

David Huddle

In the Garden

for John Engels

This may be hard to describe. One morning after my shower, my skin wasn't so much tingling as it was shimmering. Or humming. All over I felt this liveliness. I felt it especially on the insides of my wrists, forearms, and biceps — a mildly pleasant sensation. Also on the arches of my feet and the backs of my knees.

This was while I was sipping my first cup of coffee of the day. Well, I thought, *I've been needing a little pick-me-up*. Not long ago my wife, Ute, put me on notice that she might be leaving. I didn't want her to do that, but I could understand her thinking. We've raised our daughters, they're both out of the house now, and Ute says there's just got to be more for her than what she sees every afternoon when she comes home from work. I'm a house husband, and that's my usual nap time. Sometimes the sight that greets her is me curled up on the sofa snoring or drooling on one of the pillows her mother gave us. To Ute's credit and mine, we've tried a few things — rehabilitative measures. We tried parking down by the Potomac and making out in the car, we ordered some videos, we even took a blanket out under the stars in our own back yard. "Interesting," she said after our last escapade, which involved checking into the Sheraton out at Dulles and pretending we are strangers who'd met at the bar downstairs.

So if anybody ever needed his skin to be perking up his attitude, I was that person. Sitting there on the sofa, drinking my coffee, I was taking my time getting to the newspaper. All of a sudden I received a vision of a woman awakening to find that her dream of her lover slyly arousing her while she slept was not a dream and that this lover was now poised above her, maneuvering to enter. For a moment it felt like it was my skin, like some kind of an antenna, picking up the whole thing. The lover was propped up on one

elbow — a muscley guy with a shaved head. He noticed the woman's eyes fluttering as she woke up. So he whispered to her, "Is it okay?" her eyes widened, and she said, "Are you serious?" In my brain I heard and saw these people vividly, then it all poofed away like a turned off TV. I knew my skin couldn't be picking it up. But I felt this radiance all over me, with mild jolts of current running up and down the insides of my arms.

My experience seemed remarkable but pointless. So I went on with the morning. Which is to say that I finished my cup of coffee and read the newspaper. Then I poured Ute's cup of coffee and carried it upstairs to her, along with the newspaper. For nearly thirty years this is how we've done things at our house. Whether or not Ute is leaving me, I'm not likely to change. On the very day she walks out the front door, I'll probably be toting her coffee and newspaper up to her. When I arrived at her bedside that morning, her eyes were open, and she was staring at the ceiling. Evidently she'd been awake a while. "Thank you, Jimmy," she said, almost in a whisper. Her body didn't move, not even a hand or a finger. She gave me this pitifying smile. Her face said she'd be long gone from this house if she didn't feel so sorry for me — if she didn't know how desperately I needed to fetch her coffee and her newspaper every morning.

Ute could have punched me, and I'd have felt better than I felt right then. I didn't say a word. I walked right out of the bedroom and back downstairs. Maybe before that morning, I had been aware of Ute's pitying me, but I wasn't aware that I was aware of it, if that makes any sense. Anyway, that one flicker of a look of hers brought up this smoldering in me. When I left the bedroom I wasn't all that mad, but by the time I got down to the kitchen, I was mad enough to snatch a glass off the counter, spin around like a shortstop pegging a baseball to first base, and shatter it against the far wall. I felt better, but my gut still burned. Then all the while I was sweeping up the dust and glass bits, I whispered to myself, "Feel sorry for me, will you? Feel sorry for me?"

On my hands and knees, it occurred to me I might be crazy. I stopped what I was doing for a moment to think. It felt like sanity to me.

That was when I realized that a plan had snuck into my brain. This, too, could have been my skin's doing. All the while I was cleaning up the broken glass and fuming to myself, my skin was highly operational, moving a notch up or a notch down in temperature, dispatching little currents of sensation down my thighs and up the back of my neck. Also, I got this follow-up flash of the shaved-head guy and the dreaming woman. Post coitally, they were standing in front of a mirror. She was behind him, in what must have been their bathroom; he was flexing his pecs, and she was peeping over his shoulder. They were half-smiling into the mirror, whether at themselves or each other I couldn't tell. But I guessed it must have been all right, what he had done to her in her sleep.

