

H. E. Francis

The Cleaning Woman

She would say nothing about the man, her husband, Ripley Samples — Rip. If it were any workday, she would go down the street with absolute regularity, moving in any weather with something of the relentlessness of his ship, dressed always in the same unsullied green most people like to discriminate the cleaning woman by and, in cold weather, the dark green overcoat and deep brown knit cap and matching gloves, carrying what looked like a laundry basket in which she carted the boy.

She would not take a job where she could not bring the boy and set him, while she worked, in a quiet place apart from the eyes of whatever woman was paying her for the day. She had been carrying the basket so long, if anyone thought about it, that a time when she had not carried it seemed beyond memory. Anyone would think that, with time, the child would have outgrown the basket, would be walking beside her, separating from her to go off to school or play as she went off to work. But the flesh lay in undeveloping and soundless anonymity in the basket, like one of her limbs severed irreparably and carried around as part of her identity.

She had rented after her husband's death — when there was no insurance money from him or the ship from which he had dredged oysters — the rear room, the ex-kitchen, of a small ramshackle cottage back of town by the crick, a single large room whose door was sealed off from the rest of the house, with a toilet stuck as an afterthought in a cubby-hole at one end. She paid fifteen dollars a week every Monday at six p.m. without fail, the only time she ever had any dealings with the owner, until the man and his wife moved out, leaving her sole inhabitant, still at fifteen dollars, a kind of house-sitter who was free to use the other rooms now if she wanted to, but who would use only what fifteen dollars paid for.

She had only what possessions she needed, mostly for the boy, and it was the oil burner she valued most — for heat and cooking and the constant bucket of hot water ready to keep the boy clean.

Her only large possession was the dory, the only vestige of Rip's ship, which he had had to fight to get her into that night and shove off, crying, "Row, goddamn it, Wanda, row," until she did row, knowing it was useless not to — because he had made up his mind. After, it was the only thing she let anyone do for her, haul the dory from the crick, where she had rowed and moored it that night, to her back lawn, that long patch of ground where each spring she broke ground to plant the

vegetables she would can, the corn and string beans and tomatoes. The dory lay there now, overturned, long since peeled and penetrated by salt, sun, wind and water, looking like the shell of some extinct species bleached bone gray. People passing still said, "That's Rip's dory," though nobody could understand how it had come to be moored hundreds of yards away from the harbor and Hulse's Oyster Factory and the old Socony pump.

The summer following Rip's accident she would pass every Tuesday morning at 7:55 — I could time her exactly — pass alongside the house I'd rented, round the corner and go down the street. So near eight, I thought, she must work nearby. She was a rhythm that summer, carrying the basket under one arm, adeptly braced against her hip, shifting hips without the least flagging in her motion.

From casual talk at the Wyandank or Meier's or Helen's, where I ran into people whom I had all my life known casually, all I had was that it was a baby the widow was carrying, the last evidence of a man whose bones might be lying in the black silt of the harbor. But I was roused to no more curiosity until the following summer, when I realized that it was the same basket and that its contents were no larger, so I could ask directly and I suspected from the way they spoke of her — men especially, who are usually the more meticulous and reliable gossips — that her presence in their lives was as natural and relentless and as close as blood or the sea around them. Local events outlive international holocausts, and mention of Rip's bones or the baby brought silence or anger or shame, sometimes indirectly, and I was startled, drinking or playing cards on the long porch of the antiquated Wyandank — once a thriving hotel which embodied a good bit of national history — very startled at the way the word "Rip!" seemed to burn old Hulse's lips; and it was Frank, the bartender, who later explained that Rip had cost Hulse a fortune by setting his oyster business back at least a year.

"It happened at night, midnight or maybe one in the morning, though nobody knows exactly the details, how Rip maybe did it, but the results yes — Hulse's factory and dock and the pump burned, and Rip's ship too, maybe even Rip, because they never did know — they didn't find him — it he got killed or got away, skipped town."

"Without his wife and baby."

"Wife. There was no baby yet."

It was Frank's stare, too deliberated and still, which demonstrated a vague discomfort, a fear of lowering his eyes, as he did his voice, to reveal that other feeling which her mention seemed to evoke — shame.

