

## *Christian Michener*

### Mermaid

Were it not for his cataracts, Joe Kendell would have waved right back to the woman on the other side of the restaurant patio. But he had made the mistake before of waving to strangers, forced then into mumbling an apology or pretending that he was just being friendly, and this woman could have been waving to any of the others at the tables around him, those who stayed after lunch like him to play cards or checkers or just to talk. To Joe the woman was a blur of blues and whites, a fuzzy, brightly-dressed mannequin poised before the patio railing, and so he did not wave. Instead he leaned across the table and asked, "Who's that?"

His friend Lloyd looked up from his cards. "I haven't seen her before," he said. "I think she's waving at you."

"You sure?"

"No," Lloyd said.

Joe tapped the table. "Let's just play," he said. "Whose deal?" He had joined the card group six months earlier when his other group fell apart. Once Matthew had died, the other two players moved away from the retirement community — one decided to go live with his son in Nevada and the other moved himself into a rest home. It had taken Joe a year after moving into the center to find a group of people he knew and could call friends, and then only a year later, with Matthew and the others gone, he had had to start over again. Joe had been glad to find Lloyd — as well as Nicholas and John — and join them three times a week for their nickel-ante poker. They were livelier than the earlier group, loved to joke and tease each other. It was Nicholas who dealt out the last hand, and as Joe studied his cards, two fours already, a waiter placed a glass of iced tea in front of him and handed him a piece of paper. "My compliments," the paper read. "Wait for me."

"Looks like Francine's got some competition," Lloyd said.

"Which of you sent this?" Joe asked. It couldn't have been Francine, he thought — mystery wasn't her style.

The other three looked at each other and shook their heads. "Honest, Joe," John said.

They each traded in for new cards. Joe kept his fours but got nothing to help. Nicholas spread his cards in his hand and then folded them up. "Nothing there for me," he said. "I better be going." He pointed to the tea. "Not a word from me, Joseph."

After Lloyd won the hand, and he and John had gone too, Joe sipped the tea and stared out at the ocean and waited for whomever had written the note. He used to stay and play solitaire after the games broke up, but one afternoon a woman he didn't know came up and said, "Solitaire is the last game we all play." She had nodded and added, "Just ask anybody." Lloyd told Joe later that she was nuts, but ever since then Joe hadn't been able to play the game. As he waited, a wind coming up off of the ocean tickled the white fringes on the yellow and white table umbrellas. The thermometer on the deck read close to ninety, but under the umbrellas and with the wind slipping up off of the ocean, Joe felt himself getting chilly. Most of the people with him on the patio had sweaters drawn over their shoulders. Joe wished he could see their faces better, to see if any of them would give away that they knew who had sent his drink.

"I hope it was alright," someone said. He turned to see the woman who had been waving to him, her blue and white transformed up close into the sailor shirt and white duck pants and crew shoes that she was wearing. Joe could not remember seeing her before and he rushed to match her face with someone in his memory. He hoped she wasn't the nutty one who had ruined his solitaire games.

The woman pointed to Joe's glass. "I didn't put sugar in the tea," she said.

"It's fine."

"It's safer that way, diabetes and all."

"It's no problem." He raised his glass. "Thanks a lot."

"Mind if I join you?" She sat where Lloyd had been, on the edge of the seat, and folded her hands together on the table. Her knuckles were swollen and bruised, her hand resembling as her fingers folded into each other a bag of unshelled peanuts, but her hair was dark grey and still thick and her plump face beneath her glasses absorbed her wrinkles well. With Joe's bad eyesight and the different lenses on her glasses, the woman's eyes as she moved her head seemed to break into separate parts that rearranged themselves anew, a pair of fragile glass eggs. Joe tried to figure out how old she was — sixties? seventies? Since moving to the community he had practiced guessing the ages of the women. Matthew had told him that all the women who looked younger than they were would ask him to guess their age. Joe had guessed Francine's age

exactly, sixty-nine, when he had met her a little over a year ago. This woman's hands said eighty but her face, except for the eyes, was much younger.

"You didn't wave to me," she said.

