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ICE-BROOK VIOLET  
by  
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Edged on the visible spectrum,  
blade of hue concise;  
Wild blooms temper the fragile heart,  
perfuming in the season of ice.

. . . . KMK

She kicked wet piles of leaves, slime-fast at bottom, out of her way as she climbed the steps. Once unlocked, the heavy door refused to open. She threw her shoulder against it, causing her feet to slide away from her, along with the disintegrating doormat frugally left in place. Unable to recover her balance, she sat down hard on the cold porch floor. She was too travel-weary to rise immediately, or even to curse, instead emitting an exasperated little moan of surprise and looking around her with the gaping wonder of a newborn infant.

The soft rain was barely visible. Rainwater spilled out of a clogged eave trough and splashed up from the cobbled walkway onto her scarred old leather suitcase at the bottom of the steps; it looked tearfully disappointed waiting down there, as if quite willing, in place of this unpromising terminus, to be dragged into yet one more crowded airport. *Sorry, my old traveling companion, our worldly camaraderie may have come to a soggy end -- all washed up*, she conceded with a bitter laugh, an ambivalent malaise of expectation.

Her lean-fleshed backside was throbbing, her thin travel slacks soaking up the damp Northwest November coldness of these aging floor boards. She rolled onto her knees and stood up, then went at the stuck door with rapid bursts of assuaging anger, normally an inefficient emotion, which abruptly, and surprisingly, produced the desired result.

Standing below beside her suitcase she was calmer, spent, yet willfully holding at bay powerful images resonating here. Rejected for her neglected duty, she turned cautious eyes up at the house. How else would it punish her? It was much more than a house: a long-ago anticipated receptacle of history, this vitally consuming objective of her immigrant great-great-grandfather; a latter-day farmer trained as an architect in Germany well over a hundred years ago. His prided construction loomed above her as impenetrable, presently strange and coldly aloof, a house once so familiar it was inconceivable as a thing unto itself, at last as mysterious as its unmet builder had always been. Except for three days eight years ago, this hard-won improvement, standing in a western valley of freeheld Oregon homestead land, had been a long time without her; and now must reclaim her, if only to sustain the Ender family imprint -- the tag end of its meaning? Run through and through by her, *with* her and she with it, this dissembling alabaster house knew her beginning as a pod knows its coddled seed.

“Welcome home, Viola...am I truly home? I began here, it’s in my weary bones. Premature exit from this place did give some benefit, didn’t it?...perhaps to a pitiful number of the world’s superfluous children...taught to read about what they cannot have. This *was* your home, this farm. God, all the truths buried here.” Her mocking voice savored the forgotten reward of speaking aloud unheard, on a farm unheard of a hundred miles from here, on a patch of earth belonging solely to her, for however long. Here at least she could voice her restless thoughts without the possibility of undiscovered listeners; presently better to have *no* listeners than ears not receiving.

With her suitcase inside and the nearly impervious door

closed and locked -- city habits prevailing -- she headed through the foyer and up the dark oak staircase. The rose room she entered was once her bedroom, and then a guest room. She had last slept here eight years ago, when she returned for her mother's funeral. *Leave that alone.*

Mira Anderson, wife of the farmer who custom-farmed many of these acres, had for years kept the house's interior in a cursory sort of order. Mira still spoke of the farm as *Martha's farm*, as belonging to Viola's mother. Arthritic Mira could not do as much anymore, and her husband, Raymond, was about to retire. Their two sons, Mira explained in an uncharacteristic letter, had purchased a service station thirty miles away, and could no longer help with the custom farming. They were in their forties, with demanding families, and were tired of the long days of heavy work in *Martha's* filbert orchards and grain fields. This planted crop would be Raymond's last seeding -- Mira had scrupulously recommended another custom farmer Viola might want to contact.

After a brief rinse of hands and face in icy-cold water, Viola, wearing only her underclothes, crawled into a slightly musty but clean double bed. The high-ceilinged room was densely cold, the brass bed unbearable. She had observed her warm breath as distinct puffs of vapor the moment she stepped into the house. No heat could be coaxed from the registers, and of course no hot water from the ornate old faucets, although the electricity worked. She got out of bed and wrapped herself in the faded chenille bedspread, then went downstairs, through the white-wainscoted yellow kitchen and down to the basement fuse box. The water tank had to be switched on to provide her with ample hot water for a bath in the morning. Right now she was far too exhausted to care about bathing, or even to open her suitcase -- there would be no bulky sleepwear warm enough inside anyway. The ancient monolithic furnace stood balefully silent; its oil-supply tank, buried out back beneath the late-attached deck, was very likely empty.

Putting water to boil on the kitchen stove, she recalled the

nasty chilblains in her small toes winter mornings as she shuffled to and fro on the loose roadside gravel, waiting for the yellow school bus. While the water heated she went upstairs to search for a hot water bottle in the bathroom cupboard; everything as Mama had left it years ago, quietly aging, moldering. Fatigue was making her yawn repeatedly, making her slow, somewhat dazed and clumsy.

In the chest at the foot of the bed she found more quilts, and piled them onto the bed. From the same chest she pulled out a dankly rose-scented gown, her mouth tasting the sharply acrid chemistry of loss, but then a smile curling to whimsy -- her grandmother's enduring flannel nightgown. Shivering mightily, she wriggled her slight body into its capacious white folds, then sniffed wistfully at a sleeve cuff. Did she imagine the whiskey smell of Gran's regular evening nightcap, her thick old shot glass of whiskey? She could hear those indomitably summoned country idioms -- *chasing off the blue devils* -- childproof phrases cloaking an old woman's inescapable sorrow. Yet Gran could hastily improvise hilarious tales of farce and folly, most often when sensing her granddaughter's slight melancholy at bedtime. These tales Viola had childishly embellished, and they were steadily woven into a ceaseless imagination, a few much later written down.

Marginally prepared for a final attempt at uninterrupted sleep, she found gliding between the sheets more like slipping into a dark frozen lake. Beneath the frigid covers, she tried the exceedingly hot water bottle against various freezing parts of her body, wondering if it would leak, then left it to warm her icy feet. Better. Ah, to sleep as if senseless in the womb, swiftly and without thought of the present, without memory of anything in the past. How was it possible?

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A hot morning soak gave some temporary warmth as she wandered through the chilly house, ignoring whispers of disembodied voices and trying to assemble priorities. The oil service would not arrive until next Wednesday, and this was Friday.

It was a busy time of year the female voice on her cell phone explained. *Damn! I should have told Mira when I was coming...might have saved myself this freeze-up.* She warmed her body again by turning on the electric range oven in the kitchen, but that could not continue. The enormous basalt stone fireplace was clean of soot and ash, memorably promising warmth. But no wood had been found in the wood box, or out in the wood and tool shed behind the garage; probably nothing else in the barn but the annual baled fescue hay Raymond stored there; legions of mice? She kept her down jacket on and leaned against the fireplace's carved redwood mantel, tapping her fingers and pondering what to do. *What about the chain saw I noticed out in the garden shed? I'll cut one of the smallish pine trees growing behind the large old worker cabin. I used to be pretty good with a saw like that...might even have some fuel left in it...the gas pump by the barn must have fuel...keep me busy enough to limit the mess of too much thinking. I can do this. At least I know how to do this. Soon I'll have heat...oh for a warming hearth. Of course the wood won't be seasoned but it should burn...sappy pine burns.*

Outside again, and a bit hungry, she remembered the bag of groceries in the trunk of the rental car; just some lunch meat, milk, cheese, a loaf of bread, a few cans and jars, tea, and some fresh fruit. The perishables would all be fine. It was cold enough for the milk.

*I was thoroughly out of it yesterday. Maybe my memory is going. At forty-four? Guess it's possible. As I fled foggy London, Virginia argued I was too young to quit...then discordantly said she wished she was leaving too...far the hell away from a life she'll never abandon, because she didn't really mean that...poor woman still imagines she's making a difference...perhaps. She didn't think I'd ever do anything like this...until she saw how bad off I was. Starting over is a hedge, of course -- requiring a considerable amount of self-deception. Virginia didn't learn enough from circumspect me to understand why I had to give it up. But not here...God, not in Mama's piteous shoes. My deserted Mama...loved, deserted. I never intended to return...for very long. A nostalgic part of me craves this place...as it was...but the sorrows... Exactly where could someone like me be a hermit, if not in the place secured by memory? Did I*

*really intend to come back all along...the writer's humble denouement? Some of me never left, quite a bit of me actually. Oh hell, stop this and get to work.*

The house stood on a gently rising knoll of creeping garden beds and mossy, punk-limbed, poorly bearing fruit trees planted very long ago. Its back side -- facing the garden shed and a more recently added double-wide garage the same cream color as the house -- looked across remnants of an herb garden and orchard, into a dense rising and dipping forest of mostly evergreen but a few deciduous trees. Hidden deep within this northern expanding old forest were patches of boggy meadows supporting tall grasses and huge oaks hosting dark globules of mistletoe -- harvested by Gran near Christmas time. A half mile in among the trees was another cottage for hired help. Unseen at the northeastern far side of this mostly virginal expanse of timber were the partially enclosing grain fields; alongside, closer in: a few old cabins for workers. The house front looked down upon a long straight southern entrance road, bisecting the rich chocolate earth of yet more freshly tilled and seeded fields. In mid-summer these broadly curving fields would be densely mantled with tall stalks of evenly kernelled gold wheat ears, or rustling pale sprays of shimmering barley, swaying in humming choruses with the rolling sweep of earth-sweating summer breezes. The huge ivory barn and equipment sheds were some distance east and slightly north of the higher house knoll. A few hundred meters south of them, below a holly-lined lane, stood a fairly large rectangular worker cabin, fronting her objective: the maturing pines. The big cabin's long roof was no longer visible behind the dark row of bulky old holly trees; from their dense shiny-leaved, red-berried branches, Gran had made her beautiful gift wreathes at every Christmas season. Far to the south and east grew the uniformly vanishing rows of thickly arched filbert trees. These pampered orchards had flourished as her great-grandfather Herman's carefully surveyed and set-out treasures, trees forming a densely locked dark canopy of shaded escape in summer, secretive and cooling; and in harsher times composing a ramous winter fairy tale of intricate ice forms. Gazing fondly at the drowsing fall

orchards, she recalled, with a regressive rush of joy, the tinkling, snapping rattle of ice branches in occasional brutally tree-splitting silver thaws -- for a child, wondrous winter displays, but so very devastating. Directly beyond these southeasterly orchards still existed a more modest deciduous woods, mostly scattered with old vine maples, alders, and birches; every mid-spring its spongy floor had surprised her with shy sprinklings of demure wildflowers, these prized as rare woodland jewels. Somewhere deep within was the first house built on Ender land, remembered only from an old photograph. She never knew if anyone lived there after her great-great-grandfather. It had been too far beyond the perimeter of her self-absorbed youthful world. Now, gazing from her airy knoll, she reacquainted herself with the neatly groomed geometric patterns of the Ender lands. Turning to her left, nearer the house, she focused on the dark juvenile pine tops, one destined to become firewood. With her left hand pocketed for warmth, she hurried down to the holly lane, her right hand purposefully swinging the saw.

The worn saw's priming required methodical repetition, finally coughing to life and wailing a sustained complaint. Someone must have used it recently, maybe Raymond. Its workaday noise summoned bygone crisp fall days, when a saw's loud bite announced a more legitimate declaration of serious effort out in the woods. Still, the strident racket signaled aroused life on Ender Farm, along with the urgency of staying warm. She grinned as she knelt at the base of the smallest pine and edged the whirling blade close. Startled, she felt her body instantly jarred backwards by a fierce grip on her shoulder. At the same moment, a large hand flexed taut as strained rope reached around her, snatching the saw away so swiftly she gasped in shock.

"*Good God!*" she cried in trembling outrage.

"*Nei, Wild Vi, not these trees, you will not!*"

"*What?...Ragnar! But...I thought you were--*"

"*Under the sod?*"

"*I never thought that...not you.*" Still dazed, the name he

had given her so long ago easily reduced her to that callow self.

*"Lenge siden sist!"*

"Oh...yes...a very long time. Are you...staying here?"

"Ja, I live here...thanks be to the one who gave you life. And you will not cut these trees, if you please. They are choice scenic comfort at my window...years ago planted by me."

"But you're...you mean you live in the worker cabin?"

"Ja, restored to my own satisfaction. I am not squatting here, uninformed daughter. Martha put all of my days in her will. You did not read it...and you read so well...once did read well."

"I didn't think I had to read the will, or hear it read, to find I still belonged to three thousand acres of family history. I was not very lucid at the...funeral; it all went by me like...like a hazy sort of nightmare. Excuse me...you...always lived at the other place."

She gazed distractedly at the worker cabin, slowly realizing how nice it looked: smooth logs freshly stained, newly framed screened windows, a lengthened railed porch, a fancy barbecue at its far end.

"I moved from the woods cottage -- too far from the house. Martha needed someone close at hand...everyone else gone."

*You must enjoy this accusation, as you surely loved being that someone.*  
"I see. Were you...I didn't notice you at the...funeral."

"Why would I come there? When they put her down I preferred the woods she walked -- there she will always be. For the rest of it, she is no more...except as she lives in you. I saw you then...leaving the house. I meant to speak to you...but found you had left for good."

Violea stood up to silence this painful talk, still in shock. She gazed above at the pines, then reached out to reclaim the saw."

*"Nei, do not even think of it."*

"I won't cut the pine...of course...I didn't realize."

She focused on this large man, known to reawakening memories as thoroughly part of the farm. Her feeling was at first proprietary relief, but then something deeper: needed reassurance, conditionally resting upon dependability. If she ever considered it,



she must have thought that Ragnar had returned to his native Norway...perhaps to relatives. He would forever remain her mother's champion. At her first sight of him, when she was five years old, he had reached down to shake her little hand and she had looked up at him as a giant figure of a man. He was then far younger than her present age. A farm boy who ran away to work as a merchant marine and ended up back on the farm, but in a foreign place. A bit more deliberate in his bearing now, he was as tall and lean as she remembered, with tan supple hands known to be very powerful -- he could lift her small body with a single thumb, to which her hand had viciously clung; or run those nimble fingers expertly over a pampered guitar. Perhaps with the stimulus of alcohol, he had sung melodic English and Norwegian chanteys and ballads; she recalled very few of the words, slightly more so a scattered echo of differently inflected English. Now his English seemed clear enough, the accent pleasantly euphonious, and she knew it must always have been so. His copious, once ruddy golden hair had turned a tawny-flecked silver, and was trimmed in a naturally dovetailing dense pattern curling shortly against his tan neck, some barber's expertise skillfully yielding to the gentle waves. A chill stir of breeze tugged loose a gleaming lock, fluttering it alongside epicanthic eyes with irises the aqua-tinged gray of the sea, eyes very penetrating. The loosened lock of hair settled into place with a quick toss of his head. Her presumptuous chain-saw intrusion had caused him to dash outside in only a clean white t-shirt, faded worn corduroy pants, and scuffed brown leather clogs. His rugged long face was sternly set, the high leathery cheeks flushed and seriously taut; not threatening to her, no, not at the moment threatening. She recalled that steadily reserved face slightly altered by disappointed scolding -- justified, she adjudged, likely done with instructive consideration, the thought of improvement. He had immediately named her Wild Vi, not for too much forwardness, for she was inveterately shy, but aptly for a certain farouche unruliness; for this behavior, he sometimes used the throaty word *ustyrilig*, or if she was impossibly unruly, he called

her *voldsom lillejente*: fierce little girl; indelibly imprinted Norwegian words, verifying from afar her recurring unbridled restiveness.

Fearless and bemused, she leaned closer, as to warmth, feeling an old familiarity rekindling. His clothes held a hint of fried bacon, potatoes, and onions; his breath, a sweet caraway scent: *brennevin*, the *black death*, the *burning wine* brewed from fermented potato pulp.

“You’re drinking again.”

He angled his head back in quick sardonic laughter, hugging flexed, tendon-thick arms to his chest. “*Again?* What do former runaways know of years gone? I drink as I please. It preserves the body.”

“How can it be good for--”

“Let it be. It is too late for any of that.”

“Well, you’d better get inside -- at least I have a coat.”

“But you have no heat, do you, girl?”

“No, Ragnar, no heat...and no more girlhood. I was going to make do until the oil comes.”

“*Herregud!* you would cut this friendly *ung* pine on Ender front land? Have you no sense at all? I was thinking you smarter.”

“Smart enough to keep from freezing.”

“Come and warm yourself at my stove while I get a shirt and coat. Three cords of sized alder stand at the far side of my cabin, near my truck...if you had looked. I will bring enough...until you have oil.”

“I can do it.”

“*Nei. Helvete*, I will die standing up swinging an axe.”

She stood in his kitchen area, admiring the shining granite counter tops, the dark wood cabinets. He emerged from a tidy, pine-wainscoted bedroom, a room modest in size and filled by an enormous bed. Zipping up his leather jacket, he pointed to the coffee pot simmering at the back of the wood-burning cookstove; near it stood an impressive Bosch electric range.

“*Ja*, warm yourself...coffee. I will not be long,” he assured

her, pulling a gray woolen cap from his jacket pocket and tugging it down over his ears.

“Ragnar, please let me help.”

“Come then. You always had to help.”

His recollection felt far more comforting to her than the warm stove. They went out the door, Viola frowning over nagging thoughts. *I feel just like that child I was, hungry for approval, from my father, then from Ragnar. Now from Ragnar: some vindication, some awareness that I haven't messed up my life too badly. Here we are, exemplar and child again. Please somehow come to accept that I grew up all too soon long ago, by the easiest mistake a child can make, one I attempted to correct, the one that haunts me still.*

Near the woodpile she looked up and said, “Wait a minute, what about that little red wagon rusting away in the garden shed? I'll go get it and we can pile it up high and nurse it along to the house.”

“Go, then,” he acceded, smiling as he took from his pocket a rumpled gray clump of well-used cowhide gloves and pulled them on. He reached head-level to lift down chunks of alder as she hurried away.

She laughed, with minor alarm, when they nearly tipped over their last load, the weight flattening weeds along the stony, puddled path.

“Need to fill in these potholes. Avoided using my truck, thinking our reacquaintance worth this childish idea of transport.”

She blushed and tapped her head. “I never thought of your truck. I haven't driven much lately, until now...just got a new license.”

When he had stacked the third and final load beside her stubborn door, he took up an armload to carry inside.

“I don't think you'll get in with that. The door sticks.”

“Then I will fix that too,” he responded matter-of-factly, while effortlessly shoving the door open with his shoulder.

“Ah...you have far more strength than I.”

“*Ja*, Wild Vi, yet I do...sixty-five last month. You are what?”

“I hate to say it...forty-four this month.”

“Still young. You do not look your age at all.”

“Neither do you...look your age...God, not at all.”

“*Herregud*, I sometimes feel it.” He ejected his boots and went into the large living room, moving through crossing shafts of light from the corner bay windows.

“Don’t you ever come in here?”

“Not anymore, why would I? Mira comes...but now no longer.”

He threw the wood precisely into the wood box, atop sheaves of yellowing newspapers, then pulled off his gloves.

“I can make the fire, Ragnar.”

“*Nei*, I will do it. You can watch the expert.” He turned around and the steady sea-gray eyes, through with teasing, now appeared to seek a forthright clarity, inveterate taciturnity set aside by a firmly reassuring voice. “While you are here on the farm let me do what I can.”

“Thank you for that. I’m already grateful. I’ll bring in the groceries...make us some tea. Do you ever drink tea?”

“It would be a change,” he admitted as he set aside the fire screen and knelt down.

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The snapping fire was blazing. They were seated, she with legs bent aside and he with legs stretched out, on a multicolored old quilt spread before the hearth. “A picnic,” she said. She was warm now and almost sanguine. With a triangle of toast in hand, she spoke of more hunger than usual. The tray of tea things held a bowl of peeled and sectioned tangerines, plates of sliced brie, buttered raisin toast.

“If you were hungry I could have fed you breakfast.”

“Thanks...but I wouldn’t expect you to--”

“I cook well enough. You have to say what you want...ask for what is needed. *Beklager*...sorry, that is just the way I see it.”

Again surprised, she watched him roll the sleeves of his blue plaid flannel shirt and reach for the tea, which he drank straight.

“Why did you not remove your shoes?”

“My shoes? Oh, yes, filthy shoes on this nice old blanket.”

“Shoes in the house.”

“Removal a Norwegian custom, I presume.” She was holding a fruit section and slipped it between her lips, then pulled off her offending loafers and tossed them aside. He picked them up and set them neatly beside the wood box.

“Just a good habit...showing respect...makes a cleaner house.”

“So you remember the Norway of...younger days?”

“One remembers best what is earliest written on the tabula rasa.”

“But you’ve been here a long time...yet you speak using--”

“A few *Norsk* words. I well know their English equivalents. My native words suit me...familiar...habit. You once liked them too.”

“Still do. I’ll pay attention -- I’d enjoy learning *Norsk*.”

Violea got onto her knees and pulled down the scratchy old tan Scottish sweater she had found in a drawer. A few moth holes were in evidence. She sat back and smoothed her hands over her jeans, then picked up her mug and sipped. Ragnar drank and watched her with a steady but relaxed gaze. She set her cup on the hearth and ran her fingers over the bright yellow threads of the crazily saddle-stitched dark blanket, her grandmother’s whimsical answer to idle fingers. She was pondering the surprising appearance of this unforeseen entity, and looked up at him with manifest interest, hoping to see more, to attach a few indistinct memories to the unknown presence before her.

He did not blink but his eyes narrowed. “What?”

“I find I don’t know you very well.”

“*Ja*. How could you know me at all?”

“I thought I did...a little.”

“You ran away when you were still in the self-centered stage. I was like the *Cedrus deodora* growing beside this house. Always there, to be noticed only if suddenly absent...struck down in a

storm.”

“I suppose you thought of me as a little monster.”

“*Nei*. You were Martha’s daughter, a lively *ung* thing prone to mischief...pretty and curious. Now you are a handsome woman.”

“Ah, that’s what men say when a mature woman is worth having but not necessarily for her looks.”

“Then I say you are very appealing, not so mature, small but not as delicate as Martha...maybe better able to survive in a hard world.”

“Obviously I’ve survived...haphazardly...but to what end?”

“Only the existential one you make, Wild Vi.”

“Yes, free will and choice, free will and choice, free will and choice,” she chanted, biting into her crunchy raisin toast.

“You have an acre of books in your lovely cabin, Ragnar.”

“*Ja*, a fair number. Hundreds I have given away.”

“I saw a book open on the table beside your coffee cup: Halldor Laxness. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955. The book is *The Fish Can Sing*, isn’t it? I read a translation. I like Laxness very much, wise and funny and satirical...and true. Your copy is in Icelandic. I didn’t know you could read that.”

“You did not know I could read anything.”

“You’re a bit cruel,” she blurted out. “You don’t like me, think I mistreated Mama, deserted her and...yes, I guess I did that.”

“*Beklager*...sorry again. I am too direct. Icelandic is like Old Norse and I read it. I left home at thirteen, with a basic education and much curiosity. Books, I loved. My Norwegian idols were the great Nansen and the explorer Roald Amundsen, who completed the navigation of the Northwest Passage in 1906...through ice now disappearing. He fixed the position of the North Magnetic Pole, was the first one to reach the South Pole in 1911...good enough feats for youthful hero worship.”

“Worship at any age...Amundsen was driven. You liked the sea?”

“*Ja*...working thirteen years in the merchant marine, I bought

books in nearly every port around the world. Wherever I was I read as much I could...and explored...Martha liked to call me an autodidact.”

“How were you employed so young?”

“I was large for my age and thought to be much older, so I lied. But reading was maturing, addictive...a habit I cannot do without.”

“Nor I...writing is also my thing...a sort of compulsion.”

“Can we not get off this floor? My limbs are growing stiff.”

“Mine too. I so enjoy the pleonastic *nots* in your speech. I’ll take up the blanket and pull those chairs closer to the fire.”

“I should go now. Redundant or not, I have talked enough.”

She was disappointed and discomposd, but stubbornly went on removing their picnic repast, arranging two wing chairs by the hearth.

“What will you do if you go back now? Drink? What do you do alone over there...living all by yourself?”

“*Herregud*, you are nosy. You were shy at fifteen. I liked you well enough then...until you ran away. I do a fair amount of work around this farm. I have said I read. I am not always alone...have a number of friends...social obligations...I fish and of course ski.”

“Interesting friends? Who? Women?”

“*Faen!* That is hardly your business, is it?” He was grinning.

“So, it’s a woman...or women.”

“*Nei*, fewer these days...good friends, old habits. Long ago I wisely left the interested ones in the places where met.”

“Was that really wise...I mean if they were so interested?”

“You are acting like a bad child and I am leaving. *Jeg er tørst*, but not for tea...coffee. Remind me not to offer you any *brennevin*. Who knows what would happen if you drank too much?”

“I do drink, not steadily...I have a problem with depression.”

“Then quit drinking. Work and exercise are best for

depression. *Mange takk. Ha de bra.*” As he arose from the wing chair where he had briefly perched, he clearly favored a swift departure, giving his tersely polite thanks and Norwegian goodbye.

“But *I* should be thanking *you*. Don’t go so soon,” she pleaded, jumping up. “Please. It’s early. I’m not used to being alone here yet. I was so often with talkative people and I--”

“Soon you will be back with them, perhaps speaking more courteously and less ridiculously, one can hope.”

“No, I won’t be...*back with them*. I’m sorry. You know what happened? -- you were so brusque with me, for a reason I don’t fully understand, that I wanted to get back at you. That’s not me, I really don’t do that, but I’m sort of at wit’s end right now...awfully sensitive and...feeling guilty for giving up...for...*being alive*. Out in the world I’ve had to struggle, fight for things that needed to get done. I’ve had to go against resistance, *fear*, so many times that I--”

“Put on your shoes and coat.”

“What?”

“Shoes and coat. Here,” he said, easing her down on the wing chair and reaching for her shoes. “Where is your coat?”

“A...my...on the coat rack by the front door.”

He went away, returning with her coat to find her absently staring into space. Holding open the coat, he ordered, “Here, stand up and put your arms in.”

“Why?”

“We are going over to my cabin, sit comfortably in a warm room and have a drink. You can talk if you want. I might or might not answer but I will listen. Later I will make a supper of real food.”

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“Your Scotch is so relaxing...and the warmth in this room; solar panel heat and a lovely fireplace. Cozy...knotty pine walls and red leather furniture...and even a padded window seat where you can look out on your sacred pines. You’ve made a very pleasant nest out of this big old cabin. I suppose you’re happy enough



here.”

“If that is a question, comfortable is a better word...there is little upkeep and I can devote my time to work...other interests.”

“I saw a computer on the desk in your Spartan den over there.”

“*Ja*, important for some things...swift access to the world.”

Viola sprawled back on the red leather sofa and drew shoeless feet up against her denim-covered bent legs. She had compliantly allowed removal of her shoes, after watching him leave his boots at the door.

“I’m beginning to unwind.”

Ragnar smiled and adjusted his loosely relaxed body a little forward in his large leather chair, so that one elbow leaned on an armrest, with his thumb beneath his chin, three fingers curved beside a contemplative mouth, and a long horizontal finger pointed toward his silver temple. He set his emptied Scotch glass on a coaster placed on a nearby small oak table. Early on, he had replaced his plaid work shirt with a gray crew neck sweater. His long legs were crossed over the chair’s punched-in leather footrest, his eyes calmly on Viola, and conveying no apparent concern for his own silence. Such earnestly focused quietness did not constrict a reserve of swiftly relevant wit, the authentic individualist’s constant companion. He reminded her of someone. At last she realized it was not a person at all but a quality: he was the complete embodiment of self-reliance.

“You haven’t asked me anything about my life away from here.”

“If you want to tell me I will listen.”

“This Scotch is helping me ask you things...I want to know about you and Mama and the farm...and even my father and--”

“Wait! Wait now, girl. I thought you wanted to talk about your life away from here. These questions are another matter.”

“But I want *you* to talk...talk and talk...tell me--”

“*Herregud*, you cannot have whatever you want...from those lives.”

“Do I seem that naïve? Won’t you explain some things, *please*? I vaguely thought you’d gone to Norway. There’s a lot I don’t know. Couldn’t we have more Scotch? I thought we’d be drinking *brennevin*.”

“None of my *brennevin* for you, Wild Vi...and I think no more Scotch for either of us. You are mistaken if you think you can cause me to drink and babble things I have no right to say.

“Do you eat venison? I thought to broil some steaks later.”

“I can’t believe it, you’ve totally changed the subject.”

“*Nei*, I need to know now if you eat venison so I can defrost it.”

“I eat venison. Why are you so reluctant to...so short with me?”

He stood up, snatched up his tumbler and shoved the close footrest from his path. “I may answer after I take the meat out of the freezer.”

He was back in his chair and had actually refilled his glass, but not hers. He explained that, because of her depression, the denial of Scotch was not impolite but a kindness. He had brought her a tumbler of cranberry juice. “Healthy,” he encouraged with a wink.

“How can you wink at me and treat me like a child at my age?”

“I can wink at any age. You sometimes *act* like a child. The same impulsiveness as when you ran away...but then you *were* a child.”

“You keep saying that I ran away. Oh, dammit, please give me another drink. I’ll spill plenty of tears without it. I’ve worked so hard and I’m tired, Ragnar. Friends...*dead*...*killed* before my eyes. Paltry humanitarian effort in wretched foreign holes. I’ve been so angry and sick...*sick* of it all. I thought Mama told you why I left. The way you loved her, I thought she told you that I--”

“I cared very much for Martha, and to her I was a good friend.”

“But she loved you. She was always writing love notes to

you. I knew that. I knew it and never said anything.”

“She wrote nothing to me. She did not love me in that way...or your father. She loved another...and I have said too much. You are so emotionally demanding you cause me to say things I should not.”

“Why not? *Why?* She was my *mother*. Why all of this secrecy?”

He finished his Scotch and fell into a silence she found unkind.

“I’m going back to the house,” she muttered half to herself.

“Then shall I return your steak to the freezer?”

“Oh, damn you and your Norwegian avoidance!” She rushed to snatch her coat from the door-side coat rack. “Where are my damn shoes?”

“I will give them to you when you are calmer.”

“Never mind, keep them!” she cried and wrenched open the door.

“Wild Vi, this is foolish. It is raining and you--”

“Oh the hell with you and your bloody silence!”

She opened the door and began to run, her thin anklets soaking up muddy water. Already the shortened day was growing dimmer, and her foot sloshed into a puddle as she squinted at the pathway along the misty row of dark holly trees. Windblown dead holly leaves pricked her feet. She jumped up in surprise and pain and fell awkwardly down on small sharp stones that felt as if they were cutting into her knees. She sprawled there on her side, weeping and cursing loudly at everything, including herself. A dark figure loomed before her tear-blurred eyes. Ragnar snatched her up, lifting her above the ground with no effort at all. He strode off with her, back to his cabin, as if he were carrying a lightweight little sack of potatoes.

“*Helvete*, you weigh nothing. I should feed you the steak.”

Although she was hurting in several places, she almost laughed, realizing that she was now experiencing a Norwegian sense of humor.

He placed her on a kitchen chair and pulled off her coat.

“You are a soiled mess. Look at these muddy socks.”

“I stepped on holly leaves...hurt my knees. I think they’re...”

He removed a holly thorn, then pulled off her socks and examined the bottom of her feet. “Not much damage. Let me see your knees.”

“You’ll have to roll up my jeans.”

“Too tight, take them off.”

“I will not.”

“Take them off, you silly girl.”

When her jeans were removed he led her into the bathroom and settled her on the edge of the bathtub, where he cleansed her slightly bloodied knees and pricked feet, gently applying antibiotic cream.

“You will live.”

“Will I? Too bad.”

“Stop talking that way. You are better than that. Do not whine. I cannot believe you are forty-four years old.”

“Neither can I. Well, thanks for this...where are my jeans?”

“In the shower, wet and muddy. Let them dry at least. Here, take my robe,” he said, lifting it from a hook on the door back.

“I’d drown in that...couldn’t even walk.”

“Then my sweater,” he suggested, pulling it over his head. He handed it to her, tucking in his loosened white t-shirt. The sweater, atop hers, fell to her calves. Her hands disappeared completely.

He studied her condition with his chin held between a thumb and fist, and gave a throaty rumble of laughter. “Poor *lille* thing, you make it easy to see you as a child, you are the size of one.”

“And you’re gargantuan,” she giped over her shoulder as she went into his living room. She sat primly on the davenport, feeling quite foolish. Ragnar entered the room, buttoning a brown wool shirt.

“*Herregud*, you have been here less than two days and I am worn out by you. I am longing for the peace of my former existence.”

“Ragnar,” she tittered, “my God, you make me laugh...laugh in all my hurt, anger...misery. Still...if I say what I intend to, I’m liable to cry. I’ve tried to make myself hard as tough old leather, but the harder I try the softer I get. I cry more often now.”

He arose with a purposeful expression and left the room, soon returning with a packet of tissues. He sat on the sofa beside her.

“It is about the reason you left.”

“Do you know why? Did Mama say anything to you?”

“*Nei*, she was quiet about you. Now *you* will say...if you want.”

“I have to say. Why would I go away at the age of fifteen if Mama hadn’t sent me? She sent me off to Daddy’s widowed sister-in-law in Boston.” She lowered her streaming eyes and was handed a tissue.

“I was...I was pregnant...stupidly, stupidly in love with someone about to leave me, and stupidly, stupidly pregnant.” She looked up.

“Ah,” he said, staring at her with no discernible emotion, adding nothing more, crystal blue-gray eyes so limpid they were filled with firelight. Where was he now? Back with Martha? *Viola*, so adept at reading faces, read nothing, saw not the slightest twitch in the high lean cheeks of sun-weathered skin. His sensual lips remained softly closed in adjusting thought, serenely fixed as smoothly polished oak.

“I had a son, raised by Aunt Hilda while I finished school and then studied at Boston University. By the time I got my Harvard Ph.D. in literature he was *her* son. Maybe to keep her assumed motherhood, she helped him form his hostile opinion, but in time he came to resent me...mainly because I didn’t know where his father was...for having no father...for being frequently gone myself. He’s twenty-eight, single, and doing research on

bio-energy sources. We barely communicate; if there were applicable formal address in English he would use it with me. So...inflamed by world deprivation...naïvely believing I could do something about it, I accepted a position with an NGO working out of London...a non-governmental organization,” she added with questioning eyes.

“*Ja*, I understand.”

“We’ve tried to open, *have* opened, schools, distributed text books in rather dangerous places. I’ve traveled quite a bit...but then suddenly the books we were supplying to a struggling school were refused. The school wanted portable computers...and got them...rather easily. They didn’t want books at all. I thought it was drastic, but also hypocritical of me, because I used a computer myself. Everything changed so quickly. I felt *de trop*, useless, our work so paltry, the seemingly wasted lives of deeply involved and caring friends. I was nearly killed several times...accidentally caught up in the madness of wars, political strife. Then three months ago I was in Africa with an associate, someone very dear to me who was...shot dead...while I stood helpless. It all came down on me. I suppose it could be called a severe attack of nerves or rage or even self-deprecation. I could no longer tolerate the directions things always go: ignorance, poverty, war, the monstrous abuse of women. No chance for reason or subtlety of mind, no sign of virtue or beauty...only ugliness aplenty, cruelty, thirst, hunger, starvation...rape and death -- nothing new. I fell ill, had explosive anger, still do. I never saw a doctor, never took any medication until...back in London, for a while I would not even leave my Bloomsbury bed-sit. A friend finally dragged me out by dosing me with Valium. I’d always been writing some and decided I would have to give up my work, simply live out my fractured life reclusively writing.

“I loved Mama so much...perhaps selfishly and unrealistically but deeply...all the while half-consciously bound up in proving myself a worthy daughter. I always wrote her inflated, positive letters. She would write asking for news of her grandson: when

would he come to the farm? How could I tell her the truth when it was she who sent me to Aunt Hilda? She never *met* her grandson! Quite early on, he refused to visit the farm. He wanted nothing to do with us. Mama must have thought that I...so I felt I'd ruined so much...yet I wanted her to forgive me...had intended to come and explain...then the funeral...a daze of grief. She died so young. I had no idea she was even ill. I couldn't imagine being here with her gone. Years went by. Then Mira wrote me that Raymond couldn't do the farming -- she must have assumed I knew about you. At last I had to face all of this, face my history and...make some sort of finish to it. I know I'm incredibly volatile, very unpredictable...these confusing flare-ups. I need to heal...God, what if I could somehow still be useful?...and...well...here I am."

"You will stay?"

"I think so, yes...if I can learn to be alone...with memories."

"You were never married...living with someone?"

"No, just had...special friends...always working...or writing."

"You will not be alone here. There is my company when you wish, when you need something. Do you still take Valium? It is addictive. A benzodiazepine drug can cause dependency."

"No, not often. How do you happen to know the class of drug?"

"A friend was taking it so I read about it...easy to research."

"I didn't really know you, Ragnar, you're right. I only remembered you as a dependable part of this place. For years I plunged into my work...tried not to think of home. An amount of money just went into the bank account and I... Mama cared for you, I know that. I was a foolish, self-centered child when I left, hurting over a lost love who never even knew about his son...still doesn't know...wherever he is."

Ragnar lifted her agitated hand, studying the nervously twitching fingers she was unable to relax. He held the hand completely within his, but not firmly, the effect calming. He ran his thumb over the bracelet on her wrist, a single strand of small rough amber beads.

“It was given to me by a young Mauritanian woman, sweetly proud. I tried to help with food, water for her and her starving baby; it was during the severe drought in northwest Africa in the eighties. Later her baby was killed as she fled from roaming racist butchers...she made it to the sea where she drown herself to escape rape. When I first brought her food and medicine she wanted to show her gratitude; this was all she had to give. I had to take it. Hearing of her death, I carried it for a while in my pocket, where it hurt less. Finally I put it back on my wrist. I could feel it for a long time without looking, but if allowed to go on, mind and body will adjust to nearly anything. Once, while I was recovering from sudden gall bladder surgery in London, I overrode the pain by studying these crude little beads...my physical hurt was nearly swallowed by a huge cosmic wound.”

He still held her hand inside a loose warm fist on his knee.

“Can you forgive my inconsiderateness, Wild Vi? For a while you will have problems from your illness. You are quite a good person.”

“I’m not so good...and there’s nothing to forgive. Forgive *me*. You spoke the truth. I still have a lot of violence in me.”

“That will pass...and if we scrap from time to time, so be it.” He winked at her. Her smile was automatic. She was wondering how they might come to *scrap*, for just now it seemed so unlikely. She had indeed become fearfully unpredictable, especially to herself. Undeniably, her confusing conduct had been, *was*, still quite erratic. Did her damaged temperament compel him to anticipate considerably more unpleasantness? She had wanted acknowledgement of ongoing recovery, but had hardly demonstrated that she was deliberately on the mend. By now she could sense that her desired certification from his quarter would require serious effort. The thought of such effort, of anything large or complex or enervating, made her want to withdraw in endless sleep.

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Whistling wind tore loose cones from the tall firs and even a



few hearty little pines. She watched these shorn dark projectiles plummeting diagonally, idly sipping her morning tea while staring through the breakfast nook windows into the waltzing forest behind the house.

A chestnut-stained large woven-reed basket, standing empty on the fireplace hearth, had always held an ample number of aromatic cones, gathered by the Ender women to start or enliven seasonal fires. The highly combustible cone pitch instantly revived dwindling flames, roaring loudly with a cozy pop and sizzle, an unforgettable winter sound. Recalling the smoky dissonance of the burning cones brought to mind luminous facets of other childhood memories: the security of familiar women gathered around a warming fire; tea and cake; shrill laughter or easeful complaints, while excited electrons whirled up the chimney.

A sudden desire to refill the cone basket took possession of her, dulling the nervous malaise pervading these strangely aimless chilly mornings. Yes, she would go into the forest and gather cones. Simple enough. And it seemed a useful endeavor, an undemanding, satisfying way of recapturing domestic habits, some of the positive things -- or at least a minimally productive method of relieving the increasing awkwardness of her displacement. Fresh air and exercise.

She had put on a smudged old red coat, which smelled of rubber because it had lain a long time in the boot box on the back porch; also donning a knitted wool cap, found there along with wrinkled gray leather gloves. A large black plastic garbage bag was stuffed into her coat pocket. The iron gate appeared so melded shut by the seasons that, instead of opening it, she climbed over the weathered low rails of the moss-covered, zigzagging false barrier. Constructed a very long time ago, to separate the garden from the woods, the open split rails never had any restrictive usefulness, merely an old-fashioned country charm.

