

# Benson Watts Is Dead and in Virginia

by Doris Betts

After I died, I woke up here.

Or so it seems. Perhaps I am actually still dying, locked in that darkness between one breath and the next, still wearing tubes which leak from my nostrils and drain that long incision. My wife may even yet continue to bend over the high bed to catch the next beat of my heart while the blood jar is ticking down, like a water clock, into my veins. Perhaps that last hospital scene is the only scene and all the rest is a dream in passage.

But the room and her melting face clicked off, I think. Then the smells went. She was saying something; I could still hear that—I stopped hearing it. I unbloated and the queer whistle in my breathing stopped. I could no longer tell the pain from cold. All my circuit breakers opened and sensations blurred. Someone set fire to my hand but it barely tickled.

Through all this, my mind was clearer and more finely tuned than it had ever been. I treasured that clarity, though it had less and less raw material to think with now. I thought: I must withdraw into my brain and hide—there's nothing left outside.

So I did. I backed into my brain farther and farther and got smaller and smaller the deeper I went, until I fell out the other side.

And woke up prone in this yellow grass. The color is important.

When they rolled me back from surgery, it was May.

At first I didn't dare move. If I lifted my hand, it might fall through the air and drop back onto a starched sheet. I could not tell what was still attached to me and might clatter if I stirred.

The place where I lay was so . . . so ordinary. A sky as blue as a postcard. Between it and me, one tree limb: oak. White oak, I thought. The grass felt like all grass. When a cricket bounced over my head, I knew for sure we were a long way from the recovery room; they would not recover me. I sat up. I was on a sloping postcard meadow. At the bottom, a narrow stream. Willows. I touched my abdomen, which should have been hot and painful. Dacron trousers instead of gauze. Not mine, though. These were new.

Around my left wrist hung a small bracelet and a yellowish tag which looked like the ivory sliver off a piano key. On it, carved, was the following:

TO AVOID G.B.—

1. Dwell, then travel
2. Join forces
3. Disremember

Very carefully, I got to my feet. It had been a long time since I could move without pain. The cool wind was a shock and made me clap both hands to my head. Bald as an egg! Not even a prickle, a wisp, a whisker. Otherwise I was myself as I had been before the intestinal cancer, even a little younger. I tried to guess by flexing muscles, checking where pounds were gone, feeling my smoother face. A little beard starting down the cheeks. I thought I might be forty again, or maybe less. I tried out my voice. Normal. For

practice, I said aloud, “Well, it sure as hell isn’t Heaven,” and my laugh was normal, too—forced, but even that was normal. I took a few steps, then ran downhill and splashed into the water in a pair of shoes I had never owned. Everything normal. A bright September day and I was alive in it.

Yet there was something. There was something wrong with my mind. Too quiet up there, not enough panic, too small a load of bewilderment, not even enough curiosity. Earlier I said of the tree limb, “White oak, I thought,” and that wasn’t right. I didn’t quite think. This was spooky. It was more as if Something thought in me. I felt the words were moving by their own choice through my head the way air bubbles slide down the bowel.

I began walking along the stream bank waiting for—I don’t know. For my head to clear? I felt aged forty from the neck down. I waited for that age to rise and cover me like water.

I was in Texas when I died. These hills and fields and meadows looked more to me like—what should I guess?—like Virginia. I said this over and over, aloud, “I’m dead and in Virginia,” trying to make the sentence taste like mine. It never quite did.

Now and then, beside the stream, I would spot hoofprints. Cattle? Or deer? I saw nothing else alive except me, that cricket, and dozens of yellow birds on quick and nervous flights. Ricebirds in Virginia? They fed off tall stems and some stunted bush with brown catkins on its twigs. I jangled my wrist tag. I’d worn a bracelet there in the hospital, too, with my name spelled out in beads like an infant’s. WATTS. Benson Watts. Ben.

I got the first pain, under one ear. Ben Watts. 226 Tracy Avenue . . .

I got the second pain, a needle, higher. I rattled the tag. *Disremember*, it said.

Crossing the stream, I noticed for the first time I was traveling in the direction it flowed—there! You see how my brain was? Unobservant. Unconcerned. At the water's edge was a stretch of pale sand. Beyond that the mud was like milk chocolate. More yellow grass grew on both sides to the edge of trees just turning from solid green to red maples and yellow hickories. The scattered pines were thinning their needles for fall.

I rounded a bend. To my right the land dipped off, and the water turned and ran downhill faster to empty into a long lake I could not see the end of, maybe half a mile wide. Its surface was very still with a skim of reflections. As I got closer, I knew what was wrong with this scenery, so ordinary and yet so unreal; and it came from absence. Everything I expected to see did not appear. No boats or motors, no fishermen, dogs, garbage, foam, signs, fences. No plastic bottles drifting near the shore. My head was aching. The sun was too harsh on my peeled scalp.

Near the water I glimpsed a small house, almost a hut. *Déjà vu*. I spun to the southwest to see if the Fitchburg Railroad skirted the lake. No. Yet it was his house or nearly like it, built beside the pond a hundred years ago for less than thirty dollars. Built yesterday. I began to run through the ripening grass. If I was back in time, was Thoreau inside? Writing in his journal?

Or was it possible that each of us died away into our own personal image of serenity and would be tucked there forever like something in a pocket?

Running made my head worse. But that gut I had cursed for

a year was now so new and strong I thought it might be turned to gold or silver, and I ran with both palms pressed there to feel each strand of muscle move.

The wooden door was half open, heavy on its leather hinges. I jumped a low stone wall and ran up the path.

One room with an earthen floor, a smaller one beyond in which I could see strings of onions, peppers, and bean pods. I touched the table, chair, bunk, saw that high shelves on both sides of a fieldstone hearth reached over my head. They held a set of books, maybe a hundred, all with the same green binding. I called out "Hello!" to more absence. Nobody answered; though there were ashes in the fireplace, not quite cold, and the charred spine of a book which seemed to match the others.

There was no dust. Under the bunk I found a stack of empty picture frames, white canvases, a wood box of paints and brushes, and I could see the clean squares on one wall where somebody's pictures had hung. There were no titles on the books, and when I pulled one out I found each page was lined but blank—the other books were the same. This time something happened that I expected; I found pen and ink on the bottom shelf.

To enter the back room I had to stoop. It was a pantry with a board floor. Cured hams were hanging from the ceiling over a flour bin. Crockets of meal and dried beans in sacks were under a table on which apples, potatoes, yams, pears, green tomatoes lay in neat rows. One high shelf held what looked like scuppernong wine in gallon jars. The woodbin was behind the door, full of oak logs, with a sack of cedar kindling nailed outside. The pantry was dim and its odors thick as fog.

I laid the wood over the andirons. Matches had been left in a tin by the hearth, and after I lit the lightwood I rummaged in a second strongbox where small jars of spices were jumbled, some without labels. I read once that if a man eats nutmeg his urine will smell like violets. Perhaps I will try it.