"I thought you were waving at somebody else."

The woman stuck out her hand. "I'm Lorraine," she said. "I've seen you around."

"I'm Joe. From New York."

"Joe from New York." She accepted this with a nod. "Ever notice how everybody here is somebody from somewhere? I'm Joe from New York. I'm Bob from Baton Rouge."

"And where are you from?"

She flicked her wrist, keeping her fingers curled as if holding a ball. "Not important," she said.

"You don't want to tell me?"

"No," she said, "it's just not important."

Joe took a long drink from his tea, looking out toward the beach and squinting at the bright light reflecting up from the sand. He used to like little mysteries in his life, he liked sending his wife off with her girlfriends and refusing to hear what they had done, but lately secrets always seemed to be dangerous, monsters hidden there instead of magic. And there was that big mystery, always closer, that made all these little ones seem silly.

When he put the glass down, Lorraine still sat forward in her seat, hands folded again, staring at him. "I'm picking you up, you know," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm picking you up. I'm coming on to you." She lifted her hand to push back a loose grey curl but then stopped. Her eyes refocussed, their parts shifting. "You're taken, aren't you?" she asked.

"Taken?"

Lorraine leaned in and said, "Don't be coy. You're what? Seventy-two? You've been around. You've had lots of women. But you're acting scared. You have to be taken."

"I'm seventy-five," he said.

Lorraine leaned in even closer. Joe's ear was tilted toward her to listen, and if he had turned his head their lips would have brushed. "I don't live here," Lorraine said softly. "I'm from town. She'll never know."

"But you don't even know me. I could be a real jerk."

"You're being a jerk right now and I'm still asking you for a date." She pulled a napkin from the holder on the table and wrote her phone number on it. "Let's plan on having dinner tomorrow night. Call me and tell me where and when." She stood up and stuffed the napkin in the pocket of Joe's shirt and then leaned down toward him. "Don't tell anybody," she said, and then she went down the wooden steps that led to the beach, her head, Joe noticed, aimed toward where she was headed and not the steps she had to descend. He watched her move along the beach until he lost her among the other silhouettes walking on the sand.

Lorraine was waiting for him at the restaurant, a small place specializing in Italian, with red and white table cloths and windows steamed from pasta. She had refused Joe's offer for a ride and said she would meet him there. Lloyd had warned Joe about meeting her at all. "Watch out for the townies," he had said. "Remember Henderson. That woman took all his money and then disappeared."

"What happened to free love?" Joe asked him.

Lloyd had once said that he was a hippie before there even were such things. A pacifist in World War II and a beatnick in the fifties, he had turned in his middle years to writing books and giving seminars on being tuned to your true self. "Free love?" Lloyd asked. "There's nothing free about losing your money to a shyster."

Lorraine had ordered wine, and a full glass was in front of Joe's place when he sat down at the table. "I hope you like red," she said. "I thought red went with Italian."

"Red's fine," he said.

"So you got out of your plans alright?"

Joe had told her that he spent most evenings with Francine — taking a walk on the beach when it wasn't too windy, watching television, playing cards — and that it would be hard to get away. "My friend Nick is out tonight and I told Francine that I was going with him," he said. "He's covering for me."

"You shouldn't lie about things, Joe. Especially to someone named Francine. That's not a name you lie to."

"Thank you, Ann Landers," he said, but he smiled as he said it. Lorraine was right. Joe had been able to tell that Francine did not really believe the story about Nick and their trip. But she wasn't one to put up a fight. She would play hurt if she found out and suck him dry with pity. Once, over seven months ago, he forgot about a date they were supposed to have and she still mentioned it to him whenever they made plans to do something. Lying had just been easier.



Joe and Lorraine ordered their meals and finished off their glasses of wine. Joe poured another, slowly, pleased with the warmth of the first glass. "So tell me about yourself," he said.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything. Where are you from? What've you been doing for the past fifty years? Tell me all of it."

"I don't think so," Lorraine said.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't see the point in that. Just take me as you see me."

Joe stared at her a moment to see if she was serious and then said, "That's ridiculous."