This old forest was familiar to her as a sentient, striving intelligence. She wandered dreamily beneath its souging trees, accompanied only by uneven wind song, creaking limbs, or sudden

bird cries. She clambered over logs, stumbled against or leapt over forest debris, sometimes slip-sliding into spongy declivities, while single-mindedly gathering more and more cones -- soft narrow little fir cones or scarcer prickly-hard fat pine cones, both pungently frosted with oozing pitch. Her ill-fitting gloves grew hinderingly sticky, often adhering to the bag she was half-lifting, half-dragging along. All too soon her distracted pursuit had filled the plastic sack to an unwieldy rotundity hardly manageable.

Afraid of losing herself in a less familiar, overgrown quarter, she had stayed fairly near the edge of the forest, thus could see through the trees glimpses of the rough road running between woods and field; it was actually only a weedy and gravelly narrow lane, winding along the entire perimeter of the blowing dark forest. It would be easier to make her way to the fence, climb over and walk back along the edge of the open field. But how would she get this ridiculously cumbersome bag home? She sat on a large, decaying mossy log, pondering her dilemma, greedily unwilling to relinquish a single cone.

A warm spangle of sunlight played over her. She stared back into the previously indistinct mass of dark green verdure, gradually mesmerized by varying gold patches of fluid morning light; a veritable light show of brilliant patterns, rapidly changing shape as sunbeams shot through blowing tree boughs and danced back and forth across the shadowy floor. In the near distance an angled sunbeam of fluxing motes caught the flashing blue wings of a Stellar jay as it soared into the dazzling translucent medium. Swiftly exiting the ethereal column of light, it flickered into deep shadow with a single echoing cry. The limbs above her head clicked together. The wind's close sweep further tangled flying coppery-brown strands of hair, loosened from her pushed-back cap and tickling her nose. She rubbed vigorously at her itchy nose without removing her resinous glove. The sharp turpentine redolence from her glove at once acted like a mind-altering opiate. A swift epiphany of intense joy rippled through her body. She began to sing a childish made-up song, words with thin high notes,

thoughtlessly poetic. *Enjoy here and now*, she advised her elated self -- no swift frisson of inconstant nature could ever be recaptured.

Something made her turn her head enough to discover the truck parked off in the lane with its door hanging open. Turning a little more, she almost cried out, shocked to find a disturbing presence towering intrusively: Ragnar, washed to brilliance by the morning's honey shower of light. Apparently ubiquitous, the hermetic vestige of her own Ender history stood before her, mantled in a gold velvet shimmer she had thought solely hers. He was so much an interloper he received no reception, for he had appropriated her sweet morning, her private objective, her so enchanting communion with sun and woods, alas, her innocent song. Her present loss of strength left her vulnerable, regretful, feeling quite discomposed. Restraint gone, hot anger prevailed, verifying his earlier doubtfully received forecast. Struggling to govern this strange, bewildering ferocity, she blushed deeply. That unvarying, inscrutable countenance made his pleased smile suspect; yet, she thought him above petty mockery.

Clothed in a scarred brown leather jacket and faded jeans, he wore an umber fedora with a small, dark white-tipped feather tucked back nearly parallel to its band. The hat's rakish brim slanted above curiously amused eyes, a shadowed jaybird-gray flashing swift gravity at her response, but ending in subtle appraisal.

He moved to sit down on the drying moss of her log, a foot or so left of her rigid body. Penetrating flickerings of dazzling sun stroked over them. But for her the magic spell had broken against a pointed contrast: *the securely rooted Ender Farm denizen in menacing tandem transit with the circumstantial landowner -- she, having shown herself to be impulsive, barely fit to follow.* His steadily relevant experience was a cruel proximity. In the relentless sun's exposing light she felt her fragile wings melting away -- even this sardonic literary jest a plummeting fizzle, the art gone out of her. He must have heard her singing. What private wistfulness had been impulsively crooned in her short-lived rhapsody? Visceral words borne away on the wind, almost none of which she remembered -- usually she

did.

Ignoring her stolid silence, he calmly thrust out long legs, congenially crossing his oiled, thick leather boots.

“I saw your red coat through the trees...Martha’s favorite work-coat. You have fixed it good. You and it are covered with pitch.” He drew up his legs and turned sideways to brush her nose with his left thumb. “That will not come off easily.”

Violea cringed and again blushed so thoroughly she hoped it could be taken as merely the reflection of her ugly red coat. What a damn lot of nerve, invading her tranquil space.

“*Herregud!* You have a mountain of--”

“Cones!...lovely, useful tinder.”

Her assertive voice had been far too revealing, defensive.

“That sack is much bigger than you, Wild Vi.” He laughed with humiliating self-indulgence. “You got carried away...but you cannot drag the sack any further, it will tear. At least you are enjoying yourself. Good. A nice day for this.”

“Did you...have some reason for coming over here?”

“*Ja*, I did...although I did not expect to come out here. I wanted to tell you that I am going fishing.”

“I don’t suppose I needed to know that but...all right.”

“*Nei*, I think you should always know when I will not be around the farm...even for only a few days.”

This was her cue to become the prudent landowner, but she was out of control to the point of hostility, and he must see it, know it. It was true that she was upset at his appearance, but how could she have allowed it to show? She needed to somehow redress her strangely hostile conduct, before the lingering moments of this still beautiful day were completely ruined, before she began to loathe herself again.

“You seem to care about the farm. I’m glad for that.”

He stared at her in silence, as if surprised, or disappointed, that she appeared so flimsily uncertain of something self-evident.

She was inclined to believe that, due to her distracting illness, she was getting it all wrong again, that eventually she would gain a

number of stupendous facts -- perhaps very much to her discredit.

“I mean...of course you care about the farm.”

Having failed to convince her own self of her sincerity, but vaguely conscious of her envy of his containment, of his belonging here, belonging anywhere on the farm, she turned away and tried to twist the top of the cone sack; it was too full to draw together.

He picked it up, shook it down and knotted it shut, then, still holding it -- its size diminished as it dangled from his hand -- said, “I will take you back...unless you would enjoy the walk.”

“No, I’ll come,” she agreed, through with this entire episode and eager to get back to the house. She pulled off her gloves and tried to fold them to avoid contaminating the pocket of her ruined coat.

When they reached the truck, he said, “*Beklager*, will you please remove your coat and roll it inside out. Then you will not get pitch on the seat. The cab will be warm enough.”

Driving back on the jarring, uneven lane, he lifted a hand off the steering wheel and said, “*Helvete*, now I have pitch on my steering wheel.”

“Then you shouldn’t have bothered to...” she began with a swiftly contentious voice, but stopped herself and fell silent.

He glanced at her and said, “I am on my way to have lunch. Are you hungry?”

“No, I’m...yes, but I’ll--”

“Might as well share a sandwich, a cup of soup, before I leave.”

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Violea had taken off her soiled tennis shoes and was sitting at Ragnar’s kitchen table when he approached her. His gray shirtsleeves were rolled and he held a cotton pad in his hand. As he was reaching out, apparently to dab at her face, she instinctively drew back.

“What’s that?”

“Hold still. If you could see yourself in a mirror, you would be laughing.” He held her chin in his left hand and turned her

head aside while he applied the cotton pad to her nose.

“God! Are you trying to asphyxiate me? Ugh! It smells like turpentine.”

“It *is* turpentine...not very good for skin but it will get the pitch off...some on your cheek too.”

“It burns.”

“*Ja*, come to the sink and we will give you a gentle rinse.”

Earlier, he had cleansed his hands in preparation for making roast beef sandwiches. He sponged her face with a damp cloth, washed his hands again, and spooned a little horseradish into a small dish of mayonnaise, smearing this over slices of whole-wheat bread. The meat, slices of Jarlsberg cheese, and leaves of red lettuce were piled on. She sat watching with interest as he deftly sliced the sandwiches and plated them. Next he whisked milk, a dash of sherry, and a pinch of dry basil into a bowl of condensed tomato soup, and microwaved it.

They sat quietly eating, exchanging looks of satisfaction, until Ragnar finished his soup, took the empty cup to the sink and said over his shoulder, “You were hungry. You probably had no breakfast.”

“I didn’t...just tea. I can’t believe I ate that entire huge sandwich...it was really good.”

He seemed pleased at her appetite, but then leaned against the counter, folded his arms and said, “You were having a fine time until I came along. Wild Vi...it is impractical to think me an adversary.”

She was speechless, her defenses working furiously.

“Are you finished with the anger...at least for now?”

Still surprised at his incisive candor, she said, “Yes, sorry. I don’t know why that was...exactly...crotchety I suppose...awakened from my lovely escape...I didn’t mean to...” She shrugged.

He made no further comment, changing the subject and explaining that he was going fishing for a few days. “It is something I do when there is a good run. You have enough firewood and you will soon have your oil. You should be all right.

You can always call the sheriff over in Hayfield if you have an emergency. The number is on Martha's...was on your desk."

"Yes, all the helpful numbers...still there. I'll be fine."

"If you are ready to go I will take you home...to play with your cones. *Nei*, peace now, I am only teasing. The pitch is very thick this year. You will enjoy some noisy hot fires."

She could not help laughing and said, "You're quite good at making me laugh at myself...and I'm really quite good at being ridiculous."

After she got out of his truck at the house, he carried the huge bag from the truck bed onto the porch, and said, "Careful with these, you will have pitch all over everything."

"By now I've learned that much. You'd think I'd have never forgotten the pitchy little fingers of my childhood.

"Hope you enjoy your fishing."

As he strode away from the bottom of the steps he called over his shoulder, "I liked your singing...unusual lyrics. See you in four days."

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On this windy wet evening, with the rapidly used firewood nearly gone from the porch but the oil furnace now regularly firing up, there was a loud knock at the door. Startled, Viola hurried to answer, pulling off her glasses as she went. She had been seated at her desk in the drowsing parlor, gruelingly studying stacks of recent property assessments and income tax statements, just then longing to lie down with the company of an interesting book.

"Good heavens, Mira and Raymond!" she exclaimed. They had aged quite a bit in eight years, robust frames grown frailer, yet remained the same in reticence and unworldly bearing. "It's been quite a while. Come in, come in, please. It's devilish out here."

Raymond, in the fading manner of polite men of earlier generations, stepped in after Mira and at once removed his billed blue farm hat.

"Come sit in the living room. Would you like tea?"

"No, no, thank you. The kids just fed us. We won't stay to

bother you,” Mira said, sitting angled at the very edge of the sofa, her prim oxfords pushed together in a hurried manner. It was clear that she meant to do the talking. Her white hair was clipped short accenting her round, deeply wrinkled face, and she wore a plain brown skirt and heavy tan sweater. Gaunt Raymond sat back with arms folded. He had retained his rain parka, and soon began twirling his hat with impatience. Clean new tennis shoes signaled that he had now joined the leisure world, detached at last from his commanding tractor cab.

“We thought we’d see how you’re doin...and just mention a few things. If we’d known you were comin that soon we’d a had the oil on, but I suppose you done all right. Ragnar’s over there keepin his eye on things.”

“You bet he is,” Raymond joined in. “Ragnar still has the old hopper loaded...oughtta stop in there a minute, Mira...say hello. That’s how us northern-minded folks stick together.”

“Oh, sorry, he’s gone fishing,” Viola said. “Apparently there’s a big steelhead run in the Deschutes River.”

“Same thing every year this time...goes over there with his Norwegian fishin buddy.” He chuckled and Mira gave him a warning look. “Stay in a little cabin and fish, fish, fish. I’m too far gone to freeze my ass in--” Mira jabbed him with her elbow. “Excuse me, freeze myself in that damn...eh, *darn* cold river. Up to the hips in ice-cold rubber and what the hell for?”

“I suppose he’ll bring back some fish,” Viola remarked.

“Hell no, mostly throws em back. It’s for the fun of the thing. Never could understand that. If I went to all that trouble and misery, I’d sure’s hell fry em up.”

“Well,” Mira interrupted, “you probably noticed the two horses out in the paddock behind the barn...keepin that grass like a lawn?”

“Horses? Oh yes, but I’ve been...getting used to things here and I haven’t gotten too near the barn. Are they yours?”

Mira smiled and layered bent arthritic hands over her chest. “No, our granddaughters’, May and Linda. The girls belong to a



little ridin group. Our boys got the animals at auction, put em out there, real nice quarter horses. The boys keep everything up and pay for the feed -- not the right shelter on our place. We knew Martha wouldn't a minded, and Ragnar knows about it of course. He let us make the old milk storage cooler into a tack room. The girls just love it, and they're so good about keepin it tidy. The horse trailer's tucked in just behind the main barn. What I wanted to say...we wanted to make sure it was all right with you. Real nice horses, and you could use that tack and ride any time you want." Mira looked both uncertain and gently persuasive. "Can you ride at all? It's Western style."

"Oh yes. It's been a long time...I once had a fine little Appaloosa."

"Then I expect it's all right?"

"Yes, of course...nice to have animals out there galloping over the field...grazing. A farm should be like that. Maybe I'll ride."

"By all means. Well, thank you so much," Mira said, pushing herself to her feet. Raymond eased off the sofa and spun his hat on his thumb while Mira finished up. "You just let us know if there's anything we can do. We're crippin up, arthritis and such, but we're still movin good -- Ray's eighty-eight. I told Ragnar the name of a custom farmer Ray knows...said he'd tell you about it. Seems like Ragnar's always helpin folks out some way or n'other; by now we all know when to go to him. He's the one sent us to Martha that long ago. The librarian in Hayfield says his name's from an old Norse word for a powerful army and a wise leader. Fits him to a tee, don't ya know? You sure lucky to have that man around."

"Yeah, smart fella, strong as an ox and fulla pep, like I was at his age," Raymond agreed. "Nothin gonna slow that big guy down...not even that rotten Norsky potata juice."

Viola set her lips tightly together to stave off delicious laughter. She kept the back of her hand lightly across her strained mouth -- as if merely concerned for their safe departure while they

helped each other down the steps -- until they waved goodbye and the door was closed.  
Then she laughed out loud all the way up to her den.

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The sun had suddenly appeared, with the glorious gold slanting light of late fall. A whisper of wind tugged at a few russet leaves still fastened to the branches of a big maple near the barn. Viola rode out of the wide courtyard, with Mariner's hooves clapping on the pebbly ground. She had arisen with a strong, almost childish urge to race over the sun-gilded land. Standing eagerly at her bedroom window she had surveyed the world below: the cleanly washed earth beckoning with its fresh honey-glossed veneer, the redemption of cleansing rain.

In the recently created tack room, she had found the horses' tack neatly hung and arranged under their name tags: Legs and Mariner. She decided to try out Mariner, thinking of Coleridge and wondering how the horse got its name, probably not from literature. Standing at the paddock gate, she had loudly called, "Mariner?" The largest of the chestnut geldings lifted its grazing head and looked toward her. "Are you Mariner? You're the big one, big horse. Come here Mariner...come on! You want a change of scenery? Come here, Mariner, we'll go sailing."

He was sure-footed and powerful. As she rode along the stony edges of the chocolate fields, she patted his silky warm neck in a carefree and felicitous moment of acquaintanceship. "I'm an old cow hand, from the Rio Grande," she sang out, laughing when Mariner's ears rotated and shot forward. Flocks of crows rose from the naked fields. Like the recurring feeders her father had vengefully scattered when they binged on the seed plantings. He used a double-barreled shotgun. For a moment he was standing there, flashing that indelibly hard grin as he pulled the trigger. The dark aura of her father fell over her in an instant. She lowered her eyes and frowned at the swiftness of its coming. *Now I am past the age you were then, Daddy, and you are under the sod.* Her lips trembled in

a plaintive smile as her eyes lifted to the raucous crows, undefeated scavengers in freewheeling flight.

When she had circled around and arrived at the far boundary of the filbert orchards, she dismounted and gazed down rows vaulted with a withering sienna canopy. Guiding Mariner to a distant corner tree, she tied his reins, then slowly walked in via the arrow-straight median row, counting until she was at its true center. She stood spinning in a circle to claim all the dizzying geometrical angles of the fraternally marching trunks. Above: silver chinks of light hinted at eternal sky. The orchardist Herman Ender wisely collaborated with nature, creating a lush arboreal haven; ordered beauty easily trumping any ultimatum of boxed virtual reality. Here the past was the present; it held her more securely than an erratic lover; alone and at one with transmuted earth, secluded in a timeless geometry of cerebral and visceral joy.

In a while she led Mariner to the median row, and began walking back to the northwest. She flinched, imagining that she saw a lean figure standing in the very row she had traveled down. But he *was* there. Mariner saw the figure too and stopped, lifting his head to look. Black hair, dark clothes, a long black shadow, all of a sable piece. There was an odd rhythmic grace in the defying, autonomous way his limbs moved -- a dangling unclaimed hand slowly rising against his arm, then settling on the opposite shoulder, his head angled back in a steady gaze -- so familiar she inhaled an amazed gasp of nameless recognition. "Hello," she called out, stunned, uncertain, thus speaking far too softly, but then more audibly, "Hello!"

He stood still, silent, perhaps equally uncertain, but why turn and walk away without the least acknowledgement? He went down the same row she had used, then moved sharply left, heading toward the southwest and the concealed fringe of the deciduous woods. When near enough for brief scrutiny, she had noticed that his departing step had a slight irregularity, paced in a plodding effort of resolve. He had glanced once over his shoulder, his even foot flying out, deliberately kicking a clod of earth. By the time he

was nearly out of sight he appeared fixed on a familiar trajectory, doggedly aimed at a point of certainty, as if driven by the resurging pain of a recent wound.

She had turned Mariner out, put away the tack and ambled back to the house, all done in speculative thought. Even as she showered, this concentrated effort continued. Long having moved through a world of strange and incomprehensible languages, she had developed a habit of keen observation that enabled a reading of even the most close-mouthed or cunning -- those who spoke a familiar tongue frequently voiced the opposite of what they believed. She had learned to catch the minutest silent physical action and accurately attach it to motive, aversion, desire. Perhaps long ago she had met the stranger in the orchard.

As Viola combed her shoulder-length golden-brown hair before her half-lit dressing table, her large blue-violet eyes peered closely into her mirror and saw a gray hair. Should she pluck it out or leave it? To pluck it out was a lie that time would fully expose. Thinking of Ragnar's full head of stunning tawny-silver hair, she laughed.

As to the furtive signals between the Andersons, she smiled, for they were neophytes at subterfuge. Simply by Mira's scolding manner, by Raymond's obviously conventional attitude and sly school-boy innuendo when speaking of Ragnar's Norwegian fishing partner, she had surmised that Ragnar was fishing with a longtime female friend.

After drinking a mug of vegetable soup and observing the fiery early sunset sky from her kitchen window, Viola reluctantly decided she must get on with studying the farm's accounts. The obvious necessity of profitably expediting marginal earnings now required serious thought. If she was to function successfully in this tight financial environment, she must inform herself by taking a firm grip on what was concrete. Raymond had always received a percentage of the farm's income for his work, and the net balance remained in a dispersal system at her Hayfield bank. Carefully poring over account books and papers, she learned a number of

useful things -- for instance, that the farm's premium filberts were doing very well on a currently brisk market.

Gradually, she was entering all of the long-accumulated data, including the neglected reports she had always received by mail, into her laptop, using a secured system. She spent some time at this, until her neck began to ache, then retired early, to read in bed for a very short time. Ultimately, she could never fall sleep without first opening a book, whether to read or daydream over its receding pages.

She awoke to find sun streaming through the gauzy curtains, but less of it with more clouds approaching. Her sleep had been restive, but her plunge into the workings of the farm had at least kept her mind from its agonizing contemplation of past and present brutalities in the larger world. Something was particularly bothering her today. She ran most of sunny yesterday through her mind and returned to the unmistakably menacing stranger in the orchard. He had acted as if he belonged there, as if the place were quite familiar to him.

Only after a spare, uninteresting breakfast had she decided to take Mariner out, this time in a cold wind and steadily graying sky. She wore her forest-green down jacket zipped tight over a copper high-necked wool sweater, and had donned her mother's gray woolen head and neck scarf and a pair of old leather gloves. A long way from the house now, she moved rapidly alongside the prolific filbert orchard, smiling encouragement to the cherished old trees slowly edging into dormancy. She had guided Mariner some distance from the orchard's broad perimeter, intending to enter the small deciduous woods beyond, and therein search for whatever remained of the original Ender house.

The woods was a lovely delicate place of spicy, moldering airs, rife with brilliant autumn tones and detaching leaves floating and whirled on the fitful breezes. There were very few evergreens growing here. Long ago this area had been thoroughly logged for its scant old timber. She coaxed Mariner over a rushing, burbling stream, allowing him to lower his head and drink. Finishing, he

snorted and sawed his head up and down, pulling at the rains and sending drizzles of water flying from his velvet muzzle into an increasing wind.

Very soon they hastened across a narrow dirt road, one in recent use. She doubled back, examined it and curiously began to follow it, eventually rounding a rising slope of climbing trees. Nestled at its far side stood an old stone house. A few attached wires gently sagged between newer poles, disappearing into the woods. Her eyes fixed on the pale smoke rising from the house chimney and blowing away on the wind. Recently she had studied this same house in a photograph hung in her mother's bedroom. Long hanging there, it was already known to her, for it was her great-great-grandfather's first home, hand-constructed with devoted, mostly solitary labor. A motorcycle spattered with mud was parked by the rhododendron-edged wide stone steps. She dismounted and stood looking at the house, rather amazed that she could not recall having ever come here in all her early years on the farm. It was far away from the house's inveigling forest. Careless dreamy years had led her happily to the filbert orchard but only a little beyond. She had always favored the secretive wilderness nearer the house. Now she caught a flash of movement at the fern-banked row of front windows.

A slender dark-haired man in a black turtleneck and faded Levis stepped through the door, onto a door mat placed just above her and below the arched stone entrance. He was tallish, wearing moccasins.

"Hello. You're Viola Ender."

"Yes. I didn't know--"

"Tie your horse to that low branch above the grass patch down the path, then come inside."

She continued to stand looking up at him. What was he doing in a house that belonged to her family, to her? She knew him, how did she know him? The trenchant manner, those strange long dark eyes slowly advancing out of her past. He must be in his late forties. The black hair near his temples shaded into faint gray.

She felt a dissonant urgency to hurry away and to come closer, now strongly drawn to a face clearly manifesting sufferance imposed upon. She had already detected some belligerent curiosity there, and now increasing impatience.

“Come on, tie the horse, I won’t harm you. You’ve come to find me, haven’t you?”

His voice held resignation...an awareness of inevitability?

“I just don’t--”

“Tie the horse.” He stepped back inside, slamming the door.

She straightened her rumpled jacket and wound Mariner’s reins once over her gloved hand, leading him down to a rangy little vine maple. Tied, he could still lower his head and nibble on a few blades of grass. She gave him a pat on the neck. “There you go, Mariner.”

She knocked on the door and, without a response, entered rather cautiously and blinked in the autumnal dimness. The room smelled of wood smoke and fresh coffee. He stepped from a pale green kitchen into the living room, carrying two full mugs, looked around him and shoved some papers off a small table with one of the sloshing mugs, then set it down. Holding the other mug, he motioned toward a scarred leather chair near a cleared end table, then dragged the same chair’s leather footrest to a fireplace hearth lightly dusted with ash. There on the warm hearth he set his mug. It was a spacious room with an old slate floor and scattered rugs, two walls without windows lined with books, and other chairs and tables piled high with them, also holding loose papers and journals. A work desk held a shut-off computer. For a moment they stood looking at each other, held in a state of surprise and disbelief. He turned away and settled on the footrest, shoving the askew fire screen into place with his foot. Her heart was beating rapidly, her blood pulsing so loudly her ears seemed to have gone deaf. When at last he spoke, against her deafening internal thunder, she had to watch his mouth carefully to understand.

“Take off your gloves, your coat...sit down, Lea.”

*My God, no, no! are you that smooth-skinned boy? God, I feel dizzy...my knees going weak.* She lowered her head and fiddled with her gloves and coat, long enough to swallow against a dry throat, long enough to silently plead for a dispassionate self.

“You’ve got on pretty well, Lea. You look good. Jesus Christ! Nearly thirty years of your life...gone.”

“And yours.”

“*You are Viola Ender,*” he emphasized, as if still uncertain.

“And one summer you...taught me how to read poor mad Nietzsche.”

“Taught you quite a bit more than that.”

Her hands shook. She wanted to drink but couldn’t lift the cup without the possibility of spilling its contents.

“You don’t have...”

“What?”

“Any alcohol?”

His callous laughter disparaged as he stood up and went into the kitchen. He returned with a half-full bottle of Wild Turkey and a medium-sized tumbler, which he poured two-thirds full.

“I can’t drink with you right now...been trying to work on something.”

When she had downed the burning, swiftly infusing whisky, she looked away, out the nearest window, muttering, “You’re a cool one.”

“Not so cool. Right now it’s will against entropy...against everything but work...effort by inflexible fiat. I have sentiments. You can’t just have someone jump out of your past without some feeling. What did you do when you...ran off so suddenly? I remember your mother didn’t like us together. You were such a ravenous little innocent, heading for idealism...you couldn’t even stand Nietzsche contradicting himself. As I recall I was four, *am* four years older than you.”

She went to the bottle and poured another glass, fuller this time, drinking some as she settled clumsily on the edge of her chair.

“Are you a souse?”



The slangy word went deep into her. She struggled to get beyond it. “I was...got a degree in Boston...then a Ph.D. in literature.”

“At fifteen?” His voice, his laughter were cruelly mocking.

“I lived briefly with an aunt, went to high school in Boston.”

“Good for you, good for you all the way around. So maybe I did you some good, making your mother take you away from me. I knew you were smart. You devoured every book I handed you.”

*Precocious accident, she thought...the accident of love.*

“I...noticed your limp. Did something happen to you?”

“Quite a lot...quite a lot as a matter of fact...*happened* to me.”

She felt the alcohol surging through her body, the false courage that allowed her to swiftly respond with narrow insolence.

“Why do you live in my house?”

“This is not your house. My parents and I came here to live when I was seventeen. My mother died here.”

“My great-great-grandfather built this house.”

“And Martha left it to my father, it and the woods around it, twenty acres. I see you haven’t read the will.”

“Yes...no. I grieved so at Mama’s death that I...”

“I’m sorry. It *was* hard for you. I tried to forgive your mother when I heard she’d died...for taking you away from me. She did leave us this place...of course because she was so in love with my father.”

The surge of alcohol, his strange words, all that she knew and did not know, led her from confusion to a barely containable fury.

“After you went away did you come back and live here then?”

“What? Jesus, no. You don’t know a thing about me, do you? I finished my studies at Oxford...lived around the world, mostly China.”

She stood up, dizzy. “I’ve got to go...have so many things to do. I really just wanted to...find out why...so goodbye...likely I’ll see you...around.” She feared her words were becoming slurred.

“Finish your whiskey, you want it.”

He came closer and thrust the nearly empty glass at her. She saw then that he was dangerously angry, frighteningly so, perhaps angrier than she. Her poisoned body was responding with its own rage -- the fiery alcohol at work. What if she threw the glass, threw it right through one of the long-enduring, rippling old windows of her proud great-great-grandfather's painstakingly, lovingly made house? She set the glass down as carefully as she could; her hand was shaking, her head reeling. She picked up her jacket, fumbled into it, then put on her gloves, with an awkwardly precise effort that seemed to take forever. She had not looked at him since the glass was so scornfully thrust at her. Now Mariner must be trusted to get her home. Horses did.

As she rode away the stone house tilted over. Her body wobbled, floated, the earth rippled. So there lived the father of her son.

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It would be afternoon by now. She was so drunk she could hardly get the saddle off, but did get Mariner into the paddock. The tack was hung wrong and she started over. The saddle now seemed to weigh a hundred pounds, and was seated improperly. It slid off the trestle onto the spinning concrete floor. She knelt or fell with her head on it and wept. Off by the open door there was movement. She blinked several times, trying hard to focus on the approaching scuffed clogs.

Ragnar lifted her off the saddle and replaced it on the trestle.

“Got it wrong...all wrong...bloody, bloody wrong.”

“*Ja*, it is fine now, but you left the paddock gate open and the horses got out.”

“Oh no, oh no, *oh no!*”

“Never mind, I got them in. I was peacefully eating my lunch when Mariner came trotting by my window.”

“Wull...I'll...be. Yud think he'd like-a...be back at his nice, nice lil green grasses...jus like a lawn...Mi-er-a says. Buh he was going...he was going. Wonder where-a-hell he was going.”

“I wonder where the hell you have been.”

“And...where-a-hell you’ve been.”

“You know where I have been. Never mind this. Come on, get up. I will help you back to the house. You should not drink if you cannot walk away from it.”

“Oh righ-t...yoor so...righ.” She lay down on her side. The concrete floor was cold, hard and very cold. “Need nother drink.”

“I would not give you a drink if you paid me with a ton of herring. All right, here.” He lifted her into his arms, switched off the light with his elbow and pushed the door shut with his foot.

“Ree-ey ought-ta leave me there. I’m...dis-gus-ted. No, I mean, wha I mean...dis-gus-ting? E’er one...thinks...so.”

“Who?” He started up the slope to the house.

“Have I gah my shoes? I cah walk.”

“I have seen no evidence of it. Why did you do this? *Herregud*, are you going to be this kind of problem? I cannot leave the place without now worrying about what I will find when I return.”

“Yull fine me...jus me...dis-gus-ting...an him. Buh he’s way over there.”

“Who?”

“Shudda tole me...tole me that...I din know.”

He was climbing the steps with her, then leaning to open the front door. “What should I have told you?”

“Bout him...Hugh...Lang...know him? I did...once.”

“Ah.” He went quietly up the stairs and into her open bedroom.

He removed her gloves and coat and shoes and left her covered on the bed. “I--doan--wan--a--sleep!” she wailed after him.

“You will have nothing to say about that,” he called as he went down the stairs.

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She slept and slept, snoring herself awake long enough to rush into the bathroom and vomit. After that she struggled out of her sweater and jeans and crawled back under the covers. The

hours were all mixed up. The night came and went. She was drenched in sweat. In the morning her woeful head was a huge hammering pain. Her hands were shaking so much she could not get the aspirin bottle open until she tried several times. This little effort made her head fiercely pound.

“At least I got myself home. I got myself to bed,” she said into the bathroom mirror. Suddenly she remembered Ragnar, not his face but his clogs, his angry voice. How humiliating, when she had scolded him for drinking. This was a terrible setback. She was doing so well, proud of her effort with the accounts, the house. She had even driven twenty miles to the changeless little town of Hayfield, to shop for various household supplies and groceries, and while there returned the rental car and bought herself a well-kept second-hand truck. She had driven home beaming, could hardly wait to show the truck to Ragnar. It was a good price, a shiny little yellow Ford. The Enders had always bought Fords. A person on a farm needed a truck. She had grown up among years of trucks of all sizes, and farm machinery. She could drive a tractor, knew how to plow and disc and harrow, knew how to operate a combine and bale hay. She was in a terrible state of morbidity and lay in bed crying. *I'm an aging and stupid woman. I used to be much smarter. I've always been difficult...and terrible at dealing with failure. At fifteen I couldn't judge anything. I do remember how I loved him. I didn't know anything about him, except that he was smart and I loved him, loved his books...loved him. But that beautiful boy is gone forever.* With a sharp jolt she thought of her son, his son. *What can I do? I've got to tell him...don't I have to tell him?*

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In the evening Mira phoned to say that her sons would be coming to take the horses out in the trailer. The girls were going on a ride this weekend, and she hoped there would be some good weather. Viola came close to asking what day it was. She caught herself, looked at the calendar on her desk and figured out that it was Friday.

“That’s fine Mira. You’re very kind to let me know, but Frank

and Donald can just come anytime they need to and take their animals out. I won't mind. I did ride Mariner. It was...a lot of fun."

When she hung up she decided to go down to the tack room and see if everything looked all right. No telling what she had done there. She could not remember if Ragnar had taken care of anything. She put on her jacket and went out, eating an apple as she walked along. Her achy stomach was feeling a little better. Everything there seemed tidy enough and she closed the tack room door and started back. At the holly row's end nearest the barn, she could see Ragnar taking grocery bags from his big navy-blue truck. Might as well get it over with and apologize. She walked over and followed him along to his cabin door.

"Hello, Ragnar...I'm so terribly sorry I ruined your happy homecoming. I am deeply ashamed of myself. You had such a good time fishing, then you had to return to that awful spectacle. Thank you so much for catching the horses. I don't blame you for being angry."

"*Nei*, I should have known better than to say anything to you in that condition. You cannot argue with a drunk person or say anything useful. Come in. Have you eaten?"

"An apple."

"Is that all?"

"I haven't been feeling so well...as you might imagine."

"I am cooking rosemary-garlic lamb chops and buttered parsnips."

"You sound like a regular chef," she said, struggling with her shoes and getting dangerously off balance. He set the bags down and knelt to help her with her loafers. She held onto his shoulder and lifted each foot as he pulled off a shoe. He stood up, removed his loafers and stepped into his kitchen clogs.

At the sink counter he rolled up his shirt sleeves and began to peel parsnips, throwing the peelings into a crockery compost pail. She sat at the table and watched, still queasy. "May I help?"

"*Nei*, just sit. Will you drink cranberry juice?"

"I suppose."

“In the refrigerator.” He handed her a glass.

She got up and opened the refrigerator. “You’ve got a lot of interesting stuff in here. Are you a gourmet?”

“Just a hungry man with taste buds.”

“I thought the refrigerator would be full of *brennevin*.”

“Better if we stay off that subject.”

“A weak attempt at humor,” she said, pouring her juice.

“You have already done the humor...and I had a difficult time not to laugh myself horizontal.”

“Oh, I’m sure I was hilarious.”

“You were entertaining...sometimes pitiful.”

When they had finished dinner and were sitting in the living room, Viola said, “You really are a good cook, far better than I’ll ever be. Ragnar, I’m a terrible failure. I’ve wasted my life.”

“*Nei*, not true. Your life is far from over. This mood is just an aftereffect of the alcohol.” He placed a chunk of alder on the fire and settled back in his red leather chair.

“You knew he was there of course. You’ve always known him.”

“*Ja*, he is one of the friends I spoke of.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“When you told me of your son I thought I would have to. Then I went away to fish and think about it. I decided to leave it to fate.”

“That you certainly did. Oh, none of it’s your fault. Don’t think I’m blaming you for what happened yesterday, or whenever it was. It had to happen, I suppose.”

“I did not know about your son, of course, but I knew that you and Hugh had once been lovers. I inadvertently saw you making love in the hay loft...and other times when you...played at love. With that discovery I became both a censoring authority and an existentialist. The existentialist won and I decided it was none of my business. You have not told him?”

“It’s too soon...for me anyway. Our meeting was horrible. He destroyed me. I’m really mixed up about telling him. I don’t

think he'd care at all, Ragnar."

"You have seen the state he is in. He is very fragile right now, filled with violent anger...but does he not at some point have the right to know, to make up his own mind?"

"I've no idea who he is. What's wrong with him?"

"Ah, it is a long story. Maybe when you feel better and I feel like talking that much."

"He said Mama was in love with his father."

"Part of the long story. Can we wait? You are tired, I too."

"Tell me about your fishing."

"My fishing? I have racked up a few new fish stories."

"I'll bet you have. You look healthier than ever, so content."

"Just from fishing? Did I not look the same before I left?"

"I...well, yes. Raymond and Mira came to see me, mostly about the horses, of course. They are so amusing...sound farm stock.

"And what are you?"

"Unsound farm stock."

He chuckled. "And you can make me laugh too, quite often you do it...as you said I made you laugh."

"They said nice things about you...in their hilarious manner."

"*Ja*, probably my fishing and skiing habits...which they find amusing."

"Oh, you take her skiing too."

"What?"

"Raymond and Mira didn't tell me very much about your fishing, nothing about your skiing. I do remember some things about you. I suppose you're a fine skier...being Norwegian and born in the snow."

"I was born on a farm not far from Oslo, and began to ski at an early age...when about two or three. Take who skiing?"

"Uh...I guess the woman you fish with."

"I usually fish with my globe-trotting cousin, when he is around, a self-centered bore but a good fisherman...a dentist in

Eugene. I have a woman friend or two, but I neither fish nor ski with them on a regular basis...that is...I *have* skied with women from time to time.”

“I told you I am really a failure, and you’ve just proved it. Apparently I’m no longer a whiz at reading people’s intimations.”

“Intimations?”

“I thought, when Raymond mentioned your Norwegian fishing partner and coyly laughed, he meant that you fished with a woman.”

“He meant that I fish with a self-centered relative. This time I fished alone. The next time I go fishing you might come. Then your speculation about a woman will be halfway true -- an easy way to restore your self-confidence.”

“Yes...a little of it. I think I need a good night’s sleep.”

“Then go and get it.”

“Ragnar...I wonder if you would eat my breakfast. I mean, I need to talk to you about some of the farm business...and so forth.”

“I would rather make breakfast. Come at...when do you rise?”

“When do *you* rise?”

“With the sun.”

“I’ll come over at nine.”

“By then I will be starving.”

“Oh, lord, eight?”

“*Nei*, it is only my humor. Come at nine, Wild Vi.”

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Ragnar made banana pancakes with thick slices of smoked honey-glazed ham. He brewed tea especially for Viola and drank his coffee.

“Your meals are delicious, how do you stay so trim?”

“I work...and I rarely eat more than one generous serving at a meal. I never eat between meals. I am active. Norwegians have a strong work ethic. It is part of good health to work.” He winked and grinned at her to remove any possible suggestion of



priggishness.

“Apparently, you do far more around here than I thought.”

Ragnar picked up their plates, set them in the sink and said, “Let us go...maybe into the den, near my computer.”

Seated before his large oak desk, in a leather-padded side chair, Violeta said, “I was surprised to learn that you draw a salary here.”

“Of course, I do not work for nothing. It was what Martha wanted, for me to oversee the farm, to manage things.”

“A lot of work around here, over and above what Raymond and his sons have done out in the fields...the business of overseeing things.”

“*Ja*, who did you think was doing it? You have found that I have power of attorney on the maintenance fund, and that I will sometimes hire workers for special jobs. The beekeeper who maintains hives alongside our clover and alfalfa fields is also paid by me.”

His frank gray eyes, now showing their touch of sky blue, were direct and penetrating. She decided to be direct herself.

“At first I thought you were retired here...alone with your *brennevin*.”

“I drink sparingly; it interferes with nothing. I am not yet ready to fall into my coffin.” His eyes had narrowed and flashed with some heat. “Sometimes you are very much like your father.”

“I take that as *not* a compliment.”

“*Ja*, now let us get on with this. Everything is on my computer. Here are the files, farm business documented and accounted for.”

“Oh. I’ve been laboriously loading everything into my laptop.”

“You should have told me. I could have given you a CD with the farm information from my computer and saved you the trouble. I am sorry to have to tell you, Wild Vi, that you are somewhat naïve about the requirements for maintaining this farm.”

“You should have told *me* what you were doing.”

“*Beklager*, I am telling you now. Everything was running smoothly and I thought you needed a little time to...adjust...that was after I found that you intended to stay. At first I did not know what you were going to do...or even if you intended to keep the farm.”

“Of course I’ll keep the farm. Hmm, I suppose...yes, it must have started at the very beginning...with the door.”

“What?”

“The front door of the house -- stuck shut. After that I thought everything was in a state of disrepair.”

“Ah. Then did anything else look like it was in a state of disrepair? A few recurring potholes. I can do little about the aging trees in the yard...except keep them organically sprayed and gently pruned, unless you want them taken out. Although I have a key, I never go into the house, not since Martha left it. Mira always did that.” He swung sideways in his chair, offering her a patiently amused smile. “And I have fixed the door.”

“Yes, thank you. How did all of those financial reports, papers, the information you must have used, get inside the house?”

“When I finished with the papers I gave them to Mira to put on Martha’s desk. I do not need that much clutter in this small space.”

“Lord, you’re efficient.”

“*Ja*, that is how business is expedited.”

She was growing increasingly uneasy, as if she were merely a superfluous presence. How regrettably she found herself cast from a position of growing satisfaction into one of uselessness. “What about the new custom farmer? You’ve never mentioned him to me.”

“I was about to. I have talked to the man and his son; his name is Harold Jacobson, his son is Henry. They have very good references and well maintained equipment -- I have looked at it. They often subcontract one or two other reliable persons for larger jobs. I would advise that you sign a two-year contract...as soon as possible so they can get you well-placed on their schedule.”

“You sign it,” she said, pushing back her chair and standing up. “As you always have -- I’m sure you have the authority.”

Ragnar stood up and lightly touched her stiffened shoulder. “You have pitched right in...*det er bra* -- good. Do you not expect me to take good care of this farm, Wild Vi? Now you are here you will tell me what you want done, I will see to it.”

“Likely you’ll tell me what *you* think needs doing and see to it.”

“*Ja*, so I will. Please give me your cell phone number.”

“My cell phone?” she said with instant reluctance, and even as if she did not have one. In London she had been very careful about giving out her number, to avoid a barrage of unwanted solicitations.

“*Ja*, your cell phone -- the instrument that falls from your coat pocket when you are...not in an upright position.”