What I needed to do, I understood right then, was provoke Ute, get her as mad at me as I was at her. Except I wasn't mad at *her* so much as I was at how things had come to be between us. Which amounted to the same thing. Anyway, I had to go out and get myself a girlfriend. That would do the trick. It was a bold and unsettling thought. I needed the sofa and my second cup of coffee.

My past is tricky. I married Ute in a state of profound infidelity — which is to say that I was in love with her best friend Marcy. From the beginning, I was unfaithful, but Ute seemed just to grit her teeth and bear with me. Not that she didn't give me hell. She did, but she also didn't throw me out of the house. Maybe because she understood that most of what ailed me was my unrequited passion for Marcy. But somehow all that got straightened out — for me, at least. My passion petered out. Marcy and I became best friends — she and Ute were somewhat distant — and I was Mr. Faithful, Mr. Monogamy, etc. Mostly it's having kids that did all this to me. Nothing to give myself credit for, just the way things fell out.

What I mean to say is that with my girlfriend idea, I wasn't deciding to do something unnatural. If I had a notion to betray my wife, the only thing peculiar about it was how abstract it was. In the past, my infidelity was concrete, it was personal, it was essentially somebody named Marcy Bunkleman Crandall. In those days, I wanted to lay my body down and have that lady walk on it wherever she went. The other women I slept with were incidental. No matter who I was under the covers with, it was Marcy I wanted. For a long while, *incidental* even applied to my wife. Weird, I know, but I've

come to think that a few layers down everybody's got strange elements.

Certain undulations along the surface of my upper back — like a breeze riffing through the hairs across my shoulders — reminded me to take stock, take careful stock. It had been quite a while since a woman had looked at me with interest. That, too, might explain my late-blooming monogamy. I hadn't kept myself up. I wasn't hopeless, but I'd got myself a paunch and a bald spot, and, as my daughters would put it, my muscle tone sucked. Also, I'd gotten so I didn't pay attention to my clothes. Khakis and polo shirts were my daily uniform. I rarely thought about what color shirt I put on in the morning.

Sitting there and trying to decide where to go, or what to do, in order to find myself a woman, I almost gave up my plan. Maybe the humiliation of watching Ute slowly overcome her pity for me and move out was preferable to the humiliation of trying to recruit myself a mistress. I had an appalling vision of sitting at a bar in Georgetown, trying to snag the attention of some pretty young thing. "Hi," I could picture myself saying. "I'm Jimmy Rago, a proven family man, and I'm looking for a girlfriend to piss my wife off. Would you be interested?"

To say that I had a religious conversion that morning would be an exaggeration. But while I sat there in my living room, something remarkable occurred. My skin began to transmit this rippling sensation, like a horse shuddering or a dog shaking off water. I became extremely aware of my epidermal unit. Sure, maybe I was crazy, a guy believing his skin was communicating with him, but it wasn't like actual words. It was more just that I got a surge of self-confidence. I realized I wasn't young any more but I was smart, I was patient, and I was an old veteran of the wars of courtship. Why couldn't I find myself a woman?

Melinda Brown and I are acquainted through grocery shopping. We favor the Grand Union on Monument Ave., and we favor it for the same reason — the inspired work of the produce manager. A summer or two ago, at about the same time each afternoon, Melinda and I found ourselves in that store, savoring the air-conditioning while we picked over plums and nectarines. Something about fresh fruit and the shampooy fragrance of Melinda's hair, still wet from her

shower, turned me garrulous. I couldn't help noticing her bringing a plum up to her nose. My first words to her were "Sniffing those things won't tell you whether they're good or not." She put the fruit down and laughed. "That's not why I'm sniffing them," she said. She never did explain why she did it.

The thing about grocery stores, though — at least this is my theory — is that they can get you excited — fresh produce always does have a stimulating effect on me — but eventually they conspire to turn everything mundane. That's what happened with Melinda and me. In the first minutes of our first encounter, I actually broke out into a light sweat. But soon enough she and I were listlessly wandering through the Kleenex and toilet paper aisle discussing our kids' preferences in spaghetti sauce and salad dressing. By the time we reached the check-outs, I'd forgotten all about the scent of Melinda's damp hair and the fact that she had a likable shape for a woman with two kids in middle school.