I followed Frank into the bar, the soft dark, where bottles and glasses and leather and old mahogany gave off muted underwater gleams.

"Which Samples was he?" I had lived most of my summers on the island, and my mother's people had their roots here.

"They're all one. Made their living off the sea since the time when. Big

in whaling times. Nobody'd believe that now. Their house went to pieces, torn down now to make the new rest home. All of them've lived on Carpenter since — you know those fishermen's houses."

I knew the row of shoe boxes hidden just behind Main.

Over that afternoon and many others, into dusk and the few drinks, I felt the figure begin to emerge: Rip had grown tired of working for others, of the drinking and carousing and whoring when the ships came in with a big haul and the men collected their share; he had grown tired and persuaded his brother to mortgage the house they owned and shared for a down payment on Briggs' *Defender*—half a wreck, in dry dock, and headed for the graveyard — which he and the brother could restore. He would pay the mortgage and pay the brother for his share of the work on the boat, which he did resolutely. Working on that relic, they — or at least Rip — became a sight, a legend, even a laughingstock to some in town, where a man's image is pretty fixed, though a Samples could always claim old blood.

They cleaned up the ship, painted and decked it out, set it in operation; and with some pride Rip got himself a crew, three men, the mortgage outstanding and the ship, certainly, precarious. From the Wyandank porch you face the harbor — restaurants and galleries, docks, the New York train still as a blacksnake on the railroad dock but shimmering alive in the water below, Shelter Island, the far tip of Hulse's buildings, and no end of nothing beyond. And Rip's ship, the small oyster boat, came to assume a presence. It might have been docked at Hulse's, vaguely undulant, gathering darkness and anonymity now before the waterfront lights made a retreat against the infinite dark. I, who had seen it, could know it quite clearly now, somber gray, its pilothouse narrow and upright, the suspended dory, the side ramps rusting somewhat, all the deck streaked and scraped and rutted to raw wood from chains and oysters.

Then it was Ripley Samples I began to see in dark and day with his three men dredging for oysters, filling the ship so heavy its stern rode almost level with the waves, in all kinds of weather struggling, and returning to old Hulse's dock to deposit the catch, collect the cash, divide it among the men, and then appear with scrupulous haste at the bank and at home to make his payments, keeping whatever pittance remained to live on after buying supplies for the ship and crew. He had not let up working from the time he had decided the ship would be his, free and clear; but nobody could abide him — he was absolute, strict to the letter about times shipside and being in fit shape to work, about the men's share of the haul, cash deducted for food, rations doled out aboard ship.

So over the years he went through any number of crews — I would meet some of his ex-crewmen, locals, on this or that dock — and he became almost legendary as a test, which teased men into taking jobs

with him, some oldsters but mostly the young who'd quit school or got into trouble, dope or sex or stealing, and wanted or had to straighten up.

When I left the island in the fall, it remained dormant, the story, his history, the part of it which cankered, until I went back to buy the old family house sold years before when my grandfather had died, now up for sale again; and it was at Lawyer Weems' office, signing the papers with the seller, and afterward, getting a little acquainted with Weems alone — who did some writing himself, he said — that he talked of the renovation being done all over town and how there soon would be no more eyesores like the place behind me.

"Who lives in it?"

"The last of the Samples — you know the family."

I nodded. "Last?"

"His brother was blown up in a ship accident a couple or three years ago. Grim."

"You knew him?"

"I know everybody. I do most of their business — did most of Rip's until he died, or at least what little he had until he stopped coming to me and took things into his own hands."

Rip seemed to have left his traces everywhere.

"He made a go of the ship," Weems said, "had a reputation for being the most driving man around, but his crews were always satisfied with their share, though he worked them at breakneck speed and they'd gripe about his hard exactitude. He wouldn't give in one red cent, kept tabs on the New York market, insisting the locals pay him the day's closing rate, making himself obnoxious, until two or three buyers refused to deal with him. Mostly he sold — he had to — to Hulse, a client of mine too. I'm divulging no confidences; it's all common knowledge.

