

loading up a spoon and finishing it bit by bit, and then taking another spoonful and another—one kind of pleasure, enhanced by stealth and guilt, when it is someone else's carton, someone else's home in the middle of the night, another kind when it's her own and she carries her bowl, in full light, to the couch before the television in the living room. Forbidden youthful passion and domestic married love, something like that, anyway, if you want to extrapolate. If you want to begin with the ice-cream dishes licked clean by a girl who is now the old woman past all usefulness, closing her eyes at the first taste. If you want to make a metaphor out of her lifelong cravings, something she is not inclined to do. Pleasure is pleasure. A remnant of strawberries, a young man's hands, a newborn in your arms, or your own child's changing face. Your lips to the familiar stubble of your husband's cheek. Your tongue to the last vein of fudge in the empty carton. Pleasure is pleasure. If you have an appetite for it, you'll find there's plenty. Plenty to satisfy you—lick the back of the spoon. Take another, and another. Plenty. Never enough.

Alice Munro

3

Floating Bridge

ONE TIME, she had left him. The immediate reason was fairly trivial. He had joined a couple of the Young Offenders ("Yo-yos" was what he called them) in gobbling up a gingerbread cake she had just made, and had been intending to serve after a meeting that evening. Unobserved—at least by Neal and the Yo-yos—she had left the house and gone to sit in a three-sided shelter on the main street, where the city bus stopped twice a day. She had never been in there before, and she had a couple of hours to wait. She sat and read everything that had been written on or cut into those wooden walls. Various initials loved each other 4 ever. Laurie G. sucked cock. Dunk Cultis was a fag. So was Mr. Garner (Math).

Eat Shit. H.W. Gange rules. God hates filth. Kevin S. Is Dead meat. Amanda W is beautiful and sweet and I wish they did not put her in jail because I miss her with all my heart. I want to fuck V.P. Ladies have to sit here and read this disgusting dirty things what you write. Fuck them.

Looking at this barrage of human messages—and puzzling in particular over the heartfelt, very neatly written sentence concerning Amanda W—Jinny wondered if people were alone when they wrote such things. And she went on to imagine herself sitting here or in some similar place, waiting for a bus, alone as she

would surely be if she went ahead with the plan she was set on now. Would she be compelled to make statements on public walls?

She felt herself connected at present to those people who had had to write certain things down—connected by her feelings of anger and petty outrage (perhaps it was petty?), and by her excitement at what she was doing to Neal, to pay him back. It occurred to her that the life she was carrying herself into might not give her anybody to be effectively angry at, or anybody who owed her anything, who could possibly be rewarded or punished or truly affected by what she might do. She was not, after all, somebody people flocked to. And yet she was choosy, in her own way.

The bus was still not in sight when she got up and walked home. Neal was not there. He was returning the boys to the school, and by the time he got back, somebody had already arrived for the meeting. She told Neal what she'd done, but only when she was well over it and it could be turned into a joke. In fact, it became a joke she told in company—leaving out or just describing in a general way the things she'd read on the walls.

"Would you ever have thought to come after me?" she said to Neal.

"Of course. Given time."

THE ONCOLOGIST had a priestly demeanor and even wore a black turtleneck shirt under a white smock—an outfit that suggested he had just come from some ceremonial mixing and dosing. His skin was young and smooth—it looked like butterscotch. On the dome of his head, there was just a faint black growth of hair, a delicate sprouting, very like the fuzz Jinny was sporting herself, though hers was brownish-gray, like mouse fur. At first, Jinny had wondered if he could possibly be a patient as well as a doctor. Then, whether he had adopted this style to make the patients more comfortable,

More likely it was a transplant. Or just the way he liked to wear his hair.

You couldn't ask him. He came from Syria or Jordan—someplace where doctors kept their dignity. His courtesies were frigid.

"Now," he said, "I do not wish to give a wrong impression."

She went out of the air-conditioned building into the stunning glare of a late afternoon, in August, in Ontario. Sometimes the sun burned through, sometimes it stayed behind thin clouds—it was just as hot either way. She saw the car detach itself from its place at the curb and make its way down the street to pick her up. It was a light-blue, shimmery, sickening color. Lighter blue where the rust spots had been painted over. Its stickers said, "I Know I Drive a Wreck But You Should See My House," and "Honor Thy Mother—Earth," and (this was more recent) "Use Pesticide—Kill Weeds, Promote Cancer."

Neal came around to help her.

"She's in the car," he said. There was an eager note in his voice which registered vaguely as a warning or a plea. A buzz around him, a tension, that told Jinny it wasn't time to give him her news, if "news" was what you'd call it. When Neal was around other people, even one person other than Jinny, his behavior changed, becoming more animated, enthusiastic, ingratiating. Jinny was not bothered by that anymore—they had been together for twenty-one years. And she herself changed—as a reaction, she used to think—becoming more reserved and slightly ironic. Some masquerades were necessary, or just too habitual to be dropped. Like Neal's antique appearance—the bandanna headband, the rough gray ponytail, the little gold earring that caught the light like the gold rims around his teeth, and his shaggy outlaw clothes.