She blushed and said, “Very few people have my number.”

“And I will be one of them, *Ja*? It is important sometimes to reach you.” He handed her a pad and pencil.

“Of course, you’re right. Sorry.” She dashed off both her cell phone number and the new phone number at the house.

“Tell me this,” she said, tossing down the pad and pencil, “how did poor arthritic Mira get into the house through that damned recalcitrant door?”

“The house has two doors and she always entered from the back.”

“I’ve been thoroughly brought down, properly put in my place. I’m going home. I’d even have a drink to soothe my ego...if the horrors of it were not so recent.”

He walked her to the door and helped her put on her loafers, looking up at her while she leaned on his shoulder. His expression was irresolutely half amused, half serious. “Please do not drink tonight. It is not a part of my physical fitness program.”

“Now you’ve had the last laugh. I’ll have to learn some Norsky jokes.”

“*Du skal bare ikeke vørde* -- *nei*, don’t bother. You can spare

me that humiliation. I have heard them all hundreds of times.”

“Oh, by the way,” she said, turning back just below the steps, “I recently bought some transportation...right now it's getting acquainted with its new home in the garage...a nice Ford truck, pre-owned.”

“*Helvete*, secondhand. Now I will be doing motor repair.”

“Please have some confidence in my judgment...in my pretty little canary-yellow truck.”

“I was worried that it would be a lemon, but if as you say it is only a yellow--”

“Ragnar, I’m going to have the last laugh. Wait and see.

“This Wednesday night I’m preparing a meal Mama taught me how to make when I was only twelve. Will you come help me eat it?”

“*Ja, takk*...if it is not the last laugh.”

“Six o’clock?”

“A good hour.”

She walked back to the house, thinking dubiously of the few Norwegian jokes she had heard. In Hayfield she had seen a sticker on a truck bumper that read, *Don’t laugh, I’m Norwegian*. Ragnar had a very quick and incredibly dry sense of humor. He was so adept at delivery that she was often puzzled for a few seconds before his artistry registered.

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A day later after breakfast, Viola put on her coat then went upstairs into her father’s bedroom, where large boxes of old pictures and household things were stored against one wall. The only things reminiscent of him that remained in the room were the mahogany acorn dresser and bedstead and his fruitwood gun rack. She opened the glass door of the tall gun rack and took out the Winchester .22. It was cleaned and oiled just as her father had left it, with a very slight layer of dust over its surface. Could Mira have kept it dusted? The gun rack did keep some dust off. On the bottom shelf were various shells for all of the six guns quiescently waiting there. She ran her hand over the sleek rifle which, at the

age of twelve, had passed into her hands by a bizarre and difficult coming-of-age audition. From a new box on the dresser top she gathered up a handful of shells she had recently bought in Hayfield, and dropped them into her pocket.

Outside she inhaled deeply, pleurably -- another clear autumn day steeped in reddish-gold sunlight. The air was loaded with the sweet pungency of rotting vegetation, the earth and all the trembling plant surfaces a pale crimson-yellow shimmer of poised expectation. Rifle in hand she stood in the back garden, looking at numerous rooting holes wild rabbits from the nearby woods had made among vestiges of her mother's once hardy herb garden. They had even gnawed on a gnarly old rosemary trunk, the bush still stubbornly putting out tiny palest-blue flowers.

Standing there, she thought of her impossibly demanding father, and of the childhood incident of the plague of rabbits. Wild rabbits were strange little gnawing, digging rodent-like creatures that could suddenly begin to breed in phenomenal numbers and overtake everything. It was as if some curious property of nature, perhaps changing growth hormones linked to food supply, made them rise up and dart through the fulgid forest moonlight, propagating madly. A brutal freeze and starvation would eventually pare these prolific foragers down to a somewhat more tolerable number, but not before damage ensued. It was a surfeit of voracious rabbits that had caused her father to order her to shoot the Winchester. At some cost to her raw empathic temperament, she did learn to shoot, reluctantly providing the canned rabbit in Martha's pantry.

Violea examined a number of serious holes that were large enough to have been easily discovered from her upstairs' bedroom window. She clicked her tongue, muttering, "You little fellows have gone too far again -- Mama's suffering old plants." With the rifle cracked over her shoulder, she walked through the recently repaired gate in the wood rail fence -- fixed by Ragnar who had seen her crawling between the rails -- and into the moist dim forest. A zigzagging quarter of a mile in among the trees, and near a number

of fresh rabbit warrens, Violet knelt to load the rifle. She nimbly crouched beneath a lacy hemlock, near a redolently disintegrating orangey fir stump, leaning back to wait.

*Ah, the earthy smells of rotting vegetation, the memories of this woods, of this farm, memories layered like the rich black humus here around me. How far I've gone and here I am again. How strange it is to come suddenly back to this...to have won yet another fall day of sun here...or anywhere -- the random chances of life and death. I might have finished in the Middle East or Africa or Indonesia. I might have fallen with Robert in that bloody street. Here in this recycling nature not much has changed: taller trees, fallen trees; replicated ferns gracefully clumped, dying vines, pungent mushrooms, worms and insects -- life feeding on life; always the familiar silence and the hum of wind, the chipping birds. But I've changed, grown and aged, a disoriented, wandering, wiser woman-child, by chance humbly returned to indifferent nature's gratuitous guidance; yes, changed very much, yet very much remains the same...although, there is quite a bit more of the intangible me.*

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Violet had hung her good-sized quarry-rabbit in the dry woodshed for two days, then skinned and dressed it. She had cautiously worn long rubber gloves to avoid the possibility of a tularemia infection. When finished, she washed the gloves in a disinfectant, then the sharp knife, but all at once it slipped and went right through her glove, cutting below her left thumb. Luckily she had already doused everything with the strong disinfectant. She yanked off her gloves and washed the cut in antiseptic soap, then medicated and bandaged it carefully.

On Monday she cooked the wonderfully aromatic rich game marinade her mother had taught her to make. To this mélange of distinctive spices, vegetables, and herbs, she added a few juniper berries along with those of allspice. When the marinade had simmered for a little over an hour, she strained it and let it cool, then placed the rabbit sections in a heavy gray pantry crock and poured the marinade over them. Covered, this would stand in the refrigerator until Wednesday morning. The kitchen smelled of all the herbs and spices, especially the thyme and bay leaves and cloves

that had simmered away with the carrots and celery and onions, very pungent.

On Wednesday morning, Viola made tender fresh egg noddle dough, cutting rolled portions into narrow strips, then into even three-inch flour-dusted pieces, to rest covered with a towel on the counter for a last-minute boil. She took the rabbit sections from the crock, patted them dry, dipped them in rye flour and fried them in saved smoked-bacon fat. These were placed in a casserole along with a cup of butter-sautéd shallots, then the saved heated marinade was added. The casserole would bake for two hours in a low oven, and could be easily reheated.

This German dish was Gran's favorite and one of her mother's proudest achievements. Those were the days when many people were gathered at a noisy table, relatives and friends, even her father, if he was not away in town with his mistress, a divorced woman who owned the bakery shop. Perhaps Ragnar was there for this feast. He was thoughtfully included on special occasions, or always during the huge threshing meals. She tried to remember who else came. There was once a quiet, dark-eyed kindly man, remembered for his gifts of fruits and odd vegetables, enough for canning. She vaguely pictured his unusual eyes, mysterious, but could not recall his name, if ever mentioned.

Her table was set in the dining room, and Viola was tossing an apple, romaine, and filbert salad with raspberry vinaigrette dressing when Ragnar arrived promptly at six o'clock. She put the salad into the refrigerator and went to the door. Ragnar had on khaki slacks and a brown v-necked sweater over a white shirt. He removed his loafers and went into the kitchen to open a bottle of Montrachet he had brought.

"It is chilled, but I was not entirely certain I should bring you alcohol."

Viola laughed and pulled off her apron. She wore wool slacks and a silk shirt, both the color of her golden-brown hair. Earlier she had simply brushed back the shoulder-length waves and donned a small pair of gold hoop earrings.

“I haven’t had a drink in days, and believe me with this meal I’ve earned every drop you pour.”

“I could smell it all the way from my cabin. What is it?” Ragnar asked as he pulled the cork.

“Hasenpfeffer...the way Mama used to make it...I hope.”

“Ah...but then it was made with the rabbits you shot yourself.”

“Have you noticed the rabbit holes in the garden?”

“*Ja*, it is a difficult situation that comes and goes.” He was filling the two wine goblets *Viola* had placed on the counter.

“As of last weekend there will be at least one less invader.”

“You shot this rabbit?”

“Swiftly and mercifully...in the woods. Let’s sip a little of this in the living room...beside my friendly fire.”

Ragnar sat back on the leather davenport, with his elbow on the davenport arm and his long legs stretched to the side of the coffee table. He looked at *Viola*, seated thoughtfully at the other end.

“Do you remember, Ragnar, how I learned to shoot?”

“Tell me...there was a deluge of rabbits and your father--”

“Yes, I was twelve. In the evening when the rabbits started arriving, he took me out to the floodlit back yard, handed me the rifle and said, ‘Your mother says your period has come. Now you are woman enough to shoot this vermin. Get busy.’ I refused to take the rifle, and he gave me a cuff and said, ‘You will stay right here until you’ve killed every long-eared rodent with four invading legs.’ I was so furious that I took it out on the rabbits and started firing.”

“*Ja*, I do remember one of those nights. You would shoot and cry. I felt sorry for you, Wild *Vi*, but you became good enough to dispatch them so swiftly and cleanly they did not suffer very much.”

“I sang to a few, mesmerized them, then I shot them and cried.”

“Poor Wild *Vi*. You were brave. So now you have done



the whole thing, which takes several days: hanging, skinning, marinating, frying, and baking...just as Martha did. She was a fine cook.”

Viola finished her wine and stood up to lead the way into the dining room. She was laughing, feeling some small sense of accomplishment at last. But there was still the eating to be done, as proof of that accomplishment. “We’ll soon see if it’s just as Mama did it.”

“What happened to your thumb?” Ragnar asked with an instantly diverted scrutiny.

“I cut it skinning the rabbit but--”

“*Helvete!* Let me see it right now. Have you had even a slight fever, a headache?” He placed a hand on the back of her neck and the other hand lightly on her forehead.

“No, really it’s all right. I had antiseptic and I--”

Ignoring this, Ragnar led her to one of the sofa table lamps, tore off the bandage and held her hand under the light.

“See, it’s all right, healing.”

“*Herregud*, you could have infected yourself, may actually be infected as we speak.”

“No, this was one big healthy rabbit, believe me.”

“If you want rabbits shot and skinned, let me do it please.”

“You seem to think I can’t do anything right.”

“*Nei*, but you cut yourself, that was careless.”

“May I have my hand back? I’ve got to serve our dinner.”

“First we will sanitize the cut and bandage it again.”

“But the dinner is getting cold.”

“It will be just as good less hot. First, your hand.”

While a plaster was applied to her hand in the kitchen, Ragnar said, “I will pick you up tomorrow morning at eight and drive you into town to see my doctor. It is good that you find a doctor anyway.”

“For heaven’s sake, I don’t even have an appointment, Ragnar.”

“He will see you.”

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After dinner when they were back by the fire, both drinking decaffeinated coffee, Ragnar said, "Your jugged rabbit was very good. I cannot remember any better...and the fresh noodles, the salad. I thought you said you could not cook."

"I've never really had time for anything but a few special dishes, but thank you. I'm celebrating my homecoming...paying homage to my sweet mother...and to dear Gran, who so loved hasenpfeffer. What did you think of Gran?...my irrepressible grandmother."

"She was wise and sensible...and kind, but she would stand for no nonsense. She often favored me with her confiding wink. I should attribute your fiery temperament to her instead of her heartless son."

"Daddy could make her so mad. She tried and tried to change him, never gave up trying...but it did no good. She was completely perplexed as to how he got that way. Grandfather was austere but kind, humane and faithful. How was your relationship with Daddy? I never--"

"There was none. I did what he asked of me and stayed out of his way the rest of the time. Nothing anyone did ever suited him. I was young and more inclined to hotheadedness; sometimes -- when I knew he had hurt Martha -- I might have nearly killed him...then his tractor did it. Even so, I tried to get him not to work that steep slope. He would not listen. It was a very bad death, his body plowed over when the tractor rolled. But excuse me...an unnecessary subject."

Viola got up, set her cup on the mantel and placed her hands there, looking into the fire. "Everyone's gone now. I've come to think how good it is to have someone who knew my family, who can share those memories -- good and bad ones -- offer objective opinions."

"It is good for both of us...good for you to remember when

you feel too much alone...but objective? not always.”

“Yes, you cared...admirable, your caring. Hugh Lang cares nothing for Enders. I fancied him the love of my life...the one my naïve ideals made into a paragon of truth and beauty...sometimes dreamed of through the years, as if he held a lingering thought of me...he cares nothing. He once swore to so much, but for him it was only a restless summer.”

“He was very young then...he may care when he is able, Wild Vi. He is suffering with grief, anger...and you, too, are suffering.”

“Could I help him? What can I do?”

“First tell me if it is time to speak of this sadness...after your fine dinner celebration?”

“Go ahead. Why not? It’s part of everything, even my fine celebration. There’s still something of Hugh left in me, something he hates. What on earth would he think of our son?”

“Let us sit at the window davenport; this room is warm enough.”

Violea, certain that Ragnar again felt obliged to more closely position himself near explosive emotion, got up and made her way to the compactly intimate red, white, and gold striped davenport under the bay windows. She curled up at one end. He sat nearby and drew up his knee, placing his ankle under his other knee and watching her as he spoke; dutiful work for him. His spare, unembellished words were nearly always delivered to purpose; he was not prone to chatter.

And so she learned the long story of Hugh Lang, and not incidentally the story of her mother and her mother’s lover. After his degrees, Hugh had resumed a name assigned at birth: Hu Liang; he was one quarter Chinese along with amounts of Italian, Spanish, English, and Norwegian. His father was an eighth more and his mother an eighth less Chinese than Hugh, but Hugh was not raised with a great deal of attention to this heritage, except to retain the family name. This name Hugh cast aside at an early age, when the brutishness of gangs in a xenophobic San Francisco neighborhood served to convince him that he was less Chinese than his father had

asserted. This rough harassment was enough to leave Hugh surly and defensive, and because he could align himself with nearly any dark-eyed, dark-haired race, he did expeditiously did so. Hugh's great-great-grandfather was a Chinese laborer indentured to work on railroad construction in California. Instead of sending for a wife, as was the custom, he married a young laundress half Chinese and half Spanish. This New World alliance engendered mottled sets of grandparents, a colorfully imbued lineage comprised of the mixed races leading to the present day. Altogether there was enough tincturing of genetic fractions to make the head spin, but Hugh's father had a classic Asian masculinity, a delicately handsome physiognomy, and this, along with the traits of his beautiful dark mother, who was Chinese, Spanish, and Italian, had obviously been passed on to Hugh. One day Hugh's father, who worked as a newspaper Linotype operator, came home from work to find his adored wife, who had never been sick a day in her life, lying on the floor blankly staring at the ceiling; the result of a ruptured small tumor in her brain. She could no longer speak or care for herself and could only mutter and sometimes point and cry out. All through their early years her husband, called by his associates Hume, had promised her that they would one day permanently escape to the peaceful anonymity of nature's secluding wilderness, an exotic green haven they had both longed for like naive children dreaming of paradise. Hume quit his job, gathered up his small inheritance and his savings, some of which he hoped to set aside for his gifted son Liang's higher education, and drove up the coast, searching for a restorative place to somehow revivify his chronically damaged wife. She was thirty-eight and Liang, or Hugh, was a worldly seventeen. Viola's father had meanwhile mentioned to an agent that the old Ender house was lying idle and might be rented if the renter wanted to restore it to modern usefulness. Hume at once negotiated for rental of the house, then began to work on it day and night, the work serving as distraction from the grievous loss of his ailing companion's attention. Hugh's mother died only a year later. Hume, uncommunicative and passive, then began to

garden, with an almost fanatical dedication to his cleared forest plots. Very soon he had far more produce than he could use. By first cultivating a lively interest at growing farm markets and country fairs, he developed a brisk demand for a trendy array of vegetables few had previously heard of or used. But after a while not even Hume's expanding achievement brought much relief. He began to wander out in a restless loneliness, often reading at the Hayfield library where he eventually encountered Martha. She had long struggled with her husband's physical and mental abuse, and frequently visited the library to escape, even though she sometimes had to witness her husband and his mistress walking boldly through the town. Almost at once Martha and Hume fell gratefully in love, as if their exclusive passion were the last possible hope of ever banishing their despair. This desperately needed and engrossing love was apparently circumspect and overtly subdued, its physical aspect mostly occurring in their heads. During this time Ragnar had met Hume and learned that his idle son needed a part-time summer job prior to entering college; the job was offered. Quite unintentionally, Hugh cogently reshaped innocent Viola's lively coming-of-age, opening up the compelling world beyond.

Viola remembered their first meeting, when she came across him sitting on a bale of hay with a lunch sandwich in one hand and a book in the other. He was already well-read, his body strong and capable, his youthful appearance cast with a finely chiseled dark perfection. If soon there appeared a surly disdain for much that Viola thought worthwhile, she overlooked this fiery temperament as the prerogative of an extraordinary level of competence. The undirected emotions pouring from her youthful enthusiasm had found a ready receptacle.

Viola had listened to Ragnar's revelations with rapt interest, responding with amazement and near disbelief as he spoke, until at last she said, "How foolish...how self-absorbed I was then...my eyes purblind...to have missed nearly all of what you've described."

"*Nei*, growing children are just as you were, wild and selfishly testing everything...with not much interest beyond the ego, the pith

that hardens *unge* saplings...making them strong enough to survive.”

She smiled at this very accurate yet artful appraisal.

As Ragnar again took up the story, she braced herself for the account of what had happened to Hugh after her mother had sent her away to her stern Aunt in Boston. He had graduated from Princeton with honors, then finished at Oxford on a Rhodes' scholarship. By that time his personal rancor was conveniently bound to socially conscious, revolutionary thinking. He had broadly traveled and written pieces for various journals, having learned several languages, including Mandarin. Finally, he married a young Chinese student and settled in crowded Beijing. Then, on the third of June, 1989, there occurred the protest at Tian'an Men Square. Bands of excited young students poured forth waving banners that translated as: *We Have Come*. Static China's simmering pot of stultifying bureaucracy, corruption, and repression had boiled over. Hugh and his wife were in sympathy with Tian'an Men, but had just gone to Sichuan in the south to visit his wife's family in the capital city Chengdu. On the fourth of June, a protest of solidarity swept across Chengdu. Hugh and his wife joined in, leaving their new daughter with grandparents. Hugh's wife was shot by troops marching into the city. He rushed her back to her family home where she died. The child died later when still a young teenager, of a very serious case of hepatitis. For a number of years Hugh wandered around the world, occasionally living back in China, and sporadically, as a need for funds occurred, writing for journals and newspapers. Then, seven years ago, he had married a German reporter in Bierut. When the more recent intensive Israeli bombardment of Bierut began, Hugh was sharing an assignment with his young wife; she was instantly killed by an exploding shell fragment. He was badly wounded in his foot. Eventually he returned to his old woods home, a thorough recluse, disillusioned, suffering from the malaise of ignored health and recurring depression. Recently less withdrawn, he sometimes visited with Ragnar -- Violeta knew by now that Ragnar would have shown himself to be an intelligent and very understanding listener.

Presently, Hugh was attempting to compose a book from his notes and journals, but was often far too dispirited to work.

Ragnar was of the opinion that lately Hugh had shown signs of improvement, but his temperament was still very uneven and, as Viola could attest, quite unpredictable.

After a moment of silent reflection, Viola looked up and said, "The wounded chickens have fluttered home to roost." The flippant cast of her sardonic words made her add, "Do I sound hard-hearted?"

"You are hard on yourself too."

"Have to be...learned to be. Or I'd have gone crazy. The things I've seen, the sorrows, the terrible miseries that humans devise for each other, things that don't have to happen at all. There are large natural disasters, but the largest *unnatural* disaster is what mankind does with indifference. Ah well, some would call that natural too."

At this propitious moment, Ragnar stood up to leave, but paused. "You have learned that wrongful acts are natural to man...always a work in progress. New research has shown that, unlike the female brain where actions and emotions are stored collectively, the male brain stores actions and emotions separately. This would account for the male's ease of repeated wrongful acts...a survival technique."

"Yes. Perhaps it means that females often suffer more quickly when they make mistakes. That finding does necessitate more compassion for moral defects in the male animal.

"I must try to help Hugh. I have to. No matter what else might happen, he should come to know his son, be well enough to enjoy his son; the right course for both of them...at least. In that scenario I cannot expect to matter."

"*Ja*, you matter very much. You are the one at the center, the one who will make it happen. It is a powerful gift, to give a bereft and lonely man an accomplished grown son.

"Now I will go back to my cabin and let you think about these things, but not too much soul-searching tonight. You should

sleep peacefully, even with all you have had to hear. You have cooked your wild game very well...and made some good decisions. I will be at your door with transportation at eight in the morning.”

“Oh no!”

“*Ja, mange takk* for your fine dinner. *Ha de bra*, Wild Vi.”

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As they were driving toward Hayfield in Ragnar’s truck, Ragnar, who had been quietly thoughtful, looked over at Viola, who had just turned from dreamily gazing at clouds, fields, and stormy dark hills.

“When I see Hugh, may I tell him some things about you, the value of you as I see you?...not about your son, of course.”

“I ought to modestly protest. Oh, say what you please. I trust your opinions...if you don’t make me too good.”

They both fell back into their silences, until Ragnar began to look for a parking place near the doctor’s office -- a search not long without results. The parking was always free.

They stood before the clinic on an unremarkable and drowsy main street, mostly lined with low glass-fronted shops in wood or friable old red brick buildings a few stories high.

“I am going on some errands for the farm and will meet you here at my truck when you have finished. I will leave the truck unlocked.”

They both then turned toward a loud *bello*. The male half of a young farm couple across the street called again, shouting: “I need to talk to you, Ragnar!” “*Ja*, in a minute,” he called back, then resumed his focus on Viola. “My cell phone is on.”

“What shall I say about why I’ve shown up like this?”

“I have made an appointment for you, Wild Vi. Just show Doctor Nilsen your cut hand and tell him what you have done. *Herregud*, you are like a nervous child.”

“I don’t like doctors. They always find something wrong with you and then you have to change your life.”

“*Nei*, get on with it.” He clasped her arm with a slight



impatience and left her with a rebuking wink, turning to cross the street.

In the waiting room, where tiredly oblivious young mothers allowed their irritable children to crawl over the chairs, Viola filled out several pages of distressing personal inquiry, held together by a clipboard. When she had finished digging through her wallet for authenticating cards, she had to wait a while longer to be called.

After his plump little rosy-cheeked nurse, obviously a naïve farm girl, had checked her blood pressure and temperature, Doctor Nilsen entered. Without his distinguishing white coat, he would easily pass into any room unnoticed. He was a solemn, slender, sandy-haired, pale-eyed squinting man of about Viola's age. He listened to her brief account and explained that he was not overly concerned at her mishap.

"I say this because if you were infected with the tularemia bacteria you would know it by now. And you say you've had no headaches, fatigue, dizziness, or fever. These symptoms occur very rapidly after infection, and you are without any external signs of the disease. You are fit enough, Viola, but you could actually weigh several pounds more...regrettably, something I find myself recommending less and less these days."

"I've been too nervous to eat."

"You've been anxious about something?"

"Working in one of the more dangerous places in the world, I witnessed a death...fell ill over this and...a number of other things, and lost interest in food. But then...Ragnar Almestad has inspired better eating habits...that is...he's such a good cook I--"

"Oh, yes, Ragnar, out at Ender Farm. We all know where that is. *You* are an Ender, of course, excuse me...and Ragnar's boss."

"Well, I'd hardly say...actually he's at the moment more like *my* boss. I've been gone so long I need plenty of help there. He's managed the farm so well...I'm really indebted to--"

"Ragnar is a healthy specimen. If they were all like him in this community, I'd have nothing to do. Aside from a friendly chat

on the sidewalk, I see him only once a year for a checkup and a flu shot.

“Well, we’ll keep watch on you; come in if you feel the need, although I suspect nothing at all. An improved appetite is the best medicine now. And of course sleep is good for your mental state.”

“How would you treat a tularemia infection, Doctor? I’m just curious as to what might have--”

“With streptomycin. I should also say that the bacteria can be contracted from ticks, or from your grass and garden plants if you have infected wild rabbits running around. It appears that currently even the rabbits are healthy out there. Follow the usual precautions with wild game, take preventative measures, always cook your meat well...and perhaps let Ragnar handle the rabbits,” he added with a sudden discordant laugh, which Viola decided was at her expense.

“Did you know Doctor Mount?” she hastily asked, for Doctor Nilsen had stood up to hurry off to his next patient.

“Doctor Mount was your family doctor?” he said, pausing to smile as a thoughtfully dilatory hand was slipped more casually into his white coat pocket. “A fine old gent. He’s been dead some years.”

Frightened of him when still a toddler, she had gradually become less afraid of Doctor Mount. Then came the day he entered the small examination room, placed a consoling hand on her shoulder and told her in an unhealthily wheezing voice that she was pregnant. She pictured his huge white-jacketed body floating noiselessly into the room, like an ocean liner coming into a tight moorage. By revealing this startling information, he had finally lived up to her fear of him. Now clearly arranged in memory was that serious visage: round wire glasses set over tired marbled-gray eyes, the sagging jowl, red cheeks, smallish pink ears below a shiny round dome encircled by vanishing white hair. She had looked up at him in disbelief and begun to cry. It was only yesterday, wasn’t it? in that antiseptic little gray room, when he put a comforting arm around her and told her that sooner or later it would probably have

happened anyway, told her how strong she was and that it was good to have children as early in life as sound health allowed. Today such kindly words would be interpreted as patronizing, as misleading and very constraining advice for one far too young.

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Viola was so close-mouthed on the ride home that Ragnar, who more often preferred a peaceful silence, glanced at her several times, rather obviously trying to interpret her state of mind.

“Were you satisfied with Doctor Nilsen?” he finally asked.

“Yes, it was fine.” She looked stubbornly out her side window, and in a while said, “He told me I should eat more.”

“Good. I thought he might.”

“You knew he wouldn’t be concerned about tularemia.”

“At this point I thought probably not.”

“He even had the nerve to suggest that *you* handle the rabbits.”

Ragnar laughed. “Is that why you are so irritated?”

“How could I be? Except that I am. You want to handle more than the rabbits,” she suggested.

“*Ja*, possibly...but well-meant and for the good of you and Ender Farm. You will be the one to know when I can handle less.”

She remained silent until she was home, then climbed out of Ragnar’s rumbling truck and walked around to his opened window.

“Thank you so much for your concern and kindness.” Her voice was quite cool and ridiculously formal. She started to walk away but then turned back, “Oh, yes, I almost forgot. I want the rabbits out of Mama’s garden...out in the most humane manner possible but *out*.”

“I will have them live-trapped and taken some distance away if you want. But it will be an ongoing process with the woods so close.”

“Fine,” she said and turned back to the walkway.

The truck did not leave immediately, as if Ragnar were waiting for her to return and say something more. She wished he

would go. As she unlocked the heavy but smoothly opening front door, she heard the big GMC throttle away, moving down toward the end of the holly lane.

She sat at her kitchen table with no appetite at all, trying to think what had happened, and finally concluded that it was this: she had gotten it into her head that in order to protect his interests on the farm Ragnar was cultivating her dependence. She could even hear herself accusing him of it and, Ragnar, in keeping with her version, answering, "Of course." She must somehow assert her independence in regard to the farm, but right now it was a difficult maneuver because she had none. The problem was that she could still see his eyes, his lucidly critical gray eyes, full of something very like disappointment as she spoke. Well, he had said they would scrap from time to time. She forced down an apple and a slice of Gouda cheese and went upstairs to sit at the oak desk in her newly organized den, a windowed alcove off her bedroom. Opening her laptop, she decided to sketch out the beginning of an experiential impression she wanted to write, but soon found that she was staring out of the window at the garden, her mother's garden, which she envisioned as full of wildly multiplying rabbits.

Later that night, when drowsily half-asleep, she imagined Ragnar standing below her window and calling up to her: "You will be the one to know when I can handle less."

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Violea had for several days hardly left the house, except to go out and sit on the high back deck, bundled up and with a mug of steaming hot tea beside her on the deck table. There were no rabbits in sight. She sat still, staring at the woods and taking deep breaths of chilly air, clearing her head and lungs for the intensive ongoing task of writing. Writing was, at the moment, not a thing in itself but rather an escape mechanism for the grave quandary in which she found herself. Television's local weather forecaster had mentioned the approaching possibility of snow, and she suddenly felt a strong urge to go out walking before she was protractedly

housebound. Of course she had always gone out in any sort of weather, however inclement, but was not inclined to do so these days. She was tired, not really eating much but grabbing things and nibbling, therefore instinctively sensing she ought not to wander too far in such a weakened and distracted condition. Troubled by her procrastination at doing something about Hugh Lang, she thought seriously of getting on Mariner and riding over there. Yet that very hostile unknown entity remained quite intimidating. The briefest thought of her reappearance as an encounter once again gone horribly wrong, made her want to crawl into bed with a hot water bottle and sleep for days. This was cowardly avoidance in the extreme.

She put on her coat and walked down toward the paddock. There was smoke coming from Ragnar's chimney, a cozy fire and a good book no doubt, now that the rabbits were less active with the approach of winter. She chuckled softly at her sardonic levity. Although Ragnar had recently become an avoided contemplation, winter months on the farm required special kinds of attention in which she now imagined him vigilantly engaged. Her betrayed mother, desperately lonely, apparently had allowed Ragnar to run the farm completely without intervention, while she must have vanished into a sustained fairy tale with Hugh's equally smitten father. This same relegation of control was exactly what Ragnar must expect of her. Perhaps he wanted her to engage in a long drawn out imbroglio with Hugh while he went on doing what he did best, sitting unassailably in the catbird seat -- she and Hugh damaged foundering wrecks, railing and whimpering and fit only for innocuous solitude, while he ran things. She now regretted revealing so much of herself, pouring out her misery to him. She had been so ill and in need, only now coming to realize how bad off she still was.

When she reached the holly row and glanced down the other side, she saw a motorcycle parked beside his cabin. Her heart leapt with a surprising amount of angst. What could Ragnar be saying about her? Nothing very flattering after her most recent idiotic

condescension, her quite insupportable attempt at avoiding him. Perhaps he was telling Hugh that poor Violeta was emotionally disturbed and in need of help. The swift adrenalin of anger flashed through her body. If she continued to act in this wildly distrustful manner perhaps his diagnosis would turn out to be correct. Her grim self-appraisal conceded to a heavily exhausting dissonance of relentless suspicion and guilt. Something kept telling her that she was wrong, wrong in her assumption, terribly wrong and cruel, but the paranoia persisted -- there were few good reasons for Ragnar to welcome her presence, but plenty of reasons for cunningly maintaining his own position. What had happened to her trust? How readily she disliked herself these days. It was why she could not imagine Ragnar liking anything about her well enough to be kind for that reason alone. No, it was quite unlikely. She was volatile and completely unlovable, actually very much like Hugh. If only she had a friend, a trusted help-mate, if only she had a son who cared enough to be at her side once in a while.

How could she ever expect any change in her son, Marcus? He was a source of ongoing pain, of her sorrow over loss of him; angry Marcus denied his unmet idealized father. She continued to struggle hard against investing too much of herself in an absent love, a son who rejected her for the wild begetting of himself, who made it absolutely clear how bitterly he had resented her own necessary absence. She had loved him before he was born, with a love that had never faltered.

She took a sip of cold tea and watched her vaporous breath slowly rise and hang in the heavy motionless air. This still, cold atmosphere of palpably threatening snow was inducing troubling claustrophobia. No matter what the weather did she must venture into it. Weather at least would not defeat her. From the woods came the scolding throaty voice of a raven, deep primal cries of solitary complaint; a sound she could easily anthropomorphize as an ominous warning of difficulties ahead.

The snow had at last fallen, and the next day Viola huddled by the fireplace in sheer avoidance of going out, until it was almost too late in the day to attempt it. She understood her state as the work of depression, eventually defying all counter-emotion by dressing warmly and making her way through the snow to the paddock. Cautious and methodical, she took her time in getting Mariner outside the gate and ready to mount. That accomplished, she clicked her tongue and set off around the barn, moving down the slight incline and then up again and cutting across the resting broad fields expanding into whiteness. She was heading in the direction of the now barren filbert orchards. Mariner grunted a few small complaints, then pranced sideways and blew out steamy clouds of effort. When she came to the orchards, she deftly circumvented those *broolly* mounds of snow-covered sleep, the umbrella comparison swiftly returning her to London, with a discordant feeling of astonishment. She thought of Virginia, to whom she must very soon write or e-mail a brief communication. Mariner was carrying her directly toward the newly leaf-barren deciduous woods. Now she was on property apparently belonging to ungrateful Hugh, by the most generous testate provision of her mindful mother's declared wish. The dismantled woods looked different, what she could see of it, the insubstantial road having already nearly disappeared. It was starting to snow quite heavily. Undaunted, she rode on, trusting Mariner to remember the route. After silent and interminable minutes of plodding into whiteness, Mariner stopped and jerked his head up and down. Perhaps he was wondering where his tasty little plot of grass had gone. Huge flakes were flying into Viola's face, some landing on her eyelashes and melting into her eyes, some brushing coldly against her lips and sliding into her mouth. A glow of yellow light shone through the dense whirling blizzard. There appeared a large dark mass, the indistinct outline of the stone house. She dismounted and began briskly shaking and brushing herself off. Mariner turned and looked at her, then let out a loud whinney of complaint -- where was his coat, his stall, his mash?

The door above her opened and Hugh shouted, “Jesus! Put Mariner behind the house under the lean-to. You can come in the back door.”

She tied Mariner away from the motorcycle and, when the saddle was off, called to Hugh for something to put over Mariner. He went away and came back with a faded green wool blanket.

Her hands were red, her face numb. She pulled off her outer wear and hung it over a chair back in the kitchen as she passed through from the back door. She went on into the big cluttered living room, the room bathed in a steely sheen, the submarine-blue of snow-light.

She was standing at the fireplace rubbing her hands together above the fire screen when he handed her a mug of coffee.

“Sorry, I haven’t got any booze.”

“That’s probably a lie but I don’t want any.”

“You’re a willful woman, Lea. I wouldn’t go out in this freezing crap...especially to visit a nasty bastard like myself.”

“If you’re that hard on yourself how can I scold you? You’re my most challenging response to cabin fever.”

“Masochistic...coming around here.”

She was still shaking; he noticed this and said, “Do you want a sweater or something...a blanket?”

“I could sit over there. Is that plaid thing on the sofa a--”

“Yeah, wrap yourself in it...this trembling is pitiful.”

Violea pulled an old navy-red blanket around her shoulders while he stood above her, a black lock of his hair falling over a critical eye, clearly discomfited, one hand pressed revokingly to his shoulder.

She looked up at him. “The way you do that, with your hand on your opposite shoulder, is what made you familiar to me in the orchard.”

“I’m not familiar to you.”

“No...that’s right.”

“I believe Ragnar thinks I’ve mistreated you.”

“I’m sure he does.”



“What does that mean?”

“Nothing...never mind.”

“What is this...*getting to know you*? Or what?”

“You don’t have to be so defensive, Hugh. I’m not in love with you anymore. Why don’t you sit down.”

“I’ll sit down when I damn well feel like it.”

“Oh, please. You must have felt something once, or how could I get under your skin like this? What is it? You aren’t like this with Ragnar are you?”

“No. It’s incredibly refreshing to find an intelligent brain existing out here, and when you find one with intelligence *and* wisdom that’s stupendous. I like Ragnar.”

“But you hate me?”

“No. I don’t feel anything for you. That little girl I lost my callow head over has nothing to do with you. I don’t even know you.”

“Then something I stand for?”

“*Yeah!* Yes, that’s it, something you stand for. Your intolerant mother pushing out of my life the devotion I craved.”

“She didn’t mean that. You don’t understand.”

“You’re still shaking...it’s disconcerting.”

“You’ve figured out it isn’t cold any longer but fear.”

“Fear? What the hell for? Why come here then?”

“I had to. The last time you looked into my eyes you wanted to kill me. That was *me*...not a principle.”

“And you wanted to kill me back...falling-down drunk. If you expected me to do something injurious to you, you’ve certainly got nerve returning. I’m not going to do anything to you.”

“Neither of us is very well and--”

“So I understand.”

She thought how they had both received reports on each other from Ragnar...Ragnar engaged in his own production. Why should it matter? Everyone could use everyone else if there was a better way for all of them to live from it. Somehow she had to get through this hostile burn-off before they could try for calm, calm

and finally, finally perhaps even the rationality of reason.

“Shall we drink then, Lea? Do you want to get drunk?”

“No! I want you to stop this. Stop it! Cool yourself down and just talk. Talk about what’s making us act like this.”

“Why? Why should we talk? You think you’re going to fix something? Fix us? There is no us.”

Now was not at all the time to say what must eventually be said. She struggled for an answer that would make some kind of sense, some reason for coming here at all, without getting near the true one.

“You’re my neighbor and--”

“Oh. Jesus!”

“And you live in my great-great-grandfather’s first house on his cherished land. It was given to your family with a lot of love and--”

“Do you remember coming to this house, *woman of little girl?* I gave you a joint in the car in the parking lot -- after some silly high school summer barn dance -- and brought you here. You were high as the moon...on sex. I brought you here because my father was over at your house, having tea with your widowed mother, maybe even daring to hold hands, but probably not; doing it in their heads while I had you from one end of this place to the other. Do you remember that?”

“I...remember some unfamiliar place...I must not have thought anything much about it. It was dark and I never--”

“We were *here.*”

Hugh had thrown himself into an armchair across from her, and she realized, upon examining his face more closely, that, for however brief a time and in whatever self-serving manner, he actually appeared to be enjoying the memory of them together.

She looked around her at the cedar-wainscoted room of pale beige, at the way it was laid out, the tall clustered bowed windows and the sliding cedar doors that led into another room, which must be an old parlor. How high-minded, how cleverly made it was for its rough time. She could not link anything of it with that illusory

night so long ago, awakening from childish sleep and insensible to everything but the feverish pain of two inseparable bodies; a time when she had fervently, vainly sought to become an irremovable part of an equally wild, dark-eyed boy. If it had really happened as she remembered, she knew it could never happen that way again, never again.

Her eyes fell steadily upon Hugh and she smiled for the first time. "Heraclitus: you can't step into the same river twice."

"Jesus Christ, woman, you've just read my mind! Who are you really? You might as well tell me what you've been doing."

Viola tossed aside the blanket and stood up. "I'll tell you some of that next time. I've got to go before it gets dark."

"Wait a minute, Scheherazade, you've barely arrived. Stay a while longer and talk to me. I was going to eat something or other. You look like you could stand some fattening grub. It's going to be a mess riding out there, and bitterly cold. You could sleep here. There are four modest bedrooms...and nothing to fear from me."

"No thank you. There's Mariner to consider. Besides, I'm teaching myself to be brave...fighting back. I'll go now and return another day. Maybe you'll tell me a little about yourself."

"Christ, you do have a lot of nerve, Lea."

"So do you. You must see that."

"Hell, I'm still alive. Shall I worry about you going back?"

"That would be considerate, but I have a cell phone with me."

"Let me have your number...I'll give you mine." He handed her a ball point pen and the back of a grocery receipt.

When they had exchanged numbers, Viola said, "So goodbye, Hugh, nice chatting with you."

"Not very...damn sure of that. Am I now supposed to apologize?"

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"Mariner, good boy, you're earning your keep around here." She led him toward the tack room, patting his streaming wet neck.

They had finished the last quarter mile in twilight, plowing

through deepening snow. The yard lights were on and dancing flakes swirled down out of the inky darkness into bright cones of light. As if a huge feather pillow were torn open, she thought. She stared up at the wintry white flurry with a dizzy excitement, a sudden rush of gladness at having made it safely home in this most extraordinary alternate universe of ice crystals. She was surprised to see Ragnar there, watching her from the tack room doorway. Stepping out, in a heavy sheepskin jacket and a gray woolen cap, he uncinched the saddle and lifted it off.

“I will quarter him.”

“Oh, thank you but I can take care of this.”

“*Nei*, you are cold. Leave it to me and go warm yourself. Or...will you come to my place? I have just made spice-marinated corned beef and caraway cabbage with herb-roasted Yukon Gold potatoes.”

Viola put a gloved hand over her cold-paralyzed lips, hiding an irrepressible smile that would nevertheless be obvious in her eyes. “Well...I wouldn’t have to feed myself then, would I?”

“Of which you are not doing a very good job. My door is open.”