Lorraine shrugged as if she couldn't help it, as if the rules she were laying down were not her own. "I don't want to know where you've been or where you're going and I'm going to do the same for you."

Joe shook his head. "But you already know about me, about Francine."

"Francine's O.K.," she said. "That's now. I just don't want to know about then and when."

"Then and when?"

"Past and future, before and after," she said. "Tell me anything, as long as it has to do with the here and now."

"Do you know how hard it is to talk to somebody who doesn't want to talk about the past?" Joe asked Lloyd the next day. They were hitting some early holes of golf. Lloyd needed to be off the course before the sun came up over the trees and the day grew hot, and Joe was only too glad to beat the other golfers to the course and get to the beach for a morning swim. "She reminded me of those live-for-the-moment groupies you used to see in peace rallies and things," Joe said.

Lloyd stood up over his ball and putted and watched it disappear into the hole. "So what did you talk about?"

"It was like name-that-topic," Joe said. "She'd fish around for something and then we'd talk about it." They had discussed the baseball season, the president, the new tax proposals, the best flu medicine, the best state in the country to live. "And when we were done she didn't even let me drive her home. She took a taxi."

"Who can blame her the way you drive?" Lloyd asked.

"She said home was her private space."

Lloyd bent over slowly and picked his ball up from the hole. When he stood up again, he said, "Maybe she doesn't have a home. Maybe she's a mermaid."

"That would at least explain things," Joe said. He stood over his own ball and watched his putt curve right of the hole.

"So is it over?"

"You have to admit that mystery is pretty sexy," Joe said. "Besides it's fun to be chased, even by a grey-haired mermaid."

"She's still chasing you?"

Joe leaned on his club as though it were a dancing cane and tossed his head back. "Do you think she could really resist this?"

"Let me plead the fifth on that one," Lloyd said, and he pointed his club at Joe's ball, still sitting four feet from the hole.

Lorraine found him at his Wednesday card game. When Joe saw her coming toward him between the tables his heart beat harder and he wondered if she would be upset that he hadn't called. But she pulled up a chair and said, "Just going to watch, fellows." Joe picked up his cards and took two to trade in. Lorraine shook her head and made clucking sounds. "Get rid of that one too," she said, pointing to his jack. "That won't do you any good."

He had kept the card on the off-chance of getting another and having a high pair. "I thought you were just going to watch," Joe said.

"Sure, but I don't want to watch you lose."

They arranged to go out again that night. Joe usually had dinner with Francine on Wednesdays, but he went over to her apartment in the afternoon to say that he was going to meet some friends in town and that he'd just get a bite to eat himself. From the balcony where they were sitting the sand looked like a white space cut out of the air and cut off by the blue edge of the ocean. The sea was flat and motionless and Joe kept his eyes on it as he talked.

Francine listened to his story and shook her head. She had put on two dark circles of rouge but had placed them unevenly on her cheeks so that her face seemed to be tilted inside her skull. "If you want to stop seeing me," she said, "just say so. I know I'm not like I was at thirty-five."

"Francine."

"Just don't make a fool of me, Joe."

"Francine, please."

"I mean it." She pointed a finger at him. "Don't make a fool of me."

Joe reached out and held the hand she had raised. He wanted to promise something, or say some kind words to calm her, but instead he stayed silent, rubbing his thumb back and forth over the parchment of her hand and watching the calm blue bed of the sea.

Joe had decided to take Lorraine to a movie in town, a romantic comedy, and when he met her there he asked her to stand in line for some peanuts while he found them a seat. He wanted to be hidden in the darkness of the theatre, away from the eyes of those who might know him. It was a small town and people would talk if they saw them.

It was odd at first for him to see Lorraine beside him, smaller and plumper than Francine, but as he watched the movie he grew more relaxed. In the middle of the show he started to stretch his arm around Lorraine's shoulder, but on the screen a man walked in on a woman showering and he pulled back. When the scene shifted to the next morning, he moved his arm forward again and rested it on the back of her chair.