So on this recent afternoon, when I entered the Grand Union, I wasn't thinking about Melinda, though I was aware of a heightened alertness in my arm hairs. By habit, I made straight for the leafy vegetables. There, I saw Melinda already ahead of me, sniffing a bunch of radishes. "Why *do* you do that?" I asked her as I came up beside her. Melinda's and my acquaintanceship doesn't require the usual hello-how-are-you-what've-you-been-up-to chit-chat.

She set the radishes back into their display nest and gave me an arch look. "Don't buy even a single one of those Red Delicieuxes they've got stacked up over there," she said, pointing. "I bought half a dozen yesterday, and they taste like floor wax." This, too, was true to our relationship — we feel a greater obligation to advise each other about shopping than to answer direct questions.

The moment, though, was one that soared out into wild territory that Melinda and I hadn't even dreamed of exploring. She stood there. I stood there. We looked each other full in the face. I suddenly saw her as a blondish, suburban-American Sophia Loren — she has that kind of broad cheekbones and full lips. The expression on her face was one of utter startlement, though it wasn't unfriendly. Far from it. She swiped a high-lighted bang away from her left eye and blinked. The voltage between us was exhilarating. My temperature spiked up a degree and a half — though that might

be explained by the coolness of Grand Union's climate control system. Full frontal exposure was the status into which Melinda and I had stumbled. My skin burbled and purred. This was my chance.

"Floor wax?" I said.

Reviewing this exchange now, I cringe. The entire English language and even a few foreign phrases were available to me. I could have said, "Azalea popcorn news media," or "When in Utica, don't use Japanese profanity," and made a better impression.

Melinda winced, turned away, picked up a bunch of scallions, brought them to her nose, and cut her eyes back in a mean way, as if daring me to ask her why she was doing that.

To my credit, I understood that the moment was lost. I turned away, too, and began making a selection of Bartlett pears. I was aware of what Melinda was doing behind me — she'd moved on to consider parsley, water cress, and the sale-priced broccoli bunches. Her mood was prickly. However, an expedient dimension of our relationship is that neither greetings nor farewells are required. Far from being discouraged by what had transpired — or rather, had not transpired — I felt my spirits begin rising. By the time I reached yogurt, sour cream, and ricotta cheese, I was wheeling my cart along at quite a lively pace. I had made a romantic contact. If I had murdered the occasion almost as soon as it presented itself, so what?

After I stashed my groceries at home, I was too agitated to hang around the empty house. In the old days, my kids would have been around to distract me. Today there was just silence and furniture. So I drove over to Marcy's. I had remembered that Marcy likes me to call before I come over, but I was feeling spontaneous. It was mid-afternoon of a sunny mid-September day — the kind of a fall day that always sets me to hallucinating the smell of classrooms, new pencils, and bananas packed in school lunchboxes. Marcy must have heard my car pull into her driveway. She stepped around to the side of the garage to wave at me. She'd been clearing flowerbeds out back and had a streak of top soil beside her nose. Ordinarily I'd had said something to her about that, but I wasn't feeling quite bold enough to do it. She was in shorts and an old white dress shirt of A.B.C.'s knotted at her midriff.

For the first twenty years of my acquaintance with her, I was in love with Marcy Bunkleman Crandall. Our current friendship is a

relief to both us. My standard line is "Thank God I'm not in love with you any more, or we could never talk like this." For a while, I worried that I needed her friendship more than she needed mine. Then I helped her get through the really bad time she had with her divorce. In those days Marcy refused to cry, which made Ute so furious with her she wouldn't listen to what Marcy needed to tell her. I didn't mind Marcy's not crying, and I liked hearing her bad-mouthing raps on A.B.C., my former pal and her treacherous old ex-husband. With all the negative information the two of us had on A.B.C., we could stay up talking into the early morning hours. Crying would have been meaningless.

"Pull up one of those chairs, Jimmy," Marcy told me. She knelt onto the grass beside the flowerbed where she'd left her tools. Putting her gloves back on, she watched me fetch up a lawn chair.

I found a shady place to put the clunky old thing and sat down. "You could ask me to help you with that," I told her.