While Jinny had been seeing the doctor, Neal had been picking up the girl who was going to help them with their life now. He knew her from the Correctional Institute for Young Offenders, where he was a teacher and she had worked in the kitchen. The

Correctional Institute was just outside the town where they lived, about thirty miles away. The girl had quit her kitchen job a few months ago and taken a job looking after a farm household where the mother was sick. Luckily she was now free.

"What happened to the woman?" Jinny had said. "Did she die?"

Neal said, "She went into the hospital."

"Same deal."

NEAL HAD SPENT nearly all his spare time, in the years Jinny had been with him, organizing and carrying out campaigns. Not just political campaigns (those, too) but efforts to preserve historic buildings and bridges and cemeteries, to keep trees from being cut down both along the town streets and in isolated patches of old forest, to save rivers from poisonous runoff and choice land from developers and the local population from casinos. Letters and petitions were always being written, government departments lobbied, posters distributed, protests organized. The front room of their house had been the scene of rages of indignation (which gave people a lot of satisfaction, Jinny thought) and of confused propositions and arguments, and Neal's nervy buoyancy. Now it was suddenly emptied. The front room would become the sickroom. It made her think of when she first walked into the house, straight from her parents' split-level with the swag curtains, and imagined all those shelves filled with books, wooden shutters on the windows, and those beautiful Middle Eastern rugs she always forgot the name of, on the varnished floor. On the one bare wall, the Canaletto print she had bought for her room at college—Lord Mayor's Day on the Thames. She had actually put that up, though she never noticed it anymore.

They rented a hospital bed—they didn't really need it yet, but it was better to get one while you could, because they were often in

short supply. Neal thought of everything. He hung up some heavy curtains that were discards from a friend's family room. Jinny thought them very ugly, but she knew now that there comes a time when ugly and beautiful serve pretty much the same purpose, when anything you look at is just a peg to hang the unruly sensations of your body on.

Jinny was forty-two, and until recently she had looked younger than her age. Neal was sixteen years older than she was. So she had thought that in the natural course of things she would be in the position he was in now, and she had sometimes worried about how she would manage it. Once, when she was holding his hand in bed before they went to sleep, his warm and present hand, she had thought that she would hold or touch this hand, at least once, when he was dead. And no matter how long she had foreseen this, she would not be able to credit it. To think of his not having some knowledge of this moment and of her brought on a kind of emotional vertigo, the sense of a horrid drop.

And yet—an excitement. The unspeakable excitement you feel when a galloping disaster promises to release you from all responsibility for your own life. Then from shame you must compose yourself, and stay very quiet.

"Where are you going?" he had said, when she withdrew her hand.

"No place. Just turning over."

She didn't know if Neal had any such feeling, now that it had turned out to be her. She had asked him if he was used to the idea yet. He shook his head.

She said, "Me neither."

Then she said, "Just don't let the Grief Counsellors in. They could be hanging around already. Wanting to make a preemptive strike."

"Don't harrow me," he said, in a voice of rare anger.

"Sorry."

"You don't always have to take the lighter view."

"I know," she said. But the fact was that, with so much going on and present events grabbing so much of her attention, she found it hard to take any view at all.

"THIS IS HELEN," Neal said. "This is who is going to look after us from now on. She won't stand for any nonsense, either."

"Good for her," said Jinny. She put out her hand, once she was settled in the car. But the girl might not have seen it, low down between the two front seats.

Or she might not have known what to do. Neal had said that she came from an unbelievable situation, an absolutely barbaric family. Things had gone on that you could not imagine going on in this day and age. An isolated farm, a widower—a tyrannical, deranged, incestuous old man—with a mentally deficient daughter and the two girl children. Helen, the older one, who had run away at the age of fourteen after beating up on the old man, had been sheltered by a neighbor, who phoned the police. And then the police had come and got the younger sister and made both children wards of the Children's Aid. The old man and his daughter—that is, the children's father and their mother—were both placed in a psychiatric hospital. Foster parents took Helen and her sister, who were mentally and physically normal. They were sent to school and had a miserable time there, having to start first grade in their teens. But they both learned enough to be employable.

When Neal had started the car up, the girl decided to speak.

"You picked a hot enough day to be out in," she said. It was the sort of thing she might have heard people say, to start a conversation. She spoke in a hard, flat tone of antagonism and distrust, but even that, Jinny knew by now, should not be taken personally. It was just the way some people sounded—particularly country people—in this part of the world.