Slowly the oak bark caught fire underneath, curled off, till the log smoked and finally burned. Beautiful was the fire. Its colors moved and changed. I sat before it, watching for the sudden lick of blue which would reappear in a new place. So long as I stared into the flames, my head did not hurt. When there were coals, I slid three sweet potatoes in to roast and sat on, dreaming, sometimes tapping the log with a poker so sparks would leap off and shower onto the dirt floor. I must have sat that way for hours.

But the potato hearts were still raw when I peeled and ate them. I rolled the thickest log across the floor and heaved it into place. Then I went to bed though it was barely dark.

In the night I woke to hear rustling beyond me, something large scraping its hide between a bush and the wall of my house. There were no windows. In the red firelight I found the poker and carried it with me and swung open the heavy door. A large deer moved down the path, stepping as carefully as if he had made it, so heavily antlered that he seemed to be holding up an iron grille by stiffening his neck. He bent and drank from the lake, snuffled lightly, moved off along the water's edge. As soon as he passed, the frogs that he left would sing out again, so I could follow him through the dark long after he was lost to sight.

It was the same deer. I put the poker under my bunk with the paints and brushes. Only when I was settled and warm again and

had closed my eyes against the glow of the fireside did I wonder: What does that mean? *Same deer?*

I knew suddenly it must be very dangerous to sleep. I might slide back. My gut would reopen; some bastard in a white coat would whisper, "He's coming out of it." I could almost see my wife hunched in her chair, the brown rubber tubes in her hands, waiting for me. And there was a drop of borrowed blood, halfway down, hung there till my arm would be under it.

But in spite of my fear I went to sleep and when I woke up, I was still here.

## 2

In the morning I could not remember the deer. I could remember getting out of bed in the dark, but not why. I ate an apple, found coffee beans and an old-fashioned hand grinder, and at last boiled the grounds in a cooking pot. The brew was thick and scummy, but its smell was magnificent. I remembered I'd had no cigarettes for two weeks, no solid food for longer than that. When I picked up the apple, saliva ran down my throat in a flood, and I felt my nose was twitching like a dog's.

I had dreamed about a deer. That's it. In the dream, an old stag came into this house and offered to carry me across the lake on his back. He spoke in rather a high voice for so large an animal. He told me that when many deer swam the lake, each rested his head on the haunches of the one in front, and since the one behind did the same, they suffered no trouble from the weight. He said the whole line swam for the far shore with all speed in this linked

position, to reach land before being befouled. He would be lead deer on this trip, he said, and would carry me himself.

No. The headache started.

No, there had been a real deer, outside. I saw him by the lake. It was hard to remember the simplest details. Was it a doe, a fawn? I had never seen a deer this close before—that much was certain.

I grabbed one of the green ledgers and began to write down who I was and how I got here and that the deer was real. It was hard to write. My head felt as if something had come loose inside and was banging the bone. I read the entry twice, until I had it all straight and in order. Every day I would do this; every morning I would set down the previous day and read all the earlier entries. This would be good training for my mind, which, I now thought, had suffered oxygen deprivation there at the end. At the beginning? Whichever it was.

My name is Benson Watts and when I died in Houston, Texas, I was sixty-five and had grandchildren—none of whom I liked very much. I also had thick gray hair and brushy eyebrows. When I told my namesake grandson I looked like John L. Lewis, he didn't know who Lewis was. Now I'm twenty-five years younger, in Virginia, and my scalp is like orange rind, nothing but skin and pores; and I don't remember Lewis too well myself except for the eyebrows.

He might have been a principal in some school where I taught. He had the face for the job. For years I taught U.S. and world history in high schools all over Texas, for peanuts, because that left my summers free. Summers I read books, collected stamps, built halves of sailboats in the back yard, took auto trips, sold Fuller brushes (once), and encyclopedias (four times), coached

Little League, tried pottery and built my own kiln, got divorced and remarried, and made notes for the book I would someday write on the Cherokee Indian in North Carolina. Here I am at last, dead and in Virginia, with a pen and inkpot and one wall of blank paper handy, and all I remember is Tsali and the Trail of Tears. Some joke.

Once, too, I thought I might go to graduate school and write a book on the Dark Ages, on the flickers of light in the Dark Ages. By 1969, I thought we might be edging into the shadow of some new darkness, and without a Church to persevere. I taught myself Latin so I could read illuminated manuscripts at Oxford instead of translations in Texas libraries. *Illuminated* manuscripts. What a good phrase! But I did not write that book, either, and now I cannot call up a single Latin root.

All I can easily remember are random facts about myself, which don't amount to much. Trivia. The substance is missing. Let me write down the details.

Texas is bigger than France. There are four or five Texases to be born in—mine happened to be Beaumont, four years after the Spindletop oil gusher blew in. There might have been 10,000 people there then; the city multiplied itself by twelve in my lifetime. I stopped liking Beaumont when it passed 20,000, finished at Baylor, and started teaching history to conceited teenagers who—if they owned the world and Texas—would rent out the world and live in Texas. That may be why Lyndon Johnson went to Washington, to see for himself how unlucky everybody else was. He stayed gone a long time.

Most summers I escaped from Texas, and once in the Notre

Dame library I read the twelfth-century bestiaries and made notes, later lost in a Southern Railway boxcar. In the thirties I jumped freights and thumbed and left my wives (there were three in all) to go discuss me with their mothers.

The third wife, Grace, sat with me in the Houston Hospital while I died. She didn't shed a tear. Grace came late in my life; she never expected much, so was never disappointed. When I loaded up the car, she'd stand in the yard with her arms folded and just say, "Okay, Sunnybitch, don't leave me no dirty laundry." Grace had Indian blood. I miss her calm ways and her slow talking in an alto voice. I've seen her make a face at a coming tornado and then go inside and forget about it. Nothing affected her much. Even sex. She was a challenge. If Grace had cried—even once—in that sterile hospital room, I might have stuck out a finger; I might have blotted that tear and sucked it off and gotten well, just from the novelty of the thing.

She didn't cry, though, and I had not died off into a medieval abbey or a Cherokee camp. You'd think there'd be some choice. They even claim to give you that in the army.

Outside the hut I sat with my book and pen by the lake in the warm sun, reminding myself how the deer had stood and blown the water. Yes, it felt like September here. Indian summer. And for all I knew some real Indian, even a Cherokee with strings of hickory bark around his waist, might step out of these woods. Wonderful!

Might shoot me with his locust bow strung with bear entrails. Not so good. Could I die twice? Re-die? All that was . . . meta-physics. I could not think about it yet.

Could not. The landscape would not allow me. Virginia was

opposed to thinking. While I sat in the brightness, empty as a sack, a praying mantis climbed up a weed stalk and lay along its blade. I bent my face beside that green swaying. Red knobby eyes. The only insect, I'm told, that can look over its shoulder. Maybe when this one died of winter, she would be raised up to my scale; as maybe I—shrunken—was now living on the tip of some weed and my lake was a dewdrop in the morning sun.

Yet none of this interested me. The four spread legs, two bent prayer claws, wings folded in layers on her back—I could have watched these tiny things all day, as I had waited for a blue flick on a burning log the night before.

Once I would have touched the mantis to see where she would spring. It was not necessary. I had been let out of thinking as if thinking were a jail. Nothing expected me to connect it with anything else. Not to anticipate—delicious. I felt that first morning the way a baby feels. *I am here*. Nothing else.