She walked on toward the cabin where she took off her snowy hat and soggy coat and shook them while standing on the steps. When Ragnar arrived she had stepped back outside the door and was hanging onto the cold sill, awkwardly trying to get Martha’s tight old boots off.

“Come and sit on a kitchen chair. I will do it.”

While Ragnar was removing her boots tears began to roll down her cheeks. It was the relief of having made some sort of headway with Hugh, of being back safe and warm again and feeling Ragnar’s large hands tending to her freezing feet. He looked at her with his usual serene acceptance, as if whatever happened was not surprising, then lifted her up and carried her into the living room, placing her on the davenport corner angled toward the fireplace and tucking a blanket around her. His treatment of her felt so natural -- a calm acceptance of flagrantly impaired emotion -- that

she presently found herself remarkably unguarded and at ease with him. He went away to arrange their supper on a tray, first bringing her a mug of hot cocoa. When they had finished eating, on blond oak folding tables, Viola remarked on the pleasures of warmth and delicious food.

“How can I accuse you of untoward motive after this kindness?”

“At motive you would be surprised. Wild Vi, if you do not want me here you must say that. I share some family property in Norway.”

Viola sat up straight. She looked at Ragnar, who was leaning back in his chair with his feet up. He wore a heavy navy turtleneck sweater, which made his silver hair all the more striking. His limpid eyes shone back at her, narrowed gold mirrors of the flickering fire.

“But mother gave you life estate of this place; it’s your home.”

“I thought so. I did not think I had been so fawning you would nail me to selfish motive...as you have done.”

“My head isn’t good at all...the trauma of too many shocks. I’m a little paranoid and some of my decisions are way off. My creative imagination is working overtime...haywire chemistry.”

Ragnar laughed. “If you can explain that much you are healing.”

“I won’t ask you about motive.”

“Better not.”

“I don’t care anymore what it is. You’re good for this place.”

“You should not concern yourself too much, especially with what motivates a well-meaning person. If you seek what you expect to find you will likely find it, but that finding will be unqualified...and far too subjective. We all live by extenuating circumstances.”

“Yes, we do. Why were you at the tack room, Ragnar?”

“I pay attention to things. Mariner and his tack were gone.

Then Hugh called and asked me to look out for you.”

“Isn’t it wonderful? Progress. Of course, he has a way to go yet...before I’ll feel comfortable laying that on him.”

“He will get there. When you are ready I will get a flashlight and walk you home.”

“Then I’ll go now...maybe look at my writing, get some sleep.”

Back at her own door Viola said, “Please don’t make me too dependent on you. I like to think of myself as independent... always have been.”

“You always had to be.”

“Will you come in? Now all of a sudden I feel like talking.”

His eyes flashed over her face. “I have to get up early tomorrow.”

“Don’t you always?”

“All right...for a short while.”

Ragnar came inside, removed his Wellingtons and, as he regularly did at an entrance door with Viola, helped her remove her footwear.

“Do you know...I bought Scotch for you when I was in town. Will you have some with me?”

“Was it for me?” He stood up and her braced hand fell away from his broad shoulder. She nodded her head with a little mocking smile.

“Light the fire in there will you please? I set it up before I left today...knew I’d be freezing.”

A bright fire was burning when Viola came into the living room, with two tumblers of Scotch and water. “The Macallan is my favorite.”

“I thought it was for me.”

“You’re teasing. Don’t you like The Macallan?”

“I like it fine.”

They stood a minute, sipping their Scotch and staring into the fire. Ragnar towered slightly behind her. She was slowly cognizant of an oddly feverish sensation, then a shivering, tingling

awakening of flaming nerves, not from the fire before her but the consuming heat at her side and back. The entirety of her body and startled head began to pulse with frightening yearning, for a life force drawing her backwards, to a person not even touching her. Dizzying waves of pain circled from groin to abdomen, surging along with pounding blood, an occurrence so debilitating she might have sunk to her knees. Amazed, she turned and looked up at Ragnar. His fawn mouth was candidly serious, his eyes aware and smiling; eyes that often took on whatever hue was before them and were now flashing brimstone-gold in the high flames.

“Your eyes are unusual,” he remarked. “I have remembered that. Very striking blue in sunlight, but at night more violet than blue.”

Unable to speak, Violeta tipped up her glass to drink. Her hand shook and the edge of the glass struck her teeth. Never had she felt so innocent of circumstance. She at last managed to drink, as unaware of what might follow as Tristan swallowing his fatal potion. She took another swallow, hoping for some swift and miraculous benefit. Her hand trembled uncontrollably as she set her glass down on the coffee table, clumsily and with a loud impact.

“I wish you would not drink to hide your feeling. Drink is best when not used for pain or escape...but only the pleasure of mellowness.”

“Are you...is that...more supervision?”

“*Nei*, it is love.”

“I’m confused.”

“Now you know how it feels.”

“You? You’re--”

“*Ja*. Probably from the day I found you kneeling there evilly grinning at my tempting pine. There is nothing I can do about it, except to endure and try to help you as I helped Martha. I have felt some good, some accomplishment in saving this farm from the mistakes of its troubled owners. I have felt some respect for the old Ender name, your great-great-grandfather, who would wish to rise from his grave to save this place. As to you, Wild Vi, there are

two decades between us, a troubled, perhaps failing generation. I could deal with that if you believed what you feel here now. No matter what you believe or say, I will go on in the same way, unless you want me to leave the farm. Let me go now. In another minute I will carry you through the snow to my bed.”

“An entire minute?” She took his large, irresistibly appealing hand in hers, jolted by the electricity. We could...go upstairs.”

“I have the only bed that fits well...yours is too short.”

“Then I’ll get my coat. I can walk...or...or run.”

“*Nei*, Wild Vi, I am only trying to keep to my senses. I should not have come inside and drunk your Scotch. I did not intend this now...but love is difficult...the only fool worth envy.”

“Oh, Ragnar, it’s perfect...you and I, so perfect. I feel--”

“*Nei*, it is not perfect...yet...and nothing is ever that. Right now there is developing a very complicated relationship between you and Hugh. I would not damage either of you in that way with my selfishness. We must wait and see what happens.”

“But you don’t understand how I need...how I--”

“You have me. You always have me. I am there, just down there in my cabin...or somewhere else near. Now I will go.” He stroked back the hair at her temple and said, “My poor Wild Vi, in your long, demanding years out in the world you had no idea you would come home to this. Please try to leave things as they are for a while. There is still time.”

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“Tell me about China,” Viola said to Hugh. He had straightened up his entire house, to a more tolerable degree at least, and they were sitting at the newly reclaimed dining room table, finishing cups of Chinese tea. “Nothing of course personal, just about the country, why you were there, that sort of thing.”

“Why I was there would be personal. At first I was essentially looking for my roots...an alien adrift in an alien sea.” Just today Hugh’s face had been more open, less angry, but had now



returned to an expression of considerable reluctance -- similar to an expression she remembered on Marcus' face, but why wouldn't it be? "And to ask me to talk about the country is like asking me to discuss plants in general with no reference to species. China is a thousand countries of 1.3 billion people. Even if you read selective sinologists you would find that they tend to deviate in such an academic manner that they usually have no idea at all what comprises a particular existing village, what goes on in it. You'd have to read a hell of a lot of them to find out anything useful or very informative at ground level...if then. China books are myriad...and often dishonest, unlearned, or effete."

"Tell me what the village was like where you lived."

"I lived in several places, villages, cities, Beijing mainly, and sometimes Chengdu. I think I want off this subject."

"All right, sorry. Maybe another day. I'm seriously interested. I was in China...so briefly it hardly bears mentioning, but I felt huge rumblings of change. It's very repressed...that great diversity of history and topography. Few of us here know very much about it."

"And overall, few there."

"Ah, yes, I imagine so." Viola sipped her tea and wished they could go on talking about China. Hugh, she knew, would be an amazing repository of knowledge and firsthand experience.

"Today I could tell you are happier the minute you walked in, *horsified* and covered with snow." His voice had brightened.

"I love being in nature...today is all sun, a dazzle of white."

"How do you manage to make off with the girls' horses so often?"

"I borrow only one. They've tapered off riding, with the cold and school. Their fathers come regularly to check on the horses, and don't seem to mind my riding...happy for the pasture. They say my riding is good exercise for the horses. I do sometimes ride Legs around the paddock...now I'm an exerciser."

"Let's go sit on the couch...well, you on the couch and me in my chair with footrest. This damn cold is hurting my foot."

“It seems warm enough in here,” Viola adjudged, standing up to step from the sunny alcove of snow light into the dimmer living room.

“But colder at night in bed...when my foot starts aching.”

“Should you go to a doctor? I wonder if you have the same doctor I do. Doctor Nilsen? Recommended by Ragnar.”

“Yes, I do see Nilsen sometimes...as per Ragnar: all things for all people. Ragnar’s quite popular in Hayfield. He donated a huge collection of his books to the town library, very fine and important ones, with the stipulation that he can have any of them as long as desired when they’re available. The present librarian took up with her fellow Norwegian as soon as the two met a few years back. This I learned from her assistant. In Hayfield you always hear something. Am I gossiping? I don’t want to reveal Ragnar’s private affairs.”

Her heart raced. “I thought he had almost none very private. He’s so involved with farm business...always somewhere on the farm.”

“He does have a private life. He’s an active man. The town librarian, Britta Hansen, is an attractive woman, early fifties, one of those healthy Nordic types, athletic. They sometimes ski together and...etcetera. He has that side of his life and a number of friends, but I think he much prefers his solitude and his books...incredibly well-read. I have to envy a man that healthy and comfortable with himself. And you, Lea, can thank his farm-boy origins for all his years here. Nostalgia took him from the sea back to the land.”

“Yes, when he was only twenty-six and I was five years old,” she answered, attempting to calm a racing heart. “What did he do at sea?”

“He has amusing stories of that thirteen years. At first he was so young they made him a cook, and of course he became a good one, but his employers soon found that he was a sort of genius with all manner of machinery and electrical apparatuses. He became chief engineer on a number of merchant vessels. He’s been nearly everywhere. He’s very conversant on life in the

Chinese port cities in those days.

“Now are you going to tell me about you, Lea?”

“When I’ve heard something about you,” she said, still with a fiercely racing heart. “Oh, you see, we’re both balking because everything leads to something painful. But I think I’ll take my leave now...darkness comes so quickly.”

“You really are the limit, the way you get away on these short afternoons, as circumspect as when you arrived.”

Violea uncurled, setting her benumbed feet on the floor. How little she really knew of Ragnar’s present life. How could he have spoken to her as he did? If only she had not invited him into the house that night. She looked at Hugh, resting in his brown leather chair. Perhaps he was improving a little. Could it be that he actually anticipated her visits with an amount of pleasure? It must be, for it seemed that he had solely prepared his house for the interruption of his steadily augmented work schedule. Still he was as irritable as ever in certain ways, and his startling dark eyes could instantly flash with cold dismissal when she introduced a subject of which every aspect was clearly to be avoided. His light-ochre skin glowed palely in the waning snow light of the room, and in his drawn visage there were still favorable elements of his perfectly chiseled boyhood face. His sensitive lips were smooth and full, his even teeth gleaming so brightly when he gave his sardonic grin she almost asked if his smile was the artistry of some Hayfield dentist -- there was a dentist in the town who did laser work; she had thought of brightening her smile after years of tea drinking, but it seemed a vain thing to do. Hugh was not vain. He showed little interest in clothes. The faded Levis and plain dark shirts he wore agreeably complemented his unconcern for material things.

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She rode home striving for the waning day’s cold indifference. The splendid varied shadows on the snow -- a purple-gilded ice branch here, a peach streak of horizon there, a gully of blue, a white drift lipped in orange sparkle -- all now bore a

sad cast she attempted to revise, holding the evanescent colors long in her eyes. Why should not the passing years of Ragnar's little-known life be filled with his own adventures, his own associations? She might never have returned at all; if Robert had not died, surely not, not for a long, long time. She remembered that Ragnar never called, rarely came to her or asked anything of her until she came into his proximity. She was learning not to think so often of herself, but the problem was she was always learning, would go on learning and learning, with hardly any method of application. She was pathetically gullible. Everything with Ragnar would be business now, she supposed, always about the farm. She would go on seeing Hugh until one day she would tell him. She still could not make out when that would be and what on earth he would do. Maybe it would happen so suddenly it would be clumsily blurted out to very poor advantage. Why had she not told him already? Did she imagine she was cultivating him to become the father she wanted for her son -- *if you cannot cultivate the son cultivate the father*? Would not Marcus be thrilled to know of him? She was not even certain of that. No person could change another person very much. External forces caused change but, even in those situations, turning change to personal advantage involved risky variables. Motivational training for self-improvement more often advanced only the motivator.

As she prepared for bed, Viola remembered a figurative remark Hugh had made about his years of hazardous journalistic enterprise: "I always wanted to sleep with the enemy. If you don't understand the enemy, there's no point in questioning your comrades in arms." Slowly she was beginning to enjoy his company, his swift acerbic tongue, even if she still had to brace herself for those unpredictable edgy periods of backlash. He was so bright and quick that he could really be quite entertaining. Was her world closing down to a deliberate attention to harmless minutia, the mechanical actions of simply caring for the body while distracting the mind? Oh to think now of the many consuming decisions she had made around the world, when she still believed

that all of her chipping away at deprecation and despair would make some lasting difference. Thoughtfully brushing her hair before her mirror, she saw that her modestly full, evenly shaped lips still displayed a restless curl of complaint, self-rebuke. Then she looked closely at her eyes, wondering if their blue was really more violet at night.

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Robert had come to her in a dream -- she realized upon awakening. He was tranquil with compassion, knowing himself to be dead, trying to help her get up and go away. Then he appeared as he had been, in an instant lying at her feet with blood on his face. She screamed and screamed for help but heard only the explosions, awakening to hear the massive old furnace rumbling in the basement. "God I feel sick," she muttered, leaning on the bathroom counter with her head hanging over the sink, tears running down into the wash basin. There was something wrong with her throat. It was so sore she could hardly swallow. She went back to bed and awoke later, already in the stage of a cold that felt suffocating. By afternoon her temperature had climbed. She knew it must be high but had no thermometer. Her cheeks and forehead were hotly flushed, and her head pounded and wobbled with dizziness. She thought the phone downstairs was ringing, or her misplaced cell phone, or both phones. Perhaps it was only a ringing in her ears. Hanging onto the bannister, she made her way carefully down the stairs in her nightgown. At the bottom, tiny pricks of cold began in her head. She sat down on the initial step and put her head in her hands, nauseous, very weak and certain she was about to vomit. She vaguely felt her body slump forward and slide away from her, the floor so easily met.

Somehow she had made it to her bed and a man was bending over her; a sandy-haired man she did not recognize. He bobbed and wavered.

"Congestion in the chest," the man said, "high fever. Hello, Viola, careful now, take a breath. How was that?"

Her room had gotten very white, perhaps from the snow. “Snowing?” she muttered, pushing something from her face. “You’re at the clinic,” the man said. “Take a breath.” “Where’s Robert?” she asked. “Want him to come back.” “Who is Robert?” the man asked someone in the room. “Should we try to find him?” Her eyes closed.

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The nurse had propped her on several pillows and combed her hair. She gazed out a window at pure white hills against a barren horizon, then tried to focus on a lamp post; her room was above street level.

“You have a visitor,” the nurse encouraged, and opened the door fully. Ragnar came blurrily into the room and settled in a chair by the bed. Across the room, yellow flowers floated above a white stand.

She did not even feel like trying a smile, much less speaking, drowsily staring at her hands, braced together on the folded-down sheet border. Dragging her head back, she saw that Ragnar was far away, incased in a dark telescopic cylinder. They had given her something.

“Why go on sitting there? Must be...awfully boring,” she said in a raspy nasal voice. “Never have...liked places like this.”

“Soon I will take you home.” There was a book in his hand.

“You’ve been to the library,” she blurted out with helpless insinuation, a ludicrous grin swiftly vanishing.

“Have you seen Hugh?”

“*Ja*, he was here earlier. Those are his flowers.”

“Oh, nice of him in this weather...so nice...wish he had a car.”

A week later Ragnar came to take her home. He had brought her clothes, personal things. She did not like that, but gladly dressed and was wheeled out to his truck. “I can certainly walk,” she said, but got nowhere with that particular complaint. Ragnar lifted her into the truck. No words were spoken on the

twenty-mile drive. She stared out the window, looking at hungry, searching birds, at patches of snow that were steadily melting. The temperature was climbing rapidly, but would probably soon reverse itself. The hills were still white. She never knew if Ragnar had given her any of his questioning looks because she never turned her head. Her neck was sore from that.

Ragnar carried her into her warmed house, placing her on the davenport and covering her with the afghan, then made a fire.

“I will fix you something to eat.”

“Really? What?”

“Food I brought from my place.”

“Oh, all right. Thank you.”

She was served orange juice, toast, a cheese omelette, and ate very little, but did drink some of the freshly squeezed orange juice.

“You’ve been so helpful. If I want anything tonight I’ll fix it myself...can’t think of anything else I need...so you can go now.”

“You have not eaten.”

“I’ll just put it in the refrigerator, maybe reheat it later.”

“If you want me to leave, you will first eat the omelette.”

She turned her face away. “Please go, Ragnar. I don’t want to argue with you, just go.”

“I do not want to leave you alone.”

“Oh, that is ridiculous, I’m always alone.”

“Why will you not look at me, Wild Vi?”

“I’m looking at you.”

She had known her chemistry would be thoroughly rerouted when she looked at Ragnar. For her, his was a physical presence breathtakingly beautiful: tall, fit, silver-haired, seasoned and effortlessly natural and striking in his casual khaki slacks and gray sweater. She felt her fever returning, but knew it was really the other feeling, the one she could do nothing about and not conceal for very long.

“*Herregud*, this sad face is killing me. What have I done...or is it from the illness?”

She swallowed and said, “Are you the one...you must be the

one who found me? Of course. Who else?"

"*Ja*, you would not answer your phone. I thought I had lost you."

When she considered this it bitterly amused her. She offered a cool smile and said, "How could you lose what you never had?"

He was silent and stared at her so long and hard she knew he was trying to fully appropriate her withheld accusation.

"Is it because I did not take you to my bed?"

"What? Is what?"

"What you are doing here."

"I'm sick and tired of everything. I was sick before I was sick. I'm sick and tired of the games people play. I'm sick and tired of worrying over what they are or are not trying to do to me and why. I don't want to think about it anymore. I don't want to give any more of myself for nothing or be lied to. I'm just like that little six-year-old girl who got so mad when you thought she couldn't understand the meaning of what you were saying. I understood. I understand. Go away and leave me alone."

"I cannot leave you. *Jeg forstår ikke!* -- I do not understand any of this. I know you love me. I feel it, I feel your love."

"How on earth can you talk like this, Ragnar?"

Ragnar came to her and knelt before her on the floor. He threw aside the afghan and pulled her down onto the carpet, into his arms, very near the complete alignment of bodies she could not withstand.

"Something has happened. You think I did not mean what I said. *Faen!* Will you tell me? *Tell me what has happened!*"

Her head was pressed awkwardly against his shoulder but she did not move or answer, afraid to open her mouth for fear she would lose the last of her self-control and howl like a needful infant.

"Why are you trembling? Are you sick, cold, what?"

"No...I'm not."

Ragnar stood up and left the room, soon returning with her



coat and shoes and gloves and wool hat. She sat dumbly while he worked at getting her bundled and slipped into these warm items. When he had completed the task, he put on his coat and Wellingtons and carried her to his truck. He drove down the slope and around the end of the holly row, and carried her inside his cabin, straight to his enormous bed. Her clothes were none too gently removed, along with his, then he yanked an airy mound of bedclothes over them. His long arms drew her fast against him, fitting her within the length of his warm body.

“Now you will have *my* remedy, Wild Vi...for what ails both of us. From this time forward, tell me when you want me. I want you now and I will want you then and I have wanted you since the day you came to ruin my view.”

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Violen had acquired a cat. It happened when she said to Ragnar, “Didn’t we used to have cats around here? I think one would be nice. A farm should have a cat.” Ragnar duly appeared with a wide-eyed and lively juvenile tabby tucked under his arm.

“Oh, you found one,” Violen said with delight.

“Around here there is always a plentiful supply. Everyone has an extra. I thought a standard design was best. A more elaborate cat might expect special attention...and they are self-centered enough.”

She laughed so at this, but especially at the way Ragnar’s deadpan humor could make her rise to hilarity in an instant.

“You should keep it mainly in the house. What will you name it?”

“Wait a minute, is it male or female?”

“Alas, it was once a male.”

“Oh, poor kitty. I’ll name it...I’ll name it...” She stared above her with a lofty affectation she knew would make him smile.

“Maybe not an important name it will never live up to, but something closer to its feral nature,” he suggested with a wry grin.

Violen took the cat from Ragnar and set it on the floor. It

spun around and began to zigzag in all directions, then suddenly returned and pounced on her moccasin.

“I’ll name it Buggy,” Viola said. “It’s a little nitwit.”

“The two of you,” Ragnar responded with teasing eyes. “I chose the wildest to keep up with you.”

On his way out to check on the condition of the filbert orchards after a hard silver thaw, Ragnar reclaimed his boots and headed out the door. Viola, with an urgent afterthought, ran down the steps in her worn moccasins and velour robe to catch him at the door of his truck, putting her hand on his sleeve.

“Wait, Ragnar, I wanted to tell you...that I’ve never--”

He drew up the loose collar of her fading green robe. “Go back in, Wild Vi, it is very cold. You are still susceptible to relapse.”

“I just wanted...ah well, to praise you.”

“I will come tonight and tolerate some of that.” He took off his glove and held her by the back of her neck, tilting her head up to fall under his steady gaze, eyes of beryl-gray sea, making her float.

She caught his hand as he attempted to put on his glove, and held it to her cheek. “At least let me thank you for my little cat.”

“You have done...will do tonight. I am looking forward to it. Please go back in now. Buggy will tear up the house.”

“Oh, yes,” she agreed, laughing. It would remain the unspoken part of her praise: Ragnar knew how to handle her, by consideration that amounted to an almost unbearable pleasure.

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The canary-yellow Ford truck was parked outside, and Viola was stretched out on the davenport in Hugh’s living room. Ragnar would not presently let her ride in the receding sleet and reappearing snows, but agreed that bundling up and driving her snow-tired truck over the farm road would not compromise her improved health.

“You look a little tired, Hugh...using your eyes too much.”

“You look much better, Lea.”

“Ragnar’s been tempting me with irresistible food.”

“I can imagine. I’ve eaten some of it. He’s a realistic chef.

“Christ, I shouldn’t have let you go through that freezing weather,” Hugh apologized, twisting in his creaking leather chair.

“Who knows where I got the virus, maybe in the doctor’s office for that matter. I was already a little rundown and it really took hold of me. I hope *you* will be all right.”

“I’ve had my flu shot -- hell, at least I can try to avoid that. I suppose Ragnar has told you he drove you to the clinic while you were in a state of delirium. He called me later to tell me where you were. I had no idea how he felt about you.”

Viola sat up and pulled her stocking feet beneath her.

“What idea have you now?”

“As taciturn as he is, I saw instantly how he felt. He likes to have a handle on everything, and usually does. I know he doesn’t give a damn about ownership, but in many ways, valid ones, he thinks of the farm as his, ergo thinks of *you* as his...apparently.”

“I *am* his.”

“What?”

“I am his.”

Hugh leapt from his chair, immediately swearing and rubbing his complaining foot, then limped over to stand scrutinizing her.

“Jesus, I’ll have to think about that. Then why... I always thought you were coming here because--”

“Because I wanted to start over, where we left off nearly thirty years ago?” Her laughter trailed off and she went on.

“Didn’t I agree it was impossible? I’ve sometimes dreamed of that love, a love belonging only to that time and place. But, as you’ve often insisted to me, those young lovers haven’t much to do with us. I do have some insight, Hugh. I know you’ve been worried about possibly having to live up to an irretrievable past.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner...about Ragnar?”

“I didn’t quite know myself.”

“Ah, I see, a thunderbolt struck you.”

“It sort of did...does...every day.”

“Jesus.” Hugh returned to his chair to put his foot up. He looked past her and out the windows to her left, his eyes abrading that side of her face. “So you just...feel nostalgia coming here?”

“You’re a very interesting person...I’d like to know you as a friend. Couldn’t we just talk around the edges of China?”

“I’ve got an amount of insight too, Lea. I’d like to know what the hell you’re getting at. You always change the subject. Why do you want to drag things out of me? How about *you*? Tell me about you. Why did you ask for *Robert* in your feverish delirium?”

“All right...I’ll...try to tell you about that. Then it will be your turn...to say whatever you want.”

She propped an old brown-corded blue pillow on the davenport arm and lay down with her head against it, glancing sideways out of the windows at the snowy woods. The snow, the woods, the farm, this evocative timeworn room in her great-great-grandfather’s primal stone house would temporarily wane in importance; she would have to return to that place, that hot, humid place of strife and danger and death. But first perhaps she ought to say something closer to the beginning.

“When I had my doctorate secured, I thought, well what am I going to do with this now? All this literature moiling around in my head. Stories...stories...the fictive abstract world of myth and allegory, parable and metaphor -- the propensity for drama, humor, bathos, poem, and ballad, ingrained in humankind’s collective dreaming mind, feeding essential memory. Fascinating imagination has given us so much.” She turned to Hugh, “In China it must be so difficult: classicism, all the proscribing forms firmly, and almost innately, in back of you and therefore the inescapable dialectic in front of you, and very much a part of the rulers’ rule. Then when rulers are bad what do you do? Whatever it is, you’ve been trained not to do it. How do reasoning people bring a moral consciousness to that oppressive line from

which they must not separate themselves...if they want to live, if they want to try again?”

“You might well ask, insightful Lea,” Hugh called from his chair. “The schizoid personality is the norm in that society. And the only line now is *shut up and trade like hell* -- temporarily threatened peddlers to the world -- but when there’s enough money in financial play, send a few weapons systems into orbit to protect your horde.”

“I had decided to try and improve the world,” Viola went on, allaying mockery with soft laughter. “The inequitable, polluted world of the earth’s most inhuman human virus -- I always have to follow that up with the sadly discovered truth that it’s normal or natural for humans to be inhuman. Well, anyway, I so loved books, and I knew that they were desperately needed everywhere, the valid ones combined with the right teachers being the key to civilization.”

“The key to nothing. Nobody reads. They play computer games and communicate using an idiot lexicon. When you dumb down your language your thinking dumbs down with it...essential Wittgenstein.”

“Yes, but I still didn’t quite believe that reading was a lost necessity. I stubbornly hated, *do hate*, ignorance -- as Balzac wrote in his fastidious exposé, *Cousin Bette*: ‘Ignorance is the mother of all crimes.’ I thought there was yet a window of opportunity that--”

“Slammed shut,” Hugh interposed.

“Anyway, I went to work for an NGO in London. I had a little bed-sitter in Bloomsbury, but most of the time I was gone, traveling the Third World with school supplies and books and lesson plans...I and my enthusiastic, eternally young colleagues.”

“You decided to forego the husband and child arrangement?”

“I...yes.”

“A wise decision...population the ultimate destroyer.”

“So that’s what I’ve been doing for years and years...until a demand for computers began to circumscribe my effort. Along the way I’ve scribbled in journals any particular anomalies or incorruptible figures encountered...hoping to eventually verify

or...or bring these uncommon discoveries to life...three-dimensional characters.

“You want to be a novelist?” Hugh laughed with an incredulous, bruising laughter. “I’m afraid you’re a little late. I hope you’re not a sentimental moralist too.”

“That is the biggest lie perpetrated on modern literature. Every serious writer is a moralist; if nothing else, by mere selection of material, and even with the avant-garde posturing of cold detachment. As to sentimentalism, as distinct from nostalgia, if a fleshed-out character cries at weddings, it would be a gross misrepresentation of nature to expunge that action from the scene -- when the expunging is intentional, a statement of moral attitude is also occurring. It’s up to the writer to control excessive morbidity, especially of the sort that arose in eighteenth century European literature. Generally, fixedly extirpating tender feeling or denotive moralizing from a work is a manipulative departure from authenticity; the truth resides in emotive, corrective human nature; disallowing it falsely contrives for effect. In which case, you end up with a vacuum of oddity, psychosis that leads to confused disaffection, aversion, aridity, apathy. If a person isn’t sufficiently equipped to write exceptionally complex ranges of emotion, along with its motivators, that pseudo-writer-critic will probably rationalize all depiction of tender feeling as incompetence, inferior work. Sentimentality is a handy hit-or-miss epithet of low-level criticism. While a poorly written surfeit of emotion produces repugnance, imaginatively written emotion escapes the understanding of many *soi-disant* critics. That superb imaginative ability is where superior and inferior writers part company.”

“Christ, I feel enlightened. You should teach.

“So where does Robert come in?”

“I was gratefully diverted...for which I won’t apologize. Now I’m back to resistance...fear of *my* emotion. I’m probably not going to stay on this subject very long. I had known Robert for a number of years. A very stable, intelligent, confidently

positive humanitarian human being. A man well educated, undaunted, caring...thoroughly involved in international social improvement. He never let fear stand in the way of doing anything worthwhile. Exactly the sort of person it takes to do what we were doing.”

“Those requirements must include yourself.”

“I haven’t considered myself that way. No point anyway, I’m through with it. But *it* finished *me*...not the other way around.

“I’ve had a few relationships, usually ones that lasted until logistics intervened and one of us had to move on, but Robert was different. For some unexamined reason, I’ve never really been very attracted to British men, and Robert was certainly a Brit, a ginger-haired, pale-skinned, blue-eyed, divorced Brit. We would sometimes travel together...were on friendly terms and always dined together and talked a lot about world problems and local conditions...and then got on with our work. In Kenya, in Nairobi, we had gone to look over the wretched squalor of the Kirbera slum: the open sewage outside makeshift hovels, contaminated water, the putrid stench of unbelievably dangerous health risks -- young children washing in, playing in, drinking water tainted with excrement. How self-contained a few wild animals still appear in their natural habitats, compared to the helpless beaten-down humans living in what would make a jungle pig wallow look quite sanitary. We were not even working in that place, but in a somewhat better area lucky enough to have acquired a jerrybuilt schoolhouse. I’d seen a great deal of this sort of thing for years, but when we left the slum I was gagging and gasping for a hint of fresh air. My head was filled with images of sick children, dumbfounded men, and extremely thin, shy and hollow-eyed mothers who had absolutely no hope of anything but the lives they were living...women trying to scratch out meager existences for their sick families. A few offered wearily succumbing smiles. As we were driven away, the air was very hot and humid and my damp cotton shirt was sticking to my body. My raging head began to throb. I was exhausted and suddenly began to weep. I’ve never

done anything like that before and I couldn't stop. Returned to our hotel, Robert helped me out of the car and accompanied me to my room. I wondered if I was having a serious breakdown, but Robert said I was very tired and suffering from heat prostration and that I ought to drink a lot of bottled water, shower and lie down, and he would come and get me for dinner later. 'How can I conscionably drink clean water and shower and eat after what I've just seen?' I cried out. Robert carefully explained -- after all those years I can't imagine why I had to be told -- that I must never start down that road because it rendered me ineffectual and led nowhere. I went to my room and did exactly what Robert suggested, and later we met for dinner...where I at once apologized profusely. Robert said I was quite entitled to show frustration from time to time and that I probably hadn't done enough of it and had let it build up to a distressing point. He was right about that. I had always held emotion in check, trying to prevent exactly what had happened. I explained that I had also been feeling depressed at having our library efforts thanklessly preempted by a demand for computers. Once again he calmed me down, assuring me that our work would not have been in vain. His gentle strength and steady assurance were just what I had needed. During all of this he had taken my hand, and simply went on holding it and looking at me, and I at him. We sat finishing our drinks, slowly realizing that after all these years we had fallen in love. We both knew it was an incredibly fortunate occurrence, because we could go on doing what we were doing and enjoy a supportive, loving relationship at the same time. That night he came to my room and we spent the night falling ever more deeply in love. We slept late, had breakfast in bed and then went out to walk hand in hand under the thirsty trees of a small sweltering park. We had heard earlier that there was a great deal of post-election unrest smoldering in the city and that a large rebellion over rank corruption was imminent. While still in the park we began to hear an increasing roar of shouting voices and also what sounded like a series of gunshots. We thought we had better take cover in our hotel, and hurried back into



the street, but it was too late. Within minutes we were swept along down the avenue. Robert was holding onto my hand. I looked up at him, quite fearful, seeking his unfailingly comforting smile. Suddenly he gripped my hand very tight, then let go...just...let go. He had...fallen...I knelt down, dazed; he was lying motionless at my feet, the blood from his head all over my clothes. My God, I should never have started with this. I can't bear it...can't stand myself. What else is there to say? *Nothing!*"

Hugh came to stand over her, his face oddly contorted with his own memories. "I'm sorry, Lea. Despite what you feel, this may be good for you...opening up. I'll get you a glass of whiskey."

"No. No thank you. Ragnar has told me I shouldn't drink to hide from things. He's right of course."

"Then come sit in the dining room and have a cup of China tea."

Hugh set a glass half full of whiskey down on the dining room table and went to get her tea. Viola realized that while she had been talking he had been drinking, drinking to kill pain. When he brought the tea his hand was slightly unsteady, and she said, "I think this was not a good idea for either of us...my sad story. I've opened wounds for you too, Hugh. I'm sorry...you were so insistent. Sorry."

"I'm not very good at commiseration, Lea, but I feel the pain."

"You shouldn't do this, Hugh...drink right now."

"What's the difference? Ragnar's never warned *me* about drinking. Apparently he's saving you...while I thought that you were coming here to save me. But *you* are going down the hill too...or were. Have you improved? Maybe...I have some envy of that...your *healing* comfort."

Viola looked out at the fading orange sun spilling over the snow. A chickadee was pecking on a branch at the window. She decided to remain silent, to let Hugh say whatever he wanted. It might help, if he was not already drunk. But he chose to escape into the past, to rush back to it with startling clarity.

“I had you first. You were a little nympho, a little filly I broke in. Remember...can you remember that far back, how you’d slip out the door at night, barefoot in your short nothing nightgown, and run fast as your legs would carry you...down the slope...climbing to the hayloft...where I had you until the sun was nearly up? Then you’d race back to your house, all full of me, and crawl into your bed.”

*How little you knew.* She put her hands under the table and held them tightly together, her raised shoulders held taut while she looked into pain, into narrowed eyes swimming in a dark, dark sea of misery.

“I still don’t understand...maybe you want us both...get on your hobbyhorse and ride back and forth. Is that it? If I went back to having you now something would immediately kill you. After two dead wives I can assure you of it...*promise* it. You’d be dead in a week.”

“Oh, Hugh, my dear, you’re in such excruciating pain. What can I do to help? Please tell me...is there anything?”

“Lie down with me...no, put on your coat and go home...*go!*”

ViOLEA stood up and took Hugh by the arm, the first time she had touched him in thirty years. “Come on...over to the davenport. I’ll cover you with the blanket...sit by the fire until you fall asleep.”

“You’re a little young to be my mother, aren’t you?”

“Down you go, there now,” she coaxed, fixing the pillow under his head and stroking his hair out of his eyes. “The winter birds are singing, hear? The sun is setting. Close your eyes, try to sleep.”

ViOLEA poked the charring alder logs together and sat on the footrest near the fire screen. Staring dreamily, she was vulnerably exposed to Robert’s awakening smile. Her heart bled into the flames.

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Surprised one day by a certain equilibrium, ViOLEA decided to write a brief e-mail to Virginia and describe a little of her present

life. Ragnar had not come to get her this evening. Often he went about his own business and she prudently left him to it. He was on the Farm and Library Boards, went to various meetings, was involved in other social obligations in which he had participated for years.

*Dear Virginia, she wrote, I'm sorry I haven't stayed in touch, but you know the shape I was in, still am in to a lesser degree. There you are, far away in foggy London. I don't miss fog or food! But I miss you and our friends and a number of other things. I was gone so often, but I loved returning to the Thames -- winding past Kew Gardens, amplifying the city, bedazzling Parliament. Oh the Tate and the National Gallery! Quite a different life here on the farm, just me in my great-great-grandfather's large old house, but what I see every day are scenes my favorite artists would have loved to paint. There is snow now, and I ride a horse over the farm, or was doing so until I came down with a rather bad case of influenza, and my manager had to haul me off to a clinic in the little town of Hayfield twenty miles away. A couple of rather astonishing things have happened that I'm not quite ready to write about yet, but I wanted to let you know I'm thinking of you. I still dream of Robert. There are some new people in my waking hours. I'm working a bit on a novel. You were so insistent that I keep in touch, so please do the same. Tell everyone hello for me. By the way, I have a crazy tabby cat I've named Buggy, who is at this moment trying to tear off my slipper. Love, Viola*

Viola proceeded through neglected e-mail and was amazed to find a message from Marcus. She could not recall ever having received an electronic word from him, although she had given him her e-mail address long ago. When she opened the message she was even more astonished. It read:

*Hello Viola, I don't know if I can reach you at this address but I think you ought to know that your Aunt Hilda died. Perhaps you can imagine how difficult this has been for me. The funeral is Saturday, and it seems to me you ought to try and come, would want to come. Mom was so good to you when you first came to her. Get in touch with me and I'll explain the particulars.*

*Marcus*

Viola sat stunned for a moment, then slipped into a nervous agitation. She had failed Marcus one more time. The

Saturday of the funeral was long past. She immediately replied:

*Dear Marcus, I was so sorry to hear that Aunt Hilda was gone. I was shocked. She would have been only about 75, which is way too young. Was it sudden? I've been ill and haven't communicated with anyone in a while and didn't find your message until today. I am so sorry. Is there anything I can do? Please stay in touch with me and let me know if there is anything at all. I should mention that I'm on the farm now, where I intend to remain. It would be wonderful if you could come out soon. Perhaps it would be a healthful change for you. Below are the farm address, telephone number, and my cell phone number -- the cell phone number you already have. With much love and concern and deepest sympathy for this sadness, Viola*

The next day was spent almost entirely at her desk, working on a strange Lincolnesque protagonist, and taking only a few short breaks. A message from Marcus appeared in the evening. It read: *Viola, unfortunate that you missed the funeral -- but expected. It was only for your Aunt Hilda that I let you know. I have no interest in coming to your farm now or at any time in the future. Marcus*

Viola lay down on her bed and began to cry, but then suddenly stopped her weeping and looked around the darkened room with dazed eyes. Buggy, slipping into his nocturnal madness, had taken a fast turn around the bedroom and was now running up and down the stairs. "Where are you, Ragnar?" Viola muttered. She stood up and took off her robe, pulling her jeans from a chair and donning the old Scottish sweater. Passing Buggy, who was still flying up and down the stairs, she went through the kitchen to put on her outdoor things at the back door, then cautiously made her way through icy, crusty-topped snow to Ragnar's cabin. Her ungainly steps kept sinking into odd drifts that had swirled up around the holly trees. Some of the snow went over the tops of her boots and, as it warmed, trickled down and soaked into her stockings. Step by awkward step she pulled her clumsy boots from the deeper ridges and plodded on to the cabin door. The outside light was on and the door was locked. Tire tracks from Ragnar's truck led away from the cabin. Thoroughly vanquished by Marcus, she slipped down on the frozen door mat, leaned against the log

wall and plunged back into her crying jag. A pair of forgotten gloves protruded from a pocket, but her numb hands were too cold to work into the stiff leather. The indifferent black sky descended, relentless, impenetrable, reminding her of her helplessness in righting things, of unyielding dark defeat.

“Why not snow again...a whole hell of a lot more!” she shouted at the frigid heavens. “Bring it on, nature of all mothers, cover me in it...bury me in your deepest drifts until I can’t feel a thing!”

Eventually, Ragnar’s truck lights appeared. He rounded the side of the cabin and turned off the engine. The truck door slammed with some force. He came up onto the railed porch, stomping snow from his boots, then grabbed her up as if she were no more than a bundle of tinder to be carried in to the fireplace. The expression on his face was far from the comfort she had sought, which now seemed unlikely.

“*Herregud!* why have you done this, sitting here when you could be back at your house in the warm? I feel like shaking you, you careless woman-child. You are supposed to have some intelligence.” While he scolded, he unlocked his door and carried *Viola* inside. “*Helevete!*” he swore, “I will never lock my door again.” He settled *Viola* on the davenport, then lit a fire, all without even removing his wet boots. After studying her streaming face more carefully, he pulled off her boots, then her soaked stockings, and began to rub her feet. At last he took off her coat, deftly tucking a heavy blanket firmly around her, then went to get her a cup of hot water with Scotch in it.

*Viola* took a sip. “You told me not to drink when I’m in pain.”

“*Faen!* drink it! What is wrong now?”

“Why do you care? I never see you anymore.”

“This is some exaggeration, I had you with me only two nights ago. I have been busy...taking care of your business, Wild Vi.”