"If you're hot, you can turn the air-conditioner on," Neal said.

"We've got the old-fashioned kind—just roll down all the windows."

The turn they made at the next corner was one Jinny had not expected. "We have to go to the hospital," Neal said. Helen's sister works there, and she's got something Helen wants to pick up. Isn't that right, Helen?"

Helen said, "Yeah. My good shoes."

"Helen's good shoes." Neal looked up at the mirror. "Miss Helen Rosie's good shoes."

"My name's not Helen Rosie," said Helen. It seemed as if it was not the first time she had said this.

"I just call you that because you have such a rosy face," Neal said.

"I have not."

"You do. Doesn't she, Jinny? Jinny agrees with me—you've got a rosy face. Miss Helen Rosie-Face."

The girl did have tender pink skin. Jinny had also noticed her nearly white lashes and eyebrows, her blond baby-wool hair, and her mouth, which had an oddly naked look, not just the normal look of a mouth without lipstick. A fresh-out-of-the-egg look was what she had, as if one layer of skin were still missing, one final growth of coarser, grown-up hair. She must be susceptible to rashes and infections, quick to show scrapes and bruises, to get sores around the mouth and sties between her white lashes, Jinny thought. Yet she didn't look frail. Her shoulders were broad, she was lean but big-boned. She didn't look stupid, either, though she had a head-on expression like a calf's or a deer's. Everything must be right on the surface with her, her attention and the whole of her personality coming straight at you, with an innocent and—to Jinny—a disagreeable power.

They drove up to the main doors of the hospital, then, following Helen's directions, swung around to the back. People in hospital dressing gowns, some trailing their I.V.s, had come outside to smoke.

"Helen's sister works in the laundry," Neal said. "What's her name, Helen? What's your sister's name?"

"Muriel," said Helen. "Stop here. O.K. Here."

They were in a parking lot at the back of a wing of the hospital. There were no doors on the ground floor except a loading door, shut tight. Helen was getting out of the car.

"You know how to find your way in?" Neal said.

"Easy."

The fire escape stopped four or five feet above the ground, but she was able to grab hold of the railing and swing herself up, maybe wedging a foot against a loose brick, in a matter of seconds. Neal was laughing.

"Go get 'em, girl!" he said.

"Isn't there any other way?" said Jinny.

Helen had run up to the third floor and disappeared.

"If there is, she ain't a-gonna use it," Neal said.

"Full of gumption," said Jinny, with an effort.

"Otherwise she'd never have broken out," he said. "She needed all the gumption she could get."

Jinny was wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat. She took it off and began to fan herself.

Neal said, "Sorry. There doesn't seem to be any shade to park in."

"Do I look too startling?" Jinny said. He was used to her asking that.

"You're fine. There's nobody around here anyway."

"The doctor I saw today wasn't the same one I'd seen before. I think this one was more important. The funny thing was he had a scalp that looked about like mine. Maybe he does it to put the patients at ease."

She meant to go on and tell him what the doctor had said, but the fanning took up most of her energy. He watched the building.

"I hope to Christ they didn't haul her up for getting in the

wrong way," he said. "She is just not a gal for whom the rules were made."

After several minutes, he let out a whistle.

"Here she comes now. Here-she-comes. Headin' down the homestretch. Will she, will she, will she have enough sense to stop before she jumps? Look before she leaps? Will she, will she—nope. Nope. Unh-unh."

Helen had no shoes in her hands. She got into the car and banged the door shut and said, "Stupid idiots. First I get up there and this asshole gets in my way. Where's your tag? You gotta have a tag. I seen you come in off the fire escape, you can't do that. O.K., O.K., I gotta see my sister. You can't see her now, she's not on her break. I know that. That's why I come in off the fire escape. I just need to pick something up. I don't want to talk to her. I'm not goin' to take up her time. I just gotta pick something up. Well, you can't. Well, I can. Well, you can't. And then I start to holler *Muriel*, *Muriel*. All their machines goin'. It's two hundred degrees in there. I don't know where she is, can she hear me or not. But she comes tearing out and as soon as she sees me—Oh, shit. Oh, shit, she says, I went and forgot. She forgot. I phoned her up last night and reminded her, but there she is. Shit, she forgot. I could've beat her up. Now you get out, he says. Go downstairs and out. Not by the fire escape, because it's illegal. Piss on him."

Neal was laughing and laughing and shaking his head.

Jinny said, "Could we just start driving now and get some air? I don't think fanning is doing a lot of good."

"Fine," said Neal, and started the car and backed and turned around, and once more they were passing the familiar front of the hospital, with the same or different smokers parading by in their dreary hospital clothes with their I.V.s. "Helen will just have to tell us where to go."

He called into the back seat, "Helen."

"What?"

"Which way do we turn now to get to where your sister lives? Where your shoes are."