Some days went by. My ledger notes are sketchy. Like Thoreau, I gave time to birds and anthills. One afternoon—feeling so far from my other world that I mistook distance for wisdom—I analyzed completely how Western culture fell apart after World War II, and wrote down how this might have been prevented. My words lacked urgency. Nobody would read them. I bored myself.

After burning that, I tried to put on canvas my nighttime deer bent over a floating picture of himself in the black water. My painting was squat and clumsy, a hog at a wallow.

The fifth morning I was sitting on a log by the lake, watching the mist rise. Every morning it lay over the lake like cloud, then slowly churned to blow up the shore and fade among the tree

trunks. I watched it begin to thin itself over the land. Down the lake, the mist suddenly shook like a curtain and I had a glimpse of someone walking by the water's edge.

I ran forward a few steps. Like gauze, the air blew shut. I saw it again. If not a man, a bear, upright and moving toward me.

My eye fixed on the fog, I walked in that direction. Fear? I could not remember how it felt to be afraid. In the thinning haze I saw again a—a polar bear? Impossible. White but too small. We could hear each other now. Crackling brush, dry stems breaking underfoot. I moved faster but those other noises stayed unhurried and regular. The mist was waist-high. I walked beyond it into a field of broom sedge and she, at the same moment, worked out of a wispy alder thicket and stared at me. She had on a white uniform, like a nurse.

I called, "Hello!"

She kept one bent alder limb taut in her hand. She was in her late twenties, red-haired, and pregnant. I saw that not only in her shape but the way she stood, bare feet spread wide, her spine tilted. She stepped forward and the branch twanged behind her. "Who are you?"

"My name is Benson Watts. I live . . ." That verb wasn't right. I jerked a thumb over one shoulder. "I've been staying in a little house by the lake."

"Good," she said. "I've not had anything to eat but persimmons. My mouth has shrunk down to zero." She gave me a normalized smile as she passed. "This way?"

"Just follow my track. What are you doing here?"

"Eating persimmons is all so far." Flatfooted, she walked along

the swath I had made in the ripe weeds. I could not think of a way to ask a pregnant woman if she were dead. I thought about it, but the question sounded impolite. I followed. She was no more than five feet tall. Her short hair was full of beggar's-lice and sticktights.

I said, "Have you been here long?"

"Don't remember."

Her white skirt was streaked with mud and resin. "What's the last thing you do remember?"

"Spending the night in the woods. Oh. There it is." She made for my cabin in that stride which, from behind, looked bowlegged and clumsy. "What's the last thing you remember?"

I decided to say, "A hospital room."

"You're not contagious, are you? TB or anything?" She looked back and I saw how thickly her face was freckled. "You can see why I've got to ask." She patted her belly with her left hand on which she wasn't wearing a single ring. There was a bracelet, though, like mine. I pulled at her tag and turned it over. *Dwell, then travel. Join forces. Disremember.*

"Where'd you get this?"

"The fairies brought it," she said. "And the baby, too." She led the way into my house, stroked the earth floor with the sole of her foot. "This is nice." The tops of her feet were scratched, some of the marks white, some bloodied. I pointed to the pantry. Quickly she ran up to a dangling ham and laid her face on its salty mold. I said I'd slice and fry some. She poked among the pears until she found one mellow enough to eat.

While I chopped off some meat and set the pan in the fire-place, she finished the pear and bit into a cucumber, peeling and

all. “What’s in this sack?” she called. I was trying to keep the ham from catching fire. “Peanuts!” She crowed, “Oh, glory! Peanuts!” I heard them rattle in a pot. “Let’s parch some.” She pushed the pan onto a bed of coals and a little grease popped into it and speckled their hulls. “Smell that ham, honey!” she said—not to me, but to the lump at her middle.

I sat back on the dirt floor and let her tend the skillet. “What’s your name?”

“Olena.”

I had her spell it. I’d never heard that name before. I think she made it up.

“There’s flour but no bread,” I said. She didn’t offer to make biscuits but sat back with her legs crossed wide under the round bulk of her unborn child. I thought through several questions before I chose, “Is your home around here?”

Olena said, “It never was before. Where’s yours?”

“Texas.” She plucked the fork from my hand and turned over the ham. I took a long breath and blew out a statement on it, watching her. “I was sick in a hospital and then I woke up here.”

Olena said matter-of-factly, “I fell down a flight of stairs and this place was at the bottom.”

We stared at each other, then quickly looked away. Each of us stole a glance at the pale tag strung to the other’s wrist. With a grunt, Olena got to her feet and went to the pantry to find a plate and cutlery. I warned her pork needed to cook longer than that, but she was already spearing an oily slice. “I don’t think you can get worms here,” she said, staring at the ham.

“I see plenty of regular insects.”

Chewing, she didn't care. "Oh, glory, that's good!" she said, with a sigh. I brought her a salt shaker and a tomato with the top cut off; she buried half her freckled face until its juice ran down her chin. "Can I sleep here tonight?" she asked, swiping a forearm over her mouth. I said she could.

Watching her chew the ham and pull its pink shreds from between her teeth, I tried to decide what accident had sent us both here, what kink in orderly process, whether there was some link between our lives or some similarity in our natures which made us candidates for transport to this place. I asked about the location of the stairs where she fell, and Olena said, "Florida. Fort Lauderdale." All I got out of that was a vague sense of regional districts, but it made me walk to the door and search the edges of the lake for some other Southerner. The mist had cleared.

"What you looking for?"

"Just looking." Somebody else would be coming soon. I felt certain of it. "Olena, is there someplace you're supposed to be? Or be going?"

She finished the ham and raked a pile of peanuts onto the floor to cool. "I guess not."

"We'll wait here a few days, then."

### 3

The fire kept me awake. Even with my eyes closed, its pattern of light and shadow on my face was a physical touch and moved like warm water across my skin. I rolled in my blanket farther across the floor and turned my back to the blaze. Above me, in the bunk,

Olena lay, spread-legged, bulging. The covers seemed draped on an overturned chair. Behind me, the fire crackled. Rain had begun in late afternoon, so we kept the fire going against a wet chill rising through the dirt floor. Olena's snore was soft as a cat's purr.

I dozed, then leaped alert. What had wakened me? Perhaps that deer, passing my door, had ground his teeth? I threw back the blanket and sat up, listening. It must have been nearly dawn, since mockingbirds were taking turns, each song intensely sweet and swelling higher than the last. Barefoot, I crossed the damp floor and stepped onto the path. Raindrops on the weeds looked solid, like tacks or metal pellets, but the sky was full of fading stars. Far down the lake, something large and dark bent in the mist to drink, too wide and bulky to be a stag. My naked scalp prickled, for there had flared through my head the leaves of those old Latin bestiaries, page after page of winged quadrupeds and dromedaries, each fact of natural history bent to reflect an attribute of Christ. Just from Olena's presence, this landscape had become a dream we both were having and, like those books, took on some quality of concealment and mystery.