"But Rip claimed Hulse was cheating him, claimed Hulse took advantage, after Rip had docked and delivered, to lower the going rate per bushel for oysters or miscalculated the count, so Rip came to me to sue for what Hulse owed him. I couldn't set two clients at odds and told him so. Naturally I had to take Hulse's case when he threatened to go elsewhere with his business, and Rip accused me of siding with Hulse because of the business he brought in, so went to another lawyer. The judge — you've met Tasker? — ruled against Rip. After that he turned renegade."

Perhaps at that instant the picture I had of Rip, however shadowy, set him against sun and storm, tall, lean and implacably hard in mind as well as body, a strider who could halt abruptly and demand with a fixed challenge, with a smoldering calm.

"But Hulse did in fact go on offering to buy his haul and Rip did sell to him. It came to a head when Rip — who, it seems, was calculating the difference in bushels between what he delivered at market price and what Hulse claimed he delivered and paid him for — one night, after

collecting, rigged a chute and dumped oysters to the tune of his loss onto Hulse's beach so they'd rot there.

"But in no time Hulse managed to trump up a claim against him for threatening the public health. Rip was called into court again and Judge Tasker ruled against him, fined him the worth of the haul plus court costs and the cost or the work of cleaning the oysters off Hulse's sand — or jail.

"Rip paid, but the next time he sold to Hulse — that was the mystery, why they both kept at it — he made an exact calculation and reduced what he delivered by the amount Judge Tasker had fined him.

"So it seemed Ripley Samples had beaten Hulse to the draw, though, some said, selling to Hulse under any circumstances was desperation to support a wife; for by then he had married the Polack girl, Wanda, from Easy Street back of town, where once he'd drunk and played poker Saturday nights in the Polack barns until he had been stabbed near the heart, almost fatally, in an effort to prove he'd been cheated. 'Keep your money! It's the last game I'll ever play with your kind,' he'd said. And it pleased them all, when he was forced out of the harbor, to bandy those now popular words about, with plenty of laughs and smirks to Rip's detriment.

"The wife, Wanda, he kept in a small rented cottage back of town too, near the crick. The brother had long since taken advantage of the chance to take the house over in his name, assuming Rip's mortgage payments and freeing Rip's money to pay double on the ship."

"Maybe," it came to me, "Hulse was buying from Rip only to delude him until he could work something against him?"

"It's possible he was afraid of Rip and was biding his time until he could do something that wouldn't fail."

It was the *afraid* which made Rip grow in my head. I had created by then a fair image of Rip, but for a while, too busy moving into my house, his story hung suspended except whenever I caught a glimpse, rare now since moving out of her accustomed path, of Wanda. Then Rip, vague and precise, would seem to be standing there on the sidewalk where she had appeared but an instant before.

But my mind could push it no further. It was one of those cases where I am led to the edge, but not yet close enough to want to leap free into some strange sea and struggle toward a revelation which I can accept and believe as if it were an inkling of undeniable truth.

And it began to come not long after the move, when I looked out the back window one day — had he not been shorter than I envisioned him and neither so tanned nor energetic in his movements, I'd have sworn my imagination had forged reality:

It was the brother, Halsey Samples, and he was standing outside the fisherman's cottage which he and Rip — and the family before him — had lived in together, a one-and-a-half story, brown-shingle house be-

hind mine with full windows downstairs and half windows up, ceilings surely barely high enough for a man to stand under, upstairs rooms for children to sleep in or for storage. In fine weather I worked in the yard, and the brother, sullen coming and going, would after a time nod; and when I joined the club at the crick for cards and company and plenty of town talk, with some regularity he would be there, sullen too, alone at a table by the great window, staring across seagrass and crick, marina, the two cemeteries and sandy beach to nothing beyond. "Always was morose," the bartender said. "Worse since his brother, who ruined him."

"His own brother?"

"There was a big fight before the accident. Halsey came off pretty bad, beaten blue. The talk goes, somebody threatened he'd better not help his brother oystering."

"But who?"

"Halsey must know. And worse – the next day, the day of Rip's crash, Halsey's boss – at the shipyard – let him go."

"Why?"

"You can ask Halsey, but you won't get a word out of him."