“You know you don’t care a thing about *my* business...only

*your* business...and was it *my* business tonight?"

He laughed indulgently. "You are a demanding *lille* thing. *Nei*, it was my business tonight. I was playing chess with your neighbor, Bill March. Have you forgotten what I do on Wednesday nights?"

"Have you forgotten that I need you sometimes?" Her mouth was trembling as she tried to hold back her misery over Marcus.

"Ah, *koma da*, let us stop this." Ragnar took her up, striding to his chair and holding her on his lap. "You are still cold."

She tried to halt her shivering, and lay with her head pressed against his chest. "Your heart is beating so loud it--"

"*Ja*, that is you. What is it now that has caused this loss of common sense?" He raised her head and kissed her with an engrossed thoroughness, so that she forgot what she had meant to say, tasting the seductive caraway flavor of his hungry mouth. "*Brennevin*."

"*Ja*, always *brennevin*. That way you can recognize the one you are kissing." He kissed her again, then slowly again.

"Now I'm dizzy...warm and dizzy...like a silly little puppy. I want to leap at you in mad happiness...lovely, lovely forgetfulness."

"Do you want to go to bed or talk?"

"Talking's no good...just carry me to your bed; you do it without a second thought. I think you only do it to keep your floors clean."

"*Nei*, it is the quickest way to get you where I want you. When I have fattened you up you will have to walk more...except to my bed. You will never have to walk to my bed...as long as I am walking."

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"Your son's coldness is obvious to me," Ragnar said as he dropped egg whites into a bowl, swiftly and deftly cracking four shells; the whites to be beaten stiff with a dash of cream of tartar and folded into whipped yolks, oil, milk, and prepared flour for

their breakfast waffles. “He is playing with you to make you suffer for what he believes are your mistakes...this, he imagines, will make you more willing to fill the new emptiness in his life.”

“How do you know that? You can’t know that,” Viola said as she turned over two thick ham slices crackling in a frying pan.

“Human motivations come from a few basic needs; however intricate the schemes, when examined from that perspective they become clear as window glass. It is not to his advantage to lose you.”

“Are these done, I don’t know when they’re supposed to be done?”

Ragnar glanced at her effort and said, “*Ja*, put them on that platter and into the warm oven.”

“Marcus is playing with me?”

Ragnar, who had now whipped the egg white froth to curling peaks and was folding it into the mixed batter, nodded and said, “Wild Vi, you should not waste one more tear on him. He will be the one to cry at not growing up sooner. It is you who hold all the cards in this game. You can make him come here any time you want. All you have to do is tell him that his father is here. Have you not always said the absence of his father is equal to the absence of his love for you?”

“I didn’t say that, exactly.”

“But you meant it.”

Ragnar opened the waffle maker, ladled in the dough, sprinkled a spoonful of chopped pecans over the top and closed the lid. The round chrome waffle maker sizzled and steamed, sending out tempting aromas of the baking batter and toasting pecans.

Viola stood motionless, inhaling the pleasant mealy aroma and thinking about what Ragnar had said.

“My dreamy one,” Ragnar said, smiling at her, “you are supposed to pour the maple syrup into that pitcher you are holding and warm it in the microwave. All good farmers are able to think and do things at the same time.”

When they had finished eating, Ragnar picked up their plates and returned with refilled cups of coffee and tea.

Viola was leaning on her hand, still musing over her problems.

Ragnar sat down and pushed the tea toward her.

“You have told me you want to be independent, to make your own decisions, so tell me now what am I to do about the filbert trees?”

“The filbert trees?” Viola looked up as if she had been caught napping in school. *I’d better answer this correctly*, she thought, and let her mind fly back to early years on the farm. “Well, they’ve just been through a silver thaw. It’s warming again this morning. There are probably some broken limbs that need pruning and...and given a protective sealing. Winter has just begun.”

“*Ja*, and that is where I will be the rest of the day, in the orchards with two hired arborists. Fortunately, no trees have split, but there was some damage that I think can be kept to a minimum.”

Ragnar stood up and came to stand beside her, putting his hand on the back of her neck and lifting her head, as he liked to do, as he did in lovemaking. She could feel the quickening of her pulse simply by this gesture. “Last night your beautiful eyes were wild violet and today they are gentled blue again...these large Wild Vi eyes.”

“You always make me forget what I want to say.”

“Say what you want.”

“I’m worried, Ragnar.”

“Try to relax a little over this problem of Hugh.”

“If the only way I can make Marcus come here is by telling Hugh so I can tell Marcus, I’ve got to do it soon. I’m a little afraid, well a lot afraid. I feel such compassion for Hugh. He’s still quite unstable, so angry, and I don’t know if he’s ever going to change.”

“When you tell him, do not do it impulsively or in a moment of heat. Go slowly and let him almost suggest it. Please try to let me know beforehand, so that I am where I can get to you if you need me.”



Violea frowned, uncertain that any resolution with Hugh could happen quite that conveniently or predetermined.

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“You could walk to my house sometimes, Hugh. It might be good exercise. Just put on some warm clothing and let me know and I’ll fix us dinner.”

“No, I doubt I’ll come there...and I’ll stick to my bike for long distances. It gets me where I need to go. That’s what I was doing when you first saw me, walking...if you could call it that, trying to exercise in the sun.”

Hugh had moved the davenport closer to the fireplace and put the other chairs at the back of the room in front of the book shelves. They were both sitting on the davenport with their steaming cups resting on the repositioned and semi-cluttered coffee table.

“You really walk just fine. Will you always limp?”

“Very likely I will always limp...fragment damaged a tendon.”

“It’s hardly noticeable.”

“Will you stop being kind. I like you better with a little vinegar in your veins.”

“Uh-huh, allows you to *mix it up*.”

“If I’m such a bastard why do you come here?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to provoke you. I’ve never said you were a bastard. I’ve never thought it.”

Hugh turned away from the fire and toward Violea, raising his obviously hurting leg up and angling it over the leather seat.

“Look at me. Why do you come here? *Why do you come here?*”

“I--” Violea clutched her hands together at her throat. “I don’t quite know. I’m not sure. I guess I’m trying to find out...something. I’m so very interested in people and I always want to know--”

“What the hell am I, some sort of experiment?”

“Hugh, please, please stop this vitriol. I don’t have many friends around here. I long for interesting conversation. You’ve

done so much, seen so much...you're so intelligent and--"

"So? You are too. I don't *long* for interesting conversation. What shall we talk about then...for your little heuristic adventure? Daoism? Yin and Yang? Laozi? Han Xiangzi? Tao Qian?"

Violea felt her eyes brimming. She pursed her lips in vexed frustration and quickly turned her head away to gather patience.

"When I was sick you came to the clinic...all that way in the freezing weather. It was so kind of you and I've never thanked you."

"Maybe I thought you were dying."

"Maybe I should have."

"Goddammit to hell, stop that!"

They at once fell into an extended silence, which, for Violea, reverberated with her regrettably irrevocable words. But the sharp exchange gradually receded. In a while she began to wonder if she should not leave; then again, perhaps hold herself in anticipatory quietness in the hope of favorable transformation. Hugh was staring into the fire; Violea out the window, then slowly turning back to the dissociated room. She had sensed that the atmosphere was undergoing change. The framed snowy woods beyond, the shadowy cave-blue aura within, the room's gem-like points of winking light reflecting the glowing nugget of hearth fire, all flowed together, restored to moveable time by a stunning resonance, an altered, unfamiliar voice.

"I once had...a daughter," Hugh said with wonder. "We named her Meiying. It means beautiful flower, and Mei was beautiful...with jewel-bright curious dark eyes...something of me in her."

Violea felt as if she were balanced on the tip of a sharp knife and if she moved it would go all the way through her body. What could she say? What response would not damage this moment? She said, did, nothing, sensing that Hugh had so completely accepted her presence, nullified it so thoroughly, it was as if he were speaking to himself. She wished, in fact, that she could accommodate his achievement by sudden evanescence, by

dissipating into the still air and leaving him alone with the timeless joy of his untrammelled image.

ViOLEA stood up very slowly and edged carefully away from the davenport. Hugh had not moved, continuing to stare into the fire. She put on her coat, her hat and gloves, and looked toward him. If he lifted his head she would speak, if not she would go in silence. When she had her hand on the back door, she heard him call, "Lea!" She went back into the room, not overly surprised to see his altered face. Her voice was altered as well, slowed and softened and instinctively lifted to a delicate range of intense empathy.

"While you live, all those loved and lost continue. Your image of Meiyng made her beautiful to me too...thank you for that, for sharing that changeless beauty. Goodbye, Hugh, I'll come back soon."

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For the first time in a while ViOLEA was riding Mariner. After she left Hugh, briefly raised above his lugubrious mood, she was feeling some joy and some anguish. She rode with her head down, her moist eyes cold in the wintry winds. She had told Ragnar that no matter how hard she steeled herself she always ended softened by tears. *I will harden*, she thought, *I will harden just enough when I've healed my psyche*. She could not guess what Hugh would be doing after she left. Pensively gazing into the fire? With reparative thoughts, she hoped. The next time she saw him he might very well be bitterly angry again, appear to have never heard her compassionate words. The words were spontaneous, the gratitude still luminous.

The day was partially grayed by clouds, with pale columns of sunlight, and there was quite a bit of snow on the ground, although it was melting in places and the temperature was a little higher. ViOLEA rode along the edge of the attended orchards. She could hear the arborists at their work before she could see them -- growling bites of their chainsaws and cracking limbs. Ragnar was working with them. He came down a row of freshly groomed

branches and stood beside Mariner. Perhaps he had seen the condition of her eyes, for he lifted her from the saddle, with a thoughtful smile not entirely masking his scrutiny.

“Are you warm enough?”

She answered with half her face pressed against his sawdust-sprinkled down jacket, inhaling the pungency released from severed filbert bark. “I’ll be home to warm myself soon enough. Hugh told me something very precious: a glimpse of his daughter.”

Ragnar held her away and looked into her eyes. “Progress.” He pulled off his glove and held the back of her neck. “I was thinking of you before you came.” He leaned toward her, raising her just high enough to have his kiss. She swayed clumsily back, laughing.

“The arborists are watching. We’ll be all over Hayfield.”

“Fine, so be it. Why would I hide this?” He kissed her again, holding her a moment, then lifted her back onto Mariner.

Violea rode away chortling with happily revised thought, but soon stopped to call over her shoulder, “I’ll fix your supper.”

“*Det er bra!* -- good! I will be hungry,” Ragnar called back.

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When Violea had taken care of Mariner and the tack she trudged off to the house, anticipating a soothing warm bath. She hurried to have her soak in a fragrant solution of green tea crystals; then, while still in her bathrobe and with flushed warm skin, she sat down at her computer to check her e-mail. Nothing from Marcus, of course, but a message from Virginia, which proved so disturbing that it at once eroded her newly acquired optimism. The message read:

*Dear Violea, I was so sorry to hear of your influenza, but just terribly pleased that you seem to be finding new sources of happiness. You appear to be coming through your depression so well. I was hoping for this. I thought a relaxing and peaceful turn on your farm might be the best medicine after all. Certainly you know that we need you back here. Your years of experience are*

*such a valuable resource, and you are so sharp and flexible that your work can easily be channeled into any new agenda that comes along, including computer distribution and, etc. Viola, my dear, this silly nonsense of retiring to "life on the farm" at your still-productive age is ridiculous. You are not a farmer. Take enough time to thoroughly rejuvenate yourself and then come back to us. Don't desert us. Please don't think me insensitive when I say how much Robert would have wanted you to carry on. He often spoke of your expert qualities, of your great value in the field. You should consider this seriously, my dear friend, then return to what you do best. I never believed that you would make your impulsive experiment, made under quite understandable circumstances, a permanent condition. Let me hear from you soon. Love, Virginia.*

Viola sat tapping her fingers and looking down on the garden. How unfortunate that this insinuation of abandoned commitment was now imbedded like a sharp thorn in her flesh. How could Virginia send such a terribly unfair message when she knew the prick of guilt would impair her healing? Perhaps it was precisely what she intended, to make healing contingent upon imminent return. Viola had scarcely spoken of her farm to Robert. He understood it to be merely a modest but reliable source of backup income. What would he think of the way her life was going now? The question was troubling, because she surmised that he would be appalled, perhaps even consider her an unprincipled defeatist. Undeniably, the only real way to honor his life would be to carry on with her work, his work too.

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They were sitting not at the dining room table but in the cozy breakfast nook in Viola's large warm kitchen. Ragnar had returned from the orchards and gone to his cabin to shower. He had dressed in a heavy chestnut sweater and taupe corduroy slacks, then appeared at her door for supper, his silver hair neatly combed into place and his wind-burned, finely lined tan face infused with cheerful anticipation. As he seated himself in one of the old Windsor chairs at the big oak table, he owned that he was hungry enough to eat the dinner napkins. But after only a portion of one

bite he frowned and laid his loaded fork down on his plate.

“*Hva er dette?*” he muttered. “What is this?”

“It’s a kind of kedgeree. You can see what it is: rice and chopped eggs and white fish -- the fish from my freezer -- and cream and spices. It’s a common version of an Indian dish, a bit my version too. The Brits eat a lot of it.”

“But not the Norwegians. You have burned the fish. I did not think that was possible.”

“Well, not all of it,” Viola said with a stir of distress. “Some of it did get a little burned.”

“And the eggs are more like rubber. The rice, however, is not overdone...but undercooked...and I think you have put too much--”

Viola had jumped up from the table and rushed into the living room. This was the absolute end of any good feeling she had managed to hang onto after Virginia’s insensitive message.

Ragnar immediately followed, lifting her from the davenport into his arms. “I am sorry, Wild Vi, forgive me. I am just tired and hungry...but not for...whatever that was...*beklager*, sorry, sorry.”

Viola pulled away from him and said, “Why don’t you eat the dinner napkins, I’m sure you’ll find them more palatable.”

She went back into the kitchen and scraped Ragnar’s food into Bugsy’s bowl. Hearing the tinkle of a spoon at his bowl, Bugsy rushed into the room. He sniffed all around the generous offering of food, searching for some single morsel worth attention, then shook his paw over the entire bowl and walked away.

Ragnar, who had been watching Viola and then Bugsy, began to laugh. His laughter grew and grew until he had to lean against the broom closet door, laughing and holding his empty stomach.

“I had no idea Norwegians could laugh like that. Are you sure you don’t have a little hyena in your blood line?”

“Never mind, my *dårlig* cook -- it means not so good; at least this time. Throw that stuff out and get your coat. I meant to bring you home with me after we ate anyway. I have a stack of

barbecued chicken pizzas in the freezer -- sometimes one must eat pizza. Mine are easy to bake. I make batches of them and freeze them...to take to events like Grange suppers. They are popular among my friends.”

Viola said little as they trudged through the snow and slush, near accidents along the way aborted by Ragnar’s firm grip on her arm. Her overview looked down on a very tall man hanging onto a clumsy and irritated child. She finally smiled to herself in the dim snow light.

“I thought it foolish to bring my truck this short distance,” Ragnar apologized, grabbing her waist to avoid yet another spill.

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“This is the most delicious pizza...savory flavors bursting from the topping. The crust is so light...and the perfect touch of crushed fennel seeds.” Viola took another bite and held her half-eaten piece away to examine it. “How did you get the chicken to taste so good, and what are the other things?”

“I roast seasoned chicken, slice it on crushed fennel seed dough that has my barbecue sauce, then top it with dried olives, mushrooms, red onion, provolone, and olive oil. After baking, I add a little fresh cilantro -- stored in an herb bin in the refrigerator; cilantro does not keep well but is really a versatile fresh herb.”

They were sitting on Ragnar’s davenport, eating from wooden trays and enjoying the flaming alder in his fireplace. Ragnar had made mugs of hot mulled wine. Viola pulled back her sweater sleeves and lifted her mug in both hands. Ragnar slipped his finger into a hole in her sweater and grinned. “You need better warm clothes.”

“I have a few other sweaters. I found this in the house and became attached to it. It has personality...history. I suppose it was one of Mama’s favorites.”

“*Ja*, I often saw Martha wearing it.”

Viola looked sorrowfully down at the old tan sweater. It was actually a lovely Scottish weave, the holes in it representing the

empty places in her mother's life, the ellipses in her own life. With her head bent, her hair fell forward, tumbling off her shoulders; it was getting too long. She looked up to find Ragnar's eyes full of regret. He drew her hair back and stroked her cheek with his thumb.

"I am sorry I disparaged your cooking, Wild Vi. You might consider my straightforwardness bad manners. I generally think of false flattery as a lie. I cannot deny I found your food amusing fodder." His silvery-blue eyes glinted with this pun.

"I'm the one to apologize. It was awful I know. Even Bussy wouldn't...if you could have seen yourself...oh that outrageous fit of laughter was wonderful. At first I was insulted, then I tried so hard not to laugh with you. How could I have imagined you would eat my pitiful concoction...with your discriminating taste?"

"A nobler fellow would have eaten it."

"You *are* a nobler fellow. You see, about the food, I'm certainly capable of doing better. I was distracted by something a friend wrote to me. It was about my deserting my colleagues, about the necessity of my coming back to work. She called my idea of returning to the farm *silly nonsense*...reminded me I was not a farmer, then followed up with a hurtful persuasion...tormenting me with what my lost friend would have wanted me to do...to carry on...carry on with his work. There I was, absently ruining your supper...disappointment and guilt trashing everything, including my appetite."

"That was from a *friend*? *Helvete!*...then I piled it on."

"No, no, actually it was hilarious...the only amusing thing that happened to me all day." She looked more seriously at Ragnar and said, "I do remember so much of farm life, and I was fairly immersed in it too. Still...I know I'm not a farmer."

"It does not matter. You have begun on this farm and that makes you different, very different, in many advantageous ways that I will eventually tell you. I could not love you as I do if you were not so bright, sophisticated, yet still in many ways that *lille* farm



girl.”

“I don’t know how you can anyway. I’m such a--”

“*Nei*, I have shown you how I can...how I do.”

“I...wonder why you never...married.”

“That was not the life I wanted. I have always been too content alone. With a wife and family I would have had no time to read and study as exhaustively as I have. There was no woman around here who could share my intellectual interests, Wild Vi -- intellect is not valued in this country. You know I am a maverick, someone with scarce formal education who knows too much, yet never enough. You are quick-tempered, but quite a lot like me...your intellectual curiosity. You understand me...even my humor -- you always give it back to me. And I understand you. The way you have come back into my life...the way you so joyfully come to me...that I love, you I love. *Jeg elsker deg.*”

“I don’t deserve you.”

“Ah, maybe you will change your mind about that, my girl. It is I who must earn my keep from you...and I do not mean wages.”

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On the night after the evening of Viola’s kedgere, Ragnar took Viola to a Grange potluck, having argued that it was time for her to meet her neighbors. Ragnar arrived at the little wooden Grange hall on the outskirts of Hayfield with two of his freshly baked pizzas, and with uncertain Viola somewhat reluctantly in his company. She had worn a violet wool dress, which she thought might complement her hair and eyes, and an amethyst necklace she had purchased at a gem market in Bangkok. “You will be the best looking woman they have ever seen around here,” Ragnar told her when she met him at her door. He wore his soft brown sweater and slacks. “You told me flattery was a lie,” she reminded him. “False flattery; this was not false,” he insisted. “It was not even flattery, but more of an observation.”

Faithfully tended, the narrow chapel-style hall had pale yellow walls and blond hardwood floors, all aglow from the

soft-pink bulbs placed in brass wall sconces repeating down its length. The long tidy room smelled of lemon wax and cedar. It held a chattering hodgepodge of sociable farmers young and old, earthbound solid working folk earnestly involved in, and mutually supporting, numerous worthy projects of human as well as farm improvement. This was their night to eat and fraternize. In their normally more serious faces Viola encountered the pleasure of temporary release from endless hard work, a sanctioned frivolity dispersed with familiar joking and genuine interest in the affairs of one another. Their heads often turned to the long table loaded with containers of hearty country food. Healthy farm produce making up casseroles, rich stews, colorful salads, crusty breads, fruit pies, tall frosted cakes, and Ragnar's large pizzas -- these at once set off lively cheers from hungry eaters hovering near.

"Folks, here comes Ragnar's pizza!" an impish sharp-eyed farmer announced. "Won't last long. I'm standing where I get my hands on the first piece." A straight lock of iron-gray hair fell across thick bushy eyebrows raised above mischievous brown eyes; his demeanor and plump rosy cheeks made Viola quickly smile. She could easily see a once prankish farm boy, the boyishness still very much in evidence.

At the mention of Ragnar's name, a tall and trimly put together pale-skinned woman immediately sauntered across the creaking blond floor. She wore a dark blue pants suit. Long and fine creamy-silk hair was gathered in a gleaming bun at the nape of her neck, a few airy strands straying out at her temples. Her healthy, faintly lined face beamed with an ironic smile that encompassed softly crinkling, very pale blue eyes. She came up close to Ragnar, angling her head over one shoulder in a familiar, half teasing half scolding manner, and said, "*Goddag. Hvordan har du det?*"

"*Takk bare bra,*" Ragnar answered, with an accustomed mild grin. "Please meet the owner of Ender Farm, Viola Ender. This is Britta Hansen, Hayfield's librarian."

Viola, having read all of the innuendo exchanged, having

read faces for years, skillfully disallowed anything readable to appear on her own face, save a friendly smile and a polite “Hello, glad to meet you. I’m certainly a devotee of libraries.” The rest, the startling jolt of this unanticipated encounter, and thoughts of what Britta Hansen’s proprietary greeting to Ragnar might imply, would remain undiscoverable to anyone looking on -- Viola could easily sense the entire roomful of people doing precisely that.

Ragnar said a few more words to Britta Hansen while Viola walked over to talk to a middle-aged plumpish woman setting down a pie. “The lattice work is beautiful on your pie, so shiny. What kind is it?”

The stout, kinky-haired woman turned the pie to some perceived advantage with stubby, hard-used fingers. “It’s cherry, dear, what I always make. The boys love cherry. I’m Alfreda March. Your man Ragnar plays chess quite regular with my husband Bill.”

“Oh my goodness, you’re my nearest, but still somewhat faraway, neighbors. I’m so glad to meet you. Viola Ender.” Viola put out her hand and grasped Alfreda’s. “When I was a little girl my mother knew Bruce and Jenny March, Billy’s...Bill’s parents.”

“Yes, Bill’s parents, both gone. So you knew Bill then.”

“I knew Bill by sight mostly. I don’t think we ever spoke much. He was a few years ahead of me in school, and I was a shy girl.”

Viola then realized this woman must be around Britta Hansen’s age. She tried to imagine Alfreda as Billy’s young bride, envisioning a plain, awkward, freckle-faced girl with flamboyantly red curly hair.

“You should come over when the boys play chess. You and I could visit a little...talk about the goings-on around here.”

“I’d really enjoy that,” Viola said, glancing toward Ragnar, who was now talking with a group of laughing, gesticulating men; easy to spot for his height. The men’s conversation turned more sober, and she heard remarks about the Farm Bill presently in

Congress, and about the need for serious attention to retirement and health care plans.

Ragnar looked over at her, then came toward her, and she was subsequently led around and introduced to nearly everyone in the room. After a brief announcement of welcome, the Grange president, wearing no necktie with quite possibly his only suit, waved the members toward the food. They filled their plates and gathered at the long tables.

Violea had eventually sought out the restroom and, while in a stall, unzipped her dress to adjust her slip strap, which was falling off her shoulder. She had not worn a dress or slip since London, and tonight she was feeling her normally rather oblivious self-image more specifically gender-oriented. As she was about to unlatch the stall door and walk out, two women entered the restroom, speaking in a confidential manner.

“Well I think it’s just a crying shame,” one voice said.

“Yes, Britta’s known him practically since she came here.”

Violea carefully relatched the door and backed up, by now not wanting to hear any more but feeling unwelcome in this conversation. She irritably bit her lip. She was going to have to hear the rest.

“I told her some time ago she ought to get on with it. She’s just too easygoing. She’s always said he wouldn’t be pushed into anything...she thought things were just fine the way they were.”

“I’ll bet she regrets that.”

“You’d think so. Every available woman in the county -- and some not so available -- had eyes on him at one time or another. He could help himself...and did...discreetly, you know -- his cozy behavior’s never caused too much of a stir, just the usual gossipy notions. That man holds up real well...lord, handsome as ever...has his own ideas all right, but...too good-hearted to malign...and he can *do* just about anything.”

“There used to be an idle rumor about him and Martha Ender...never came to anything. Then along comes the absent offspring...good-looking...a whole lot younger...with that nice big

estate Martha left her. Mighty convenient, I'd say. He'll let himself get pushed into that."

"Probably doesn't need pushing; notice the two of them together? It's plain as the nose on your face. Poor Britta."

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Violea rode home in silence, very disturbed at how easily gossip could unsettle her feelings. When Ragnar looked toward her in the darkness, she gave him a quick smile and went on with her reflection, not allowing him to read anything at all on her shadowed face. When they reached the house she said, "Just let me off, I'm going straight to bed." It was barely ten o'clock and she never retired that early.

"How can you be so tired? You did not ride or do anything at all strenuous today. I wanted to take you to my cabin and talk a while."

"Some other time," she said, finally in a much cooler voice.

Ragnar accelerated right past the house and drove around to his cabin. The truck braked to a stop and he sat looking at her.

The hot fire of her father was rising in her now. For just a moment she tried to hold it in, but suddenly knew she would not.

"Why did you take me there? To show me off in my nice little dress. *This is mine because the farm is mine and you'd all better understand...and especially you, Britta dear!* I wish I could have recorded what I had to listen to in the restroom...so you'd have to listen to it too. Two judgmental gossips with no idea they were delivering the scuttlebutt right into my quavering ears. I did not want to listen! I did not want to hear what everyone finds so entertaining! Take me back to the house or I'm going there anyway."

Ragnar sat a moment in silence. She opened the door and slid her mid-high heels down into the slush. Edging around the truck ineptly, and now well outside Ragnar's cleared pathway, she floundered toward the holly lane, but got no further. Ragnar was there, tending to his woefully misbegotten acquisition, she told herself, carrying her rather easily, while swearing at the impairment

of his good loafers, right up to his cabin door: Ender Farm Headquarters, for all practical purposes.

“Your pretty shoes are full of snowmelt...*faen!* mine too,” Ragnar said as he pulled hers off, then his own, hanging onto her arm with one gripping hand as he did so. Quite a display of agility. But he was well acquainted with her tactics by this time. “I am certain you would head right home without your shoes if I let you. Sometimes I have loved the fire in you, Wild Vi...but not especially tonight. *Ja*, I have named you correctly.” He took her arm and drew her along to his davenport, where he sat down still holding onto her, not with much tenderness but rather in uncertainty as to whether or not she could be trusted to remain.

She jerked her arm away and said, “You cannot imagine...you cannot begin to imagine how totally, totally frustrated I feel. I’m full of anger. I am just full up to the top of my head with anger.”

“It is why you and Hugh are so dangerous for each other, this wild heat. In that, you are equals. When you go there I worry--”

“Oh don’t bring that into it. If you’re going to try and defend yourself get on with it.”

Ragnar pulled off his sweater and threw it into the far corner of the davenport. “What do I give a damn about gossip? That goes on everywhere. It is human nature. They have been talking about me for years...and now you. I do not have to defend myself but I intend to explain some things.”

“Not to my satisfaction...it won’t be to *my* satisfaction. I’m--”

“Now be quiet, you child. Try to grow up for a few minutes.”

She folded her arms and sat staring at him with livid eyes.

“*Ja*, I took you there to meet your neighbors. *Ja*, I took you there for another reason too. It was a good way to get things into the open. I knew Hugh had said things to you. I did not fail to understand your remark about the library when you were sick at the clinic. *Ja*, I have known Britta for years, skied with her, gone here

and there with her...and...I have slept with her. You have done the same before me, have you not?"

"You told me you had no intellectual equal. That was a lie. A librarian is certainly--"

"*Nei*, it was not a lie. She is a good, if conservative, woman, agreeable, kind, a reader of course, but of no great intellectual capacity. I like her very much, Wild Vi, but I do not love her. I did not expect to love anyone...had no idea of it until--"

"I'm trapped by you. I'm trapped here with you...because *you* know how to run this farm. You know how so very well and you've--"

"*Nei*, it is much simpler than that, Wild Vi. I know how to run this farm, *Ja*, and I am in love with its owner...who is hardly trapped. Please remember that I tried to resist you, and it was you who wanted to come to my bed -- to be honest, I did know it was inevitable."

"You want your world all nice and tidy. You want--"

"*Nei*, it is more that I want your world that way. I know you have lost someone you loved. I know you have a very difficult relationship with your son's father...which makes me uneasy...as it makes me uneasy to hear that your London friends want you back. I have told you I would continue to do my job whether or not you wanted me...but it is a terrible waste, Wild Vi. Have you forgotten how you said it was perfect, together *we* are perfect? I did not forget. For all your storminess I cannot but want you, even as you are now...and I very much value you for the shared history joining us. I make you happy and you give me great joy, even with all the difficulty of it. That is all I have to say. I did think you were a very beautiful Wild Vi tonight. I was justly proud of you. Now I will take you home."

She lowered her head and looked at her clenched hands. Her lips quivered. "No...no, Ragnar. In spite of your poor nemesis, you've done just what you set out to do. You've made yourself and everything else very clear. I will try not to fly off the handle anymore."

“*Try* is the operative word. By now I know what to expect.”

“I told you I don’t deserve you. With all this irrepressible emotion, how can we ever know what our true motives are? Oh, if you feel at all like it, please do what you always do, make me happy again.”

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Viola lifted her head and looked at the clock. It was 3:30 in the morning. Ragnar’s long body lay sprawled along the side of the bed that was not against the wall. *Even in sleep he fences me in*, she thought, *in case I should decide to walk home in my bare feet*. Her ensuing restrained chortles of laughter were softly audible. She was thirsty and tried to execute a slow and difficult maneuver over him in order to make her way to the kitchen. She had planted one foot on the other side of his body when he suddenly rolled from his side to his back and she fell straight down on top of him.

“*Faen!*” Ragnar exclaimed, sitting up with her in his arms.

“Can you not wait until I am awake for this?”

“It was not *this*, it was *that*, the kitchen. I’m thirsty.”

“Do you want me to get you...a glass of...water, juice?”

Ragnar muttered with a disgruntled, groggy voice.

“No, go back to sleep, I’ll go...but I haven’t got anything to put on and it’s a little chilly...because you don’t like to sleep in warm air.”

“*Helvete*, by now I am awake anyway,” Ragnar growled, throwing the covers aside. He drew on his robe and strode toward the kitchen.

Viola sat on the edge of the bed, swinging her feet and smiling with dreamy thoughts of last evening’s sweet resolution. Ragnar found her still in this state when he returned with a large glass of water.

“Ah, Wild Vi, you are my *vakker kvinne*, my beautiful woman: golden-autumn hair I have thoroughly mussed, *kjønnslig* breasts swaying in contentment. When you look at me with these huge blue-violet eyes, which are very violet now, I cannot believe you are naked on my bed. I almost forget what a wild fox you are. I have



no idea what on earth you will do to me next, but I know it will be interesting.”

“I’ll think of something if you don’t hand me that water.”

Viola took the glass and emptied it with long thirsty gulps, then gave it back. Ragnar set the glass on the night stand, turning to find her appreciative eyes subtly wishful. He threw off his robe and drew her from the bed into his arms. “First you wake me up with thirst, and now look what you have done. You want to satisfy another thirst, my *lille* sex.” His rough-skinned hands slid over her silky thighs, gripping them to lift her up and effortlessly bring her down on him. A single cry of elation rushed from her throat as her head dipped forward then arched back, her hands spreading against his chest. Her sensuous murmur was unfamiliar to her, an incoherent sound issued as but a semblance of his name. Her lips then attempted to offer words of love or joy or encouragement, spontaneous effort silenced by his swiftly prevailing mouth; giving, taking, without any distinction, a powerful, wolfish fusion of current: the kiss, the kiss so intimate of itself, the kiss that led to everything else, that led to inflamed bodies tightly conjoined and held in lofty, liquefying suspension. She wondered, for a fleeting instant, how she could have lived so long without ever knowing such pleasure. Keeping her body entwined with his, he braced the low curve of her back with one spread-fingered hand and lowered her onto the bed. When they finished they lay apart for a few minutes, then Ragnar folded her in against him. Here was luscious inertia preponderant of any and all troubling thoughts; and here she desired to remain, no more than a drowsy flushed animal, caved within the crescent safe-hold of bent muscular limbs and pulsing warm throat.

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It was almost nine o’clock when Viola got up and pulled one of Ragnar’s flannel shirts from a hanger in his closet, a red plaid that worked perfectly as a robe when the sleeves were rolled a number of times. She started barefoot toward the kitchen and,

reaching the door's sill, found Ragnar on his knees in jeans, white t-shirt, and thongs, mopping the speckled-cream linoleum blocks.

“*God morgen*, Wild Vi.”

She smiled at the greeting, which sounded like *goe moe-orn*.

“Your choice of clothing makes me laugh. Please go into the living room until the floor is dry.”

“How can you possibly be mopping the floor...after...all of that expended energy?”

“You see me doing it. The floor was not clean enough for your bare feet.”

She watched him a moment, feeling a strong urge to run across the wet floor and throw her arms around him, then left him to finish.

In a short while, he brought a mug and a carafe of hot tea to the table beside his chair, in which Viola had settled. He lay supinely on the large davenport, his feet now in thick warm socks.

They remained in reflective silence for a few minutes, a lucid awareness crackling with the hot tinder of the previous night.

“What would you like to eat?”

“I have a choice? I would eat something of anything you fix. You’ve already eaten?”

“*Ja*, I was up at seven...late for me.”

Viola took a sip of tea and said, “I don’t know how you do it. I’m tired.”

“Go back to bed.”

“If you come I will.”

“That would not be sleeping...and do not tempt me. I have to go to the orchards.”

“You’re shaming me with your work ethic. Can we talk a little?”

“Come into the kitchen. I want to feed you.”

Viola sat up, sliding to the edge of Ragnar’s big chair. “Couldn’t I be near you for a little? I want to touch you.”

“Ah,” he said, moving his stretched-out body against the back of the long wide davenport to make room. “*Koma*.”

She lay down and Ragnar drew her in with his hard sinewy arm held firmly across her ribs. “How can you make me so happy? What is it?”

“You know, my *lille* songbird. *Jeg elsker deg* -- my Norsk declaration of love...sounds better that way.” He kissed her hair.

“But no one else could do it like this.”

“That is the part you like to call perfect.”

“Why did you run away to sea so young? You must have loved your farm...the life on your farm.”

“*Ja*, I did...until my father’s brother came to live with us. A Lutheran minister who had slipped off the edge of the real world into the deep end of fanaticism. I was twelve years old and suddenly everything was ruined by this lunatic. There was caterwauling and praying every minute of the day, which naturally changed not a hair in the goat’s beard.”

Viola giggled delightedly. “What a clear picture you’ve made. My poor child, my poor little twelve-year-old boy. So then you--”

“Because I was not steeped in that mythic madness from an early age, I saw it for what it was. I refused to join with my more submissive sisters and younger brother in that fatuous waste of time...talking constantly to empty air. My parents went along with it so there was nothing I could do. I got out of the way, worked at our highland *seter*, our chalet for livestock tending...or fished. At home my only sanctuary was an old storage outbuilding where I read books. I stood it for a year and left. I could not speak a word of English.”

“Now it’s taught in all Norwegian schools. How did you learn?”

“The way I learned every other language I have managed to get by in: by human contact, reading. *Et språk er aldri nok*, you see? -- one tongue is not enough. Sometimes I was on British merchant vessels.”

“Yes, that’s what I’ve been hearing from you, Brit English mixed with American English spoken with a Norwegian accent.

“So I’ve got to thank your mad uncle for the coming of Ragnar.”

“*Ja*, you are right, that *jaevla dust* did cause some of this.”

“What does that mean?”

“Bloody moron. *Koma*, let me fix your breakfast.”

“First tell me about the beautiful textile hanging on the wall in your bedroom. Is it from Norway?”

“*Ja*, my sister sent it to me. It is an *åkle*. *Åklær* were bed covers...now more decorative. My grandmother wove it from the wool of the *spelsau* sheep. The bed covers were made for warmth but they also decorated many dim sooty farm homes in those long months of darkness.”

“Lovely red flowers with eight petals.”

“*Ja*, called *åttebladrose*. I often saw it as a child.”

“I want to talk with you about so many things..about Mama and Daddy...and about Mama’s lover...writers, philosophers...mad Nietzsche and wise Hume...and why humans can’t use a larger frame of reference. It’s incredible, all the foolishness and madness of the blunted mind. I’ll tell you my favorite writers and you’ll tell me yours. We’ll--”

Ragnar laughed and drew her hair away from the back of her neck to kiss the feverish damp nape. “I will talk about anything you want. You will make certain of it, I can see that. We will teach each other a lot of things. Now, *forstandig* woman, wise woman, please take your *lille* bare feet to my clean warm kitchen floor.”

“Is it warm, your kitchen floor?”

“*Ja*, I installed heat beneath the floors everywhere in this soundly built former bunkhouse. Even *your* house does not have that.”

He drew her from the davenport. She looked down, her feet settling on a friendly Navaho wool carpet, patterned in stripes of sage green, thinner ones of cactus flower red, and rows of black crests, antelope horns? It felt luxuriously warm.

“For all this you will have to eat.”

“I want to eat. I want to eat whatever you cook.”

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Ragnar took Viola home after a breakfast of scrambled eggs with dill and smoked salmon, and freshly squeezed orange juice, which he had found she craved. He carried her into her house because her shoes were still damp and her feet were bare. “Now you can sleep as long as you want. These floors are cold, where are your slippers?”

“Upstairs. I’ll get them in a minute.” She swung the bag that Ragnar had filled with her clothes and shoes.

“I will not see you tonight. I have to go to a meeting in town.”

“What meeting?” Viola asked, dropping the bag. She leaned on her large front door, her arms hugging the red plaid shirt she still wore -- she had decided to appropriate it for an indefinite period.

“Just a meeting at the library. *Nei*, do not imagine any foolishness. Remember I am on the board...and we hold different meetings in our new building. Our library is the best in the county. I want it to remain so. We are finally installing much newer computers...selecting them this evening.”

“Oh...computers represent my downfall...terrible hypocrisy,” she said, trying to show no concern at the mention of the library.”

“Please, Wild Vi, work at your writing and your sleep tonight. You cannot be anxious whenever I go to Hayfield.”

“I...was only thinking that you might have to console a tearful woman. I myself would be inconsolable. I’d be--”

“I have already done that...nothing too serious. I want to kiss you goodbye. Tonight I will think of you as you were last night.”

“Tonight I will *wish* it were last night.” She lifted her face to be kissed, hoping to make it last until done again.

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“China, the land of the Han, who are ninety-three percent of the population, China having twenty percent of the world’s population, about one point three billion humans. If you go into the street of any large city, you will be looking at a sea of shiny black heads, thousands and thousands and thousands and then millions. You may be frightened or depressed or claustrophobic from these densely pressed together masses of underpaid workers coming and going -- sometimes compelled to stay away from their families for years in order to provide for them -- because it makes you feel, and rightly so, that you are nothing, one single blip of life no more important than a busy ant on a huge anthill. If you go into a school in a remote village or small town, you will inevitably find the stern, well-indoctrinated teacher teaching English, the language of money, but you may not know it is English until you listen a bit. And what the teacher will be teaching the students to hear and repeat in that stretched, oddly accented and inoperable rendition of English is where all the oil in the world can be found, who controls it, who buys and sells it, and where China stands in the race to possess it. The teacher will tell the glazed-eyed students, in ersatz English, that China is doing very well. Yes, making great progress, and this is the most important thing for them to consider, for it means: the possibility of housing, of which there is little or none; cars, of which there are more and more, with fewer places to put them, but new roads on which to drive them steadily carving up land; factories, of which there will be more and more, often generated by foreigners; but alas also tons and tons of pollution going into the atmosphere. All of this makes you want to seek out even more remote villages, fleeing over wild rivers into deep valleys or across high deserts of drifting powdery yellow loess, eventually drained marshes; rugged mountainous countryside, always magnificently scenic. In those presently money-obsessed villages you will find some of the most primitive living conditions imaginable, except that, barring flood or famine, which regularly occur, the people are, of course, agricultural and therefore generally

able to produce something to eat. Yes, there is a growing young rich class, but the enormous population is aging, alongside a constant target of slowing birth rate, which is still a demographic uncertainty, yet national health care was discontinued in 1979 -- even with ongoing reforms, rural areas have little or no health care assistance. The terrible thing about China is its high density of population. The fear among the ruling elite that this huge unstable mass will fall into groups of anarchy -- threatening a tight but tenuous domination -- always encourages vigilant repression; an authoritative process demanding no deviation from the overseeing power. But most of China is too busy feeding itself to care about politics; still there remains an ancient less conscious tincture of Confucian teaching in their behavior: honor the family forward and backward and by extension the ruling government. The insular Chinese have always been the most genealogically-minded people on earth. Each person possesses that generation's ideogram, the person's name a double ideogram that is quickly identifiable in time on the family tree. The wonderful thing about China, aside from a varied and incredibly rich topography, is its amazing history. One might well ask: how could it have come to this? It was, for a very long time, a segmented, broken apart, natural-barrier-ridden land, rife with brutal warlords and bandits, downright ungovernable as a sovereign totality -- until the Age of Mao. Presently, it greedily focuses on any and all world trade arrangements, but it remains a repressed country, which is its nervous government's answer to the catastrophic threat of chaos. Communism is not even moribund, but rather in the same useless limbo as Mao Zedong, refrigerated in his Tian'an Men Guangchang mausoleum, *The Square of the Gate of Heavenly Peace* in Beijing. It was the *zouzi pai*, those friendly to capitalism, led by Deng Xiaoping, who cleverly invited capital and capitalists into China in the seventies, ending the Mao era and changing the face of China forever. As everywhere else today, China bows to the money god, the god with no conscience. It might well over-extend itself and fall into a dangerous recession. On the other hand, when the hungry Han beast finally gets its

mouth fully open it might well swallow the world.”