"We're not goin' to their place, so I'm not telling you. You done me one favor and that's enough." Helen sat as far forward as she could, pushing her head between Neal's seat and Jinny's.

They slowed down, turned into a side street. "That's silly," Neal said. "You're going thirty miles away, and you might not get back here for a while. You might need those shoes." No answer. He tried again. "Or don't you know the way? Don't you know the way from here?"

"I know it, but I'm not telling."

"So we're just going to have to drive around and around till you get ready to tell us."

They were driving through a part of town that Jinny had not seen before. They drove very slowly and made frequent turns, so that hardly any breeze went through the car. A boarded-up factory, discount stores, pawnshops. "Cash, Cash, Cash," said a flashing sign above barred windows. But there were houses, disreputable-looking old duplexes, and the sort of single wooden houses that were put up quickly, during the Second World War. In front of a corner store, some children were sucking on Popsicles.

Helen spoke to Neal. "You're just wasting your gas."

"North of town?" Neal said. "South of town? North, south, east, west, Helen, tell us which is best." On Neal's face there was an expression of conscious, helpless silliness. His whole being was invaded. He was brimming with foolish bliss.

"You're just stubborn," Helen said.

"You'll see how stubborn."

"I am, too. I'm just as stubborn as what you are."

It seemed to Jinny that she could feel the blaze of Helen's cheek, which was so close to hers. And she could certainly hear the girl's breathing, hoarse and thick with excitement and showing some trace of asthma.

The sun had burned through the clouds again. It was still high

and brassy in the sky. Neal swung the car onto a street lined with heavy old trees, and somewhat more respectable houses.

"Better here?" he said to Jinny. "More shade for you?" He spoke in a lowered, confidential tone, as if what was going on in the car could be set aside for a moment. It was all nonsense.

"Taking the scenic route," he said, pitching his voice again toward the back seat. "Taking the scenic route today, courtesy of Miss Helen Rosie-Face."

"Maybe we ought to just go on," Jinny said. "Maybe we ought to just go on home."

Helen broke in, almost shouting. "I don't want to stop nobody from getting home."

"Then you can just give me some directions," Neal said. He was trying hard to get his voice under control, to get some ordinary sobriety into it. And to banish the smile, which kept slipping back in place no matter how often he swallowed it.

Half a slow block more, and Helen groaned. "If I got to, I guess I got to," she said.

It was not very far that they had to go. They passed a subdivision, and Neal, speaking again to Jinny, said, "No creek that I can see. No estates either."

Jinny said, "What?"

"Amber Creek Estates. On the sign. They don't care what they say anymore. Nobody even expects them to explain it."

"Turn," said Helen.

"Left or right?"

"At the wrecker's."

They went past a wrecking yard, with the car bodies only partly hidden by a sagging tin fence. Then up a hill, and past the gates to a gravel pit, which was a great cavity in the center of the hill.

"That's them. That's their mailbox up ahead," Helen called out with some importance, and when they got close enough, she read out the name. "Matt and June Bergson. That's them."

A couple of dogs came barking down the short drive. One was

large and black and one small and tan-colored, puppy-like. They bumbled around at the wheels and Neal sounded the horn. Then another dog—this one more sly and purposeful, with a slick coat and bluish spots—slid out of the long grass.

Helen called to them to shut up, to lie down, to piss off. "You don't need to bother about any of them but Pinto," she said. "Them other two's just cowards."

They stopped in a wide, ill-defined space, where some gravel had been laid down. On one side was a barn or implement shed, tin covered, and over to one side of it, on the edge of a cornfield, an abandoned farmhouse. The house inhabited nowadays was a trailer, nicely fixed up with a deck and an awning, and a flower garden behind what looked like a toy fence. The trailer and its garden looked proper and tidy, while the rest of the property was littered with things that might have a purpose or might just have been left around to rust or rot.

Helen had jumped out and was cuffing the dogs. But they kept on running past her, and jumping and barking at the car, until a man came out of the shed and called to them. The threats and names he called were not intelligible to Jinny, but the dogs quieted down.

Jinny put on her hat. All this time, she had been holding it in her hand.

"They just got to show off," said Helen. Neal had got out, too, and was negotiating with the dogs in a resolute way. The man from the shed came toward them. He wore a purple T-shirt that was wet with sweat, clinging to his chest and stomach. He was fat enough to have breasts, and you could see his navel pushing out like a pregnant woman's.

Neal went to meet him with his hand out. The man slapped his own hand on his work pants, laughed, and shook Neal's. Jinny could not hear what they said. A woman came out of the trailer and opened the toy gate and latched it behind her.

"Muriel went and forgot she was supposed to bring my shoes," Helen called to her. "I phoned her up and everything, but she went and forgot anyway, so Mr. Lockley brought me out to get them."