But I did get a word. One early afternoon the mail truck stopped at his door with a registered letter. From the truck Dennie said, "You can just bet Halsey won't budge even for mail."

I offered to sign.

Late that afternoon I caught Halsey to hand him the letter. It was our first confrontation. He opened the envelope then and there. And instantly, at the dark pain that came over his face, a visible sinking into far time, I wanted to turn away, but I said, "You could stand a drink?"

For a fraction his eyes faltered. Then he nodded, forlorn, but his dark eyes kept to that paper.

"It's his license. They gave him back his license." The paper quivered, and the voice, heavy and harsh.

"Him?" I dared not look up.

"Rip. My brother."

"But –" I could go too far.

"You knew him?"

"As a kid, maybe – his name, your father's, uncles'."

He began then to tell it – in the yard, under the maple, with some bourbon – not because of the drink, though that helped, but perhaps because some impetus, released then, could not stop releasing whatever of truth he held in him that a stranger or the license or the moment or simply time had made way for.

"Old Hulse, he pulled every string to get Rip cut off all down the coast. Rip *had* to sell at below the going rate or let the oysters rot on the ship or dump them and waste the men's labor. And with Rip's luck, who could keep a crew? Bad enough what the crews turned out to be. His reputation got around – made it tough – he took crews too far out,

too long, and maybe sometimes just to keep them on he was forced to sell to old Hulse cheap. Rip had his moment — dumped a load to rot at Hulse's — I suppose Weems told you all that?"

I said nothing.

Halsey retold it with such tautness of speech and stare that I was tempted to follow his eyes to see who it was he was talking to. I felt *him*, the other, Rip, talking through Halsey, *at* somebody or something. And I could begin, through Halsey's eyes, to see Rip, hear, feel the breath of him, when Halsey said, "I talk too much," and rose and crossed the yard to his cottage, his head down, with that quick walk that was sometimes like skulking. And I felt bereft, left high and dry, abandoned, but I did not underestimate an ear, which most men long for, and the moments came — early afternoons of burning sun or late afternoons of silver and shadows, or nights by the living room lamp as salt air flurried the curtains — when he let me into his darkness.

So I could see Rip better and especially clearly on a night much later, sitting in Halsey's front room, Halsey telling how the times Rip came it was always night. To Halsey the dark had come to be filled with Rip's presence even when he was out to sea oystering. And Rip brought night, carried darkness in his shadowed eyes, in the face sunk too close to bone, the lamp sending glints, stars that flickered and fell diamond-white and hard in his eyes:

Rip shoved into Halsey's front room.

"Bastards!"

"Now what?" Halsey said — no greeting, too appalled, despite the rush of pleasure in his blood, at the bone of his brother, the hang of clothes on a body gone thin, degenerated. Halsey said he jerked under Rip's hand, not in disaffection but at the unbroken stride of Rip's fury.

"Bastards! They won't renew my dock lease."

"Why, dammit?"

Rip threw himself into the armchair, too still then, hands gripped still, hard brown as his face, legs bones under his trousers.

"I can't dock after tonight, that means. They've cut me out of the harbor."

"How'll you make a living?"

"Oh, I'll make it. Bastards! Next it'll be the license."

"How'll they manage that?"

"You know them!"

"Then go to —"

"I've been to my lawyer! You know what the bastard said? Try farther south, the Carolinas maybe! As if they hadn't already cut me off all the way down past the Jersey coast. I offered to pay him whatever was legally fair, even mortgage the ship —"

"Mortgage your ship!"

"But it'd take months, he said; they'd have the ship in no time, he

said. Meaning — he won't fight Weems. Weems — and Hulse, sure — have the whole north fork sewn up."

"You could live here — as long as it takes."

"That wouldn't be long, the way they work."

"What'll you do?"

"Live on the ship — I've just about been doing that."

"And Wanda?"

"Wanda and me'll settle that."

"And how long can you keep that up?"

"You can just bet old Hulse won't turn me down with a load. It's what he wanted — me to sell to him, then to nobody, then go crawling back to the greedy son of a bitch. Trying to prove he was generous and fair! We'll see!"

"You can't manage the ship alone."

"That's right."

