes. The darkroom was ready. Waiting for the film to process in its bath was hard. She found herself fiddling with it too much and forced herself to stop. When it was done, she prepared a contact sheet and printed each of the rolls in turn, without looking at any of the results. She washed the printed sheets and hung them up. Her hands were shaking again.

As soon as the contact sheets were dry, she shut off the red light in the darkroom and took them upstairs to the dining room. The light was good; she could examine the exposures better there.

The first roll was a complete loss; the window was nothing but a black oblong. That wasn't unexpected. Too much light outside.

The second roll began to show some interior blots of dark and light, but the shapes were grainy and indistinct.

It was on the third roll that she found it; the light levels must have hit a perfect balance for that one shot. She went to her study and got the magnifying glass she sometimes used for checking ad paste-ups. Looking through it, she saw that the image was clearer than she had hoped: the shadowed figure was perfectly defined. The contact print was too small to offer much detail, but she was closer to really seeing him than she had ever been.

She marked the negative she wanted and went back down to the darkroom to enlarge it. She decided on an 8 X 10 print as the best balance between clarity and size. On her fourth print, she got the cleanest definition she could hope for: the distinct figure of a tall man in a long coat, arms dangling at his sides as he stood in shadow.

His face was not visible.

She drifted for several days, like a water plant, torn free of its roots, that floats downstream. And, like such a plant, she fetched up on an unfamiliar shore. Not recognizing the source of her impulse, she took the photograph to the frame shop she used for her prints.

The woman who owned the shop said, "Working in black and white now? This is an

interesting study. Who was your model?"

Julia turned away from the intrusive question and pretended an interest in an Erte print displayed on the rear wall. She would not share him.

"Do you have an idea about what matting and frame type you want on this?" the woman asked after a moment. "Something simple, I think, to keep from distracting from the image. It's quite arresting."

Julia turned back. "Yes, it is, isn't it? I think a plain three-quarter round black frame, with a gray matte about three inches wide." That was all she had planned, but she hesitated as she glanced over the matte samples. A deep scarlet, sample caught her eye. "And that dark red. A narrow inner angled matte that shows a line of red."

The owner raised her eyebrows. "Yes. That should be quite effective." She wrote up a sales ticket, her handwriting clear and black on the white form. "You always get regular glass, I remember. That'll be --" She used her calculator briefly. "Forty-nine seventy-two. Will that be cash or charge?"

Julia wrote the woman a check and took her receipt. "When can you have it ready?"

The woman looked over her shoulder at a wall calendar. "You're such a good customer, we can have it for you day after tomorrow. Any time after noon."

Julia picked up the framed print on her way home from work on Friday. It was ready for her, already wrapped and taped in brown paper. She didn't open it; she wanted to be alone when she looked at it.

He wasn't there when she got home. She waited on the walk for almost fifteen minutes, but he didn't appear. Would he ever come again? Could he, now that she had trapped him on film?

She went indoors and changed into her old sweat suit. Her hammer was in the utility room off the kitchen, along with an acrylic box of assorted nails. In a drawer, she found the lightweight-nylon cord she used to espalier tree limbs. The label assured her the cord was rated to two thousand pounds.

She carried the hammer, nails, and cord upstairs to the landing, then came back down for the print. Carrying it like an infant, against her chest, she climbed back up the stairs, and sat on the top one to undo the brown paper. It was slick under her fingers, but tore smoothly once she slid a fingernail under the seam where the tape ended.

The brown cocoon spiraled open with a rasping sound, and she lifted the frame free. The gray matte with the line of red along its inner edge was stark, surrendering to the image. He was there, right there with her, yet still shrouded from her in his darkness.

That was the moment when she realized she would never see his face clearly. He was the shadow man; shadow was his element. He might wait for her, she might

see
his silhouette, but he would never come forth from darkness for her.

Julia positioned the print carefully on the wall opposite the window, directly behind the spot where he preferred to stand. She drove the nail easily, straight the first time, and hung the photograph.

The image was strong, burned into the film by the pattern of light and shadow that was his essence. Hanging there it looked -- correct. The shadows surrounding him blended with the shadows on the landing lapping around her in dark welcome.

She stooped to pick up the nylon line, and it ran smoothly through her fingers, wound itself around her hand like a friendly snake. The iron balustrade was firmly fixed, rooted deep in the wood of the stairs. It was strong and the line would hold.

The label had promised her.