The woman was fat, too, though not as fat as her husband. She wore a pink muumuu with Aztec suns on it, and her hair was streaked with gold. She moved across the gravel with a composed and hospitable air. Neal turned and introduced himself, then brought her to the car and introduced Jinny.

"Glad to meet you," the woman said. "You're the lady that isn't very well?"

"I'm O.K.," said Jinny.

"Well, now you're here, you better come inside. Come in out of this heat."

The man had come closer. "We got the air-conditioning in there," he said. He was inspecting the car, and his expression was genial but disparaging.

"We just came to pick up the shoes," Jinny said.

"You got to do more than that, now you're here," said the woman, June, laughing as if the idea of their not coming in was a scandalous joke. "You come in and rest yourselves."

"We wouldn't like to disturb your supper," Neal said.

"We had it already," said Matt. "We eat early."

"But there's all kinds of chili left," said June. "You have to come in and help clean up that chili."

Jinny said, "Oh, thank you. But I don't think I could eat anything. I don't feel like eating anything when it's this hot."

"Then you better drink something, instead," June said. "We got ginger ale, Coke. We got peach schnapps."

"Beer," Matt said to Neal. "You like a Blue?"

Jinny waved at Neal, asking him to come close to her window. "I can't do it," she said. "Just tell them I can't."

"You know you'll hurt their feelings," he whispered. "They're trying to be nice."

"But I can't."

He bent closer. "You know what it looks like if you don't."

"You go."

"You'd be O.K. once you got inside. The air-conditioning really would do you good."

Jinny just shook her head.

Neal straightened up.

"Jinny thinks she better just stay in the car and rest here in the shade," Neal said. "But I wouldn't mind a Blue, actually."

He turned back to Jinny with a hard smile. He seemed to her desolate and angry. "You sure you'll be O.K.?" he said for the others to hear. "Sure? You don't mind if I go in for a little while?"

"I'll be fine," said Jinny.

He put one hand on Helen's shoulder and one on June's shoulder, walking them companionably toward the trailer. Matt smiled at Jinny curiously, and followed. This time, when he called the dogs to come after him, Jinny could make out their names.

Goober. Sally. Pinto.

THE CAR WAS PARKED under a row of willow trees. These trees were big and old, but their leaves were thin and gave a wavering shade. Still, to be alone was a great relief.

Earlier today, driving along the highway from the town where they lived, they had stopped at a roadside stand and bought some early apples. Jinny got one out of the bag at her feet and took a small bite—more or less to see if she could taste and swallow it and hold it in her stomach. It was all right. The apple was firm and tart, but not too tart, and if she took small bites and chewed seriously she could manage it.

She'd seen Neal like this—or something like this—a few times before. It would be over some boy at the school. A mention of the name in an offhand, even belittling way. A mushy look, an apologetic yet somehow defiant bit of giggling. But that was never any-

body she had to have around the house, and it could never come to anything. The boy's time would be up, he'd go away.

So would this time be up. It shouldn't matter. She had to wonder if it would have mattered less yesterday than it did today.

She got out of the car, leaving the door open so that she could hang on to the inside handle. Anything on the outside was too hot to hang on to for any length of time. She had to see if she was steady. Then she walked a little, in the shade. Some of the willow leaves were already going yellow. Some were already lying on the ground. She looked out from the shade at all the things in the yard.

A dented delivery van with both headlights gone and the name on the side painted out. A baby's stroller that the dogs had chewed the seat out of, a load of firewood dumped but not stacked, a pile of huge tires, a great number of plastic jugs and some oil cans and pieces of old lumber and a couple of orange plastic tarpaulins crumpled up by the wall of the shed. What a lot of things people could find themselves in charge of. As Jinny had been in charge of all those photographs, official letters, minutes of meetings, newspaper clippings, a thousand categories that she had devised and had been putting on disk when she had to go into chemo and everything got taken away. All those things might end up being thrown out. As all this might, if Matt died.

The cornfield was the place she wanted to get to. The corn was higher than her head now, maybe higher than Neal's head—she wanted to get into the shade of it. She made her way across the yard with this one thought in mind. The dogs, thank God, must have been taken inside.

There was no fence. The cornfield just petered out into the yard. She walked straight ahead into it, onto the narrow path between two rows. The leaves flapped in her face and against her arms like streamers of oilcloth. She had to remove her hat, so they would not knock it off. Each stalk had its cob, like a baby in a shroud. There was a strong, almost sickening smell of vegetable growth, of green starch and hot sap.

What she had intended to do, once she got in there, was lie down. Lie down in the shade of these large, coarse leaves and not come out till she heard Neal calling her. Perhaps not even then. But the rows were too close together to permit that, and she was too busy thinking to take the trouble. She was too angry.