This was Hugh’s initial sally into China, not prolix, inviting.

Viola had listened with intense and grateful concentration, knowing herself introduced to an open-ended investigation that an entire span of life could never finish.

“It’s a subject so multifarious its study is endless.”

“Well, enough of that,” Hugh responded. He got up from his chair and walked around one of his work tables, fingering papers and books as if he intended to plunge into work, and as if Viola had already left. But it turned out that he was merely ruminating on something.

Viola could feel the mood shift, the room growing dimmer as the white exterior light diminished in a thick drift of large snowflakes. She had wanted him to go on, eventually narrowing to specific events related to himself, but had learned much earlier that it was no use opposing his resolve once made. He was now focusing on her, those penetrating black eyes burning bright with foreboding, the brightest glitter in their wintry blue grotto.

“Let’s go for a walk in the snow,” she nervously suggested, a countering effort so ridiculous to him he laughed.

“Have you looked out the window?” He fell into his chair.

“It’s just a friendly flurry of snowflakes, harmless enough, and you need exercise. Only a short walk. Can’t I tempt you?”

“You do tempt me. I’m beginning to know you...you’re very smart and you do tempt me. I see what you’ve done to Ragnar...and what he’s done to you, made you *gu ròu xiàng lián*: as inseparable as blood kin; quite an accomplishment to do that to an independent worldly woman like you. He’s a large man, does he hurt you with his lovemaking? Do you like that big Norwegian father figure keeping you in line?”

Viola felt the blood rush to her face, the quick anger that made her want to throw something at him -- if there had been anything at all within reach she might have. She leapt from the davenport, her arms straight and rigid, all of her optimism going up in flames.



“You could never ruin anything so fine with only your degrading mouth, but you’ve stepped over a boundary that perhaps cannot be recrossed. I thought you liked Ragnar. How sad...how sad.”

“I *do* like Ragnar. I almost love him...his wisdom. He is Odin, the Norwegian god of gods...the Solon of Hayfield and environs, a wise man. How could I not admire him in every way? How could I not envy such immaculate subtlety of independence? He’s above reproach. No matter what gossips around here say about him they always end with high praise. Here, Ragnar possesses nothing much material, therefore everything. There’s a masterful sagacity involved in that. See how he doesn’t own the farm and yet does possess it. See how he appears not to own you, but has you as absolutely as he has the farm.”

“You are just as pathetic as any Hayfield gossip. You’re not well, Hugh...and alone too much, growing very strange. Really I...”

In the next instant powerful emotions flooded her body. She sat down on the edge of the davenport and began to rub her temples with the tips of her fingers. “I cannot stand much more of this. Dammit! *Damn, damn!* I’ve tried so hard...I’ve tried so hard to...”

“To what? To *what?*” Hugh suddenly stood above her. “That’s the question, that’s the point. Why the hell are you here with me?”

“You. *You!* How could you ever have been a father?”

He stood a moment looking at her with wildly unfocused eyes, a ferocity heretofore unseen, then grabbed her by her hair and pulled her up roughly against him. “I’ll show you how it’s done. You’re still fertile, aren’t you? I’ll show you how it’s possible!”

“Stop, *stop!* Hugh! Oh, Hugh, I’m sorry I said that. *Sorry!*”

“Christ!” He let go of her. “Jesus, this is...*Jesus Christ!*”

He backed away, distancing her from his own imperilment?

“Put on your coat, put it on right now. We’ll walk in the damn snow...until we’re numb with cold. You’ll forgive me, I’ll

forgive you...fall at your feet and freeze there...cauterize the fiend in me with ice...is that sensational enough? I mean it.”

Violea watched him as she moved cautiously away toward her coat.

“Don’t be afraid of me, I won’t hurt you, Lea. That was just too much. You realize it was too much? I was a caring father. I might have had something of myself to leave behind, a sweet little thing who might have embraced life, left something of *her* self behind. But what does it matter now? All meaningless. What the hell does it matter?”

Violea hurried to Hugh and clasped his arm. “Yes...yes, let’s put on our coats and go outside. Look, the blizzard’s thinning. We can walk in the fresh snow...pure and clean...there’s not a mark anywhere.”

“You won’t tell Ragnar? You won’t tell him what spewed out of my disgusting mouth?”

“No, of course not.”

“The trouble is, Lea, rage could happen again. I have no control over myself these days. The anger rises and falls inside my head like a surging sea in a hurricane.”

As they plodded through the uneven snow to reach the traversable path her truck had made, Hugh said, “I’ve actually done a little work. I may let you read it soon.” She looked up at him with a sad smile. Every barren branch, to the most insignificant twig, was laden with fresh snow. The fast-creeping violet of late afternoon had tinted the enclosing land with a hue Violea could only think of as the color of melancholy. Her chemistry had gone awry from adrenalin, and she was down again. Hugh held her hand as they trudged along. She thought of Hansel and Gretel, she and Hugh lonely emblematic figures making their way through an imagined conspiracy of snow-locked darkening woods.

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Violea sat at the oak work table nearest her rose-walled bedroom, leaning on her elbow and staring down on the garden.

She had left the back yard light on so she could see the snow from time to time. Now it was tumbling against the glass with ever so delicate, mesmerizing little brushes of sound. She began to think of her mother. Martha's relationship with Hume had become a sorrowful one. The cancer must have been waiting, dormant in him when Viola went away, and although he wrestled with it for years and outlived Martha, he never heard from his son, according to Hugh's own recent disclosure. Hugh had told her that when his mother died his reserved father became even more formal and distant, and that their earlier relationship never recovered from the loss of his mother. He had broken all ties with his father, perhaps resenting his transference of love to Martha, but Hugh painfully regretted that cruelly insensitive action. Obviously Martha had never told Hume the real reason why Viola had so suddenly been sent away. Very likely she feared his or his son's intervention in the child's stable existence. Perhaps Hume mistakenly suspected some prejudice against his son, but it was really Martha's conviction that they were both too young to ruin their lives. How different it might have been if Hugh had been told the truth then. After their harrowing clash today, Viola was again convinced that Hugh was not ready to hear anything, that he would be violently irreconcilable at not having been told long ago. She grew even more fearful of ever bringing it up. But what if he did rage? Did he not have a right to be angry? Was it not a legitimate response she must eventually withstand? She had often rehearsed explanations for everything: that she was such a child when she went away; that later, when she wanted to bring her son and Hugh together to make an end of Marcus' anger, she could not find Hugh. She never knew that he had changed his name. Nervously stroking her fingers through her hair, she felt the pain of her scalp where Hugh had pulled quite hard. Only a short time ago, he knelt in the snow, repentant, stroking her hand. "I know you'll come back here," he hectorred, unyielding in his uncanny disbelief, "but I don't know why. Why Lea? *Why?*" He was such a pitiful, volatile mass of unknowns and extreme contradictions. One minute she wanted to

strangle him, and the next tell him everything, acceding to abuse perhaps justifiable.

Her cell phone rang. There was Ragnar's calm even voice, asking her about her day. She told him little, only that she had seen Hugh and that she was seriously tired and planned to turn in early. She could not face him after what Hugh had said. As if some taint would come to Ragnar through her, as if she herself were a party to wrongful and harsh acts that must not intrude upon his life. Concurrently, she felt that she was developing a very complex relationship with Hugh, from which she might not be able to extricate herself without resulting damage to him, or perhaps to both of them. Were they gradually but unavoidably becoming co-dependents in the making of some tragic consequence they could neither foresee nor avert?

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She ought to take her own advice, Viola thought, for when she told Hugh that he was alone too much she might have included herself. She missed her close friendship with Virginia, but was presently too disappointed in her to even answer her e-mail. Last night she lay for a long time watching snowflakes swirl past her window, never having turned off the yard lights, and was at last hypnotized into sleep. Buggy had awakened her once, doing his regular nocturnal rampage, his claws digging into the carpet as he swept through the dark room. His navigation was superb at night, even in fits of wild speed. He wore himself out this way and liked to sleep at her feet while she worked at her desk during the day, by then a completely docile animal. If only she could slough off her own fits of rage in an unseen private midnight tear, one leaving her becalmed and tractable during the day.

She dreamed that her mother was sitting at the kitchen table, stuffing tall canning jars with juicy golden peach halves. Viola wanted to tell her something, but only smiled in a dreamy, blissful state of mystery. She wanted to speak of wonderful books in the long summer evenings, of lying in the haymow beside a beautiful

young boy and reading renowned writers who must have changed the world in important ways; and who, as she devoured their books, would transform her idle uselessness into a future of fine and worthwhile endeavors. Martha looked at Viola's secretive face and began to cry. She appeared to have said, "Why have you taken away my sun?" Viola answered, "It's only setting, Mama. Stop a minute and look out the window. There, peach dazzle in the sky, gold and red...see how your good work still shines everywhere. You can rest now. You're in me too and I'm going to change the world." "My sun, my sun!" her mother wept. Viola floated toward the door, calling over her shoulder, "I'll have to go away if you don't stop. You'll make me go away." But when she turned around it was her caring mother who was gone. Abandonment, loneliness, opened her mouth in a shuddering wail, but no tears would come. Slowly she floated up to the hayloft, but that too was abandoned. Beyond the loft door the dark cobalt dome of night curved down to a bleeding horizon of peachblow. She slumped onto the straw. Her heavy body was rapidly changing, whirling dry stalks settling over her face, smothering her in mounting coldness. Snow? No, ice. Cries of agony awakened her.

Although she must be regularly dreaming, Viola was unable to remember any dreams of late, only this newest illusion. She pondered its implications as she drove her truck over the snowy road. She was on her way back from grocery shopping in Hayfield and had decided to stop at the March farm and look in on Alfreda. Within the local farming community, dropping in unannounced was generally not considered rude, if done at a reasonable hour. She had been tempted into buying a large cheerful bouquet of early-forced daffodils, and now divided them while sitting in her truck outside the March's two-story dormered farmhouse. Her new tractor-soled, fleece-lined boots, purchased earlier today in Hayfield, brought her briskly up the shoveled but slushy walkway. She knocked and stood at the door holding the flowers. Alfreda answered wearing a faded torn apron over a cotton housecoat, and worn mules on her feet. She pushed back thinning frizzy hair,

diffidently smiling a welcome, then took the daffodils, sniffing their bitter freshness with childish delight.

“Like a breath of spring. Thank you. Mine in the yard won’t be coming along for a while yet. I would never have thought to buy any. Come in, come in. I’ll make more coffee...or is it tea?”

“Tea if it isn’t too much trouble. Should I take off my boots?”

Alfreda laughed and waved a dismissive hand. “No, we’re not like Ragnar...unless there’s a lot of mud. I just keep the floor mopped.”

They went into a big yellow kitchen with 1950s chrome and yellow chairs, a yellow table, and an L-shaped counter rounded at one end and covered in red formica. Alfreda held out the daffodils -- “Yellow for my kitchen.” -- then slid them into a glass of water and took Viola’s coat. When the teakettle was on, she wanted to change her clothes.

“You pour it into that red teapot, and I’ll be right back.”

Viola pulled her blue knit turtleneck down over her jeans and stood looking out the windows above the sink, at a snowy rail fence and a serene pasture. The teakettle reached its boil with a piercing whistle. She was sitting at the table nursing a white mug of English Breakfast tea when Alfreda returned, followed by a large, sleepy-eyed tortoise-shell cat with its black tail rising straight in the air.

“How about cinnamon rolls? I make them from scratch and freeze them. Just takes a minute in the microwave.”

“Sounds good to me. I tasted your cherry pie the other night and it was wonderful, those sour old pie cherries Mama used to make into heavenly sweet tart pies. It really took me back, Alfreda.”

While Viola was talking, Alfreda turned to get the rolls from the freezer, and Viola studied her plump little body covered in wine slacks and a gray sweater. The cat was sniffing Alfreda’s new-looking house slippers; they were like satiny ballerina shoes

with tiny bows.

“You were so pretty in your nice dress the other night...really cute to see you alongside Ragnar. He *is* so tall. I’ve got a little crush on that man -- nothing I haven’t said to Bill. He just laughs.”

“I was probably overdressed.”

“No...most folks like an excuse to dress up...especially for potluck.” Alfreda handed her a cinnamon roll on a red Fiesta plate.

“Mmm, so nice and warm...walnuts with gooey-sweet caramel...tasty as your pie. I imagine you’re great at making holiday feasts.”

“Not as much as when my two girls were right here...both married farmers. I’ve two grandchildren. Were you okay on Thanksgiving, Viola?”

“Oh, I guess it went right by me. I’m not much into most holiday celebrations. I used to love big Thanksgivings on the farm though.”

“Ragnar cooked a turkey for us...just brought it over and I made all the trimmings. He and Bill drank some of his *brennevin*. Ragnar played his guitar and serenaded us; his voice is surprising -- he and Britta used to sing duets...such lovely harmony. Then the boys played chess half the night. I and my cat Token finally went to bed.”

Viola tried to recall what she was doing on Thanksgiving and realized that she had been at the clinic. That must have been why they fed her turkey.

“Oh...was Britta here on Thanksgiving?”

Alfreda looked at her as if intending to scold. “No, as I say, Ragnar and Bill played chess half the night.”

She reached across the long length of the table without getting up and poured more tea into Viola’s mug. “Well, I’ve got to stick to my coffee. I only keep this around for tea drinkers.”

“I just realized where I was on Thanksgiving: at the clinic in Hayfield, recovering from influenza.”

“Uh-huh, that’s why I asked if you were all right. Ragnar

was worried about you. They wouldn't let him bring you any holiday food. It's different, him having his boss around now to think about."

Violea fixed her gaze on Alfreda's cunning pale blue eyes, and almost said, *Just what do you know or not know? Do you know what those two women at the Grange thought they knew?*

"Alfreda, I don't like being called his boss. I'm not at all. He manages the farm and I do very little bossing. How could I? I certainly don't know enough to run the farm...I am trying to learn."

"Well, you know what I mean. You own the farm, he works for you. "What are you doing on Christmas, Violea?"

"Christmas? I never do much of anything on Christmas. I really don't like that holiday...everyone buying stuff like crazy...it's a sad time." She smiled apology. "Guess I sound like a cranky old naysayer."

"We don't do much anymore either. Kids are at in-laws this year. You could come over, you know. I'd have an excuse to cook a bit more fancy...and Ragnar would probably come over and cook too."

"Oh...well I...how nice. I'll have to see if he has any plans. Thank you, Alfreda. I'll let you know." She looked at her watch and said, "Guess I've made enough of a nuisance of myself, and I've got some groceries in the truck so I should probably get going. I enjoyed this. I hope you'll come to my place and we'll do the same."

Alfreda stood up and offered a pensive little smile. "I don't drive so much in this kind of weather...got a frozen toe joint and it hurts to put my foot on the accelerator. But I'm pretty stubborn. I get out and do it anyway in better weather. The cold's bad for this darned arthritis."

"Maybe I could drive you into town for lunch sometime. I don't know about the restaurants. Are there any good ones?"

"There's a couple of dinner houses that aren't bad -- for Bill and me, special occasions -- an Italian place, mostly pizza...a pretty good pancake house...and the standard junk food places."



“Then we’ll have pancakes...whenever you say.”

As Viola was driving away she wondered why on earth she had said she had groceries in the truck, as if they were going to spoil in weather that was colder than her refrigerator.

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Returning from Alfreda’s, Viola settled down to write, but deep introspection in developing a bad character made angst loom larger and larger. Altered chemistry was overtaking her again: a paralyzing guilt, first because of her mother, then everything else. She had returned here to recover, in the process managing to affect others’ lives in damaging ways. She was, in these erratic days, like a fitful feverish child, longing to be cared for and very self-centered. But her sudden moods of remorse, of melancholy, were no excuse for involving others. She had thrown Hugh into a terrible state and, it now seemed to her, had thrown herself at Ragnar. She began to imagine Ragnar and Britta singing spirited duets. Poor Britta must feel almost like a widow, to lose such a worthy man. By evening, when her melancholy very often increased, she had become miserable with self-loathing. Something ominous settled over her, leaving a dark somber state of distraction. She felt herself slipping oddly away and vaguely knew she must prevent it from happening, perhaps walk herself to empty exhaustion in the snow, any effort to escape the actual physical pain of remorse. It was too cold to go jogging, even if she could have endured it. She half-heartedly tried to exercise a little on the living room rug, but was very soon staring fixedly into threatening darkness, once again assaulted by accusing voices. She nibbled frantically at her fingers, edging further and further toward a grievous black chasm. It was no use, no use.

Frantically retrieving her cell phone from her coat pocket, she dialed Ragnar’s number. When he answered she said, “Ragnar, please, please will you listen to me?...just listen to me and don’t say anything until I’ve finished. I’ve done terrible things to everyone. I’ve treated you very badly, selfishly...I think I’ve ruined a good

relationship you had. I'm so sorry. I've been like a greedy child just longing to be cared for. A couple of days ago I had another terrible clash with Hugh. I've done nothing but severely disturb him...mostly confuse him. I've been careless and...cruel. Forgive me for interrupting your peaceful existence in such an unfortunate way. I've caused you misery and exhaustion and...I can't do that anymore...can't be a problem for you too. You shouldn't have been so good to me." Her strange voice droned on and on, until it seemed she had begun to apologize for her very existence. But once again she appeared to be seeking relief at another's expense. Attempting to apologize for everything, her floundering talking jag became a sort of mental collapse, repeated sentences dangling, words ill-chosen. Why couldn't she stop, how could she stop? She heard a key turn in the front door. The phone slid from her trembling hand.

Ragnar rushed into the room. He wore only a t-shirt and jeans and was barefoot. Oh, not barefoot, *not barefoot!*

She was sitting in the middle of her living room floor with the phone lying nearby, did not remember at all how she got there or why she was there. Ragnar strode toward her. She stared in shock at his reddened wet feet. He had come here like that, through the snow. Had she done this? She clasped her hands over his cold ankles and said, "My darling, poor darling...your wet feet, cold wet feet. Did I cause this? Oh I must have. Forgive me, can you forgive me?"

By an indistinct flurry of actions, she swiftly found herself unclothed and in the shower, warm water pouring down on both of them; wonderful soothing steaming water, and Ragnar's dispensing fingers lifting wet strands of hair from her face. She closed her eyes and laid her head against him, listening to the steadily splashing water, content to feel nothing but his warm wet skin, his fingers threading through her hair. She had not even the will to hold herself up, certain that if he let go of her she would fall down on the tiles in a quivering heap.

Some time later, Ragnar was stretched diagonally from

corner to corner on her too-short queen-sized bed, holding her back against him under the loose comforter. She lifted her head, looking around, then at Ragnar. He eased her down, his mouth caressing her neck.

“What happened? I’m afraid I...God, am I losing my mind?”

“*Nei*, go back to sleep. Your brain needs a lot of sleep to repair itself. It *will* repair itself.”

“But I called you, didn’t I? I wasn’t talking to myself...or was I? I called you...didn’t I? You’re here. I think I was really awful...God! going on and on...talking a lot of gibberish--”

“*Ja*, talking to make me come...but you did not know that. You only had to ask more directly...but could not. I came and now you will sleep. No more talking. Close your eyes. I am here and we are warm. Nothing else is of any importance now. Sleep, Wild Vi.”

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Violea sat up, looking groggily around her room, and found Ragnar settling into a chair by her bed.

“*Beklager*, I could not take any more of that constricting position...thought I was going to crush you. I had to go back to my cabin anyway.”

“You’ve been gone? But your feet...how did you get--”

“The same way...moving fast. Last night I was in a hurry.”

“Oh, God, I caused you to--”

“Will you stop. I do not want to hear another apology from you for anything.” He fell silent, his attention thoughtfully on her, and after a while said, “Please get a longer bed.”

“Oh, but I--” She looked at him, wondering if she was supposed to laugh. There was no hint of sarcasm, mischief, only the discerning blue-gray eyes with cherished crows feet at their corners, only the reasonable tan brow, the long straight nose, high cheekbones, and the irresistibly fleshed lips held smoothly, lightly together; a mouth not at all judgmental but, as she so often found, magnificently serene. Then an arched tawny eyebrow and a wry

smile jarred her back to life.

“I will have one delivered here if you do not.”

“No, I’ll...do something about it.”

“You have slept about twelve hours. Are you hungry now?”

“So *long* I’ve slept...that long? I suppose I should try to eat a bite of something...or maybe just drink some orange juice.”

“You will have orange juice but you will also eat.”

“Are you very angry with me, Ragnar? I don’t blame you for--”

“*Nei*, how can I be angry? But you need to be told what to do while your mind heals. If you do not know why I am here, you have forgotten everything I said. But you have not forgotten, have you? I am not going to listen to any more nonsense.”

“Tough love?”

“*Ja*, good. Tough love.”

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Ragnar fixed *Viola* breakfast in her kitchen: cinnamon and brown sugar oatmeal with cream, and freshly squeezed orange juice. This mild fare was easy to eat and filled her emptiness with a temporary sense of comfort she could not deny. Ragnar was about to get on with his work day, and *Viola*, although she would not dare to apologize, was sorry that she had caused him sleepless aggravation. He remained at her large old kitchen table a few minutes longer, drinking the coffee he had made himself, appearing to ponder a difficult subject.

*Viola* wanted to redeem herself with a show of useful intent, and hoped by her appearance to make that clear. She had not worn her robe but dressed in blue jeans and a dark fir-green turtleneck under a warm gray *Polartec* vest. Some listlessness was inescapable, but she had worked her wool-stockinged feet into the brown suede moccasins she often wore around the house, usually without stockings; convincing herself that this enervating effort of aptly clothing herself would get her onto the right path, at least psychologically. She swallowed a little of her cooling English

Breakfast tea and waited to hear whatever was on Ragnar's mind, fully aware that her increasingly severe mood swings troubled him deeply. She knew him well enough to know that he would not go until he had left her with some piece of advice, or at least a few incisive observations, which might beneficially keep her going throughout the day. She continued to be surprised at how well he understood her, could anticipate her, but lately her generally stoic nature was unsustainable, her impaired condition more readable.

"You already know what I am going to say, Wild Vi."

"Perhaps not entirely."

"You cannot let this continue. It is harming you...not telling Hugh about his son. He will likely not accept it very well at first, and blame you for leaving him in the dark, but you must do it."

Viola set her cup down hard and rubbed her eyes. "Oh, dammit, how can I? The time's never right. Last time he nearly..."

"Has he ever hurt you in one of his outbursts...hurt you physically in any way?"

She wanted to be truthful with Ragnar. He was always so utterly straightforward, honest, commonsensical -- and incisive, oh so very, very incisive -- that he plainly imposed the truth; any other ploy with him would be foolish and self-defeating. And yet she did not want to answer. A little pulling of the hair could surely be excused when Hugh had so contritely begged her forgiveness. "No, he hasn't," she answered slowly, looking out the breakfast nook window.

Ragnar sighed and stood up. She could not tell whether or not he believed her, but he startled her by saying, "If you cannot tell him, I will do it. *Nei*, you must allow me to do it if you cannot. What is happening is damaging to both of you. I worry to think of you there, inflicting torture on each other. I worry about you."

"Please, you have to let me do it. We're making progress. We have some good, some *very* good moments. He's opening up, and I'm gaining his trust, so please--"

"All possibly to be thrown away when you tell him he has a son, whom you failed to mention twenty-eight years ago. Can you

not see that? I know myself how angry I would be if this was kept from me.”

“But you wouldn’t do anything harmful, not you.”

“*Ja*, listen to yourself. It is not *me*, it is Hugh we are here considering, a damaged, unpredictable man of painful sensitivity.”

“All right. I’m going over there today and I’ll see how things go. I may or I may not tell him. I don’t know...I don’t know. It’s going to do things to me too.”

“I will be in the orchard if you need me, with my cell phone, but *Herregud*, get it over with...for your own peace of mind, Wild Vi.”

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When Violeta called Hugh to say she was coming, he was not his usual noncommittal, come-if-you-want self, and told her to stay away. He was working on something and not in the mood to be distracted. She was surprised, and for a moment at a loss, but merely rejoined that she was happy to hear it.

She went up to the musty old attic and began taking framed photographs from boxes, deciding to place some of them on the tables in various rooms throughout the house, tables that Mira had kept barren to facilitate dusting. These were the family members who had originated this house and farm, created with harsh labor and sweat, and they deserved to be released from oblivion and put on display. Eventually she came across a small, silver-framed photograph of her father and mother; her father, whose name was Niklas, and her mother standing close together. Her father looked embarrassed for the most part, perhaps because her mother was leaning playfully toward him as if about to kiss, and her pretty left high-heeled foot was lifted off the ground in a very stylized and flirtatious pose. They were standing near a backyard gazebo that no longer existed, very nicely dressed, as if they had just returned from a trip. Violeta had never seen her father in such a fancy suit, or her mother quite so young and lovely and teasing. Could it be the end of their honeymoon? How accurately put. They had

only managed to bring forth *Viola*, before her father went off to other conquests and her mother withdrew. Martha once told *Viola* that they traveled across America on their honeymoon. Probably this was their homecoming.

She carried a few most favored photographs downstairs and placed them around, but the small silver-framed one of her mother and father she set on the table beside her wine leather easy chair in the living room. She made tea and brought it back to her chair, sipping it and looking at the photograph and then around the big handsome room.

The sharp winter light, which poured densely through the glass of three sets of bay windows, was partially filtered in a more gossamery softness by the plain stiff organdy curtains hanging straight at the window edges. The old striped davenport, where she and Ragnar had sat talking, shimmered below the window light. It rested on a broad thick Persian carpet of yellow-beige displaying an ornate brownish central medallion. The rug was well cared for but showing wear, and had been there as long as *Viola* could remember. Her mother periodically had it taken away and cleaned. The floor beneath and around its edges was wide-slatted, varnished golden hardwood. At the center of the beam-supported inner north wall, a shiny liver-colored ceramic hearth lay below the arched, pocked gray stones of the gaping basalt fireplace; it was built into the interior wall at the house's inception; on its other side, in the large remodeled kitchen, which also had a high ceiling, was a smaller fireplace, from earliest times used for morning heat. The living room's wine leather davenport was set before the fireplace, just behind a long mahogany coffee table, and backed by a Brazilian rose-wood sofa table with squat jade-green square Chinese lamps at both ends, providing ample reading light. Martha had liked to read there before the fire, covered with the wine wool afghan still folded over the davenport. No television had ever been placed in this room, nor would its intrusion have been welcome here. There were television sets in the bedrooms; these were generally looked at only for the weather and news. Niklas, in his quieter rare evenings

at home, preferred to read, reading mostly magazines, newspapers, or travel books. Viola was very glad to have been raised in this manner, always with books, yet none of them so fine or provocative or scholarly as Hugh's early enthralling works -- purchased by his supportive father she now realized. Hugh had been unable to comprehend his father's long bereavement. Now of course he did.

She thought of her sprightly grandmother sitting on the striped davenport beneath the windows, with her flying fingers forever working at something: quilts or knitting or clumsy old fancywork, anything to keep her nervous hands busy. This was in her last years when she could no longer roam the fields and woods, hunting her cherished wild plants, dried weeds, and beloved wild flowers. She had married Viola's grandfather, Charles Ender, at age nineteen and thereafter rarely went away from the farm. She was surprisingly durable, being so small and quite frail-looking, and had lost two baby sons before incorrigible Niklas came along -- *screaming for life*, she used to say. Of her grandfather, Viola could remember very little, a sullen, thin, very hardworking man, but kind enough. The Ender men, except for the patriarch, her formidable great-great-grandfather, Felix, all died too young, either by accident or from overwork and subsequent diseases.

In the evening, Ragnar knocked at her front door, carrying a large tray covered with foil and wrapped in a flannel blanket to keep his Parmesan halibut, garlic mashed potatoes, and filbert green beans hot. He had driven over, and now slipped off his polished loafers at the door, walking onto her terra-cotta-tiled kitchen floor in his tan socks; especially because of Ragnar, Viola kept her floors spotless. He removed his freshly brushed sheepskin jacket, revealing a black wool shirt tucked into tan corduroy slacks sporting a shiny-buckled brown leather belt -- so prepossessing, with his recently cut thick silver hair combed into neat waves, she imagined him a skaldic chief.

She went up to him and laid her hand over his shirt front. He leaned down and lifted her into a long kiss, then tugged her hair



gently and looked into her eyes, so that she completely forgot about the platters of food waiting on the counter. She drew his head down to kiss him again, tasting the lovely caraway. “*Brennevin.*”

“*Ja*, merely a quick swallow of enjoyment after a hot shower and toothbrush. Does it bother you, my girl?”

“No, it’s delicious, so very you...a brawny fresh sweetness.”

“I looked for you today...thought you might be riding past the orchard. You did not leave the house?”

“No. Hugh is busy working on his writing. And I did a little writing myself...after I carried all the photographs you’ll see around the house down from the attic. I even polished the lovely old parquet floor beneath the dining room table. Let’s eat in there with candles and wine.” Her buoyant voice held a lively childish enthusiasm.

“Good...but perhaps no wine, Wild Vi...not presently. You know that for you wine is a depressant.”

“I suppose,” *Viola* said with some disappointment, but knew he was right. She went to get the silverware, plates, placemats, and cloth napkins, next filling tumblers with ice and water. While she lit the two cream candles placed in crystal holders on the large mahogany dining room table, *Ragnar* served the food.

“You’re so good...so good to me. It tastes wonderful, but how can I let you do this?”

“It is only an easily made supper...but decent food. I would be eating the same thing alone, so why not two of us? I like to feed you. I think you would not eat much otherwise.”

“I would. I do get hungry.”

“But when you eat you eat wrong...worthless food.”

When they had finished, they carried everything into the kitchen and washed the dishes. *Viola* said, “Let’s curl up on the davenport and talk about whatever comes into our heads. Shall we have a fire?”

“*Nei*, Wild Vi, let us go now to my place, before we settle into our pleasure. We will get too comfortable and then...we will

be too far away from my bed.”

A furry paw tapped Ragnar’s pant leg. “Hello, Buggy,” he said as Buggy made a dippy circuit of the kitchen, then swiftly returned, much more seriously focused. He had suddenly smelled something new and wonderful in his bowl as he passed by, just now discovering that Viola had placed some halibut skins there.

“By the way, today I...” Viola hesitated and wondered at her own reluctance to speak, feeling a little foolish.

“What is this, are you blushing? Not you. What?”

“Today I ordered a longer bed on the internet...a four-poster, larger, longer...everything that goes with it...for your...comfort.”

Ragnar threw back his head, grinning with delight. “For *our* comfort.” His head inclined to her with mildly teasing laughter.

“It turns out that specially made framed beds are incredibly expensive.”

“I will give it to you for Valentine’s Day.”

“You are so amusing. You will *not* give it to me, but you’ll have to assemble it, I think.”

“I will assemble it and immediately we will try it out. Ah, look at you, my shy woman of the world. Come on now, will you laugh with me? Laugh with me, my pretty *lille* sex.” He picked her up and whirled her around the kitchen, then set her down and said more seriously. “Get your coat. I will help you with your boots.”

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Ragnar and Viola were restfully stretched out on his long leather davenport, drinking hot chocolate and talking softly before a drumming alder-wood fire.

“I was in Hayfield very briefly late this afternoon...at the library to look at the new computers.”

“That’s nice,” Viola answered, not knowing what she was to make of this. Was it simply Ragnar being thoroughly honest as always? “How is the library? Is it going to survive all of this?” she could not resist asking.

“She is my friend and will remain so,” Ragnar answered

matter-of-factly. "I want to be able to talk about Hayfield, about the library or anything else there without difficulty. There should be none."

"I don't know how you do it. And I'm the one left to feel a guilty aversion to an innocent library -- a joy of my life."

"You cannot feel that way. You have done nothing...except become the joy of *my* life. Do not shake your head at me. I understand how you are. You have done nothing wrong. If I had not decided to act on...*nei*, there was not a decision -- I felt as I felt...and knew what you would feel, especially when you swore at me. There is no one else dead or alive I could know as I know you. It is our history and you as you are now...what you are. I want to feed you, make you healthy, help you as I can...talk to you more than I do, always more."

She took his large hand and ran her fingers across its top, a long-fingered hand of such dexterity; already so when she was five.

"Our history...so many we know are dead. Then it's our turn. Are you troubled by the certainty of dying, Ragnar?"

"Hardly at all. I spend scarce time thinking about it. I am too busy living. Dying generally does not take very long."

"How unfortunate that as soon as our evolving animal brains were far enough along to allow us to think abstractly -- qualifiedly to some greater or lesser degree -- we became so full of ourselves that we could not accept our own demise. Hence the escape of religion, all manner of religion the world over; so full of superstitions, terrified narcissism, they destroy the ephemeral span of time in which we all might peacefully coexist. Life, unusually untrammelled life at least, holds such great potentiality. It's a wonder. In and of itself it can be so very beautiful...especially in the rich manner of discovering things, of simply looking around at, looking *closely* at, the natural world, from the infinitesimal to that fiery macrocosm far, far out there. A world yet so desperately religious, participating in some form of greed, intolerance, hatred, xenophobia...or senseless wars to the point of genocide -- it's what I've seen around the world. The golden rule is so simple, yet it

eludes vast numbers.”

“*Ja*, so we travel our short, interesting journey...mostly unaware that as a species we are, perhaps fatally, trying ourselves out, like other failed trials along the dipping and rising turns of evolution.”

“Yes...yes, so we might very well annihilate ourselves...or a clever virus will do it for us. I wonder if we could possibly make it until our sun begins to burn out. That long and we could well be somewhere else. Another star system. Will we be there...or be nowhere?”

“You see how profoundly curious you can be? And the emotion of your wild animal nature, your brainstem, wants to counteract all that wisdom working just above it...to lead you down a troubling path.”

“How true. I and my brainstem start the same battle all over again every day. The world doesn’t want me to succeed.”

“I want you to succeed...by that I mean: to be comfortable with your existence...always as curious as you are now.”

“Then I need you in my world.”

“I may not always be your world, Wild Vi. If things go according to no plan, you will live some years beyond me. Your life should be as rewarding all the way to its end as mine continues to be. We must get you in a frame of mind to exhaust all of the positive that life holds...to use it up. To paraphrase what the writer Nikos Kazantzakis said, *When death comes to get us it will get only bags of bones.*”

Violea turned her head so that her cheek lay against Ragnar’s chest, and asked, “Why did you run through the snow barefoot?”

Ragnar laughed, kissed the top of her head and answered, “Because I could. *Nei*, I heard enough of that rambling misery and wanted it to stop...knew it had to stop at once...no time for shoes. I understood precisely why you called. Everything you said came from mind-numbing desperation...dangerously fouled chemistry. It was *me* you called.”

“Yes, and you held me in a warm shower...amazingly simple.

The result, because of you, far surpassed that of Valium.”

“My remedy was sudden forced distraction. Holding you in a warm shower was almost as good as where I will be holding you next...*koma*, off to bed, feather-light *lille* bird. *Herregud*, you weigh nothing.”

“Lucky for you, however much you feed me I’ll probably still be light as my grandmother...and she had a healthy appetite.”

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The smell of ham frying drifted from Ragnar’s kitchen as Viola swung her legs over the edge of the large bed. She was wishing she had a robe and slippers and, glancing toward the foot of the bed, saw a pretty fabric that held her attention: a plaid robe, soon found to be a good fit, along with a pair of fleece-lined suede moccasins.

Wearing her surprising discoveries, she entered the kitchen, blissfully flaunting her new apparel. Ragnar turned from his electric range and surveyed her with a critical eye.

“*Ja*, good. You like those colors?”

“I was so surprised...blue and violet plaid.”

“*Ja*, I thought you would steal all of my shirts.” He laughed and said, “How could I not buy it with those colors? I found it in a shop in Hayfield...and told the clerk it matched the eyes of my boss.”

“Oh, Ragnar, you didn’t?”

“*Nei*, but I was thinking of your eyes.”

“It’s so soft...cashmere...and these snuggly moccasins. I feel very special. How can I thank you?”

“You have...but you can eat my breakfast. You never had anything to wear when you left my bed in the morning. Will you still sometimes sleep with me here when you have the new bed?”

“I’ll sleep with you anywhere...in the fields...in the woods.”

“*Ja*, better wait for summer. Sit down. I am making my own brand of Eggs Benedict: hollandaise-topped eggs on toasted thin-sliced bagels with lox, capers, and fresh dill.”

“First I have to thank you.” She stood behind him and put her arms around his waist, fingering his silver buckle, then laid her face against the flannel warmth of his back. “*Jeg elsker deg,*” she tried in a careful voice, wondering if it could be understood.

Ragnar set down the spatula and turned around with an approving smile of gratitude. He tucked his hands into her armpits and lifted her up. It was the kiss again, that strange primitive act like no other, first waking her up then sending her back into dreamy arousal. She leaned away to look into his eyes, offering an inviting smile.

“From this soft mouth my *gebrokken* native tongue is hard to resist. Please sit down now or we will forget breakfast entirely.”

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“I’ve gotten some work done without your disturbing presence,” Hugh said, appearing to enjoy Viola’s quickly somber expression. “Of course I’ve also missed you, Lea, although I shouldn’t say so. I can’t *long* for you, can I? You belong to Ragnar. I can’t long for anyone anymore. There’s no hope for me in that regard. I’ve ruttet myself into impassivity. The path behind is strewn with bodies.”

“Have you been drinking, Hugh?”

“A little...since your phone call. I adjudged that if you were turning up I might as well call it a day. I haven’t drunk anything in a number of days. Been too busy with this damned interminable pantology I feel compelled to churn out.”

“Maybe I should come back another time,” Viola said, not having yet removed her coat.

“No, God no! Not now. I want you to drink with me.”

“I won’t do that, Hugh. I don’t feel at all like drinking in the middle of the day.”

“Once you did..until *his nibs* got hold of you.”

“I’m going now. Goodbye, Hugh.”

“Wait! I’m sorry. Look, I’m putting down my glass. I’ll drink no more and you may have tea.”

Hugh stood wanly, in faded jeans, black shirt, and scuffed moccasins, rubbing his shoulder and offering her a lonely, quite beseeching look that tumbled her heart.

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When they had talked a while about Hugh's early studies and a little about his travels as a young freelance writer, Viola said, "So we've both come back home to...well, I did have to attend to some farm business -- at least I thought I did, but it was all being well taken care of. Still, quite a lot more drew us back here, didn't it? Memories. Ties. There must be some solace in this place for you."

"Nothing quite so availing. I own this place; it's a suitable environment for...maybe some healing...emptiness filled with hard writing, a little reevaluation. I really can't afford to live anywhere else right now. I'm living frugally on my inheritance. My father wasn't rich by any means, but he was more clever at making money than I am. With me, it was always feast or famine. I'd sell a hard-won piece to a journal, pertinent news from a place no one wanted to go; sometimes, and not always by accident, I was in the right place at the right time -- a crisis situation -- then I'd have a nice chunk of cash. Later I had a wife and child. Viability dictated that I not write anything evaluative or judgmental about China -- like the existing facts -- until I was outside its borders. Of course now you can use the internet, but it's a slow process, because you have to know all the ways to circumvent the firewall that filters information, and without a pseudonym and a damned waste of mitigating obfuscation you risk being harassed and thrown out -- rising numbers will prevail, and that vacillating commerce may eventually smother scrutiny."

Viola got off the davenport and walked up to the front windows to look out at the barren snowy woods. There were brown patches where the snow had receded, and chickadees were pecking in decaying leaves. She had hoped that she would be able to somehow broach their early lives today and go on from there,

but when she found that Hugh had been drinking she felt extremely nervous, a sense of defeat. For this volatile man across the room, alcohol was a very dangerous component. Even the thought of revealing anything now made her heart beat rapidly and her skin grow moist and flushed.