I started through the wet grasses to surprise the drinking animal, but it melted through the brush and downhill into the woods, looking odd and fictional. The woods were, at the same time, dark and translucent. It seemed to me even the tree trunks were spelling words I could nearly read. I rested my hand on the bark of one, and tried in its cracks and lichen crusts to make out the Braille. Not since I was a child had I felt this expectancy, as if at last I were on the verge of seeing everything unveiled. Most of my life I'd been certain there was nothing *to* unveil. A bit of lichen, like tough lace,

came loose in my fingers.

Quietly, I walked inside the hut, dried my feet, and slid again into my blanket roll. Olena had turned her face to the wall and her back took on a woman's curves. I was fearful of desiring her. I slept and dreamed that my mother was lying on her deathbed and the doctor took a large white bird out of his satchel and wrapped its claws on the brass bedstead. "If the bird turns to face her," he said, "this is not a mortal illness, but if he keeps his back turned there'll be nothing I can do." The bird unfolded extra wings and feathers after being cramped in the leather bag and seemed to grow larger and larger. One at a time, he uncurled his feet and shook them, then flapped once around the room. Each wingbeat sounded like an oar slammed flat against the water. At last the bird lit facing away from my mother, who gave a great cry. I ran forward to beat at the big bird but I could not make it move or even look at me, and its yellow talons were wrapped on the metal rail as if molded there.

At daylight, we were wakened by loud thumps on the wooden door. Olena sprang half out of bed, one of her feet touching the floor.

"Don't worry," I said. "It's another one."

She whispered, "Another what?"

"Another one of us." I jangled my bracelet in the air between us and stepped into my shoes. I dragged open the heavy door.

He was ugly. Malformed—not deformed but malformed—six feet tall and the parts of his body mismatched. Hips like a woman and a head flattened on both sides. I could not see a bracelet under the black sleeve of his suit. I pictured him yanked from his mother's

womb, not by forceps, but with a pair of cymbals clapped over both ears. His face, driven together by the blow, was long and its features crowded. The nose, buckteeth, popeyes had all pushed forward when the doctor first compressed his skull. "Come in?" he asked softly.

"Of course." Another Southerner—Georgia Cracker by his drawl. "Are you hungry?"

Thinking about it, he rubbed his temples with both thumbs. "I think I just ate," he finally said, and spotted Olena waiting by the bed. "Good morning, Ma'am."

I introduced Olena and myself. He wasn't curious. "Melvin Drum," he said, and wrapped my hand in a long set of fingers. He was too thin for his black suit and the pale bow tie made his Adam's apple look red and malignant. He said politely, "Hate to wake you up."

"We've been expecting you." That puzzled him. He took a seat and stared at his knuckles while he popped each one.

"This is a funny thing," he said mildly. "It might be amnesia. But look here." He leaned his head forward and his longish tan hair divided into two hanks. "You see a knot there? Anything?"

I felt his scalp. "Nothing."

He leaned back and his eyes—which I had thought were blue—glowed green as a cat's. "Maybe I've gone crazy," he said, obviously pleased. "They say religious people do."

Dryly I said I thought Mr. Drum would find he had passed beyond all need for religion now.

He did not hear me. "It's hard to tell nuts from saints," he explained to Olena, "except for God, of course. He can divide them

up left and right in the twinkling of an eye. The twinkling. Of one eye.” Smiling, he tilted his chair onto two back legs and I grabbed for his sleeve where something gleamed.

“Can you explain this?” I said, shaking my own tag.

“I can accept it,” he said. He pulled his cuff over the third bracelet. “We’ve all passed on and these are our instructions.”

“Passed *on*?” said Olena. She crossed to the pantry, carried back a skirtful of yellow apples, and sat on the floor to share them. “Are you certain you’re dead, then, Mr. Drum?”

“That was the last promise I heard.” His rabbit teeth bit out a sharp triangle and he talked over the sloshing noise of apple in his mouth. “I turned down an alley—there were three men bent over somebody. I tried to run. They grabbed me; one of them put a flashlight on my face and said, ‘Oh, Lord, it was Willy and Willy had a big mouth.’ The one I couldn’t see said, ‘Willy’s a dead man, then.’”

“Who’s Willy?” I asked.

“God only knows.” He read the carving softly: “‘To avoid going back—dwell, then travel. Join forces. Disremember.’ Anybody want to go back?”

I pictured myself hooked up to tubes, pumps, catheters, filling and emptying at the nurses’ convenience. No.

But Olena had pressed two freckled hands on her abdomen and was staring at them while her eyes filled. She sounded hoarse. “How did you die, then, Mr. Drum? After that promise?”

Tire iron, lead pipe, he wasn’t sure.

“But you were cured of your final . . . condition. Your head wound. And you, Mr. Watts, of yours. Does that mean . . . ? Do

you think I . . . ?”

We tried not to look at what her hands were cupping. Melvin Drum leaned forward and his face shifted in some way I could not see; his tone dropped down an octave and he got older and almost dignified as he laid his thin hand on Olena’s red hair. “Sister,” he said, nearly rumbling, “leave it to God.”

Water ran down her nose and hung there. “This baby’s alive,” she burst out. “You hear me? When the time comes, you’ll have to help me birth. I won’t leave that to God.” She shook her head loose from under his hand.

“Yes, you will,” he said, but I told her we’d both help and maybe by then we’d find a doctor, too.

Melvin Drum tapped his bracelet. “We’ve joined forces, then,” he said. “When does the travel start?”

Tomorrow, we decided. We’d pack food and bottle water. Olena would rest today and we’d swim, clean our clothes. I wrote these things down in my green-bound book. “Which direction shall we take?”

Melvin said east seemed appropriate. I wrote that down.

In the afternoon, he and I floated on our backs in the lake while Olena hung our clothes on the sunlit bushes. My younger body was a joy to me, moving easily, stroking well. Melvin had a large genital and as we drifted I could sometimes see it shift in the water like a pale fish. “Were you married, Melvin?”

He said no. I thought he must be over thirty. “Were you queer?”

Laughing, he had to gargle out some water. “Very,” he said.

I don’t think he meant for boys.

“I’m already tired,” Olena complained. “Why must you walk so fast?” On her short legs, she had to make three steps for every one of Melvin Drum’s. I was winded, too, and the sun stood directly overhead. “Why hurry,” she puffed, pushing swags of honeysuckle to one side, “when we have no destination and no deadline?”

“None that we *know* of,” said Drum, leading the way like the major of a band.

Over her shoulder to me, Olena said, “This is silly. There’s no time in this place.” Overhearing, Drum pointed straight up at the blazing sun and kept marching. She poked him in the spine above his belt. “Disremember,” she said.

We walked noisily, single file, through woods which were thick and shady, their fallen leaves ankle-deep; and the sun slid with us, shooting a ray through a thin branch now and then.

Olena carried the lightest pack—raisins, dried beans and figs, the peanuts she brought over our objections. Drum and I had mostly ham and wine and water jars. The kitchen knife I’d strung at my waist had pricked me half a dozen times climbing uphill from the lake. The land was level forest now, with no sign of paths or trails.

We rested by a shallow spring with a frog in it. I asked Drum, “You hear a river?” He said it might be. Olena stuck her red hair backward into the spring, so the ends uncurled and hung wetly down her back and dripped on the leaves in front of me when we walked on again.