"I would if I wanted you to." Marcy lifted an eyebrow at me. "When my tulips and daffodils and crocuses start poking up next spring, I want to be able to look out at them and say, 'Those beauties are mine. Nobody helped me with them.'" She grinned at me with one side of her mouth, then turned around, bent and stretched her torso into the garden and began plucking weed sprigs out of the earth. Her sandy hair fell around her face while she worked. She was quiet, and I was, too. I marveled at how painstaking she was. It was fine with me just to sit and watch her from my shady spot. I started to tell her that evidently it was better to be a flower than a weed when she was around, but then I decided I liked our silence better than my remark.

My skin was in a low pulsating mode, a sort of dermal chanting. This was actually the calmest it had been all day, and I understood that it, too, was responding to Marcy and her gardening. It was serene out there. Time let go of me for awhile, though I was aware of Marcy moving to new positions along the edge of the flowerbed. The progress of her work moved her closer to me. After her last relocation she was near enough that I could easily have touched her hip with my toe. I gazed up into the leaves of the tree overhead.

"Ute says she might leave me," I murmured.

I had barely given voice to the words, but it was so quiet in the yard, and Marcy was so close to me that she heard what I said. She sat back on her haunches and turned to me. Her eyes scanned my face — I knew she was checking me out to see what I felt about what I'd just told her.

My skin conducted this spontaneous inventory: I was a male creature, more or less healthy, neither weak nor strong, not actually old yet but definitely not young. For a few seconds I met Marcy's eyes and tried to imagine what she was seeing in me. I couldn't face her for long. I had to go back to considering the slightly fluttering leaves above me.

"She feels sorry for me," I said. "I think that's the only thing that's keeping her in the house." My voice remained low, though there was no good reason for it. Nobody but Marcy was out there to hear me.

She held still and kept her face turned toward me. A bird sounded a call like "Pretty-pretty-pretty." Traffic droned in the distance.

"Jimmy," she said. Her voice was no louder than mine had been. When I didn't look at her, she said it again, "Jimmy." This time I met her eyes. "Jimmy, I think you'll be okay."

The face of my old friend Marcy was just so dear to me right then.

That was the right time for me to cry, and I wanted to. I actually thought I was going to. I swallowed, thinking a sob was the next sound I'd utter. But it wasn't. It didn't come. The tree leaves remained of great interest to me, and after a moment or two, Marcy bent back to her work. We stayed like that, quiet, with her working and me sitting still, for another long while. I let my eyes go closed. Then I was aware of Marcy's hand on my shoulder. She was smiling down at me. "Time for some iced tea," she said. When I looked around, a little startled, I saw that she'd put away her tools and her gloves.

"Iced tea sounds terrific," I said.

Marcy's kitchen was all hers now; since her divorce, she'd had it completely made over. I felt tense and overly alert. I was aware of Marcy's slightest gesture or detail of her appearance. Her wrist, for instance, though tanned as an old farmer's, now seemed to me unbearably slender as she wrestled the too-huge pitcher out of the refrigerator and onto the counter.

"I've been meaning to tell you something," she said, looking across her shoulder at me while she dropped ice cubes from her freezer into our glasses. "Actually I had meant to tell it to Ute a long time ago, but the time to do it never came up. All those years Allen and I were married, I thought I would get around to telling him, but I didn't. When our marriage started coming apart, one of the little things that bothered me was that I thought I wouldn't ever be able to tell this to anybody. Then when you and I got to be so close, I thought it must be you I was going to tell. That was, what?, maybe three years ago, and I still haven't told you. I don't know if today is a good time, but I want to tell you. I don't want to have this all to myself anymore."

She handed me my glass, having fixed the tea just as she knew I liked it, with half a teaspoon of sugar and no lemon. "This may not be useful to you," she murmured.

"The iced tea?" I knew that wasn't what she meant, but I needed her mood to change. Her expression had remained grim too long.

She was impatient with me, but she did smile just for that instant. Which was enough for me to catch a glimpse of the face of that exuberant, jittery girl I had met at a college dorm party a long time ago. Back then, her face had almost made me fall down in front of her, but now the memory of it had a calming effect on me.

"I'm only guessing that this story will be of any use to you," she said. "It may not be." She kept looking steadily into my face.