It was not about anything that had happened recently. She was remembering how a group of people had been sitting around one evening on the floor of her living room—or meeting room—playing one of those serious psychological games. One of those games that were supposed to make a person more honest and resilient. You had to say just what came into your mind as you looked at each of the others. And a white-haired woman named Addie Norton, a friend of Neal's, had said, "I hate to tell you this, Jinny, but whenever I look at you, all I can think of is—Nice Nelly."

Other people had said kinder things to her. "Flower child" or "Madonna of the Springs." She happened to know that whoever said that meant "Manon of the Springs," but she offered no correction. She was outraged at having to sit there and listen to people's opinions of her.

Everyone was wrong. She was not timid or acquiescent or natural or pure. When you died, of course, these wrong opinions were all that was left.

While this was going through her mind, she had done the easiest thing you can do in a cornfield—got lost. She had stepped over one row and then another, and probably got turned around. She tried going back the way she had come, but it obviously wasn't the right way. There were clouds over the sun again, so she couldn't tell where west was. And she had not checked which direction she was going when she entered the field, anyway, so that would not have helped. She stood still and heard nothing but the corn whispering away, and some distant traffic.

Her heart was pounding just like any heart that had years and years of life ahead of it.

Then a door opened, she heard the dogs barking and Matt yelling, and the door slammed shut. She pushed her way through stalks and leaves, in the direction of that noise. It turned out that she had not gone far at all. She had been stumbling around in one small corner of the field, the whole time.

Matt waved at her and warned off the dogs.

"Don't be scairt of them, don't be scairt," he called. He was going toward the car just as she was, though from another direction. As they got closer to each other, he spoke in a lower, perhaps more intimate, voice.

"You shoulda come and knocked on the door." He thought that she had gone into the corn to have a pee. "I just told your husband I'd come out and make sure you're O.K."

Jinny said, "I'm fine. Thank you." She got into the car but left the door open. He might be insulted if she closed it. Also, she felt too weak.

"He was sure hungry for that chili."

Who was he talking about?

Neal.

She was trembling and sweating and there was a hum in her head, as if a wire were strung between her ears.

"I could bring you some out if you'd like it."

She shook her head, smiling. He lifted up the bottle of beer in his hand—he seemed to be saluting her.

"Drink?"

She shook her head again, still smiling.

"Not even a drink of water? We got good water here."

"No, thanks." If she turned her head and looked at his purple navel, she would gag.

"You hear about this fellow going out the door with a jar of horseradish in his hand?" he said in a changed voice. "And his dad says to him, 'Where you goin' with that horseradish?'"

"'Going to get a horse,' he says."

"Dad says, 'You're not goin' to catch a horse with no horse-radish.'

"Fellow comes back next morning. Nice big horse on a halter. Puts it in the barn.

"Next day Dad sees him goin' out, bunch of branches in his hand.

" 'What's them branches in your hand?'

" 'Them's pussy willows—' "

"What are you telling me this for?" Jinny said, almost shaking. "I don't want to hear it. It's too much."

"What's the matter now?" Matt said. "All it is is a joke."

Jinny was shaking her head, squeezing her hand over her mouth.

"Never mind," he said. "I won't take no more of your time."

He turned his back on her, not even bothering to call to the dogs.

"I DO NOT wish to give the wrong impression or get carried away with optimism." The doctor had spoken in a studious, almost mechanical way. "But it looks as if we have a significant shrinkage. What we hoped for, of course. But frankly, we did not expect it. I do not mean that the battle is over. But we can be to a certain extent optimistic and proceed with the next course of chemo and see how things look then."

What are you telling me this for? I don't want to hear it. It's too much.

Jinny had not said anything like that to the doctor. Why should she? Why should she behave in such an unsatisfactory and ungrateful way, turning his news on its head? Nothing was his fault. But it was true that what he had said made everything harder. It made her have to go back and start this year all over again. It removed a certain low-grade freedom. A dull, protecting membrane that she had not even known was there had been pulled away and left her raw.

MATT'S THINKING she had gone into the cornfield to pee had made her realize that she actually wanted to. Jinny got out of the car, stood cautiously, and spread her legs and lifted her wide cotton skirt. She had taken to wearing big skirts and no panties this summer, because her bladder was no longer under perfect control.

A dark stream trickled away from her through the gravel. The sun was down now. Evening was coming on, and there was a clear sky overhead. The clouds were gone.

One of the dogs barked halfheartedly, to say that somebody was coming but somebody they knew. They had not come over to bother her when she got out of the car—they were used to her now. They went running out to meet whoever it was, without any alarm or excitement.

It was a boy, or young man, riding a bicycle. He swerved toward the car and Jinny went round to meet him, a hand on the warm fender to support herself. When he spoke to her, she did not want it to be across her puddle. And maybe to distract him from even looking on the ground for such a thing, she spoke first. She said, "Hello. Are you delivering something?"