“I’m ready to unstrap this blanket and leave it on some tree.”

Drum told her for the third time we'd need blankets later.

"He thinks we'll still be hiking in December," she grumbled. "He's got a new think coming." She passed me a pocketful of peanuts to crack and eat as we walked. She wouldn't give Drum any.

The river still sounded far away when we saw it flowing low between walls of thicket and vines which had briars under their heart-shaped leaves. Drum stopped, and we stepped to either side of him and looked downhill. The water was brown and sluggish, with small sandbars in the middle. "Want to camp here?"

"Won't there be snakes?" But Olena let us lead the way and reach our hands back for her when the slope grew slippery or jagged. Rows of black willows kept us from the water's edge, but upstream Melvin Drum broke through to a slab of gray rock which jutted into the current and had built behind it a sandy pool. Olena unlaced my borrowed shoes and slid her feet into it. "Glory, that's cool!" she said and slipped forward until her white hem turned gray in the water.

"It's a good place to build a fire," Drum said, "but we might want to sleep on higher ground."

"I'm so tired all I'd ask a water moccasin is not to snore," she said, lying back and letting her toes float into sight.

Melvin and I dropped our packs to gather firewood and haul it to the rock. I nudged Olena's shoulder once with my toe. "All right?"

"Sleepy," she said. I climbed uphill for another load, thinking that was Drum who thrashed ahead of me through the bushes in the gathering dusk. I squatted to rip lightwood from a rotted stump.

Suddenly, from behind, he spoke my name and I jumped up, pointing uphill at the moving underbrush. We watched the dark leaves stir.

“There?” said Drum softly. I saw only a dim trunk of a thick shrub; then it moved and grew a snout. I could make out between twigs the animal’s long outline, lean and low to the ground, with a tail curved around its hindquarters. He whispered, “Dog?”

“Wolf,” I said. Lupus. Very still, like a carving or a piece of statuary. In slow motion the wolf began to back away uphill, and at one point I could see the whole arch of his back and the curve of his tucked-in tail. Once he stepped on a twig which snapped, and he punished his own paw with a nip. I saw the sharp flash of teeth. He turned then, and went up the slope in three long bounds.

Drum’s breath blew out on the back of my neck. “A real wolf? Here?”

I didn’t think it was a real wolf. More like an animated artwork I had seen drawn somewhere, and I said so. “Didn’t you see how the shape was exaggerated? It looked so . . . so stylized.”

Drum sniffed at his armpit. “Well, I’m real enough. I’m organic and I stink and there’s a blister on my foot.”

I wanted to tell him about a pictured Lupus who could only copulate twelve days in the whole year and whose female could not whelp except in May and then when it thundered; but that was like saying a twelfth-century picture book had come alive before our eyes, and the Psalter or Apocalypse might be next. For all I knew, Melvin Drum had dream beasts in his own head to which I had yet to be subjected.

We carried down the remaining firewood, pulled the small bag

of white beans out of its river soak, and boiled them slowly with a chunk of ham fat in our only pot. While they were cooking, I asked Melvin just how religious he had been.

“The last five years I thought of nothing else.” He stretched out on the rock. “It’s a shame I’m dead,” he said, “because someday I would have finished the stealing and had it all.”

“Stealing what?” asked Olena, stirring a peeled stick through the beans.

“Religion. I went in every church I could. Catechisms, hymnals, prayer books, rosaries, creeds—I stole them all. Went on field trips to the Mormons and Christian Scientists. I stacked all that stuff in my room. You could hardly walk for candles and books and shawls.” Olena speared a bean for him but he shook his head that it was too hard to eat. “I was in Los Angeles at the end,” he said. “On the way to visit the Rosicrucians.”

She snapped, “What on earth was it for?”

He smiled at the rising moon. “You ever seen a big set of railroad scales? Where you keep adding weights till the arm is perfectly balanced? When I got all the stuff together, when I had collected the right balance . . . weight . . .” Suddenly he giggled toward the darkening sky. “It sounds dumber now than it did then.”

I leaned toward him on both my gritty palms. “Doesn’t your head hurt when you remember things like that?”

“No. Does yours?”

Olena said hers hurt, too, just behind both eyebrows. She spoke in a fast singsong: “So I’ve quit remembering I was a beautician and having a baby and he was already married and I didn’t care and one day I fell down the steps of my apartment building all the way to the

washing machines in the basement and the woman folding towels just stood there and hollered all the time I came rolling down and all I could see looking up was her open mouth and fillings in every tooth in her head.” She grabbed her forehead. “Whew! That’s the last time, damn it.” She turned away and for a while the three of us lay flat on our backs on the hard rock, not saying anything, while the sky got darker behind the stars.

The beans took a long time to soften. We got our spoons out of our pockets and tried them and lay down again.

I was almost asleep when Drum said, “Why don’t we use the river?”

“Use it for what? To travel, you mean?”

“Beats walking,” Olena said.

“If we knew anything about boats or canoes,” said Drum.

I sat up. “It happens I know a little.” I told them how the Indians would burn down a big tree or find one struck low by a storm, and put pine resin and tree gum on one side and set fire to that, chopping out the charred wood and repeating the blazing gum, until they had burned the log hollow. “Some of their dugouts would carry twenty men.”

“Won’t that take a long time?” One of Olena’s hands climbed up by itself and rubbed her belly.

“We have a rock, water, matches, trees . . .”

Olena pointed her finger at me. “Hah! Why didn’t your head hurt? Talking about the Indians, why didn’t your head hurt then?”

“I think,” said Drum thoughtfully, “it must not hurt if the things you recall are useful to you. Useful now, I mean.”

Which, in view of his vague religion, made us stare at him.

It was late when we spooned our mushy beans in the dark and rolled up in our blankets, tired enough to sleep on solid stone. If snakes crawled up at night, we never noticed. The last thing I thought was that any serpent I saw in this place would be like the one Pepys claimed could feed on larks by spitting its poison into the air, and for that one I would send forth a weasel, since—as the monks wrote in their illuminated manuscripts—God never makes anything without a remedy.

For all I knew, somewhere in Melvin Drum’s last rented room there were stacks of medieval books full of viper-worms and amphisbaenae, and perhaps even stories of the Cherokee Thunders, who lived up in Galunlati, close to that great Apportioner, the Sun.

And Drum was right—thinking of all these things, my head never hurt at all.

5

After that come repeated entries in my ledger: “Worked on boat today.”

I don’t know how long it took. We had one hatchet and we used sharp rocks. My knuckles bled, made scabs, and bled again.

I slipped into a way of life I seemed to know from the bone out. Squatted in the woods, wiped with a leaf, covered my shit. I peed on tree trunks like a hound—it’s instinct, I think. We’re meant to give back our excrement to plants. We washed in the river. Even Olena, after a while, bathed with us and I stopped staring at her stretched white skin and the brown mat of hair below. My beard grew out itchy; there were welts across my chest and the beans

made gas growl inside us all. One night I spotted the wolf's eyes shining near the rock and I called to him, but the lights stayed where they were. When the ham got moldier, we lived off fish. My fingernails smelled like fertilizer.