"Can't hurt me," I said.

Marcy reached up and around to put her cool hand to the back of my neck and pull me forward just a bit, nodding her forehead to touch mine. "Poor baby," she said. Then she moved away and pulled out a chair for me on her way around her kitchen table. She sat down opposite me. This was often our way — her living room was obviously more comfortable, but when we talked, we sat in here.

She placed her iced tea directly in front of her and stared at it.

"When I was fourteen — " She clipped these words. "I had a lover."

An odd thought came to me: *This is how Ute will tell me she's leaving, in just this tone or voice.* But I kept that thought to myself.

"He was an old guy. He was 41." She released an edgy laugh and shot her eyes up to meet mine. "Isn't that funny? — to think of somebody that age as an old guy?"

Marcy was wrought-up, maybe even a little hysterical. I started to say something, to answer her question, but my skin abruptly tightened. *Shut up, pal*, it said. I did.

She let her eyes go back to her tea glass, around which she'd folded her hands. "It lasted most of a school year," she said. "My freshman year." I watched her mouth almost grin, then go taut, and then grin again. Evidently her mind was showing old movies of that year of her life.

"Robert Crews," she said after awhile. "He's dead now, but his wife is still alive. We could call her up right this minute." She raised her eyes as if to ask me whether or not we should do that, call up Mrs. Crews.

"I almost went to his funeral," she whispered to me, leaning forward with wide eyes. Her face had turned gleeful. "Wouldn't that have been something? For me to go to his funeral and stand up and speak? I thought about it. I wanted to. I even tried to imagine what I would say at his funeral. 'Robert Crews —,' I would begin. I'd get everybody's attention. But I never could find the right words for what came next. 'Robert Crews molested me when I was a child — Robert Crews seduced me when I was 14 — Robert Crews took me to bed — Robert Crews fucked me —' "

Marcy's glee was all gone. I kept quiet. She searched my face intently.

"'Robert Crews loved me —' " This she mouthed more than said aloud, but I understood her well enough.

"Was that it?" I murmured. "Was that what he did?"

She lowered her eyes again. "Yes," she said. "I thought so. But I don't know. Maybe if he'd really loved me, he wouldn't have let that happen, wouldn't have let us be lovers."

"But he cared for you."

"Yes. He did that. He did that so much I finally couldn't stand it. It was his huge load of caring that made me end it with him. At the time, though, it seemed natural that I didn't want to go on with Robert because I'd gotten interested in Allen and wanted to be with him."

"I see."

"I don't think he meant to fall in love with me as much as he did. Robert, I mean. I think he was shocked when he realized what had happened to him."

She fell silent with her face changing according to her thoughts. She wasn't aware of my watching her.

"Allen never did quite fall in love with me," she murmured. "He wanted to, but it didn't happen. And because I'd seen Robert's feelings for me, I always knew they weren't there in Allen."

She thought about that for a moment. "But that must have been what I wanted — for him not to care about me so much that I couldn't stand it."

Again she paused, then finally said, "As you know, I stayed with Allen until he left me."

I waited before I spoke, but she stayed quiet. "What about you?" I said. "With whom did you fall in love?"

"Not Robert," she said immediately. She sat up straight in her chair, and her voice gained strength. "I thought I already was in love with him because back then he was my hero. Among grown ups, Robert was the one who paid attention to me. Who understood me. And he really did. It was just that after we started having sex, I couldn't keep shining that romantic light on him. I tried."

Marcy gave her tea glass a rueful smile. "It was actually pretty classic. Robert was a business man, a very successful one. He wore suits, and in them he looked perfect. He was fastidious and confident and full of energy. Women like my mother were crazy about him, but he was cool toward them. Robert had a way of holding himself. He could even look good in a swimming suit — which was what he was wearing the day he asked me if I wanted to have an adventure with him. I did! I really did want to have that adventure. But then later when he took his clothes off, he got old. His skin went slack. He lost his . . . his *authority*."

She laughed and looked me in the eye. "Some adventure," she said. "In bed with him, I felt like the warrior queen. I was the strong one. Robert was weak."