He laughed, springing off the bike and dropping it to the ground, all in one motion.

"I live here," he said. "I'm just getting home from work."

She thought that she should explain who she was, tell him how she came to be here and for how long. But all this was too difficult. Hanging on to the car like this, she must look like somebody who had just come out of a wreck.

"Yeah, I live here," he said. "But I work in a restaurant in town. I work at Sammy's."

A waiter. The bright-white shirt and black pants were waiters' clothes. And he had a waiter's air of patience and alertness.

"I'm Jinny Lockley," she said. "Helen. Helen is—"

"O.K., I know," he said. "You're who Helen's going to work for. Where's Helen?"

"In the house."

"Didn't nobody ask you in, then?"

He was about Helen's age, she thought. Seventeen or eighteen. Slim and graceful and cocky, with an ingenuous enthusiasm that would probably not get him as far as he hoped. Jinny had seen a few like that who ended up as Young Offenders. He seemed to understand things, though. He seemed to understand that she was exhausted and in some kind of muddle.

"June in there, too?" he said. "June's my mom."

His hair was colored like June's, gold streaks over dark. He wore it rather long, and parted in the middle, flopping off to either side.

"Matt, too?" he said.

"And my husband. Yes."

"That's a shame."

"Oh, no," she said. "They asked me. I said I'd rather wait out here."

Neal used sometimes to bring home a couple of his Yo-yos, to be supervised doing lawn work or painting or basic carpentry. He thought it was good for them, to be accepted into somebody's home. Jinny had flirted with them occasionally, in a way that she could never be blamed for. Just a gentle tone, a way of making them aware of her soft skirts and her scent of apple soap. That wasn't why Neal had stopped bringing them. He had been told it was out of order.

"So how long have you been waiting?"

"I don't know," Jinny said. "I don't wear a watch."

"Is that right?" he said. "I don't, either. I don't hardly ever meet another person that doesn't wear a watch. Did you never wear one?"

She said, "No. Never."

"Me neither. Never, ever. I just never wanted to. I don't know why. Never, ever wanted to. Like, I always just seem to know what time it is anyway. Within a couple minutes. Five minutes at the

most. Sometimes one of the diners asks me, 'Do you know the time,' and I just tell them. They don't even notice I'm not wearing a watch. I go and check as soon as I can, clock in the kitchen. But I never once had to go in there and tell them any different."

"I've been able to do that, too, once in a while," Jinny said. "I guess you do develop a sense, if you never wear a watch."

"Yeah, you really do."

"So what time do you think it is now?"

He laughed. He looked at the sky.

"Getting close to eight. Six, seven minutes to eight? I got an advantage, though. I know when I got off of work, and then I went to get some cigarettes at the 7-Eleven, and then I talked to some guys a couple of minutes, and then I biked home. You don't live in town, do you?"

Jinny said no.

"So, where do you live?"

She told him.

"You getting tired? You want to go home? You want me to go in and tell your husband you want to go home?"

"No. Don't do that," she said.

"O.K. O.K. I won't. June's probably telling their fortunes in there anyway. She can read hands."

"Can she?"

"Sure. She goes in the restaurant a couple of times a week. Tea, too. Tea leaves."

He picked up his bike and wheeled it out of the way of the car. Then he looked in, through the driver's window.

"Keys in the car," he said. "So—you want me to drive you home or what? Your husband can get Matt to drive him and Helen when they get ready. And he can bring me back from your place. Or if it don't look like Matt can, June can. June's my mom, but Matt's not my dad. You don't drive, do you?"

"No," said Jinny. She had not driven for months.

"No. I didn't think so. O.K. then? You want me to? O.K.?"

"THIS IS just a road I know. It'll get you there as soon as the highway."

They had not driven past the subdivision. In fact, they had headed the other way, taking a road that seemed to circle the gravel pit. At least they were going west now, toward the brightest part of the sky. Ricky—that was what he'd told her his name was—had not yet turned the car lights on.

"No danger meeting anybody," he said. "I don't think I ever met a single car on this road, ever. See—not so many people even know this road is here. And if I was to turn the lights on, then the sky would go dark, and everything would go dark, and you wouldn't be able to see where you were. We just give it a little while more, so then when it gets dark, we can see the stars, that's when we turn the lights on."

The sky was like very faintly colored glass—red or yellow or green or blue glass, depending on which part of it you looked at. The bushes and trees would turn black, once the lights were on. There would just be black clumps along the road and the black mass of trees crowding in behind them, instead of, as now, the individual, still identifiable, spruce and cedar and feathery tamarack, and the jewelweed with its flowers like winking bits of fire. It seemed close enough to touch, and they were going slowly. She put her hand out.