Olena kept saying the boat was done, but I wanted the shell thinner, lighter, and we chopped through the heartwood and sanded the inside down with stones. We pointed the stern and rounded the bow. Even after dark, we'd sit scrubbing her surface absently with rocks until she felt smoother than our calloused hands.

"She's ready," Melvin Drum said at last. "Admit it, Ben. We can go on."

I did not want to stop. It seemed to me there was grace in the log we had not yet freed, shape that was still unrefined. But finally I gave in. I crushed pokeberries in my palm and wrote on her side with a finger, "*Escarius*."

They made me explain. A labrus fish, thick-lipped, called by Sylvester "Golden-Eye." The monks had thought the Scar clever, since, when it was trapped in a fish pot—they wrote—it would not dash forward but would turn around and undo the gate with frequent blows of its tail and escape backward. Other Scars, if they saw him struggle, were said to seize their brother's tail with their teeth and help him back loose to freedom.

We loaded *Escarius*, even filling our water bottles, though we would be afloat in water. We still had beans and damp peanuts, and we opened a jar of grape wine on the rock and poured some on the boat and each spat a swallow into the river—I don't remember why.

Pushing off from the gray rock, we started down the river, Drum and I trying our new poles and paddles. Olena sat amidships and let her fingers trail. She was singing. "Shall we gather at the river? The beautiful, the beautiful river? Gather with the Saints at the river that flows by the throne of God?"

Into the current we moved and skirted the sandbars, slipped silently past the drooping willows, and began an easy drift. The knobs of turtle heads dropped below the water as we drifted by, and floated up again when we had passed. We may have looked majestic, moving downstream in a boat so much longer than we needed. *Escarius* tended to wallow to this side and that, but we learned how to balance with our oars. Our rock went out of sight and the water seemed thick and reluctant and bore us without interest, slowly, while the river spread wider and showed us floodplains and sycamores with watching squirrels.

I felt like a man on a color calendar, poised with my oar level, going off the page and out of sight.

"She's all right," called Melvin Drum. "She rides fine."

Sometimes a snake would drop limp off a low limb and lie on the water like a black ribbon. Olena stopped worrying, since they seemed to fear us and would at the last glide toward the shallow edge and blend with tree roots there. "We're dreaming," she said, turning her face to me. "Even the snakes are dreaming."

The first set of rapids was shallow and we bumped down it like a sledge. Late in the afternoon we pulled up to a low bank under pines and slid the hull over brown needles and braced her ashore with stones. Olena found a tick on her ankle but said it was still a fair place to sleep. My shoulders ached. I walked up the small creek

to relieve myself, and on its far side saw the bent tail and stiff fur of the same gray wolf as he slunk away. He could not be the same wolf, yet I was sure he was.

With darkness, the air turned cool and rain spattered overhead. We huddled together under our three blankets but slowly the wool soaked through. Then we just pressed together to outlast the rain, Olena with her back against a pine trunk, Drum and I on either side. Her knees were up, her face down. "I hate it here," she suddenly said. We leaned closer. "I hate it." Putting an arm about her shoulders, Drum and I got tangled with each other, and once I slapped at the wet shreds of his sleeve. "I could have been married by now," she said between her knees. "And had regular customers on my sun porch and bought myself a dishwashing machine." Rain poured over us. "I could have joined the Eastern Star," she wailed.

Trying to rub our foreheads on her soaked hair, Drum and I bumped skulls, and he said angrily, "You let me do all the work today!" Which wasn't so.

When at last the rain stopped, what could we do? We went on sitting there while the moon started down. We were soggy and chilled and had wet wool in our lungs.

In the morning nobody spoke. We spread our clothes to dry and tried to nap but the bugs were too bad.

"We might as well go on," I finally said. I felt resigned. There was nothing at the end of this river but a sea waiting to drown us. It would pull us home like caught fish on a line.

In silence, Drum wadded our wet blankets into the boat. Olena waded out and hoisted herself aboard, and without a word we pushed loose into the current. I was lonely and the river seemed

hypnotic, just fast enough not to need our thrust. For a long time we sat with our oars laid in our laps. If Drum watched one bank, I stared at the other, and when his attention shifted I crossed mine over, too.

Once Olena said we should capture the next snake, lift him into the boat, just to see what would happen. Maybe, she said, if one of us was bitten he would move on another layer to someplace else. “We might wake up in the pyramids.”

Or Bethlehem, she hoped. I stroked the water hard. Drum grabbed at blackberries hanging from the bank until his hands were purple. I said, “Am I using my paddle enough today? Are you satisfied?”

He said, “It was raining, Ben.” We drifted on.

By night we had passed into drier land and could build a fire and string our clothes nearby. We heated a cup of wine apiece. I asked him, “Is there a God? Now? What do you think now?”

“It’s hard to think here.”

“You can remember, though, better than we can.”

The tin cup covered half his face. “I’m like every other expert,” he said. “In time, I got interested in the smaller sects. I specialized. Osiris or the voodoo drums. I went to the Hutterites and Shakers. Once I met Frank Buchman and I couldn’t see anything special about him. A man had the Psychiana lessons, all twenty-four. It had cost him twenty-six dollars during the Depression; I won’t tell you the price he wanted. I didn’t pay, of course. I stole the set and hid it in my mattress.” He finished the wine. “If a snake bit me, I’d wake up in Moscow, Idaho, asking about Frank Robinson.” He said to Olena, “I’d just as soon be here. You feeling better?”

She had fallen asleep, mouth open, the edge of her teeth in view. I knew that I wanted to put my tongue there. I jumped when Drum said, "One thing we mustn't do is fight."

Swallowing, I nodded. He rinsed his cup in the river, stared across its lighted surface. "My brother used to have dizzy fits and he said he dreamed like this. Always of journeys and trips. Mostly he rode on a train that went very fast and roared. He was always on top of the engine, holding to the bells, and the whistle would go right through him, he said. If a tunnel could feel a train go through it, he said he could feel the sound of that whistle, boring, passing." Away from the fire, Drum looked taller. "The dream was always dark except for the engine lamps."

"Where did he go?"

"He woke up too soon."

"Is your brother dead now?"

Melvin Drum laughed coming back into the firelight. He couldn't stop laughing. Even after we had curled up in the damp blankets, I heard him laughing in the dark.

6

How was it possible to dream in that place? Yet I went on dreaming, every night, inventing an overlap of worlds which spun out from me without end. I dreamed of a life in an Indian village ringed by sharpened stakes, where my job was to be watchman over the fields of corn and pumpkins and to run forth with screams and rattles to drive off crows or animals. I dreamed of being alone on a sandy plain, lost, staying alive by eating fly larvae scraped from the

surface of alkaline pools.

Drum said he never dreamed. Olena did; she tossed and grunted in her sleep but claimed she could not remember why in the morning.

We blundered on down the river, shipping water, overturning once in white froth when *Escarius* scraped a jagged rock.

“If we took turns sleeping, we could travel at night, too,” Drum said; but what was the point now that time did not rush from left to right? Only the river moved—for all we knew, moved forever.