After the movie, on the street, Joe blinked at the cars and the stores and the streetlights, trying to reorient himself. He had loved to go to movies with his wife, but he hated when they were finished, and he would have to leave the magic of the show for the soft predictability of his Cadillac and the wearying life it led him toward, his shaded, suburban house where he would go to bed and get up for work or church the next day, do what he had to do, come home again. He had told his wife once about his feelings and she had surprised him, she who was usually so quiet and ordinary, when she said, "Maybe heaven is like that. Never having to leave your favorite movie."

A line of people were waiting to get into the late show and Joe led Lorraine down past them until the two stood by themselves on the sidewalk. "Boy, I'm hot," Lorraine said.

"Are you kidding? My toes are numb from that air conditioning."

"I'm sweating." Lorraine pulled the neck of her top away from her and flapped it. "You know how hot I am?" She raised her eyebrows at Joe. "I'm so hot I think I need a shower."

Joe looked away down the street. He saw the brown square of a store sign, and when he heard the squeal of its hinges as it rocked in the wind he recognized it as the sign for Ye Olde Coffee Shoppe where he and his friends often took breakfast. In the mornings the squeal was the butt of jokes between the men and the owner — "Sounds like my ex-wife in the morning," Matthew used to say — but at night it sounded mournful, no one there to laugh about it. Joe turned back to Lorraine. She was smiling up at him, fanning the neck of her shirt. "A shower?" he said. "A shower might be just the thing." He reached out and took her hand and led her toward the parking lot.

When he woke up the next morning, Joe was halfway to the bathroom before he realized that he had no pajama bottoms on. He covered himself, but behind him the bed was empty. When he put on his glasses he saw Lorraine's note on the side table. "I thought I better get out before daylight," was all it said.

Joe started some coffee and then stepped into the shower. It had taken him months to try to get Francine into bed with him, and then whenever he did, he knew she was scared. He was scared himself, that he wouldn't be able to do it, or do it for her, and there was the awkwardness of the misfires and the gels. He had been scared last night with Lorraine too at first, but they had fooled around for so long in the shower that he had almost been unaware of when the foreplay ended, and he couldn't remember rolling off of her and somehow putting his pajamas on, half of them at least, and falling asleep. As he rinsed the soap from his body, still remembering her, Joe was surprised to see that he was ready for Lorraine again.

On his morning walk on the beach, Joe felt his footing uncertain in the sand. He kept his eyes down or looked out at the sea so that he wouldn't have to wave to anyone. Someone could have seen her come in or leave, and surely the guards at the gate would know something. He had asked her how she got onto the grounds without an I.D. but she had only said, "This isn't Fort Knox, you know." He walked all the way to Lloyd's building and saw him sitting on his porch, reading. His condominium was on the ground floor and his patio led right to the beach.

Lloyd lowered his book when Joe stepped on to the deck. "So how was the movie?" he asked.

"Good," Joe said. "Young love. Everybody happy in the end."

"You're looking starry-eyed. Or are those your cataracts?"

Joe sat down in one of the lawn chairs. "Just fix me a drink," he said.

Lloyd stepped through his sliding glass doors and came back with two glasses of orange juice and vodka. "I'm not even going to ask," he said.

"I wish you wouldn't."

They sat for a while sipping at their drinks. A boat slipped onto the horizon, dawdled for a moment in front of a cloud, and then fell away again. Even though he knew the sea went on far beyond where he could see its edge, Joe always felt a tug of pity for the boats that disappeared, as if they had fallen away forever.

"So was it any good?" Lloyd asked.

Joe turned to him. "Like high school," he said.

The more Joe got to know Lorraine, the more her secret life bothered him, looming up as another part of his life beyond his control, like Matthew's cancer, like his tee shots. But each time he and Francine went out he realized he was playing by the same rules, hiding part of his life from her, his own secret, Lorraine. Still he couldn't help trying to find out more. "The guys think you're quite a mystery," he said to Lorraine one night. They were at the miniature golf game in town, stalled at the fifth hole in the crowd. "Lloyd said he thinks you're a mermaid. Because you disappear every night. Like you're going into the sea."