“I’ve heard that young moderns in China don’t care about their recent history, don’t care or even know about Mao. Is that true?”

“I haven’t been deep into China for a few years...just brief visits. I’ve been in the Middle East, other places, but I’ve only had to see China’s frenzied construction and commerce to know it’s true. There is no functioning *ism* now but commercialism, buy and sell. Villages deflate and swell with the times, streaming into the monstrous cities that are now some of the world’s major polluters -- Beijing continues to asphyxiate. The water supplies are fouled, or in grave danger of being so. There is a new class of rich young in the cities, but a widening gap between haves and have-nots, no matter the measures taken, no matter what tax relief and loans are given to poor farmers. With modernization and massing in the cities, everything is in flux, incredible, irreversible runaway change. The sad damming of the Yangtze River would be an apt metaphor for that change, if it were not a heartbreaking reality: history, occupations, villages, entire cities deliberately flooded in a massive final deluge of water, because of *face*, population growth, a mad grappling for any usable power -- imagine the contamination of *that* floodwater; how does it counterbalance Yangtze floods? --; the swallowing of the earth and of mankind’s livelihood and history for the sake of energy. It’s called progress, onward and upward to the great god Megalopoly.”

“Our beautiful, less polyglot planet spinning away from us.”

“What languages did you study for your lit doctorate in those early days of academia, Lea?”

“French and German...a fair amount of Latin.”

“And now you intend to stagnate here?”

“I haven’t been doing literature, per se, anyway...rather more



like an offshoot of human ecology. When you go *out there*, fine literature is quickly swallowed by human misery. I'm really tired, Hugh...and I've been sad. The farm becomes more meaningful to me every day. I didn't realize how hungry I was...until this taste of happiness -- it tastes so delicious, like coming off a long diet and eating the equivalent of ambrosia."

"Finally you arrive at narcissistic gluttony."

"Hugh, please don't try to make something wonderful into anything unpleasant...or I'll leave."

"Why should I care if you leave?"

"You just begged me to stay. You need a friend and I'm good for that. I know how to be a friend."

"Meaning I don't."

She gave an incredulous laugh. "You must have been suspicious of friendship all of your life, Hugh; having, I suspect, cohorts rather than actual friends. I think I'll leave you with that thought."

Violea had moved to get her coat, but Hugh said, "Rarely even cohorts. Don't go yet. All right, today I'm a contradiction. Please just lie on the couch and don't say anything...while I think about what you've said. I like your nervy presence here...enjoy familiarizing myself with the confounding you I've just met...an unexplored mystery with the same name as that naïve girl I once ravished."

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Virginia, having been ignored, had sent Violea another e-mail announcing that she was thinking of visiting Violea on her touted farm. This was alarming to Violea; she could not imagine so sharp a confrontation with her immediate past. She was not ready for it, and quickly supplied a number of plausible excuses as to why it could not yet happen.

Ragnar was presently skiing on what Violea thought of as quite prohibitively difficult cross-country trails, high up at Anthony Lakes in Eastern Oregon; this ingrained call of the wild surfaced in

his Nordic disposition during the winter ski season. He liked that remote area because it was less commercialized, although often not easy to reach. He had wanted to know if she would like to go with him and do some cross-country skiing in the famously powder-dry snow. Viola had skied with friends during college years, but not since, and her adequate skiing had been done in the New England atmosphere of much tamer terrain. He tactfully suggested that she take a class at the resort to familiarize herself with the local topography. Clearly, he did not intend to spend his time teaching her to traverse steep inclines or, more likely, how to safely fall down. She had vacillated between a desire to be with him and an aversion to making a fool of herself as an undignified novice. Ragnar, in his usual pragmatic manner, weighted his big truck for icy road conditions, loaded both his downhill and cross-country equipment, and kissed her goodbye without argument. His expedient method was superb for, by her glum and hesitant manner, he could not fail to infer that next time she would be joining him.

Viola decided that this would be a good time to invite Alfreda for a pancake lunch in Hayfield. When the offer was made, Alfreda enthusiastically agreed, glad to escape confining winter.

Now they were sitting in the little street-side pancake shop, warm and cozy at their blond wooden table, watching the passersby and augmenting their conversation with more and more lengthy subjects. It soon became patently clear that Alfreda owned more than a mediocre or superficial mind, her sound country-wisdom upbringing regularly in play.

“We’re an endangered species, you know,” Alfreda said as she finished her second cup of coffee. “Nationwide there aren’t many of us family farmers left. Weather, crop failure, unfavorable world markets, and then there’s the inheritance tax...these are the things that finish us or drive our children from our farmlands.”

“Can’t you set up a sort of generation-skipping trust?”  
Viola asked, remembering how her father had brought up this idea. He had wanted Viola to run the farm free of tax drain, to

keep it intact, in the hope that her offspring would inherit without too great a burden, and assuming the increased value of the land would assist her heirs in maintaining the farm. But at the time he had no idea if she would ever have children, and she had inherited outright, with the added burden of an inheritance tax. She had discovered this only recently when an attorney at the family's legal firm explained how her mother's stock earnings had been sufficient to pay off the inheritance tax, as stipulated in her will.

"Why, yes," Alfreda said. "Our daughters, who now legally own our farm, have set up a deferred trust, so that their children can run the farm without excessive arrears. It's a bit complicated, and I couldn't explain it to you without our attorney sitting here."

"Then let's simply enjoy the last bites of these wonderfully airy buttermilk pancakes. Alfreda, I'm afraid I'm not much of a cook, except for a few special recipes...wonder if it's too late to learn."

Alfreda smiled and seemed about to make a comment, but then stopped herself and looked out the window. Her frizzy reddish hair was combed back behind her ears, and she had worn tiny pearl earrings. The pale-teal turtleneck sweater she had chosen nicely accented the very pale blue of her eyes. Her freckled skin was somewhat abused by years in harsh elements. The only makeup she wore was pink lipstick.

Viola ran her fingers over her copper sweater sleeves, her intuition swiftly in play. "You were about to advise me to avail myself of the expertise of a very good chef on the farm, weren't you?"

"It's never too late to learn about cooking...I would think. Viola...I've been kind of careful...I mean, talking about Ragnar. Because everyone's talking and I don't like to...tongue-wagging is the favorite winter indoor sport around here. People just don't have enough interesting things to prattle. There was a silly rumor going around...well, by the time I heard it they said you'd come home nutty as a fruit cake and were running around shooting rabbits."

“What? How on earth did they know I--”

“That chatty little simp, Doctor Nilsen’s nurse. I put a stop to that, told her straight out what she ought to have known, for crying out loud...that it was unethical to talk about the doctor’s patients to her friends. Then the Bradley boys said a few things.”

“Who are they?”

“They’re the arborists who do your orchards with Ragnar.”

“Oh. I told him he shouldn’t...” Viola laughed then and shrugged, producing a helpless grin she hoped would allay Alfreda’s discomfort.

“It isn’t news to me...as I said earlier, on Thanksgiving it was plain enough how Ragnar felt...but don’t think *he* was wagging his tongue because he wasn’t.”

“No, I’m sure. I heard quite a bit of hearsay in the Grange restroom.”

“As to that, I should tell you that Betty and Joyce saw you go in there. They did some of that on purpose.”

“Really?...that was neighborly of them. Well, how very encouraging.”

“They’re pretty good friends of Britta. Everyone likes Britta, and you’re that unknown party whose come to ruin things. That’s how they see it right now...but I see a decent person here. Ragnar’s no fool. If he cares for you, that’s good enough for me.”

“Thank you for that, Alfreda. I liked *you* from the moment I met you. You’re genuine, honest, good. I’m very grateful...really grateful.”

“Thanks, honey. Britta is a nice gal, but I think she’s less longsuffering than anyone realizes when it comes to Ragnar. So I guess I’ll just go ahead and tell you something else. This is the season when Ragnar, from time to time, used to take her skiing, but he didn’t do it this year...I can well imagine why. Britta’s assistant is in charge over at the library right now...because yesterday Britta drove up to Anthony Lakes with her skis. I know darn well she won’t get anywhere with Ragnar, but she’ll probably try. I was afraid you’d find out if you went to the library...and then you’d think

something totally unfair about Ragnar. You shouldn't, Viola.”

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The three remaining days of Ragnar's absence had passed slowly, and Viola swore she would not call the library to see whether or not Britta was back. She did think that Ragnar might have called her, just to see if she was all right. Another character in her novel was giving her trouble, recalcitrant and going in an odd direction she did not want. Each night she worked very late on that escaping segment of her writing. Once, she talked a little to Hugh on the phone. He was distractedly at work. On the early morning of the day Ragnar was due home, the sky was a piercing blue and the sun had gilded everything with a frigid white-gold light. The crusted cream snow sparkled below her windows, as if sprinkled with myriad tiny flashing diamonds. By noon she had decided to dress in her warm boots, fir-green jacket, woolen hat and gloves, and do the long trek out the entrance road to the mailbox on the highway. There would be only junk mail, statements, and bills, but the walk was a good excuse to exercise. She had made it out and was standing by the mailbox, looking wistfully at a colorful spring flower catalog, when a deafening motorcycle roared up and stopped.

“Get on,” Hugh said, jerking his head behind him with a broad white grin. He wore a black leather jacket and jeans, brown boots and a big shiny black helmet. Because of these racy outer coverings, and his dark visor and wind-burned red chin, she hardly recognized him.

“I thought you were some Hell's Angel.”

“Hell no. Come on, I'll take you back to the house.”

“Mmm, I've never ridden that way.” She frowned and stood still.

“Dammit, get on, Lea...please.”

Hugh shoved her mail into a pouch, and she mounted the

motorcycle behind him, placing her gloved hands delicately on his shoulders.

“Arms around my middle, mooncalf. Ready?”

“Yes!” she shouted and began to giggle, laying her face against his jacket and laughing crazily as they roared up to the house.

“Jesus, it’s cold out here. These highs with fooling days of blinding sun freeze ass in a hurry...along with the rest of the body.”

“I feel fine,” Violea said as she dismounted.

“Well, *you* haven’t just gone twenty miles in this freeze-up.”

“Oh, poor you. Have you groceries in your saddlebags?”

“And such.”

“If you dare come inside I’ll give you something hot to drink.”

“With alcohol in it?”

“If you want. Scotch and hot water?”

“Perfect,” he said, stomping on the kick stand and pulling off his gloves, then his helmet.

In his stocking feet, Hugh sprawled on the davenport before the fireplace, looking around him while Violea stacked small alder chunks over crumpled paper and held a long match to her hasty arrangement.

“I’ll get some water into the hot pot and pour the Scotch,” she said, leaving him to survey the room.

When she returned with two filled blue mugs, Hugh said, “My God, I haven’t set foot in this house in nearly three decades.”

Violea carefully pushed Hugh’s feet back and sat angled at the far end of his resting place, taking a sip from her steaming mug.

“You see...and it didn’t hurt you at all.”

“How do you know whether or not it hurts?”

“You don’t look as though it does. I don’t remember you coming into this house.”

“Just twice: to bring in some wood, and to carry a lug of pears inside for Martha...off limits for the low-level hired help.”

“What a good memory you have...but if you’d been this

crotchety back then I might never have fallen in love with you.”

“What made you?”

“*You*...you and your fine books were beautiful. What an impression you made. Maybe you changed the direction of my thought...surely enhanced it. I had no idea you didn’t love me. I was so innocent that I didn’t know about hot young boys...and I suppose I was incredibly romantic.”

“Then why did you leave?”

“You were going. Remember? Off to college.”

“But you didn’t even say goodbye.”

“I did say goodbye...only you didn’t know it. The night before I left I went out to the hayloft and sat at the door, watching the moon, and there I told you goodbye.”

“But you could have said it to my face.”

“I was not rejecting you, Hugh. Tell me how things were when you were very young...before you came to live in the stone house -- do you realize that myopic little fifteen-year-old girl never even knew where you lived? No one told me anything, everyone so self-engrossed, and you wouldn’t talk about yourself. What was San Francisco life like?”

“Rotten. Have you got any more of this?” Hugh held out his mug.

As the afternoon waned, Bugsy began his clockwork antics, running through the living room and flying over the davenport, tapping Viola with his paw as he streaked by.

“Jesus, your cat needs a shrink...or maybe a downer.”

“That’s just high energy Bugsy doing his sundown shtick.”

“Impressive...for such a brainless little mass of fur.”

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When Hugh finally left, after frustrating exchanges of alcoholic sarcasm and rebuttal that led nowhere, Viola went on drinking. It seemed like the thing to do. The Macallan tasted better and better and she gave up on the hot water, simply adding a splash of cold water from the kitchen faucet. When she had gone

out to see Hugh off, she noticed Ragnar's fresh tracks going past the house. It was a very long drive and he was probably tired. She would not disturb him. He would probably fix himself something to eat and go to bed. She kept adding wood to the fire, lying on her old quilt on the floor near the fire screen, gazing into the flames until the familiar sadness began to creep over her. Once Bugsy jumped wildly onto her back. She cried out, "Dammit, stop it Bugsy! You scared me." Then she dozed off, but something startled her, the front door clicking shut. She squinted at dark legs towering above her, sitting up with a cry of fright.

"*Nei, nei*, it is me, Wild Vi. I am sorry to find you like this. I wish you would at least not drink alone."

"Oh...welcome...home. Thought you'd be resting."

"I came to get you."

"You must be really tired...so glad you've had a good time. Sorry...I was drinking with Hugh and then...suppose it just got out of hand. Please go...go rest. Just leave me alone...be all right...just trying to...understand...*be* understanding...be understood? Alfreda told me some things...was afraid I'd think the wrong thing. She's a very kind person. We had pancakes...a really nice person."

Ragnar leaned over the fire screen with the poker and broke apart the fire, then went away. He returned with her outdoor things and helped her into them, lastly her boots, then picked her up and carried her out to his truck.

Violea awoke at three o'clock with a bad headache. She moaned softly, looking around and wondering where she was.

"What is it?" Ragnar asked.

"My head...God, it hurts."

Ragnar brought her water and two aspirin and held her, massaging her head and neck. She began to cry, weeping with a maudlin bitterness she was unable to control.

"I don't like to cause you any worry...grief. You must be exhausted. You've had such a fine time...then you come home to this. I wish you hadn't come to the house."

"I could sleep no longer without you."



“Why do you want me? *Why?*”

“We will not talk about this right now. You have been with Hugh, and this is what happens to you. You do not even realize it. Come now, my girl, try to sleep. You know I always want you.”

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The digital clock read 11:30, bright sunlight was streaming from around the edges of the blind, and Ragnar was, of course, gone from the bed. Her headache was somewhat diminished, bearable at least. She put on her robe and moccasins and went into the bathroom, then into the kitchen. She found an insulated carafe of hot tea and poured a large mug. Ragnar came from the computer in his den into the kitchen. His bare feet were snuggled in shearling moccasins and he wore clean faded jeans and a gray sweatshirt.

“*God morgen*, you look better. You look very good to me.”

“Don’t be nice to me,” Viola said, propping her chin in her hand. “I don’t deserve it. Afraid I finished the rest of your fine Scotch yesterday...the Scotch I bought for *you*. Hugh helped.”

“*Ja*, how did that happen?”

“It all began when I walked to the mailbox, mainly for exercise, and Hugh came along on his motorcycle and insisted on carting me back to the house. Well, it all began much earlier than that...years and years earlier.” She looked up at him, he standing patiently near her now, and thought, *am I in some post-Scotch state of blues? I feel like crying again. Why should everything be so sad?*

He stroked her hair and said, “I am happy to see you. Have you looked outside? Everything is really beautiful...the gold light.”

Her heart stirred. “*You* are really beautiful, Ragnar.”

“What would you like to eat?”

“You can’t continue to wait on me.”

“*Ja*, I can. You have no idea how I enjoy it. If you do not tell me what, I will fix whatever I like and join you for lunch.”

“Go ahead. I never worry about unwelcome diversity when you’re cooking. You look so healthy and pleased with yourself.

Was the skiing good?”

“Very good.” Ragnar was busily taking things from the refrigerator. “Powder snow, the best place to find it...at over seven thousand feet. High dry air...well-groomed trails. A good challenge for life and limb...and thought.”

*And skiing with a friend is good too*, Violeta noted, but would say nothing, knowing it would be narrow and self-centered and careless of her to say anything. She would not begin to question Ragnar’s judgment, his conduct. It was something she could no longer do, without injuring their incredible relationship, without violating her own integrity as well as his. There was much to question in her, but whenever Ragnar did it, it never seemed to be a selfish act, only one with the thought of making her well. As hard as it was to believe this in a world of flawed humans, it appeared to be the case.

She began to watch with interest. “Tell me what you’re doing.”

“Mostly it is already done.” He opened two prepared containers.

“So you knew what you were going to fix before you asked.”

“*Ja*, but only if you did not want something else.”

Ragnar took two butterflied trout from the refrigerator. He dipped them in melted butter and laid them on a pan under the broiler. He opened the container of Mornay sauce he had made earlier, and put it into the microwave to warm. Next he opened a container of creamed spinach, also prepared earlier, and spread it in a buttered clear glass baking dish. Again from the refrigerator, he took six lightly poached eggs, nestling each one atop the spinach, then poured the warm Mornay sauce over this arrangement and sprinkled the top with grated cheese and bread crumbs. He slid the egg dish on a rack below the broiling trout. The trout were now cooked, and he reset the oven, plated the hot trout, removed the bones, and cut defrosted slices of parsley butter over the tops. This he covered and set on a warming rack. While the casserole was baking he juiced oranges in an electric juicer and handed Violeta a fresh glass. Soon the Eggs Florentine was crispy on top and

bubbling hot. He plated two servings of his casserole, each one accompanied by a parsley-buttered broiled trout, and set one dish before Viola and the other across from her for himself.

“I like watching you prepare food. And this, I’m sure, is Eggs Florentine. Delicious. Oh, these buttery pink trout...sweet, tender. I’ve never seen such blushing beauties. Where did you get them?”

“I caught them in Diamond Lake early last September -- one of my favorite places to fish...where these rosy fellows live high.”

“So...the creamed spinach has onion and nutmeg, right?”

“Shallots and nutmeg and cream.”

“And the Mornay has some onion with cheese, yes?”

“*Ja*, egg yolk beaten with cream and whipped into onion white sauce, with grated Parmesan and Gruyère and a dash of cayenne.”

“Why aren’t you running a restaurant?”

Ragnar laughed. There is nothing exotic about this; it is just good fare. I am not interested in feeding large crowds...only you, myself, and a few friends.”

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They enjoyed their coffee and tea while sprawled on Ragnar’s davenport. Ragnar had his arm around Viola with the mug in his hand. He set it down on the near coffee table and put both arms around her.

“So you were high above the earth, flying over powder snow and thinking. Did you say *thinking*?”

“*Ja*, I was thinking...about you...about us...about here and now.”

“You were thinking about quite a lot. You never called me.”

“*Nei*, I did not. I thought it was good for you to be away from me...completely away. Perhaps to be thinking too.”

“I was.”

“Good. I know it is too late to...that this is the way things generally happen, inconveniently or much worse...but I have often

wondered if you should not have...or I have thought, Wild Vi, that you should have resolved your problem with Hugh before we--”

Violea swiftly sat up and cried, “No! No!”

“Wait, Wild Vi, let me explain. You do not quite know your own mind in this regard. It might be that you have always loved Hugh...or that you are falling in love with him again. In that case I am...or could be...an unfortunate burden in your life...in your lives. You have a son together, a grown son but--”

“Oh, you’re breaking my heart! *You’re breaking my heart!* I’m getting dressed. I want you to take me home...no, never mind, I’ll walk. Of course, I’ll walk. I can walk.”

She ran into the bedroom and threw off her robe, grabbing up her clothes and dashing into the bathroom, where she locked the door and began to dress rapidly. While she was dressing, she tried to think about why Ragnar was having second thoughts about their relationship. Perhaps he had just resolved something with Britta. Anything could be the case. She did not know what to think. A sharp pain was traveling slowly through her body, and she had to get away immediately, like a dog crawling under a bed to lick its wounds, or die.

She opened the door and Ragnar swiftly took hold of her, restraining her completely while he tried to talk to her.

“I know you’re far stronger than I, but I’m asking you now to let me go. Let go of me! If you want to be at all decent to me you’ll have to let me go. Do you understand? *Do you understand?*”

“*Ja*, I understand, of course I understand. I understand also that you have a volatile temper, and I will have one hell of a time reasoning with you in this condition. If I let you go, please do not leave yet. *Please*. You know what I feel for you. *Herregud*, when you are reasonable you know it. Can you understand that I am mostly thinking of *you*? And it is possible that...I believe that Hugh is falling in love with you. Can you imagine how I feel about this? Can you possibly try...*try* to put yourself in my position.”

“So what person are you *really* thinking of?”

Her head drooped, the precipitate reaction of fast-altered

chemistry. She went limp in his arms, so quickly that she fell to her knees before he could catch her.

“Oh, I’m going to vomit your nice brunch. Throw me out on the snow...throw me out!...leave me unconscious there. Cold’s the only thing for this...*ice*...shut it all down with ice!”

She put her shaking hand over her mouth. Ragnar guided her into the bathroom and knelt with her beside the toilet bowl while she lost her brunch and any sense of self. He helped her stand, then cleansed her face with a warm rag. When she looked into the mirror she saw an ugly, red-eyed, ravaged woman, turning her face away in disgust.

“My hands aren’t working. Humiliating...you’ll have to help me with my boots. I’ll walk home. I think it will be good, the cold.”

“*Nei*, I cannot do that. I would not let you go away from me now for anything in the world.”

“You see...I’m...in the kind of pain that’s unbearable. I need to walk...be alone...crawl under my bed like a sick dog.”

“*Helvete!* I refused to believe this could happen.”

“Then you have no idea of me. You don’t know who I am...don’t love me. Imagine what a sad discovery that is...by someone who loves you...cannot help loving you beyond anything you could possibly understand. Sorry it was so messy for you, terribly messy getting mixed up with this crazy Ender woman. Go back to your uncomplicated Britta...or have you already? She’s sensible enough for you. Just what you like. Everything tidy, everything--”

Ragnar had picked her up and walked into the shower with her, held her there while he turned on the water, both of them presently standing under very warm water, their steamy clothes growing soggy.

“Cry now...or scream...or say whatever you want, but do not ever say again that I do not understand your love, that I do not love you enough.”

“I didn’t say *enough*. I meant *at all*,” she moaned, water

pouring over her face. Her soggy sweater, a cashmere blend, hinted of rotting cacao pods, for a second summoning the mephitic tropics; her aberrant life running hot and cold. With her face continually bathed in warm water, she could not even tell if she was still weeping, or why.

Ragnar, watching her intently, said, “Are you back with me?”  
“Now what do I do?”

“*Ja*, you have returned.” He shut off the water and peeled off her clothes, then his own, toweling them both dry from head to toe.

“I am going to carry you to my bed. You can do whatever you want there, except leave it.”

She lay turned to the wall, her eyes wide open and staring. Ragnar left the bed briefly, then returned and lay on his back.

“In the morning will you let me go? Will my clothes be dry?”

“*Ja*, I threw them into the dryer...cool air for your sweater.”

“So, you’ll let me go?” Her hand clutched at her damp hair.

“I am not holding you prisoner. I am only worried about how you will treat yourself.”

“I’ll live. Of course I’ll marry Hugh. Eventually we’ll kill each other. Think how relieved you’ll be. Maybe I’ll leave the farm to you. Marcus has no interest in it. I know how you love it.”

Violea sat up and looked around her with anguish. “She slept with you in this bed...and so many others I’m sure.”

“*Nei*, Wild Vi, I swore to myself, out of respect for Martha, that I would never bring women to Ender Farm...an unbroken oath.”

They lay for a while in grievous silence, until Ragnar’s low, softly pondering voice startled her into sharpened consciousness.

“When I was skiing I thought a lot about you...your beautiful eyes. I remembered you as that *lillejente*. I enjoyed having those memories and tried to recall more. I thought next year, or even next month, you would come with me and I would teach you

cross-country. Britta came there, poor woman. She has always said she was satisfied with our friendship, always been independent and busy, as I have been. We had a drink together. She wanted to know how I felt about you. She thought I wanted a younger woman, and I told her it would not have mattered if you had been older, that what is between us has nothing to do with age. Then I left her to accept whatever she could, knowing full well she would not disappear from Hayfield over this. I skied the trails alone, sometimes thinking of Hugh. I believe he realizes what he might have had with you. He is difficult but you would tame him with all the love in you. You are a passionate woman with a great deal of love, very deep love. I have it for you and love it in you. It is the profoundest emotion, without decision, without self-control. I will never feel this for any other...have never known it this way. I have told you so before but you have forgotten.”

“You ought to punish me somehow for forgetting...for disbelieving. I can’t explain what happened...except that I thought you didn’t want me...if you could give me away so easily. All of my fine reasoning instantly dissolved -- my cool restraining reason totally useless. Love has no use at all for reason. Love values only its presence. You’re absolutely right; the way you say I love is the way I love you. It’s gotten me into...*will* get me into trouble.”

“Not with me. There will be no trouble with me over this love. Come here into my arms. What has all of this been about but the fear of losing what cannot be lost?”

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The long, king-sized bed arrived, followed by the mattress, box spring, and the bedclothes. The frame and accessories were upstairs in Viola’s bedroom, obstructively leaning against the wall. She was not inclined to inform Ragnar of the bed’s appearance, or presently ask for any help in regard to its installation. To have revealed in so violent a manner such complete vulnerability, so great a need of him, remained irrepressibly shameful and confusing to her, adding to her general remorse. Around Ragnar, she seldom

maintained very much restraint or held onto composure, for he unintentionally fostered spontaneous emotion, most of which Viola managed to channel into words of praise, rather than impulsive physical demonstrations. Despite all of her nervous uncertainties, Ragnar's influence prevailed, eliciting from her an almost unconscious sensuality and a girlish playfulness, the latter effect redounding to her childish teasing of him so long ago. His felicitous responses encouraged her lighthearted behavior, so that the high pleasures of both were inexhaustibly fed. Ragnar could readily be all humor or patience, or, at a clear indication of her desire, exhilarating physical satisfaction. After their most recent emotional fray, he could not have failed to notice an aloofness in her, which he must have read as a need to regain her equilibrium, for he had wisely gone about his farm business and personal endeavors without disturbing her, keeping in touch by phone with a changeless attentiveness. These calls she answered with soft diffidence.

As her dread of Christmas approached, Viola dutifully called Hugh to obliquely check on his plans for the holidays. He had none, quickly reading her intimation and flatly conveying his disdain for holidays in general. He informed her that he was busy. Viola then wondered if Ragnar might be right about Hugh, if he could be shunning her to avoid the unobtainable. She decided it was unfair, possibly self-absorbed, to assume any such likelihood.

Ragnar, in a delightfully practical and accommodating manner, considered holidays an excuse to cook and eat good food with friends. He roasted a Christmas goose and he and Viola brought it to the comfortable farm home of Bill and Alfreda March. Alfreda made corn bread stuffing, sweet potato pie, and mince and pumpkin pies, also fresh asparagus with a creamy-rich Hollandaise. Viola brought a tall, crusty-topped onion cake. She had lined a springform pan with rich butter pastry, refrigerated it, then sautéed seven thinly sliced large onions in butter, added eggs and sour cream, and poured this seasoned mixture into the dough-lined springform pan to bake. Released from its pan and



handsomely plated, her tall, golden-topped warm delicacy rapidly diminished wedge by wedge, along with much of the crackly goose. Alfreda asked quite sincerely for the onion cake recipe.

“It was my mother’s...from her favorite cookbook,” Viola said. “I’ll copy it for you and give it to you soon.”

Viola fleetingly wondered how the coveted art of cooking fit into a world view, reminding herself that her former self-image, or any sense of a self engaged in the world, had been replaced by life on Ender Farm. Having a *world view*, if she had ever espoused one, now appeared so great an impossibility it disengaged the mind at every attempted contemplation. The broader world was now only a chaotic abstraction, only a great dark moiling sea *out there*. She looked around the room, wondering if she was not supposed to be in some other place, but where? She had a sense of bobbing on her delusional black sea like wreckage flotsam, directionless. Gradually that discordant self drifted away, leaving her still in possession of her sociable smile.

They talked until very late, the men politely foregoing chess in respect for Viola’s newly enlisted participation. Firelight from an oak-mantled brick fireplace flickered over her as she sat in a flowery easy chair. After a small glass of port, her hands lay rather more relaxed in the lap of her gray wool long-sleeved dress. Occasionally she lifted a hand to finger her cool amethyst necklace. She enjoyed Bill March. He was a stocky, curly-headed, weathered outdoorsman, a good-natured man who delighted in continually turning a humorous phrase. From time to time he teased Viola as the backslid country girl regrettably tainted by worldly habits. He did remember the little neighbor girl who rode on his school bus. The evening’s discursive conversation edged into, and lingered on, the sad plight of American family farms, then fluidly switched to the more cheerful subjects of fishing and gardening and awards sought and received at previous county fairs.

Finally, Ragnar drove Viola home.

He came inside the house and held her with his large hands around her wool-clothed waist, looking at her in a provocative way

he had been careful to avoid all evening -- once during the evening he had winked at her and given her a thumbs-up, upon tasting her onion cake. His coveted praise had made her want to dance giddily out the door over the dark night's rindy snow.

"Are you too tired to come with me? If your delinquent bed were here, I would not go," he said in an unsuspecting manner, then quickly detected something revealing in Viola's expression. "Is the bed here? It is. And you have not told me. Why is that?"

"Oh...you're always doing something for me...and you've been busy with other things." She bent down to pet prowling Bugsy, then stood up to pour dry food into his empty bowl.

With his stocking foot, Ragnar pushed the filled bowl away from Viola and toward Bugsy, then took her back into his arms.

"Lately, I have done *nothing* for you...and you have not slept with me since I had to maneuver you into the shower to get your attention. That night ended in a way I would not have thought could lead to this. I am not going to stop saying what I think...nor should you when it is necessary, Wild Vi. If either of us can be intimidated into holding back honesty, we are in danger of bad times. I know when to leave you alone and I have done so. Now I very much want you. You were so fine tonight in this soft wool dress...your tempting hair...your sparkling eyes the only ornaments necessary in the room. All evening I was thinking of having you to myself. What is it?"

Her heart was beating rapidly from so much verbal attention, his dizzying praise, his arousing suggestion and warmly looming proximity.

"I...I'm grateful for your honesty...but it's difficult for me to say why I...I don't want to...become insufferable."

"Do you think any of that night's wildness has made you less desirable? I have come to expect it from you. I can handle it. Why did I long ago name you Wild Vi? If you had not mistakenly overreacted, we would now be lying in your new bed. I will let you rest tonight -- punish *both* of us...but please remember what I have said. I will come over tomorrow in the afternoon and assemble

the bed.”

He lifted her firmly against him and kissed her good night, so fully and persuasively she painfully regretted that the new bed's sheets were not already turned down. How she had missed that caraway flavor of *brennevin*.

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Ragnar had dismantled Viola's stripped-down bed, carrying it piecemeal to a bedroom used for storage at the end of the upstairs hall. He was in the final stages of assembling the large bed, and was presently kneeling on the floor locking the frame into place. Viola was pacing around the room, occasionally looking out the window at a flock of robins pecking on snow-patched earth, but mostly watching Ragnar at work under the lamplight of this dim afternoon. She began to study him with total absorption. Thick gray wool socks disappeared beneath narrow widths of crisp, faded-blue Levis covering his lithe jackknifed legs; a metric wrench conveniently stuck in a back pocket. He wore a khaki shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows. The unerring hands so fascinated her, agilely asserting multiple skills, the forearm tendons fluidly tensing long, hard muscle into work-shaped contoured surfaces. Understandably matured by years of exposure, the bared skin held an irresistibly smooth gleam in the rosy light. She went up to him and kissed the nape of his neck where trim silvery hair grew in thick soft waves. His head straightened. She leaned further down and ran her fingers over his bare forearm. The long flexing arm swept back and gathered her against him, bringing her gently to her knees. He sought her eyes, returning her look with an amused gaze of wishful compliance.

“Go read a book, drink tea, take a shower. Let me finish this or I will have you here on the floor...and we will both pay for that.”

“I've already had my shower,” she answered with petulant voice. Still wearing her robe, she stood up and left the room, deciding to make tea. Reading was out of the question.

In a while Ragnar called to her, and she came up to watch

him grasp the huge mattress and fling it squarely onto the box spring.

“Bring the rest,” he said.

Viola walked down the hall to her father’s room, where she was keeping all the new bed things, including four extra-long pillows. First she brought the mattress pad, and together they secured it over the silver-gray mattress. Next they spread and tucked the sheets, and Viola covered them with the duvet, all dyed a dusky rose that blended with the shaded rose walls of her room. Two at a time, she brought in the four long rose pillows and arranged them at the head of the broad four-poster. They stood back to admire this massive lofty invitation. The bed was so high it came with a mounting steps -- useful for her, unnecessary for Ragnar. The frame was solidly constructed of knotted pine with tall pineapple-topped, smoothly lathe-ringed bed posts, the creamy wood translucently white-washed with a satiny finish.

“Sort of a magical Elysium all its own,” she softly mused.

Ragnar turned to have his kiss, and she began to unbutton his shirt. He unbuckled his belt and was rapidly unclothed, thereafter swiftly removing her robe. Both were laughing, both fully in the immediate, time-banishing moment of their roseate achievement. Ragnar lifted her startled body high above him, then brought her down to his waist and tossed her onto the center of the bed.

Viola cried out with laughter, “*Why* did you do that?”

“To see if I did it right,” he teased.

“When *you* lie down we’ll know for sure.”

“*Nei*, we will only know for sure an hour from now.”

His confident smile dissolved into an ardently imperative kiss. Then, with deft impatience, he adjusted her body to his.

What vague dream could equal this empyrean rose-land of reality? The bed so high and Ragnar floating her higher still.

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“Every day when I get up I have the same argument,” Hugh said. “Should I go on with this damn work? Why am I doing it? Beyond that question: is this life really worth living?”

“What’s the alternative? It’s the question Camus posed in so much of his writing, his short life -- he’d have cherished more years. How did *he* resolve it?”

“Ah, wise Lea, he resolved it for himself by trying to write the devil out of his evolving absurdist formula. The pleasure is in the act...if you can keep your mind to it and refrain from asking *why*.”

There had been a respite of sun from the griseous dark days, and they had walked through the snow-patched woods, and were now back drinking black tea before Hugh’s small alder fire. “I’m running out of wood again,” he complained. To which Viola replied, “Cull some of the deadwood out of your woods...get someone to help you do this.”

“The old work ethic that heals the mind and heart, yes? Once again I detect the influence of the *Master*.”

“If there’s been influence, and there has, I welcome it.”

“So far, Odin can do no wrong. What will happen to beneficent tolerance from that quarter when you decide to fly the coop? Surely with all of your heavy expenditure out in the world you don’t intend to devalue its worth by rustivating here.”

“What about yourself?” Viola asked, a doleful pain rising in her throat having caused her to apply quick diversion. “Where does your work lead you? You could teach, if you wanted...or maybe we should just rename Ender Farm Utopia and work on here.”

“Sorry, inveigling muse, for some of us it is *all* dystopia, no matter where we are. But *Utopia* would be a cruel death for at least a few of us.”

“All right, dystopia *out there*. Yes, look what’s happening to

China, for instance...as you've said: the fine old wooden beauty of artisans replaced with concrete cells for the helots.

Fascist capitalism ergo communist commercialism: a bastardized mutation. Their architecture, one of the last lovely things about that maimed social structure?"

"You're aware of course that it never came near Utopia, however stultifying *that* would be...and more prone to helots. Remember the cruel warlords? The slave-driving landowners? Young moderns want plumbing and snappy kitchens, not delicate structures of fine old wood, or courtyard houses, persimmon trees, and, alas, slop buckets."

"Nevertheless, they should at least be preserved...instead of smashing them to dust, or allowing the merest fraction to be carted off piecemeal to museums on the other side of the world."

"No room that way, no room for capitalist superabundance. Lea, you are a dreamer...a romantic stagnating in that misbegotten history."

"And you're the same...beneath your devil's façade."

Hugh departed his chair a little too swiftly and had to stabilize his uncooperative foot by standing still a moment.

"I'm through with this tea...going to pour myself some whiskey. The late afternoon is upon us. Will you join me?"

"Please don't, Hugh. It isn't good for you. It changes you. Sometimes it's better to get it out of your system for a while."

"Ah, the *Master* again."

Violea stood up riled and followed Hugh into the kitchen. "You're making me angry. You credit me with intelligence and then tell me I'm dependent upon someone else for reasoning power."

"No, listen...it's only that right now you need to lean on someone strong who thinks clearly...besides that...you're in love."

"I can think for myself, as you've surely seen, and that's what I'm doing right now."

"No, you're thinking for *me*. Give it up."

Hugh poured himself two fingers of whiskey and sat at his

dining room table, twirling the glass and sending Viola a menacing stare.

“You and I...we’re a sad lot in the matter of lineage. You’ve no one to leave your farm to, and I’ve no one to leave my dubious chromosomes. At least in my case, it’s probably a good thing. I’m the fractious final member of a troubled line.” Hugh took a long swallow of his rye whiskey and stared through the dining room windows. The diluted sun was slipping lower in the branch-filled sky, tinting the partially snow-covered woods an uncertain and foreboding metallic yellow.

Viola’s heart was speeding with fearful ambivalence. Here at last was the dangerous tipping point. Hugh was drinking now, yet he had just provided her with the opportunity she had long sought, the moment when she might offer him a wonderful sort of perpetuity, or throw him into a rage. Should she wait or proceed? She walked over and leaned on the marble counter that divided the kitchen from the dining room. A pitcher half full of ice water, which Hugh had just removed from the refrigerator, stood on the gray marble. She held her pulsing warm wrist to the large pitcher’s dripping condensation, cooling her feverish veins. The heavy pear-shaped pitcher, tall and thick, reflected her face in its solid glass bottom, an upside-down face.

“Why are you standing there looking at me like that? Come and sit here and have one innocuous shot. You look like you need it. I’m not a drunk...rarely do that...nothing like you were a while back.”

“I know that. I’m not a drunk either. By now you should know why I got so drunk that day.”

“Ah, yes, because I was *mean*...I wanted to throttle Viola Ender for once treating me so shabbily. Strange...it was almost as if I fell into a coma just after you left the farm, and awoke with the same thought coursing through my head the day you showed up here. Why should I still have had that thought in my head? The idea that your mother wanted to get you away from a loser...so off you fled to--”

“Hugh, would you have...could you possibly have wanted...”

“What? Hey, Scheherazade, what’s tying your loose tongue now?”

Violea felt the blood roaring in her ears. Her hands were shaking. Suddenly she knew, she *knew* there would never be a time that would easefully lend itself to a predictable, possibly even tolerable, outcome. She was not going to have any control over the result of what she was now compelled to say, must say, was about to say.

“I left because I was pregnant.”

Hugh narrowed his eyes, stared at her, and then began to laugh. “That is the fucking limit. *You* are the limit. Can’t you think of a better excuse than that? By whom were you pregnant, Lea? Jesus, I’m going to die laughing.”

“By you.”

“The hell you were. I was very careful with you. I took precautions with you. Who was it? For God’s sake, don’t make me think you’re turning into a whoring little liar. *I was careful with you!*”

“Not that night...the night we were here...in this house. Hugh, Hugh, I didn’t even know where I was. I was so young. I thought we were always going to... Your son was conceived in this house.”

“If I knew for certain that you went away from me with my child in your belly...that all of these years you...all of these years I might have had a son to know, to raise, to...that you could possibly do anything that cruel, that evil, that--”

“Please stop it, Hugh, *please*. I was only fifteen. What could I have done? Please think about who you were then. You were going away to school. My mother thought--”

“Oh Christ, your mother! *Your mother!*” He jumped up and his chair flew backwards onto its side, crashing into the wall.

“She thought it would ruin our lives. She was thinking of both of us. Thinking of *us!*”

“So all of these years you’ve had a son, but not me, *not me!*”



“No, I haven’t, *I haven’t*. My Aunt Hilda raised him. He doesn’t even like me...because I could never tell him where you were, how to find you. You changed your name and vanished. I never knew how to find you.”

“In the beginning you could have asked my father.”

“You see, I never knew about your father, never even knew where you lived. Don’t you see?”

“You blind stupid imbecile! How could you not know?  
*How?*”

“Don’t you understand? I was a very naïve fifteen. Only very recently did I learn all of these things about you and your father and my mother. Only recently when Ragnar told me.”

Hugh snatched up the chair and sat back down, lowering his head in his hands in a silence of revision; in a while he looked up at her with an expression of such violent emotion she fell into a depleted state of defeat, fear. She walked away to stand behind the counter.