After would come evidence from this or that bum, scum, some stranger who had been with the ship, slumped now against a piling or sitting on a curb or sponging at the train depot snack bar, who would bear witness to Rip's tough demands, his niggardliness to the red cent, his energy and sleeplessness, and the tongue-lashings of old Hulse and his crowd, who he claimed had cohorts up and down the coast, who sometimes "bribed" or "made offers" to the scum to bring back news of what Rip was up to. There would come too the fury of owners whose docks Rip would tie up at deep in the night and set out from before the motions of morning business began. There would be some nights when his ship lay in the bay as if abandoned while he stole home to that cottage back of town to Wanda, but the ship would be gone before morning. And there would be fines too, which he appeared regularly to dispute and ultimately pay. There would be the wonder where he came by his supplies, fuel, for he had exhausted the town, the area, and could no longer hire even the untrustworthy men who had turned out to be bloodsuckers, thieves, free riders to New London or Bridgeport, Brooklyn, Jersey.

All the time that he had still been selling to Hulse, clinging to town (was it because of the woman and bones in the cemetery and the places that fill a man's head?), he must have been tallying his increasing losses — what Hulse, if he would admit it, owed him — which he swore to his brother he would collect come hell or high water.

"And he did decide to make old Hulse pay — I know it," Halsey said. "He had some plan — that was written all over him," though Rip shared only silence, restrained fury, an energy which he surely was storing up for the right motion, which must have come to him the night of his final visit to his brother — in dark again, as Halsey had learned to expect, though it was not the dark which upset, but Rip.

"Not an ounce of flesh to spare then," his brother said, "and eyes too

deep, dark. You sure wouldn't want to run into them in an alley. But no matter what he's feeling, Rip could sit still, all control, hours — fixed, waiting. And I knew this night he'd do whatever it was, and I had to stop him — I *would* too. I told him I'd do anything to help — and it *was* help I wanted to give, though *he* couldn't know what kind, or me either — yet. And I was half in my jacket, I followed him out, when he turned on me. 'No,' he said, 'I shoulder my own.' Maybe he knew about the threat — to the house, and me too, if I didn't get him to leave off oystering around here — for good. All the oystermen were down on him for selling cheap to Hulse. They hadn't gone to Wanda yet, maybe because she was pregnant. So when I tried to go with him — I wouldn't take no — he turned on me and clobbered me, left me cold on the front stoop, bleeding — because he maybe thought I was lying or wanted to protect me — I don't know; but everybody in town still thinks I got beat up covering for him or protecting him from somebody, thinks I had a hand in what he did — well, let them! — everybody except, I guess, Wanda."

"Wanda?"

"She says — said, 'I know you'd've helped if you had the chance.'"

So it was Halsey who had got me at last to that night: the fall. Dark, and no moon, and no rain. A quiet season for town. Few activities. Silence. Perhaps two thousand TVs flickering. Then sleep.

I had got that far, though from the very beginning at the Wyandank it had been old Hulse, bitter: "Months without the factory buildings!" Or, Frank, the bartender: "The biggest fire in hell knows when — three days smoldering." And later the men at the club: "Nothing left to the ship but what was metal." Yet I always sensed in their talk the defiance they could not overcome, or maybe shame.

But I did not have *him* yet: I would like just once to have arrested their memory, vision, at the right moment and seen for myself who the man was they thought they looked into. Yet finally, if I could take it as far as I might, if it were to come to the end, I would know it was that — that I had *not* seen him, would never see him — which was the wonder, the blessing: I could thank not knowing him for releasing whatever it was I was seeking:

Because he had become a demand in me.

By winter I had come to know the cottage where he and Wanda had lived together, came to know too that house empty but for the rear room she still rents. I had gone there one night because she was the best cleaner around. The single bulb on a cord glared across the dark. The dory made a black mound in the shadows. She said, "I've got my steadies. There's only seven days to a week."

So I was not prepared when one breakfast time down Main Street came the unchanged image in the green coat and brown knit cap and gloves, and with that basket, came up my walk and rang the bell.

"You wanted a cleaning woman." She stood, all health and sturdy, her round face bit red and alive from the cold, clear her skin and brown eyes. "Old lady Welsh died."