Lorraine laughed. "A mermaid?"

"And John said you're a vampire because you leave before dawn."

"I've played cards with you at one in the afternoon."

"John's not the brightest guy," Joe said.

After they had finished playing, Joe asked to take her home again, but she refused once more, as she did each time that summer. "We each have two lives," she said to him once. "One we share, and one we don't."

"Nick says you're married."

"I'm a mermaid. I'm a vampire. I'm married. Why can't I just be Lorraine?"

"Who's Lorraine?" Joe asked. "I don't know Lorraine. I know this woman I see a couple times a week. I know you like manicotti and miniature golf and Johnny Mathis. But who's Lorraine?"

"I'm not doing it to hurt you." She pulled herself close to him and laid her head on his chest. "It's how I need things to be," she said. She looked up at Joe. "You know the saying, 'You can't take it with you'? Well, I believe at this age you always have to be ready to let go. It's the best way to do things. Ignorance may not be bliss but it does save you from a lot of pain."

Joe put his arms around her and squeezed. For four years after his wife had died he passed his time in New York eating by himself, reading the paper, even getting interested in soap operas, until his daughter convinced him to move to Carolina, where she had settled, and live in the retirement community. He played golf again and started at cards, every morning now he took his swim, and he frequently joined the boat trips and the bus excursions. But lately, despite all the activities, even with Francine and Lloyd and the others, he had felt the cold creeping up on him, a chill that came from thinking of all that had already happened and how little might be left to him. For Joe, Lorraine had arrived to warm him up.

One morning after spending the night with her, Joe showed up late for his golf game with Lloyd and the others. None of them complained,

but when Joe lost a ball into the water hazard on the fourth hole and lost count of his score on the fifth, Lloyd said, "I think somebody's in love."

"Please," Joe said.

"I'm not teasing you," Lloyd said. "I'm just warning you."

"It's true," Nick said. "You look like a man in love."

"If somebody as thickheaded as me can see it," Lloyd said, "think what Francine knows."

Joe pointed his club at him. "I thought you were a guru."

Lloyd shook his head. "My wives were the gurus. I just wrote down their messages and sold what they said."

They teed up again, but by the sixth hole the sun had come up over the tree tops and the fairways turned as warm as the beach. On eight Lloyd stood over his ball and then put the club on the ground to steady himself. His face was pale, and Joe saw three drops of sweat sneak from his sideburns and start down his cheek. "You alright?" Joe asked him.

"I think I've had enough for this morning." He nodded to the sun. "It's just too hot."

Joe took Lloyd's club and put it in his bag, and the four of them climbed into the carts and headed back to the clubhouse. Lloyd begged off on having a drink. He took a glass of water that he ran over his face and across the back of his neck. Joe offered to drive him back to the resort. "If you really cared for me, you'd let me drive," Lloyd said, but he accepted the offer anyway. Joe would have gone into the condo with him but Lloyd stopped him. "I'm fine, Joe, really. Just a little woozy."

When he got back to his own building, Joe headed out again to see if Lorraine had snuck into the restaurant or onto the beach.

In late August, when Francine called him up and asked him to come over, Joe recognized in her voice that she had finally seen what Lloyd had, the look of a man in love. Or she had seen any of the more obvious clues, Lorraine at the card games, or greeting Joe when he came out of the ocean in the mornings, or riding with him in the golf cart, even taking a few of his putts. Joe walked over slowly to Francine's apartment, bracing himself for what she had to say. She let him in but stopped him with a hand to his chest. "Stay there," she said. She took a deep breath and licked her lips. "I just wanted to tell you to your face that I know and that I've had enough."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't act stupid, Joe. It's insulting to me. Beyond the parted curtains of her balcony doors, Joe saw clouds like misshapen feathers float by. "What did I tell you?" she said.

"About what?"

"I said, 'Don't make a fool of me.' That's all I asked." Francine walked across the room as if she were heading for the balcony, but then she turned around and came back to where she had been. "Tell it to my face. I want you to say it."

"Say what?"

"There's another woman."