She was quiet a moment, thinking. "I actually didn't mind that part of it," she said. "That I became so much stronger than him. That was all right." She was quiet again. "But I hated his fat fish belly!" She shuddered.

That last Marcy said as if the thought had just come to her. Then she was crying. She wasn't sobbing or anything, but tears were coming down her face. When I stood up to go around the table and put my arm around her, she waved her hand for me to stay where I was. So I did.

That was when I realized I was feeling devastated myself, as if I'd been this Robert listening to her talk that way about me. I didn't think I'd ever heard Marcy even use the word *hate* before.

So in our separate miseries the two of us sat there. It wasn't good. But then it began to seem all right. While Marcy was moving through her feelings, I started to see Ute. I mean literally. It wasn't like just reviewing mental pictures of her, it was like my whole body was *envisioning* her — my imagination was doing it, yeah, but it was also my flesh and my bones, my ribcage, my feet and hands.

Just finished with her shower, Ute stood in front of a mirror, about to get dressed. She was studying herself, the way I guess anybody does once in a while. I realized it had been quite some time since I'd seen Ute naked. She must have been recently withholding herself from me because not so long ago she wasn't bashful about my seeing her. On the contrary, she had found occasions for making me the gift of the sight of her. Oh, this wasn't a good way for me to be thinking, but there I was doing it, sitting with Marcy at her kitchen table but with my whole physical self studying a private view of Ute in front of a mirror. My wife lifted a breast with each hand and stared at her reflection. Then she let go of herself and let her hands drop to her sides. Her head angled forward as if she wanted study the mirror's view of her toes.

I was aroused by the sight of Ute, I admit that. I was curious, too. There's nothing remarkable about a person standing in front of a mirror, checking out how time has worked on the old physical plant. What I couldn't seem to grasp was what had brought Ute to the mirror in the first place. She was a good looking woman, but her looks hadn't ever been a great concern to her. So it didn't ring true that Ute would be asking the mirror if she was still beautiful. Crazy as it was, I was halfway assuming that this picture I was getting was what Ute was actually doing. Odds were — and I did recognize this — that my imagination was responsible for what I was seeing.

So if that was the case, then what was I trying to tell myself by making up this little peep-show?

When she raised her head again to face herself in the mirror, Ute's mouth was tight, and her eyes were squinted. She looked fierce. She plucked a white bra out of the open dresser drawer beside her and strapped it around herself with what seemed to me gratuitous determination. All business now, she picked out a pair of white underpants and stepped into them. The mirror was still there, of course, but as she dressed she seemed to forget it. She was thinking about something else now that she was getting dressed for work at the hospital.

Ute's a senior nursing supervisor. I remembered that this week she was taking the afternoon shift. When I glanced at my watch, I saw it was time for her to be doing exactly what I was seeing her do — which slightly freaked me out. Either my imagination was wearing a watch, or I was tuned in to what was actually happening at my house.

"Ute's different now, Jimmy," Marcy said.

She startled me. For some time now, I'd been looking straight at her, but of course I hadn't been seeing her. I must have flinched because she reached across the table for my hand.

"No, I don't know any secrets." Marcy shook her head and went on. "I just know she's been changing. The last time Ute and I tried to talk to each other, it was frustrating for both of us. She was bored with what I wanted to talk about, which was mostly our kids. Listening to me, she got restless as a kid herself. So I tried to shut up and let her do the talking. I think she wanted to, but she couldn't find anything to tell me. When she left here, she told me she was sorry, she guessed she just wasn't in the mood for conversation. I told her that was all right, and it was, of course. But it wasn't. I knew what was wedged between us wasn't just her mood. Something important was going on with her that I'm pretty sure she didn't quite understand. It happens with a lot of people."

"A.B.C., for example," I said

She tightened her lips and nodded. "Yes, Allen is a good example. Allen and his women. What do you hear from him, Jimmy?"

"He doesn't communicate with me any more," I said. I was about to give her the complete answer. Which was that last week I had

gotten a glimpse of A.B.C. at lunch in Georgetown with a woman who looked like *her* — looked exactly like Marcy had twenty-five years ago. I was trying to think how I was going to phrase the business about the age difference. It really was eerie, how A.B.C. was driven to find younger versions of the woman who'd been his wife. That was a topic I wanted to take up with Marcy. But just then, a load of agitation shot into my system. And I saw Marcy's eyes widen with what she saw behind me.