"I'd like somebody steady." I smiled.

"I can start right now. Eight hours every Thursday, pay at the end of the day, and I bring my boy — that's understood."

"Of course. I'll show you —"

"I know this house. Pantry and sink's what I need first."

On Thursdays the house took on vigor, her hard breath, the biting clean odor of her skin. There would be only the briefest hiatus now and again, when I knew she would be tending to the basket, talk quiet and factual — she might be speaking to me or anybody.

Her presence brought Rip in. Her silence made him grow so that there were days when my questions almost insidiously broke into words, when, after she had gone home, I was certain I would come upon him behind a door, at the foot of the stairs, sitting in the shadows, waiting, hard glints in the darks of his eyes. Sometimes I felt the press, as if he could not, nor I, wait much longer. So I counted on her Thursdays to make him grow in me.

And it was a day between Thanksgiving and Christmas when she was in some way agitated, her rhythm askew, that she stood in the study doorway and said, "I could give this room a good hurry-up cleaning, and I wouldn't touch a single paper, honest." She must have seen how off-guard I was because she backed off so I said quickly, "It can stand a cleaning, can't it!" And a smile almost — yes — burst from her, the first spontaneity, white teeth in a splendor of gratitude.

And it occurred to me afterward, in the stillness of night, that she had obliterated or celebrated something. And in the morning, during my usual meandering downstreet, I stopped in to talk to Eaves at the *Times* and ended by finding the day, December 7, a Monday, and with the front-page story, how sometime in the early morning hours fire destroyed the Hulse Oyster Factory buildings, the dock, pump, and Ripley Samples' ship, *Defender II*. At press time the fire was still blazing, spread by gasoline from Hulse's private pump, the old Socony landmark, and there was no possible way to discover who, how many, had been on the ship. Articles on the following days added little. A day in December. So it was neither celebration nor obliteration, but a translation into utterance of a kind, or the eloquence of work — and to a man, to me, as if to that other one, Rip. Somehow I was getting nearer.

That same morning I found too — at the town clerk's office — the other date, which would have been, yes, some four or five months after the fire, when what they had made together was born: that son.

And when his day in April was nearing, I left for the boy some new clothes and a stuffed whale, ostensibly from the Easter bunny, not knowing whether she would accept them, for people said she had re-

fused all public benefits, had turned from charity after the fire. "And me so able-bodied?" she'd said.

At the end of the day she was standing again at my door. The study, on the second floor, views the backyard and over low houses the bay and near island, and pours sky and sea forever in.

"Why, I thought you'd gone, Wanda."

She said, "Rip thanks you."

"Rip?"

"He's Rip too. In the hospital I said, 'It's a boy, ain't it?' It was Dr. Sperling. He nodded. 'Rip said it would be,' I told him."

For a flicker, as her eyes sought the window and faltered on the sea — clear and serene, shimmering with late sun — I believed we understood each other.

And I made then my appeal to her. I said, "My own children are words," and as I said it, I was ashamed.

"Children?"

I knew it was insidious, but I could not stop then, I had to go on while she was standing there, while it was Rip out there, and the sea, perhaps even *then*, that last night, all of it — in her thoughts.

"Because," I said, "it's the only way I know to make things live."

"How's that?"

"In words, stories —" It was mean, paltry, low, but I watched her. She waited.

I said, "We use the way we have, our only chance sometimes."

She was staring at the water again — I wanted to know what she was seeing — and she was even impelled a few steps toward the windows. She said again then, roused, "Rip thanks you," and left.

I sat there gazing at where she'd stood. Then I went over and stood in her place, in her footsteps, and looked out: from there the fisherman's house, his, rose to sight. Was that why she had come to me, taken this job — to be near that; or maybe near the brother, who looked like him, reminded?

But inadvertently Wanda herself would tell me no, not because of Halsey: "I got no truck with Halsey. No need to abuse people's judgments. *You* know." And it might have been because she knew Halsey and I talked now and again, or because she thought Halsey might tell it differently, or even because of the Easter gifts: whatever, she gave utterance and, once released, there was the inevitable motion to talk and to afterthoughts.