Finally the banks began to withdraw and the wider current slowed. We seldom had to use oars or poles. Early one morning, the shores were suddenly flung outward and we were afloat in a wrinkled lake which seemed without end. Drum said it might be an ocean sound at low tide, since the waves were light but regular. We turned south to keep a shore in view. Soon Drum thrust down with our longest poplar pole and struck no bottom. It flew under the water like a spear and bobbed up far away, beating slowly and steadily toward the sandy bank. Under the hot sun my brain cooked like stew in a pot.

Olena had been silent for a long time. Suddenly she burst out, “You two might be dead but I’m not.” Perhaps the child had moved in her, or she imagined that it moved.

Over her head, Drum said to me, “Shall we keep on?” For the first time, he sounded tired.

“Olena?”

She jerked her face away from the disappointing shoreline, so plainly empty of other people like ourselves. Her freckles were wet and her sweaty forehead flamed. “There’s nothing here,” she said,

almost whining. We stroked the water. “You, Melvin Drum, you made us leave that house too soon. Somebody else might have come if we had just waited awhile.”

Or, by now, why hadn’t we caught up with whoever had burned his books in that fireplace? Yet, I thought, Old Lobo might be the fourth one in our group, and I eyed the shore as if I might spot his gray head sliding through the water, parallel.

The sun had started down the sky when we landed on a small and wooded island pocked with crab tunnels. Drum built a fire and dropped a dozen crabs into boiling water. We carried them in cloths, like hot spiders, up the beach and into the shade of high bushes.

“I’ll fix yours,” Drum said, breaking off claws, throwing the flippers downhill on the sand. He separated back from body, then gouged down to a paper-thin shell. “Hand me your knife, Ben.” He scraped out white meat for Olena and offered it in his palm. She ate bits with her fingers. I cleaned my own. In case there should be some later use for them, we scrubbed the pink shells with sand and set them to dry in the sun. Then, while Olena lay resting under a tree, Drum and I explored the narrow island. There were so many loud birds inland that every tree seemed to scream. We found one pool of brackish water and wild grapevines which still had late fruit, although some had fermented on the stem. We could barely see the shore from which our river had issued, but on the island’s far side there was only water and some shadows which might be other islands.

Before dark, the waves grew higher and crabs at their foaming edges carried off the claws and flippers we had thrown. Olena felt

pain during the night. Her heavy breathing woke us. She sprang up and began walking on the damp sand, hunched over.

“She’s aborting,” Drum said, watching her pace.

Olena heard him and screamed that she was not.

“It isn’t her time. She’s not big enough for that,” he added.

I called to her, “When were you due? What month?” But she would not answer.

Drum asked, “How long have we been here, anyway?” I looked back through these moonlit pages trying to count days, but it was hard to estimate. I kept glancing at Olena. Drum jerked impatiently at my book. “Is it forty-nine days? Is it close to that?” I didn’t know. He said something about people in Tibet once thinking it took forty-nine days for the passage between death and further life; then he clapped both hands to his head. I stared, for at last there was some piece of remembering that made Drum’s head hurt. Good, I thought. I wanted his jaw-teeth roots to burn like fire.

I left him and crossed the sand to Olena. “I’ll stay with you.” The moonlight turned her hair black and skin gray and sank her eyes into pits. Together we marched on the cool sand. When the pain eased, we dragged her blanket closer to mine and I could feel the knob of her bent knee low in my back like something growing on my spine.

She had rolled to the other side when I woke at sunrise. I turned also, and fitted myself to her back. She only murmured as my arm dropped over her. Our parts were sweetly matched, as if she were sitting in my lap; under the curve of her hips I could feel my stiffening heat. My fingers slid past her collar to her loose breast until they could play on her nipple like tongues.

Drum coughed. Over Olena's red curls I saw him watching my busy hand, staring at the cloth where it was moving. I pulled on her skin till the breast budded, all the while letting him watch. Olena was awake now. The cells in her body came alive and caused my own skin to prickle.

Now I yanked my blanket and threw it over both of us, taking care that Drum could see, and that he knew I saw him see.

Under the blanket, creating bulges for his following eye, I ran my long arm over the swell of Olena's child until my thumb was centered low in her body hair and my fingertips pressed on. She moved to help me. I heard her breath. Her leg slid wide and dropped back over mine until I was touching her at last. The hot grasp was too much for me and my spasm came while she was simply widening and making ready for hers. I kept on until she made noises and threw herself on her back, knees up and shivering. Instantly, so Drum could not see her taut face, she jerked up the blanket and pulled it to her eyebrows.

Drum never moved. I gave him a long look, but he never moved. I fell asleep with my hand on Olena's thigh and she must have slept also.

In the morning Drum was gone, and the boat *Escarius* was gone, and half our possessions were neatly laid out by the dried crab shells on the beach. There was a moving speck near the mouth of the river, but I could not tell for sure if it was man or animal and, when the sun got higher, could not find it at all in the glare.

Sweet days! Long, languid, poured out like syrup.

Olena slept in my arms. No sex in the regular way—because of her coming child—so, like curious children ourselves, we played touching games on each other's bodies.

Our clothes were very worn. I made a loin wrapping from my torn shirt; she sawed my pants off with a butcher knife for herself and left her breasts naked to the sun. We might have been Polynesian lovers from another age except for our bracelets, which, without ever discussing it, we did not discard.

Maybe ten days, two weeks went by. The nights were cooling but our afternoons were still part of summer. For many meals we dug clams from an inland mudbank, steamed them in salty water.

“Wouldn't you give anything for butter?” Olena said. She had persuaded herself the sea waters were supplying her baby rich brain food and protein. She would watch me slide a knife along a fish's backbone as if each filet were preordained to become some tender organ inside her unborn child. Maybe, she sometimes said half seriously, we should powder the fishbones since she had no milk to drink?

In spite of the sweet days and sweeter nights, I began gathering wood, poles, stakes, and lashing them together with strings of our ragged clothes or strips of bark. Olena didn't like the raft.

“Where will we go? Not out to sea, and there's nothing ashore but wilderness.” She ran a freckled hand around my waist, spun a fingertip in my navel. “You'll help me when the baby comes, Ben. Things will be fine.”

But I could hear, in the night wind, winter draw closer than her child. How cold might it get? Which of the fish would stay and what shelter did we have?

She pounded sea oats into flour, mixed that with water, and baked patties in an oven of stones. They were bitter but we ate them for the sake of the different texture. “Now stop working on the raft and let’s go swimming,” she said. Sometimes I did.

“Isn’t it good,” she’d whisper to me in the dark, “not to be planning ahead? Saving money? Paying insurance?”

I held her tightly and watched the perpetual sea. “What do you think happened to Melvin Drum?”

Her whole body shrugged. “Who knows?”

Who-knows tormented me more than What-happened. “Maybe,” I said, “Drum’s found the place by now.”

“What place?”

The place it ended. The sweeter Olena felt and tasted, the more certain I was that this was an interlude we would both forget. Our stay on the island was timeless, so I felt certain it could not possibly last. I had even begun to feel homesick for endings, arrivals. Finality.

“Ooh,” breathed Olena, grabbing my hand, “Ooh, glory, feel that!” I laid my palm under her ribs. “Feel him move!”

I held my own breath in case there should be some faint shifting at last below her tight skin. “I feel it,” I lied.