I've played this through my mind enough times that it makes a certain amount of sense. Marcy's house was only slightly out of Ute's way as she drove in to work at the hospital. She'd been known to stop by before, back when she and Marcy were close, maybe just for a quick chat or to make plans for later in the week. Ute had walked into Marcy's house by the front door — which of course meant that Marcy had left her front door unlocked, but she often does that when she's puttering around in her flower gardens outside. Ute chose not to ring the doorbell. But of course they'd been that kind of friends — walk-in-without-ringing pals. She'd seen my car, she'd known that I was there, and so her coming in was also sort of the way we used to do it, Ute and I visiting the Crandalls and sometimes even arriving in separate cars. Then because of the carpet in Marcy's house, Ute hadn't made the slightest sound. All those circumstances didn't add up to a complete coincidence, but what they produced was far away from anything that Marcy or I could have expected. We must have had these totally astonished expressions on our faces.

As if she'd been zapped there from outer space, Ute stood at the threshold of Marcy's kitchen. Her nurse's uniform enhanced the general spookiness of the event. From that doorway, in those clothes that made her appear bathed in light, she gazed down on us. Marcy and I sat across from each other at the kitchen table, holding hands and gaping up at her. Ute's face was expressionless. Marcy and I must have looked like Adam and Eve just as they realized God was watching them eat the apple.

In that long moment, not one of us spoke.

Then Ute turned and left the house as silently as she'd appeared.

I thought Marcy was about to let go of my hands. "If that's what she wants to think," I said, "it's okay with me."

Marcy didn't let go, and she didn't say anything, but she did keep looking at me.

"It won't matter what we say to her," I said.

Marcy returned my gaze. Being with her like that wasn't uncomfortable. It felt like moving deeper into a familiar landscape. My skin went cold and then hot. Nothing changed between Marcy and me, but sitting with her, holding hands with her, staring into her face — it had turned into something perilous.

Marcy stood up and stretched, but she never looked away from me. I got up, too. I stood opposite her and reached over to brush the garden dirt off the place beside her nose. She let me do that.

Exactly what I began knowing then I couldn't be sure about, but I felt an odd confidence move into me, along with a coolness deep beneath the surface of my skin. "It's this way, isn't it?" I asked Marcy. I tilted my head up toward one side of the house.

She nodded.

So I turned and walked upstairs and down the hallway. I took my time. I knew Marcy was behind me. It wasn't necessary to turn back to see her. What was I thinking? It wasn't exactly thought. It was more like instinctively acting out of the grand cosmic will — at least that's how I describe it to myself nowadays. In the great scheme of time and space, Marcy and I were just tiny specks of protoplasm, but it felt like something powerful and right.

I'd never been in Marcy's room when it was all hers. When it had been the Crandall's bedroom, I'd stepped into it and out of it to leave my coat on winter party nights at their house. So I might have spent a total of two full minutes in it during the thirty years Marcy had been sleeping there. When I stepped into it that afternoon, it was like entering a greenhouse. The curtains were pulled back, and the shades were up. That room was bright and warm and fragrant. It was sucking in sunlight from every angle. Now I remembered that when A.B.C. moved out she'd had her bedroom done over. There was a raised alcove for a Jacuzzi with fancy tile and a skylight and windows on three sides. In there Marcy had set up shelves of cactuses and hibiscuses, ferns and even small trees.

I stood still just looking around me until she came up beside me. The carpet in there was dark green, and her curtains and her bedspread had this plants-&-blossoms motif against a white

background. It occurred to me that I hadn't expected — probably because she lived by herself — the room to be tidy. Her bed was made, there where no clothes lying around, even her bedside tables were uncluttered. On a table by one window was a vase of flowers she must have cut from her garden that morning.

When I looked directly at her again, Marcy was grinning as if she'd just done something remarkable. The sight of her gave me goosebumps. She actually executed a mock-pirouette into the center of the carpet, raising her arm, sweeping it out and around in a flourish.

"Sir?" she said, striking a graceful pose and letting her fingers stop in air, more or less toward me.

"Ma'am?" I said, stepping forward.