"His brother don't know about the dory neither, and it's better you get it straight and true, no lies, cause I know now it's for Rip, it won't go reckless from this house, at least in cheap talk."

July was a swelter. She sought whatever breeze to set the basket in for air. She kept wiping her face with an old rag. "Whew!" Her husky legs she kept set wide apart for air. She would not talk on my time, she

was all business, and in the study she would not sit. Did she need the goad of the view – cottage, sea, the ship out there, Rip – each time she stood in that doorway?

“That night he come after dark. I almost never seen him in day no more. He couldn’t dock and they pulled his license too, so I guess you’d say he was running illegal – see? They’s a lot of them at sea are crooks with no license. Nobody’d stay with a ship had to steal in even for supplies. Rip knew that. But it was how long he could keep going – I *know*, even if he’d not admit it to himself. He said he’d get the license back, he wrote for it, and be back at the docks with crews too when he made them all see they were wrong, he knew they were, he’d prove it. He come that night like his old self: You come with me, he said, quick. Where to? I said. The ship. No, Rip, I said, not this time. And he grabbed me – I’ll never forget – and whispered so mean, and him never mean before: You’re my wife, you’ll do’s I say. You get dressed – now. He needed me for a crew sometimes in a pinch when not even his brother was around. It wasn’t far – you know, by Gull Pond, the dory hid in tall seagrass. When we got to the ship, I didn’t know how he done it alone, the nets so full and the boat deep, and he knew he couldn’t pilot and handle the winch and even out the load too. I was almost afraid to go aboard. How much you got on this damned boat? I said, and he said Just do what you’re told. Seemed like we run two hours, him making me lower the nets while he shoved the load in place, the shoveling to keep the oysters level and me every minute thinking Holygod, water’s going to come pouring in. You never done it so full before, I said. Shut up, he said. And it sure stinks of gas, I said. I told you shut up, he said. I never seen him so fast, hard, like I wasn’t there but to be his right arm, a thing he could make do. Why’d you think I got a Polack wife, he’d say sometimes at home, if not to work her ass off? But me asking now, What’re you up to? and What, Rip? and him no word at all then, both of us sweating like fools, even bundled against the cold and me pregnant and about to say I can’t no more when he said, It’s done. He lowered the dory and loosed it, said, You go home now – harder than he’d ever been – and that’s what done it. I said, Whatever it is, you can’t! Don’t Rip. You can go too far. He said, It’s some others’ve gone too far. Now you get in that boat, Wanda. No, I said, you can’t. And he hauled off and let me have one I couldn’t believe – Rip, what never one time smacked me before. I fell. My head pounded. I knew then it was bad. Rip: I’m staying. You grab those oars, he said. Rip! He shoved the dory off. He said, Go to the crick. You never saw me – get it? I didn’t answer. I sat there. I couldn’t move. I didn’t till he said Row, goddamn it, Wanda, row! like mine and his life depended on it, so I knew nothing could change his mind and I rowed to Stirling Creek and moored the dory and went home. But I sat up. I waited – it would come, I knew it, but not when or what. And then the fire whistle blew,

I went out — the sky was burning. I thought I'd die that night — I would have too, but for him, not even born yet: he saved me."

A great breath quivered her body.

"And nobody saw?"

"Not a thing. Not him nor me. Nothing."

"And Rip?"

She was seeing sea again: empty, it filled her eyes.

"Nothing."

And was it that — not a bone or a grave? Out the window, far to the left, almost on the edge of things, are the stretches of stone and shrub, trees, walls — the Protestant and Catholic cemeteries. A widow is not complete until her man is laid in the ground in a final place she can know.

She went downstairs then, and home.