"It's not like that," Joe protested. "You don't understand."

"She plays cards with you. You take her to dinner. For all I know you two are spending the night with each other."

"Francine, for crying out loud."

"Tell me you're not."

"You don't understand," Joe said. This was not how he had wanted it, to let things get away from him like this, and to hurt Francine too. "She's not even from around here," he said. "She's from town. We just go out sometimes. I don't even know where she lives."

"You're pathetic," Francine said. "You're an ass. And you made an ass out of me." She had started crying and let the tears run down her cheeks. Joe lifted a hand to wipe them but Francine pushed it away and turned around. "Please get out of here," she said.

Joe backed out slowly, closing the door on himself, keeping his eye on Francine's back framed in the glass in front of her until the door shut in his face. He had a vision of her for a moment propelling herself through the glass door and over the balcony railing and into the white hot sand that would take her in only so far. That's how easy it would be. Just like that, you can finish it. Joe stood for a moment in the hallway, debating what he should do, thinking of knocking and checking on her, until he ridiculed himself for considering that someone would kill herself over him. People like Francine don't hang around this long, he thought, enduring all the stuff thrown their way, and then jump ship over Joe Kendall.

Joe walked back to his own apartment. Lorraine didn't answer her phone, but when he finally got a hold of her that evening, he asked her to meet him at the city park. She brought a bag of bread crumbs, and the two of them walked down to the pond to feed the ducks. Joe stretched out on the grass, resting his head on Lorraine's thighs, and she combed her fingers through his hair. "She actually said 'ass,'" Joe said. "You have to know her. She'd never say that."

Lorraine dug into the paper bag and tossed the crumbs to the ducks. "I'll go apologize to her if you want. I'll say it was my fault."

"I feel bad for Francine."



"Me too, but I don't mind sharing you. Maybe she shouldn't be so grabby."

"Lorraine, that's the whole point." He held up his hand. The skin was almost translucent. Thick blue veins bulged and then ducked under the outline of his bones. "Look at me. We're melting. What else can you do but hold on?"

"Like I said, 'you can't take it with you.'"

Joe turned toward her, feeling he should defend Francine. "Lorraine, she's scared."

There was a long silence. Lorraine kept her eyes on Joe for a while and then turned away toward the ducks, her eyes shifting as she did so in their cracked glass cases. "Aren't we all?" she asked.

Joe put on his best suit, tailored and charcoal grey, for the Labor Day Dance. He had decided against asking Lorraine, and she hadn't brought it up on their last date. His going out with her had created more of a scandal at the community than he had realized, and Francine might be at the dance too. After she and Joe had broken up, whenever he saw her around the resort, Francine would wave to him only after he had lifted his hand to her or called out her name.

The dance hall was crowded. A live band on a stage was playing ballroom songs, and above them on the ceiling white crêpe paper stretched out in loops like the foamy edges of waves. Over the music you could hear the scrape of shoes on the dance floor and the murmuring of the couples. Joe made his way across the floor, feeling awkward in being alone as he sidestepped the early dancers. He moved from the floor and was heading toward the punch table when he saw Lloyd and John waving to him from the corner to come over. Joe motioned for them to wait and he stepped up to grab the punch spoon, finding as he did so that Francine was there, staring over his shoulder. "Don't worry," he said. "I came alone." She looked back at him as if she didn't understand. With her soft, confused face, in her jewelry and make-up, she looked as beautiful as Joe had ever remembered her. "You look nice," he said. "I've been hoping to see you, to talk to you. If you want, maybe we can dance later, just to catch up."

"Not tonight," she said. A man came up and held a napkin of cookies out to her. "Hugh, this is Joe Kendell."

Joe shook hands. Hugh was glad to meet him. He had moved into the community a month ago from Virginia, he said. He had been an airplane pilot, flown all over the world. They shook once more, and Hugh said he hoped to see Joe again.

"I tried to warn you," Lloyd said to him when Francine had gone.

"Why? I'm glad for her. It made me feel good to see her happy."

"Feeling a little guilty?"

"I didn't think you believed in guilt," Joe said.