Not quite. But close. The road seemed hardly wider than the car.

She thought she saw the gleam of a full ditch ahead. "Is there water down there?" she said.

"Down there?" said Ricky. "Down there and everywhere. There's water to both sides of us and lots of places, water underneath us. Want to see?"

He slowed the car down and stopped. "Look down your side," he said. "Open the door and look down."

When she did that, she saw that they were on a bridge. A little bridge, no more than ten feet long, of crosswise-laid planks. No railings. And motionless water.

"Bridges all along here," he said. "And where it's not bridges it's culverts. 'Cause it's always flowing back and forth under the road. Or just laying there and not flowing."

"How deep?" she said.

"Not deep. Not this time of year. Not till we get to the big pond—it's deeper. And then, in spring, it's all over the road, you can't drive here, it's deep then. This road goes flat for miles and miles, and it goes from one end to the other. There isn't even any road that cuts across it. This is the only road I know of through the Borneo Swamp."

Jinny said, "Borneo Swamp? There is an island called Borneo. It's halfway round the world."

"I don't know about that. All I ever heard of was just the Borneo Swamp."

There was a strip of dark grass now, growing down the middle of the road.

"Time for the lights," he said. He switched them on, and they were in a tunnel in the sudden night. "Once I turned the lights on like that, and there was this porcupine. It was just sitting there in the middle of the road, sitting up on its hind legs, and looking right at me. Like some little tiny old man. It was scared to death and it couldn't move. I could see its little old teeth chattering."

Jinny thought, This is where he brings his girls.

"So what do I do? I tried beeping the horn, and it still didn't do nothing. I didn't feel like getting out and chasing it. He was scared, but he still was a porcupine and he could let fly. So I just parked there. I had time. When I turned the lights on again, he was gone." Now the branches really did reach the car and brush against the door, but if there were flowers she could not see them.

"I am going to show you something," he said. "I'm going to show you something like I bet you never seen before."

If this had been happening back in her old, normal life, it's possible that she might now have begun to be frightened. If she were back in her old, normal life she would not be here at all.

"You're going to show me a porcupine," she said.

"Nope. Not that."

A few miles farther on, he turned off the lights. "See the stars?" he said. He stopped the car. Everywhere, there was at first a deep silence. Then this silence was filled in, at the edges, by some kind of humming that could have been faraway traffic, and little noises that passed before you properly heard them, that could have been made by birds or bats or night-feeding animals.

"Come in here in the springtime," he said, "you wouldn't hear nothing but the frogs. You'd think you were going deaf with the frogs." He opened the door on his side.

"Now. Get out and walk a ways with me."

She did as she was told. She walked in one of the wheel tracks, he in the other. The sky seemed to be lighter ahead, and there was a different sound—something like mild and rhythmical conversation. The road turned to wood and the trees on either side were gone.

"Walk out on it," he said. "Go on."

He came close and touched her waist, guiding her. Then he took his hand away, left her to walk on these planks, which were like the deck of a boat. Like the deck of a boat, they rose and fell. But it wasn't a movement of waves, it was their footsteps, his and hers, that caused this rising and falling of the boards beneath them. "Now do you know where you are?" he said.

"On a dock?" she said.

"On a bridge. This is a floating bridge."

Now she could make it out—the plank roadway just a few inches above the still water. He drew her over to the side, and they looked down. There were stars riding on the water.

"It's dark all the time," he said proudly. "That's because it's a

swamp. It's got the same stuff in it tea has got, and it looks like black tea."

She could see the shoreline, and the reed beds. Water in the reeds, lapping water, was what was making that sound.

"Tannin," she said.

The slight movement of the bridge made her imagine that all the trees and the reed beds were set on saucers of earth and the road was a floating ribbon of earth and underneath it all was water.

It was at this moment that she realized she didn't have her hat. She not only didn't have it on, she hadn't had it with her in the car. She had not been wearing it when she got out of the car to pee and when she began to talk to Ricky. She had not been wearing it when she sat in the car with her head back against the seat and her eyes closed, when Matt was telling his joke. She must have dropped it in the cornfield, and in her panic left it there.

While she had been scared of seeing the mound of Matt's navel with the purple shirt plastered over it, he had been looking at her bleak knob.

"It's too bad the moon isn't up yet," Ricky said. "It's really nice here when the moon is up."

"It's nice now, too."

He slipped his arms around her as if there were no question at all about what he was doing and he could take all the time he wanted to do it. He kissed her mouth. It seemed to her that this was the first time that she had ever participated in a kiss that was an event in itself. The whole story, all by itself. A tender prologue, an efficient pressure, a whole-hearted probing and receiving, a lingering thanks, and a drawing away satisfied.

"Oh," he said. "Oh."

He turned her around, and they walked back the way they had come.