She rubbed my chest with her forehead so her long red hair tickled. “When Eve had a son, do you think she worried about who he would marry? We’re married, Ben. In a way.”

“In a way,” I said, kissing the peak of her ear.

“Really, you’ll be the baby’s father.”

The word was not real to me, not in this place. I tested it over and over in my head. Fatherfatherfather until the sound was mixed meaninglessness and prayer. Fatherfather.

“We should have asked Melvin to marry us.”

I said, “He wasn’t a preacher.”

“Never did think that mattered much.”

What had mattered, after all? Damn headache.

“Surely I’ll not get much bigger,” said Olena, stroking herself. I thought she was the same size as the first time I saw her walking through the mist. We were both browner, though. Her legs were hairier; on my face grew a broad beard, still not a hair on my scalp. We cleaned our teeth by wrapping wet sand in wads of cloth, or chewing twigs into brushes. Nails on our toes and fingers were long and tough; my foot sole felt like canvas. Sea bathing had hardened our skin and crusted the smallest scratch into a quick scar. My forearms looked almost tattooed.

Yes, we had changed. But Olena was the same size.

One morning there washed on our beach an assortment of trash which made me shout for Olena. Empty blue bottles, finger-length. A warped black piece of a nameless book cover . . . the foot of a celluloid doll. She grabbed for that—a toy for the baby, she said. I followed the tidemark of seaweed, stirring it with my toes. Rubber tubing. A piece of comb with the teeth sealed by barnacles. A length of wood which had once been fluted, part of a carved chair or table. Olena traced its design with awe, like some archaeologist.

But I was afraid. While she scanned the horizon for sails or a smokestack, I thought of a rent in the membrane between worlds,

perhaps the great suck of a filling vacuum which would sweep Olena down more stairs and drop me under another scalpel. When the wind blew, even lightly, it raised goose bumps under my tan. "I've got to finish the raft," I said firmly. All day I watched, while pretending not to watch, for some vessel to follow its trash ashore. The raft grew wide enough for one person. Olena watched openly for a boat. The raft was wide enough for one person and a half. I worked on it constantly. Olena was bored with the building and bracing of its parts, and no longer sat nearby or carried me cooked fish in crab-shell dishes; but sat at a distance on the beach where the flotsam had washed, crooning to the doll's foot and waiting for something to rear up on the line between sea and sky. Some days she did not cook at all. At sundown I would carry food to her. Often she was sitting in an unnatural, stiff position, and kept her hand poised like an eyeshade longer than she should have been able to keep it there.

One evening she used the doll's foot to mash her fish meat into white gruel, then lapped it up with her tongue. I was disgusted and struck her under one eye. I watched tears spill on her reddening cheekbone.

"I'm sorry, Olena. Forget it. Come sleep now."

She shook her head.

"I want you to put your hands on me."

Her eyes were sliding off my face, across the streak of moonlight on the water.

"I'll put mine on you, then," I wheedled.

No. She shrank away on the darkening sand.

When the raft was done, Olena would not climb on. "We're

leaving,” I said, “even if it is dark.” I held the platform still on the water. She would not come and I threatened to hit her again as I had on that other night.

In the moonlight, then, we walked the raft past the low waves till I hoisted her on board and heaved myself beside. Olena wrapped her body and head in a blanket and sat in the middle, a lump, a cargo bale.

“We can cross most of the water in the cool of the evening,” I said. All I could see of her was the roundness of one pale heel showing at the blanket’s base. I tried to be cheerful. “We might even see Melvin Drum. I bet he made camp on the shore below the river’s mouth, and that’s right where we’ll land.” I paddled with wood, with my hands. The raft was slow and awkward and zigzagged on the black water. “Even if Drum moved on, he may have left some clue behind for us. Some message. Why don’t you answer me?”

“I don’t feel good,” said the lump.

We moved very slowly across the wide bay, as if the thick moonlight were an impediment. The edges of the dark water beat luminous on our island and the landfall.

In a loud voice I said, “I couldn’t stand just waiting like that. I couldn’t keep doing that.”

Olena would not move but rode on my labors like a keg under a tarpaulin.

At first light we landed on the same inland shore from which we had come, although the river was out of sight. No sign of Drum—no old campfires, no heaped shells or stones. The sand piled quickly into low dunes, stubby grass, underbrush.

“Why don’t you sleep now?”

“I still don’t feel good.” Olena tottered up the beach and lay down in her damp blanket while I dragged the raft high from the water. There were shallow paw prints in the wet sand, some in a circle, as if the animal had paced.

I squatted by Olena. “Are you hurting?”

“No.” On her back, she stared beyond me. The last stars looked like flecks of paper stuck on the blueing sky. “I feel funny, though.”

“It’s from leaving. I’m sorry I forced you, Olena.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she said. “But it’s colder on this side of the water.”

I asked if she wanted a fire, but she said no. I curled up with my head laid on her thighs and went to sleep.

The sun was high and warm when I woke, feeling sticky. Again, Olena was too rigid, with one arm raised off the sand and her palm spread open to the sky. I felt for her knee and squeezed it. “Move around some.” Her skin felt cool and dry.

I sat up, staring. Overnight her pregnancy had collapsed like a balloon which had leaked out its air. Without even thinking, I patted the blankets in case there should be a loose baby lying there. No. Nothing at all—no baby, no stains.

“Olena?” I got a good look at her face. She was—what else to call it?—she was dead, her eyelids halfway down. I kissed her cold mouth, which felt hard as a buckle. Then again I kissed her, frantic, blowing my breath deep and pinching her nostrils shut. I was trying to cry without losing the rhythm of the breath and my body shook. I thought my forced air might inflate Olena anywhere, blow up her abdomen or toes, because I did not understand how

anything functioned in this place; but nothing happened except that my heartbeat got louder and throbbed in my head until even the sight of Olena lying there pulsated to my eye.

She was dead. I walked away on the beach. I covered her with the blanket and sat there, holding her uplifted hand. I walked some more. I took off every stitch of her clothes and, sure enough, her stomach was flat now as a young girl's. She looked younger, too, fourteen at most, but her face was tired.

I dressed her body again and tried wrapping her hand around the pink doll's foot but there was no grip.

Finally, because I could not bear to put her into this ground, to bury her in Virginia, I laid her on the raft in the blanket and spread her red hair, and combed it with my fingers dipped in water. The bracelet looked tarnished and there was rust in the links of the chain. I placed on her eyes the prettiest coquinas I could find, and she seemed to be staring at the sun with a gaze part pink, purple, pearly. Then I saw I could not push her out to sea without crying, so I wrote in the ledger book awhile, until I could stand to do that.

Now it is dark again, and I think I can bear to push Olena off into the waters and let the current carry her down this coast. There have been noises from the thickets at my back. I think the wolf is there.

In a minute I am going to close up this ledger book and wrap it in a strip of wool I have torn off my blanket and put it under Olena's arm, and then I am going to walk waist-deep into the water and watch them both ride away. Who knows where this sea will end, or where Olena will carry the doll's foot and the book? Maybe somewhere there'll be someone to read the words, or someone who

dreams he has read them.