"Are you kidding? I made my living off the stuff."

Together they watched the crowd grow as the band picked up the pace. "Are we just going to be wallflowers tonight?" Joe asked.

"I'm afraid I'm on the disabled list for a while," Lloyd said. "Doctor's orders." He fished into his pocket and pulled out a small vial of nitro pills. "Look at the goodies I got today." He rattled them in the bottle to the beat of the music. "At least I could use them as maracas," he said.

Once Joe started dancing he barely sat down. There were enough women there that all the men were needed as partners. He didn't dance well, but he kept his steps smooth, and he stood up straight above the others during the waltzes and fox-trot, his head brushing against the white crêpe paper that had slipped from the ceiling. When he finally did take a break to get some punch, someone grabbed his arm, the hand on his wrist a familiar dark pattern of swollen knuckles. "Not yet," Lorraine said.

"How'd you get in here?"

"I bribed the ticket-man. Let's dance." Joe saw Francine in the corner and headed away from her. "Am I causing a scandal?" Lorraine asked.

"No more than me."

"Do you mind?"

Joe looked out at the heads of the other dancers. Many of them had been watching him and turned away. "Not at all," he said. "I kind of like it."

"Me, too," she said.

They stayed for half an hour before Lorraine took his hand and pulled him off of the floor. "Let's go," she said. She led him outside and took off her heels and went down the wooden steps to the beach. Joe followed, stopping at the bottom to take off his shoes and socks. The sand was cold and refreshing as they walked around an outcrop of black rocks that came down from the dance hall. On the other side the music sounded a faint counterpoint to the waves slapping at the shoreline, and the houses and condominiums stretching down the beach blinked out at the darkness. Lorraine loosened herself from Joe's arm and walked up to the water and touched it. "Not too bad," she said. She took a few steps back and lifted her dress up over her head.

"Lorraine!"

She took off her slip and then her bra and panties. Against the dark sky behind her she appeared to be glowing. "Coming, Romeo?" she asked.

Joe watched her walk slowly into the water and then with smooth strokes work her way out until she bobbed with the waves. "Come on!" she yelled back.

"We'll get arrested."

"They'll never arrest two old geezers like us." Lorraine swam back in where she could stand and held her hands out to her side. "I'll freeze if I don't keep moving," she said. "Hurry up."

Joe struggled out of his suit, folding the clothes in a pile. He looked for a place to hide them but the only possibility was the rocks and they were a hundred feet off. When he was naked he took one last look up and down the beach, laid his glasses on his pile of clothes, and started in, concentrating on keeping his balance on the rough bottom of the ocean. His body contracted as he stepped through the water, but the shock of it invigorated him, and after a few cautious steps he jumped into the waves. He felt the cold wash over him, and the push and pull of the current, and the salt tickling his skin like a thousand teasing kisses. When he surfaced, Lorraine was right in front of him, her hands flat on the surface of the water. "Isn't it beautiful?" she asked. They swam out and back in again. "I hope dying is like this," she said.

"Lorraine, please."

"I hope it's like swimming in cold water until you're too numb to feel anything. And then you sink into the dark and relax forever."

"Not me," Joe said. His skin tingled from goosebumps, as if the pieces of salt had left behind hundreds of tiny bruises. "I want to be asleep. I want to know nothing."

Lorraine rolled onto her back and Joe flipped up on his own back beside her. He tried to listen for the sounds of the party, the music and the laughing, over the steady gulping of the waves. He watched the sky, the stars flattened above him into shiny pinwheels, until Lorraine said in the darkness, "I'm getting a little chilly."

Joe rolled over and swam up between her legs, "I'll take you in," he said.

"No," she told him, "I want to stay a little bit more." She hooked her arms around his neck and lowered the back of her head into the water and closed her eyes. "Just like this."

"Then hold on," Joe said, and he felt Lorraine tighten her grip. He stretched out his arms to keep the two of them balanced and afloat, and as the waves lifted and dropped them, he saw at the edge of his failing vision, on the horizon where each day all the boats disappeared, the stars come down and touch the water and then reascend.