What it must have cost her to break silence! Though she could not know, she had brought me to the brink, and she could not know the tumult; she had left me seething with it. I stood in the window, watching the motion of the water, watched till the air itself became a sea moving, and dark came down, slow, long, and stillness and shadows moved, moved, and I heard the sea, saw it come through the window, felt it under the ship, moving. I looked out at the harbor where the lights came one by one piercing dark, and the harbor made the one small coil of light in the growing dark. My legs twitched, my hands; I felt a fierce energy, nervous, I couldn't contain it. I was seething with what was to be done, had to be done, waiting for Wanda to row off, listening, until I had to cry out *Row, goddamn it, Wanda, row!* I said it aloud, I said, "Row, goddamn it, Wanda, row," and listened in the interval of quiet; then I heard the oars scrape in the locks, the splash, then the suck of water, listened, so still my head and skin would burst, bones shatter, watched till there wasn't a streak or ripple — she was gone in the dark. It would be only a few minutes I had to wait before she hit Stirling Creek, a few minutes more to the bank by Pell's Fish Market to moor the boat and then a few more to walk to the house. Wanda! My breath cracked — too loud. *Wanda*. The boat was making heaves. On the left I could see the Orient Point lighthouse, far, and all the night beyond, black — pitch — and on the right the harbor, all the lights long pins in the water. I could feel the laugh, it broke in my throat: I knew every foot of this harbor since a kid on the boats, I knew exactly the factory at the far end, knew blindfolded I could shoot the boat direct, right past Preston's shipyard and Claudio's restaurant, the railroad dock, straight to the end — that pump. *Cheat a man of his living, you son of a bitch!* I switched the ignition on and *Jesus!* for a second it was thunder. I throttled slow. I couldn't stop the *put-put*, but *Jesus* too loud, too. But the ship made the line, it headed direct, I held: it moved toward the harbor, smack into the middle of the mouth of the harbor. But so slow! I could hardly breathe. I could

feel my breath hard. And it was coming — the long dock, the main building, long and gray and the spots spraying light down, and the old Socony pump straight up and hard, waiting — I could see it clear now, green and white and red. I eased the throttle all the way. The ship glided, scarcely a heave, cutting straight, straight. It would not veer now. I went out on deck. Even at full speed the ship reeked gasoline from the open drums planted in the hold. And I sloshed gas over the deck, ropes, old clothes, pilothouse. The boat was whining, taut and stretched to groaning, heavy in the water but cutting fast — and the dock growing bigger, the buildings, and that pump: fifty yards, less, less. I lit the torch — *You and your kind, Hulse!* — it leaped flames; I grazed the deck with it, hurled it into the hatch, and shut myself in the pilothouse. The air whipped a fast blanket of fire over the deck, flames swept around the pilothouse. *Here's your haul, Hulse!* I clutched the wheel, headed straight for the pump. *For my son,* I shouted, *so someday he'll never forget!*

"Never forget!" I shouted. My hands leaped for the pane, but my own voice halted them.

The silence was so sudden my breath thundered in the study.

But I was exultant. I had done it, I had been there, seen — for a moment I had brought Rip back, and it had come such a burst over me — for *him*, that son, who would someday bear witness without shame or fear and justify his name.

Somewhere in my mind I saw the ship strike the dock, hurl the pump down, ride up half out of the water, penetrate the building, jar, tremble and settle suspended there — and then explode, again, and again. The sky throbbled red. The rest was fire and ashes and bones.

Outside, darkness returned, not a star. Only the lights of the harbor were burning, still and white. And there was nothing. No one. The voice faded to the shadow of a sound. Rip receded. I could no longer see him clearly . . .

But I could envision Wanda standing alone in the dark, watching the sky burn that night and feeling the stirring of the son she carried inside her. Who could know how far she would carry him? Here in my study, I had made my appeal to her in his name. Looking out over that empty sea, what had she seen? Whatever it was, she had broken silence. She had spoken. What more could she have done?

Then she had gone to that cottage back of town.

In the morning she would set out on the endless round. Who in town after so many years of going down these streets in day and dark, knew the way any better? Children would stare with wonder or curiosity or sometimes taunt in deviltry. The men at the Wyandank or Meier's or standing on any corner or any dock, and the women glancing out frosted windows or sitting in good weather on this stoop or that porch, would speak or nod, lower their heads or drop their eyes until she

passed and then raise them to follow what she carried in the basket, which must move them to ponder many things.

And sitting at breakfast, I would know it was Thursday because there would be her firm step on the porch before she rang the bell and opened the door and called out, "We're here!"