“This is all a lie, isn’t it? Maybe Ragnar is the father.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ, Hugh! How can you? How dare you say such a thing. Oh, I’m so angry, *so angry!*”

“Can you imagine how I feel? *Can you imagine how angry I am?* All this time you’ve been coming here, never telling me, never having the guts to tell me the truth. What were you thinking? That in time we’d turn into a nice little family unit? You have no idea how I dispise you for what you’ve done.”

“Hugh, please...you’ve been far too unstable to be told--”

“The hell with that! It’s what you and your mother did all those irretrievable, *irretrievable*, years ago. I’d like to...to--”

“Oh, stop it! Stop it! *Stop it!*” *Viola* shouted. The room disappeared in blackness, then she saw only blood-red flowing out from behind her eyes. She had taken the big water pitcher in her hands and was running across the floor up to the table where Hugh was looking at her with surprise. The pitcher rose high in her hands and slammed down onto the hard shale floor with all the strength she could summon. She watched it dreamlike as it

shattered into deadly projectiles of glass that exploded over the room. A tiny splinter struck her cheek. She heard Hugh groan with pain, looked toward him and saw him leaning forward in his chair with his arm on the table, the fist clenched. A gleaming thick glass spike was imbedded deep in his arm, the impaled arm oozing blood that was spreading in a fresh red pool on the table.

“Oh, no, *no!* Hugh! Oh my dear, I never meant, I never meant...”

She ran into the kitchen, grabbed a tea towel and a wooden spoon, ran back to Hugh and began to wind it around his arm in a tourniquet.

“Don’t move. Sit still and hold this, my darling...oh, forgive me. Please forgive me. I’ll get help.”

Violea ran to her coat and clumsily extracted her cell phone from the pocket, punching in Ragnar’s number.

Finally he answered and told her he was in the west field with a Hayfield subsoiler. They were cleaning out a blocked drainage ditch.

“What is it, my girl?”

“Ragnar, can you come to Hugh’s? Come now. *Now!* I’ve hurt him. I didn’t mean to. I threw a water pitcher on the floor. A large spike of glass went into his arm. It’s bleeding so...*bleeding!*”

“Have you made a tourniquet?”

“Yes, yes!”

“Do not pull out the glass, leave it. I am on my way, but it will take a few minutes to get to my truck. *Faen!* I wish I were not in this distant field. Go on now, see to Hugh. I will be there as soon as I can.”

Hugh had not spoken a word. His face was pale, and he seemed to have slipped into shock. Violea sat with him, carefully tending to the tourniquet and thinking of how much bloodshed he had witnessed in his life. He had come here to recover, and now she had brought all of this uninvited misery down upon him. Was it selfish, what she had done in telling him? How could it be? She had only wanted to bring something momentarily positive and

promising into his life. It had never been a matter of absolving herself, only a wish to provide her angrily accusing son and his unhappy father with something lasting, good, uplifting, the joy of familial propinquity -- which, in the case of Marcus, she herself had always been denied. She thought next of how accurate Ragnar was in suggesting the terrible conflagration she and Hugh could so easily ignite. What was it? *Why* was it?

Finally, she heard Ragnar's truck, the truck door slamming. She went to meet him, he solemn-faced, coming up to brush against her as he passed where she stood on the porch. Moving quickly ahead, she led him straight to a confoundedly distracted Hugh; he looked up at them, blinking in dazed incomprehension. Ragnar moved behind Hugh, grasping him gently beneath his arms and helping him to stand. Viola had made an open sling from one of Hugh's shirts. His legs were unsteady but Ragnar had supported him down the steps, then slowly eased him into the truck. Viola cried out to Ragnar, and he hastily returned.

"Shall I come with you?"

"*Nei*, it will be good for him to work the tourniquet, focused away from his mild shock. Clean the blood from your face carefully, there is probably a splinter. I have to go, the roads are getting bad, icing up. Shall I come back here when I can?"

"No, I'll ride Mariner home. He's in the lean-to."

"I will see you later then. Hugh will be all right."

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As Viola rode home in the dusky light she thought how Hugh's shock would be linked to his devastating past. How could she have sunk to an impulsive act so very irrational and dangerous? Hugh had spoken so cruelly to her, but why could she not have withstood that acrimony, held her temper? *He would not stop his raving and I wanted to have his attention. How hopeless it is...to have presumed he would ever understand. Perhaps a year from now I might have sent Marcus to him and myself stayed out of it completely. How foolish to imagine I could redress anything with the astonishing offer of a grown son.*

When she had taken care of Mariner and the tack, she trudged off to the house, terribly bewildered and remorseful, still dumbfounded. She went into the house and sat on the edge of a wing chair at the side of the empty fireplace, staring into the black ashes as intently as if a fire were burning there. She had brought misery to everyone, and now thought back to her last moments with Robert. Had she not asked him to walk in the cooling park that day? If they had stayed in their room he would now be alive. *I should go back to my job and work the rest of my life away, work and work. Some little good might come of it. Ragnar did say work is best for an ailing wreck like me -- oh Ragnar, what shall I do?* Her hands lay rigidly folded in her lap, as she pondered how to finish her life. Marcus must come here, at least for a short while. Should she go away? How could she leave Ragnar?

The click of the front door roused Violeta from her trance-like state. Ragnar was standing before her. She had apparently been sitting there for hours, her taut shoulders beginning to complain.

“You have not even taken off your coat,” Ragnar scolded.

“How is Hugh?”

“He will be fine. They have taken stitches in his arm. He will remain the night...although he might have come home.”

Violeta turned her head, her eyes brimming with relief.

“You still have blood on your face. Come here, let me turn up the heat and take your coat, then we will clean your face.”

“Don’t help me any more, Ragnar, please. Believe it or not, I can take care of myself -- I know it doesn’t look like it right now, but one way or another I’ve extracted myself from a whole range of difficulties in my life. I can do it. You’d better just learn to leave me alone. My darling, I really am not good for you.”

“Let me decide that please.” He was pulling off her coat.

He led her into a downstairs bathroom and rummaged through the medicine cabinet for tweezers and antiseptic cream. She felt a twinge of pain at the side of her right cheek, then Ragnar held the small tweezers nearer the counter light, displaying a tiny

blood-coated splinter of glass. “Lucky it was not your eye.” He dabbed antiseptic on the small puncture, then turned her face toward him, serious darkened eyes holding a message.

“There, now the splinter is out and the pain of your silence is over; your wounds of conscience, some of Hugh’s wounds, on the mend. I left him to his reflection on our rapid drive, except for occasional medical reminders. In the last eight miles, he began to talk. The main things he said were, ‘Please ask Lea to forgive me. She was my first serious love. I have always remembered her that way. This wound was my own fault. I was rotten as usual. I wonder if I deserve a son. Will you ask her to forgive me?’ A verbatim message I was careful to remember word for word.”

Violea lowered her head and began a different impulse of weeping, for it was impossible to have only soft tears; the wrenches of sound came from deep spasms of regret and release, a flooding catharsis.

Ragnar held her shaking body and stroked her hair. She slowly drifted into a vague silence, distracted, empty, remote.

“Do you really not want me here now, Wild Vi?”

In her vacuous state she could not process his words, but said aloud, although mainly to corroborate her intent, “I’ll take my truck and bring him back tomorrow. He’ll want to know about Marcus.”

“*Ja*, I understand. Then I will go now. Please go to bed.”

Ragnar stood up and left the room. Oblivious, Violea sat in silent exhaustion, then within minutes called out, “No, no, I didn’t mean that you should go...I don’t want you to go.” But Ragnar was no longer there.

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On the drive back to Hugh’s stone house things were entirely different, almost peacefully collected and mundane, as if nothing so violent could possibly have occurred between them. They talked about their immediate environment, about Hayfield. Then Hugh brought up his late father’s vegetable business and its remarkable success.

“His was one of the first organic truck farms in the country, small but unique and profitable,” Hugh said with some pride.

“I knew nothing of it, except that I do remember your father, a gaunt dark figure who came to the house with vegetables. Away from school, before you, I spent any free time riding my horse, wandering the near woods, or at my friend Margo’s house. Where is she now, smart pale little Margo Slone, a freckle-faced snub-nosed curly-head? Her prim bald father was our fussy Dickensian school principal. Everyone was always teasing her, often cruelly, so of course she became my friend.”

“That would be you...yes,” Hugh said, holding his sore arm away from the truck door. “Every outcast, every dying squirrel and fallen bird had your full attention. You went crazy when your father would not ceremoniously bury your first pet heifer...the newly fresh milk cow that died after ingesting rusted bailing wire. Finally, it was hauled away, off to what used to be called the *glue factory*...and you, poor little idiot, pretended to run away, sleeping in the hayloft.”

“You found me there,” Violeta said. She sped around a fast-moving snowplow -- temporarily out of work, for roads were now clear -- and eased her flat-out rattling yellow truck back into the right lane.

“Yes...I found you crying in the hayloft -- one of our favorite places. You told me how you were once forced to shoot rabbits.”

When they reached the stone house, Hugh said, “Please come in for a while. Make me a sandwich, some tea.”

Violeta rummaged through Hugh’s refrigerator and managed to come up with pepper salami and Swiss cheese, layering these on mayonnaise-spread bagels. The kettle whistled and she poured the water into a brown teapot and set it on a tile square on the marble bar. They sat on high stools, silently eating, gazing toward the dining room windows.

“Lea, tell me a little about my son...about Marcus.”

“I’ll tell as much as I know,” she said, with a carefully gentled but eager voice. She put down her unfinished sandwich.

Relating everything of Marcus possible to recount, she ended with a smile at the clear image in her head. “He looks very much like you, Hugh. I’ll contact him as soon as I get my thoughts well-organized: the best way to tell him of you...a straightforward revelation. He never wanted to come to the farm. Now I know he will. You see, for him you’re a blameless aspiration. He’ll love you because you’re his father and you’ve never done anything wrong to him...as I have. He blames me for everything. He was, you might say, stolen from me by Aunt Hilda, so I’ve never been able to get close enough to him to disprove anything he believes. I’ve always followed his progress, loved him from a distance...taking the few crumbs available.”

“We can change that. I’ll insist upon it.”

“Oh, my dear, you ought to know you can’t make a person love you, or even like you. You’ve lived long enough to have learned that. I’m sure that somewhere along the line you loved someone who didn’t love you back...it’s something I suppose everyone’s encountered.”

“I would like to love you the way I once did, Lea -- it wasn’t just sex. Hell, I could do that now...give you, I think, enjoyable sex...but as to the love you need, I don’t know if I will ever be able to... It takes an enormous amount of selfless devotion...Ragnar has it...obviously. It takes a spontaneous force, a strength that flies into existence in an instant...then perpetuates itself, that kind of love. It does exist...as you must know. Anyway...I’m burned up, used up. First I’d have to like myself again. I can’t even--”

“Hugh, the love I hope you’ll be able to feel and explore now is love for your son. That would bring me the greatest joy...to think that Marcus could be happy with at least one of us. Oh to think that the two of you could find pleasure in each other... You *will*.”

“My God, you’re an unselfish woman...really, Lea, you are amazing.”

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By the time Violeta had put her truck into the garage and

entered her back door she felt, with reservations, a new sense of peace. The weight of telling Hugh had been lifted at last. But now there was Marcus, who must be brought into this Ender world. The most difficult thing about that would be his rejection of her. There was no reason to expect it to stop, even if Hugh intervened.

She needed to escape her present reality and so plunged into her writing, until the room grew dark. She stood up and stretched. Buggy followed her example, rising from his napping spot at her feet. She turned on the lamps. Abandoned by Buggy, who had run downstairs to check his bowl, she walked around her little writing den and into her bedroom; there she ended her pacing, standing at her window to savor a cunning half-hidden moon. It shone discreetly, bone-white, through an unevenly woven net of silvery clouds. She went downstairs, ate a few bites of cottage cheese, filled Buggy's bowl and water dish, then went back upstairs, brushed her teeth, and again looked at the moon, higher now, brighter and more fully in view. *What's wrong with me? I'm so nervous, terribly restless, feeling too much aloneness. I know I said something wrong to Ragnar...hardly knew what I was saying. I was so distraught over Hugh...what I'd done to him. Poor Hugh, I love him very differently now, love him in many ways. He hardly reciprocates, and not with the undeserved, nearly impossible love I seem to crave. Why should I suppose him able to do that? I know his exhaustion so well, what it does. He must have some peace...must have Marcus.*

She took a long shower, washed and dried her hair and stood aimlessly before her mirror in her robe. *I'm so tense...as if I'm fiercely holding my breath underwater.* "You know what's wrong with you," she said aloud. She put on a soft white Angora sweater she had not worn since London, pulling it over a warm pair of beige corduroy slacks, and went downstairs to put on her boots and coat and hat. Outside, there was hardly any snow on the path that led down off the house knoll, or along the holly row. Ragnar's porch light was on and his truck was gone. Then she remembered it was Wednesday, the night he played chess with Bill March. She tried the high door -- the heavy cedar door whose handsomely carved pine cone and delicate spray of needles had gone unappreciated



until this moment. With her fingers pleurably stroking the carving, she stepped through, for the door was open -- as Ragnar had sworn to leave it. She tugged off her boots and set them just inside against the wall, where Ragnar always kept his current footwear. Wandering into his den, then into the living room, she sat down on the davenport. The scent of him, the lingering presence of him was everywhere. Her heart was beating rapidly, her innocent invasion now a suspenseful transgression, thrilling. She sat with her hands folded, until her head dipped in fatigue.

To revive herself she stood up, then moved toward the bedroom. She took off her clothes, laid them neatly over the back of his big Windsor chair, and crawled beneath the green sheet and duvet of his huge long bed. There she could smell a wonderful admixture of Ragnar: the outdoor smell of bark and earth, the herbal soap in his shower, even a little of the caraway of *brennevin*. She clasped his large pillow in her arms, smiling and drifting into sleep. Was she dreaming? She was standing by a clear stream of icy-fresh water, its burbling a joyful music. There was the click of a banked stone falling, or could it be a closing door? She called out and it was Ragnar's name she called. Her eyes were still closed, but when she turned over he was there, leaning on an elbow beside her. His dusky eyes flashed the color of the soft orange night light. She smiled and said, "Am I dreaming?"

"*Nei*, Wild Vi, I thought it was myself dreaming. Are you really in my bed...or is it only because I want you here?"

She laughed and said drowsily, "I love the smell of this pillow. It's you...what I've come for."

Ragnar yanked the pillow from her grasp, threw it behind her and pulled her into his arms.

"Better now for both of us...what you have come for. When I saw your *lille* boots standing inside my door I had to take them in my hands. Can you know the joy just the sight of them gives?"

"I know the joy the sight of *you* gives. You're all my pleasure, so much of my happiness. I don't quite know how it

works...do you?"

"Only that it works very well, my wild one. *Jeg elsker deg.*"

"Earlier at my desk I was thinking...love, of any kind, can't be left out of a story of human relations; if done, the writer is in denial. You sometimes must go deep to find it, but it's always there in some manifestation, this powerful driving force too often decried."

"*Ja*, here and now it is deep, but not at all hard to find. Thoughtful girl, can we not discuss literature at some other time?"

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"Virginia!" Viola cried, having opened her front door to behold her London friend standing on the long veranda, which everyone around here called a porch.

"I knew you were never going to invite me," Virginia scolded with her familiar British voice. "I did warn you I was coming, my friend."

Viola pushed her glasses atop her head. "But you've...I just can't...you've come all this way? How did you ever find the farm?"

"I've a mouth that works. I asked until I got the right answer."

Another person had just climbed the steps, behind this rather pleasant-looking, tallish, mildly wrinkled, gray-haired friend, who always reminded Viola of a somewhat younger Jane Goodall. The person standing behind Virginia was an attractive and lanky much younger version of her, with dark blond hair and curious pale blue eyes.

"You know my daughter, Sylvia, of course. We're on holiday."

"Hello, Sylvia. Please come in. I'm astonished. Let's see, what shall I do now? I'll have to fix up one of the bedrooms. Could you share a queen-sized bed in my late grandmother's bedroom?"

"Of course we could, couldn't we Sylvie?"

“Of course we could,” Sylvia repeated, smiling amiably.

“We’ll bring in our luggage and then come help you fix the room.”

While they were out at the trunk of their rental car, Viola ran upstairs to shut the door of her bedroom, hoping, for a time at least, to keep her interloping guests downstairs, away from any viewing of the celestial bed, which the two might have coveted.

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Virginia laughed as they finished applying bedclothes to the stripped-down mattress in Viola’s grandmother’s ochre bedroom. This downstairs room was out of the way and next to a little sewing room. It had been arranged so that Gran would not have to climb the stairs. Martha must have slept there when she fell ill.

“Isn’t this a lot of nerve?”

“Something you’ve always had plenty of,” Viola said, pointing across the room. “There’s a small but adequate lavatory through that beige door -- a few years before my grandmother died, the large walk-in closet was made into a convenient little bathroom. Why don’t you both freshen up and rest. You must be so tired or...are you hungry?”

“Not at all. We filled ourselves with eggs and pancakes in that folksy town of Hayfield about twenty miles north of here.”

“Yes...good for you. You chose the right place for lunch.”

“Is there sufficient hot water for showers?”

“Of course, help yourselves. I’ll check on soap and towels.”

“We have soap,” Virginia said, pulling at her wine turtleneck top, which had ridden up as she worked. She had removed the jacket of a navy pants suit and then her shoes, noticing the stocking feet below Viola’s jeans. “Let’s wear our slippers, Sylvia,” Virginia advised in an accommodating voice.

Finally, Viola had ducked across the living room and into the kitchen, and was at once speaking softly on her cell phone.

“I was astonished,” she said to Ragnar. “Will you please come for supper as planned? God, what shall I cook, I haven’t

even been grocery shopping? I was going to do that when they suddenly arrived.”

“I will bring the supper,” Ragnar said in a reassuring voice, adding a somewhat humored response, “but it will not be more kedgeree.”

“Thanks...I could stand a good laugh. You’re busy I’m sure and I wouldn’t dream of asking you to fix our supper.”

“You might not dream of it but I hope you will eat it. Let me hang up and go back to my freezer. It is only late afternoon, but I am essentially finished in the field for today. Serve the usual afternoon tea and cake...if your guests are even awake -- theirs was a long and tiring journey. Enjoy yourself. I will see you around eight o’clock with something edible.”

“Ragnar...you’re my hero, *my hero!*”

“*Nei*, save that for more than a supper, my girl. *Hade.*”

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“Beef Stroganoff. We are spoiled, aren’t we, Sylvie? We awake from our nap to be fed so very well, so tastily...with candles and pretty red cloth napkins and a crystal bowl of bright-berried holly. I had no idea you could cook so well, Violea. You never fed me anything like this in London. Of course, you weren’t there often enough...and your little bed-sitter hadn’t the facilities.”

They were seated at the hastily prettified dining room table, the room bathed in lambently glowing candlelight and moderate lamplight. Ragnar winked at Violea, but she would not allow this deception.

“I wish I could take credit but I can’t. Ragnar cooked the entire meal...except for my humble little cucumber salad. He prepared the Strognaoff, made the egg noodles, cooked the tender green beans... And soon you will be tasting the dessert. I’ve no idea what it is but I know it will taste better than any of its kind you’ve ever eaten.” Violea squinted toward the foot of the dining room table where Ragnar sat grinning and shaking his head with disapproval.

“*Nei*, Wild Vi, you should not confuse your guests. The basic Stroganoff was from my freezer. I would not have minded if you--”

“But you made it,” Virginia said in astonishment. “It’s too incredible. And who, pray tell, is *Wild Vi*?”

Ragnar laughed. “It is the name I have always called her.”

“He named me that nearly forty years ago.”

“I see...or do I? This is all so new and interesting, most interesting,” Virginia said, intently studying Ragnar, her long scrutiny mitigated by the dim light, and done with a slightly more wrinkled brow than was normal for her, suggesting a frown of distaste.

“A very long relationship,” Virginia remarked, after Ragnar had gone into the kitchen to fetch the surprise dessert.

“Ten early years, actually. As I must have told you, I went to live with my aunt and attend school in Boston when I was fifteen.”

As they were dipping into dessert dishes of orange flan topped with sweet fresh-whipped cream, Virginia could not resist expressing more curiosity. “This is heavenly. How is it that an outdoorsman like yourself is able to cook like this, Mr. Almestad?”

“Virginia, call him Ragnar, or he might not answer,” Viola scolded. “Ragnar has cooked like this for years and years. He was first a cook in the merchant marine...after that becoming ever more resourceful, and they would surely steal him back if they only knew how exceptional he is now. We could both learn many wonderful culinary secrets from him. However, he’s a busy man and--”

“*Herregud*, Wild Vi, let me speak for myself. I was a cook for a short time, but it was enough to whet my appetite for the making of edible food. I was actually chief engineer on merchant vessels, that too at an early age, and came here when I was a very young man.”

“Yes, as Viola told us earlier, you were raised on a farm in Norway...then you traveled the world...an interesting beginning.”

“The life I have now, Mrs. Putnam, is as interesting as I would wish,” Ragnar said, returning Virginia’s formal courtesy.

“Please do call me Virginia...and my silent daughter here, so eagerly spooning your orange flan into her mouth, should be called Sylvia, not -- if you were intending it -- Miss Putnam.”

Sylvia looked up, smiling, and said, “I do have a tongue, mother, but at the moment it’s in ecstasy over this flan.”

When they had finished Viola sent Virginia and Sylvia into the living room to rest before the fire, then hurried into the kitchen through its swinging door. She was rinsing plates for Ragnar to load into the dishwasher when he drew her into his arms to have his kiss.

“*Ja*, now I remember why I came here tonight.”

“Oh, Ragnar, I’m sorry.”

“*Nei*, go be with your guests. I am sorry for you...this worried frown. Sorry that you have to go through so much all at once. I will clean up and leave. Tomorrow is another day when I rise early.”

“You always rise early...but I don’t blame you for fleeing from three chatty women. You shouldn’t fiddle with this. Stop! Let me. You’ve already done too much. Supper was so delicious. I appreciate immensely your rescue...your wonderful Stroganoff made with Marsala.”

“You may soon need rescue from those two...from Virginia.”

She noted that Ragnar’s instinct for what was to come was as incisive as her own. Understandable, for why should he welcome a visitor presumed to have come to fetch her away from him?

“Lord, at least I’ve managed to separate *those two* from where most of the private activities go on in the house. Oh, this is such bad timing for everything. I’ll miss you tonight and--”

“*Ja*, good, then you might be happy to fly into my arms whenever that is possible. Now go into the living room. There is little to do but turn on this machine and be on my way. One more thing: please do not be too anxious about your son. You are far more capable than you realize, Wild Vi...skilled in human relations. You will have him completely, I know that.”

“You think so? Then you know a lot more than I do.”

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“Your farm manager is a ruggedly handsome man -- I was trying to calculate his age. You must have been--”

“Five years old when we met, give or take a few months. I’m certain your brainy calculations are accurate, Virginia.”

“He’s used his attributes to healthy advantage, mother. All that I’ve seen I like. Possibly I already have a little crush on him.”

“I too, daughter. I believe I’m closer to him in age than either of you. Stay with your own generation, please, Sylvie.”

Violea sat with her mind wandering into another province, the one that had caused Ragnar to express his concern. Two nights ago she had sent Marcus an e-mail requesting his prompt response by phone. In order to assure this reaction, she had written that it was about his father. Now, with Virginia and Sylvia inconveniently present, she was on tenterhooks as to when the call would come. She was still trying to clarify what she would say to him, while forced to sit listening to a very superficial conversation, one that bordered on silliness.

Virginia, soon noticing that Violea was not responding to their banter, said, “Violea, I know this isn’t quite the time to explain why I felt it so important to come and see you, but I want you to at least think about what I must say. I’m sure you know--”

“No, it isn’t the time, Virginia. You’ve arrived right in the middle of a huge and seriously important preoccupation...which must be resolved by me. I’m afraid you’ll have to entertain yourselves to some degree, until things settle down...if I’m even able to make that happen. I’m at the moment engrossed in a family matter incredibly draining...so consuming I can hardly think of anything else.”

“Oh dear, oh dear. Is there anything we can do?”

“Not a thing...except...excuse my present distraction.”

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Violea's call came at ten o'clock the next morning, this while Virginia and Sylvia were taking a post-breakfast walk out to look at Mariner and Legs in the paddock. They intended to wander around the farmyard, exercising in pale sunlight and presently less frigid air.

"What is this about my father?" Marcus asked almost immediately.

"When I returned to the farm in November, I discovered that your father was living in a house on the farm, the first house built by the man who began this farm, your forebear, Felix Ender. Hugh has not been well. I had to wait to tell him about you, Marcus."

And so began the revelation of certain elements of a very long and rather complicated story, only those basic parts that Violea felt would help Marcus understand enough to entice him to come as soon as he was able. When she finished, she detected a much higher level of engagement in Marcus' tone of voice, a never known excitement.

"I could take a week off within a few days. I have plenty of vacation time coming because I'm a damn workaholic, so they tell me."

Violea smiled. Even now, she could hear quite a bit of Hugh in that surly disposition.

"I'll drive to the Portland Airport and pick you up, if you let me know exactly when you expect to arrive, Marcus."

"No, never mind, I'll rent a car and drive to your farm," Marcus quickly responded, retaining his unvarying aloof and formal manner. "Then you can take me to my father's house."

*No, he would not want to ride that far with me,* Violea thought. "All right. But you *will* let me know when you're coming?"

"Yes, I'll do that, of course."

When the conversation ended, Violea found that her hands were shaking. She had already concluded that Marcus would not want to spend any time with her, would probably want to stay with Hugh. She would have to go over to Hugh's and straighten things



up, make sure there was adequate food, perhaps help prepare a bedroom. How she hoped that Hugh would remain in a steady enough state to allow her to help. She wanted everything to be as good and comfortable as it could be for the two of them. Then she would simply remove herself from the picture. The thought of that estrangement engendered an ungovernable ache, settling into ankles and wrists. She was immediately irritated that she could feel so sorry for herself. She paced up and down in her little den, occasionally looking out her window to see if she could spot any activity from her two guests. To sit down and breathe deeply a moment would be the thing. She tried this, lowering her head in her hands and closing her eyes. She had done the best she could, hadn't she? From the moment he heard her tearful story, Ragnar had urged her to do just what she had done. Somehow she must get through this ordeal without showing sentimentality where it was not wanted. She must always keep in mind that Hugh was dealing with the ravages of his own wounds and sorrows, and that Marcus had never fully bonded with her and had little or no feeling for her.

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Viola drove Virginia and Sylvia to Hayfield's environs, to the large local supermarket called *Murrylton's*, where she asked them to suggest the kinds of foods they liked to eat. As she selected certain items, she tried to imagine the various ways each could be prepared to everyone's satisfaction. With no intention of prevailing upon Ragnar to do her cooking that evening, or at any time in the near future, she would definitely be consulting her mother's cookbook.

Ragnar was working long hours in the west fields, overseeing the urgent work of the subsoilers. Recent rapid snowmelt had presented a need for substantial field drainage. If this was not done, all of the fall seeding effort would end in rot. Because the farm extended into the foothills of the Cascade Range, it existed in unique microclimatic extremes of weather, with increased amounts of snow or rain often lasting later into spring. As she shopped,

Viola thought more of pleasing Ragnar, returning hungry from the cold wet fields, than she did of pleasing her guests. She wisely reasoned that if Ragnar liked her cooking so would Virginia and Sylvia.

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On the drive back to the farm, Viola listened to Sylvia talking about her work tutoring foreign students in English. She was growing fond of Sylvia, whom she had hardly known in England, and who appeared less intense and far more relaxed and comfortable with herself than Virginia had ever been with herself. It was obvious that Virginia was intently looking around for any evidence that might strengthen her argument, sizing things up, growing daily more curious, and preparing to turn herself into a problem with which Viola did not want to deal, now or at any time in the future.

“Just in my short lifetime the world has turned into a very mobile place...a polyglot of languages now audible in our own back yards...people relocating great distances from their native lands.”

“How old are you, Sylvia? I don’t think I ever knew.”

“I’m twenty-six, but I’m not so green as you might think. I have traveled...mother’s influence; she, as you know, still travels some.”

“Not often, now that I’ve gone into the recruiting end of our organization...but hardly ever tourist destinations,” Virginia interposed.

“Not all of my traveling has been leisure, mother.”

“Yes, when you were with me. It’s her father giving her all the travel money...conscience, you see. His new little wife is probably having fits. I tried to enlist Sylvie in our work, Viola, but she’ll have none of it...it’s this obsession with teaching everyone English.”

“Mother, you well know it isn’t an obsession at all, but an inclusive necessity. The knowledge of a predominating language, in its subtlest forms, is so terribly important. A comprehensive

understanding of languages often prevents the grave mistakes so destructive to us all.”

“As long as it isn’t imperialism.”

“Oh, mother, *really*. English is the global lingua franca, but I have a great respect for all languages.”

Violea laughed and said, “The Putnams are so entertaining today.”

“And now you will entertain us, Violea. I suppose you can ride a horse, drive a machine, and etcetera...all of those relevant things?”

“You really mean they’re *not* relevant for me. You may want to imply that I’m ignorant of my land, Virginia, but you’re wrong. I know how to ride...how to handle all of the equipment on this farm.”

As they drove around to the garage, Virginia said, “I doubt that you’d ever have to handle much around here from what I’ve seen...not even your manager. You could leave this tidy farm for years and return to find it coming along most efficiently.”

It was precisely what she had done. She remained silent.

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She so wanted to surprise and please Ragnar that Violea had outdone herself. She had bought a fish whose species was nearing extinction, a large whole rare wild salmon, and stuffed it with her mother’s own creation: minced celery, onion, and green pepper sautéed in butter and seasoned lightly with snipped fresh sage, lemon zest, and salt and pepper; this stirred into dry bread crumbs with a small amount of clam broth. She wrapped the fish in foil and baked it while making a shrimp, chopped egg, and paprika white sauce, which was to be individually spooned around each serving. When the salmon was ready to be eaten, she carefully slit the back and removed its spine, then served the sauced stuffed slices with herbed basmati rice and a mushroom-spinach salad, an elegant tour de force of exquisite tastes. Ragnar enthusiastically ate two generous helpings of her savory entrée, which he rarely did.

Virginia and Sylvia, having admiringly gazed upon the handsome fresh-from-the-sea silvery salmon while browsing in the plenteous supermarket, cheerfully admitted they could never have anticipated a result so lavishly delicious.

“Enjoy it while you can. It is not the all-too-frequently anemic Atlantic salmon you usually eat,” Ragnar preferentially announced.

“No, and I’ve not even eaten *those* very often,” Virginia agreed. “The fish of itself is quite superior, but, ah, what *Vi* has done to it,” Virginia held up her hand, gesturing to *Vi*, with her index finger and thumb forming an approving circle, “really superb.”

“Wild *Vi* surprises to everyone’s advantage,” Ragnar praised, lifting his glass and smiling broadly at *Vi*, who received this message, intended mainly for her, with a flush of pleasure.

They had their coffee and tea in the living room before the fire, Virginia and Sylvia together on the davenport, muttering to each other postprandial pleasantries and staring lazily into the flames. Everyone had agreed that they were much too full for dessert, and for this *Vi* was thankful, for she had none. Ragnar and *Vi* sat in wing chairs positioned off to the side of the hearth. She was content to proudly, if surreptitiously, enjoy her silver-haired lover’s masculine presence, so handsome in his heavy black turtleneck sweater and tan corduroy slacks. She distractedly luxuriated in the radiant warmth of his proximity, rather than the diffusing heat of the hearth. Occasionally, Ragnar repaired the fire. She was amused to find her guests competitively studying him as he did so.

In the easy silence, she looked over at a fine old clock standing on a mahogany table to the left of the dark bay windows. She knew its key lay just behind the rectangular case, and thought of winding it. At this becalmed social hour, she missed the clock’s friendly ticking, something she had not heard in many years. The clock had stood there so long it had become nearly invisible. It was a Junghans mantel clock with Westminster chimes, and had

originated in the Black Forest establishment of Erhard Junghans and Franz Xaver, made some time between the 1860s and 70s, and brought to America by her great-great-grandfather Felix. The brass-faced clock, handsomely and quite ornately engraved, with its thick beveled glass and rich red walnut grain, was always kept wound in early days. Once, Gran had remarked that the patriarch Ender considered it a sign of misfortune if ever he discovered his treasure standing silent and neglected.

Searching behind the clock to lay her fingers on the key, Viola then opened the front, inserted the key, and began to wind the loose spring. The others watched in anticipation as she praised the lovely sound of the chimes they could expect to hear. "I've just realized how I miss this old thing's friendly ticking," she added with smiling affection. All at once there was a pitiful twang, something tinkled and rattled inside, then the winding mechanism lost its tension.

Viola set the key back on the table, welling disappointment blurring her eyes. *Now I've broken an heirloom...ruined it the way I ruin everything.* Her ragged emotions were so close to the surface she could not withstand even this minor failure of filial trust. An accusatory wail from her offended dead antecedent echoed in her head.

"*Damn!* Now I've broken great-great-grandfather's once cherished old clock." She put her hand to her mouth and turned away from her astonished onlookers. "What next? What next!"

Ragnar at once stood up and came to gently clasp her limp shoulder. "*Nei*, my girl, I think you have only finished a worn mainspring. I can easily order another on the Net and install it myself. It will soon be fixed. Please, Wild Vi, you are tired and overreacting."

"Sorry, I know it...I *know* it," Viola apologized, tranquilized by Ragnar's soothing voice, his hand at the back of her neck. He had tilted her head to bestow a reassuring look. She smiled, now docilely afloat in that comforting gray sea, and hardly aware of her guests.

Eventually, she noticed that Virginia had pursed her lips in blatant disapproval. Heretofore, her alert friend had no cause to suspect any such intimacy with Ragnar; now her eyes were hard-cut stones of discovery. *Oh, the hell with this*, Viola thought, *Ragnar doesn't care and neither should I. But still...it would have been much less complicated if I could have somehow kept our relationship from her a little longer.* She had not asked Ragnar to conceal anything, and very likely he was indifferent to having their feelings known, or had never considered it at all. Whenever he found her in need of curative attention, he was seldom less than candid, whatever the circumstance.

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Sylvia, who had taken fondly to the horses, was at the paddock feeding them withered carrots discovered in a bin at the bottom of the refrigerator. Viola and Virginia were seated at the kitchen table, drinking post-breakfast tea, both still in their long morning robes.

"I was so surprised to learn that you have a son. Lord, you are a circumspect woman, Viola. I thought I knew a great deal about you, then I find I know less and less. I suppose if he's coming here, after your not having seen him in a while, you don't want us present at all...but now you see we've come and--"

"You'll just have to excuse me for a few days until I get things in order at his father's house...then I'll--"

"And his father is living on your farm -- quite surprising. What did I really know of your past? Only that once you were a precocious little farm girl; that you were a bright student with excellent credentials who became a devoted worker. *All* I knew, it seems."

"*Then*, as I was explaining, I'll be free to spend more time with you," Viola continued. "You might actually be a good diversion, my friend...keeping my mind off what transpires...you see, I plan to leave Marcus and his father alone together to get acquainted."

"Do you mean to say they don't know each other?"

“Oh, Virginia, you’re discovering more of me than I’d wish at the moment...all by random bits and pieces. Please don’t expect me to explain very much. It’s just way too enervating.”

“I hate to say anymore...you’ll think I’m prying but--”

“You *are* prying, Virginia...but when has that stopped you?”

“Well, at least let me say...I took a little tour of your lovely old house and saw your bed. I did wonder how Ragnar could fit into your life...but I no longer wonder how he fits in your bed.”

ViOLEA was unable to restrain uncomfortable laughter.

“You’re really the limit. If I hadn’t known you all of these years--”

“I do hope our long acquaintance gives me some license to say a few things. You’ve apparently been quite alone here except for... Regardless of that, I think you need another point of view.”

“Which is?” ViOLEA said, stiffening with irritation.

“ViOLEA, you are so competent, so valuable, so very well educated that I can’t see how you could...oh, I don’t want you to throw your life away on someone who can’t possibly..”

“What?”

“Who...can’t really know who you are.”

“Is that what you think? You’re so wrong. I’m sorry to have to say it’s none of your business, Virginia...what I do with my life.”

“I’m trying to be a good friend, good enough to take some abuse if I have to...to keep you from making a terrible--”

“What if I were to start inquiring into your failed marriage, Virginia? How would you like that?”

“But you don’t have to. I’ve told you nearly everything. You know very well Nevil had someone for years. I finally had enough.”

“But I never asked, did I?”

“I think it important to have a friend in whom you can confide.”

“Then let me confide that my relationship with Ragnar is unlikely to change no matter what you think or say.”

“Oh, Viola, have you forgotten Robert so quickly?”

A sadness ran through her.

“Robert is gone from me forever.”

“There are things you could do to support his wishes, his--”

“Virginia, *stop!* This is so painful. I came here suffering over Robert and everything else -- *you* witnessed what you called my *nervous breakdown*. Now, gradually I’ve been healing. You only want me back. That’s what it’s all about with you...but I can’t.”

“It is such a waste: all your experience; all your effort. You still have many good years ahead of you. I simply cannot imagine you staying here like this...staying here and going to seed.”

“I have no intention of *going to seed*. Ragnar wants me to teach a class in the same building that houses the library in Hayfield. I think it’s a wonderful idea. We have to make important works of literature sustainable...in young and old...in everyone...everywhere.”

“Ragnar? My dear Viola, you’re blinded by emotion. He’s a handsome man, I grant you. As nearly as I’m able to calculate, he certainly doesn’t look his age. Anyway, in men, age lines often enhance appeal rather than detract -- men are lucky that way. Even Sylvia has been tempted. But what on earth can this farmer possibly know about literature, writing, culture, *you?* You have so little in common.”

“Now it’s my turn to question your judgment, Virginia. You’re normally so perceptive...you haven’t been paying attention. I think I’ll just leave it at that and let you find out for yourself. I will certainly enjoy watching you receive an education.”

“I think I’ve been fairly well educated. Of course there’s always more to learn...but at the moment I can’t think what you mean.”

“Quite a lot will be revealed to you,” Viola said as she rinsed out their cups. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to change clothes and ride over to my son’s father’s house.”

“Could I come along? I’d love to meet the man who--”

“No, sorry, he’s presently a fragilely volatile man, and likely to send you away without explanation -- you’d see only rudeness.”



“What are Sylvia and I to do while you’re gone?”

“Don’t just stay in your room and watch television -- too often a degrading picture of America, a false picture I normally abjure...without *holding my hands over my eyes* -- I generally look there only for the weather. You can read something from the family library while I’m gone. Plenty of snack food in the refrigerator. Take a walk. I seem to remember you cooking -- you did ask if you could help. Perhaps you could put together some of the those things I bought because you said you liked them so much...make us all a nice little supper.”

When Viola had dressed and was going out the door, heading for the tack room, she paused and returned to Virginia, who was sulking quietly in the living room.

“Virginia, I suppose you’re thinking of some subtly incriminating questions you want to put to Ragnar. Well, I know you are, my friend. So I’m just trying to save you from a real verbal donnybrook by asking you to pay keener attention to your intended victim, and to think carefully before you speak.”

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“Hmm, Welsh rarebit,” Viola said as Sylvia set the plate before her at the dining room table. Viola stared down at the soupy melted cheese spooned over white toast, then looked at Ragnar, whose face was sympathetically indulgent. He shrugged very slightly, so that only Viola noticed, then tacitly offered her a wry smile, a curling brook of surrender, as if to say, *never mind, I will eat it*. She knew that he wished he were at his place, even if eating no more than a lunch meat sandwich, but she had invited him and he had dutifully come.

“Of course, I didn’t have any good ale to mix with the cheese, just a pedestrian beer,” Virginia lamented.

“Not too serious, I’m sure...for this famous old recipe,” Viola said, discreetly ambiguous solely for Ragnar.

It was Sylvia who had prepared the fruit salad -- by opening several cans and mixing the contents together, she had concocted

something innocuously edible, if a little too sweet.

“There’s pumpkin sherbet for dessert,” Virginia announced.

“Please none for me,” Ragnar politely demurred, thereby forcing Viola to eat melting squash sherbet so as not to insult her guests.

When they were at last seated in the living room, before a fire Ragnar had meticulously set ablaze, Ragnar, who had claimed the davenport to sit near Viola, said, “How is Hugh getting along?”

“He’s much more even-tempered, hard at work and noncommittally, but obviously quite curious about meeting Marcus.”

“No more than that?” Virginia questioned.

“I do know he’s excited deep down, but having so often had his feelings shattered, he’s proceeding cautiously...understandably so. He’s allowed me to prepare a bedroom and to suggest staples for his kitchen. While I couldn’t touch any of his books and papers, I was able to dust the living room...clean the bathroom and kitchen.”

“Good lord, Viola, are you his maid service?”

“Only because of Marcus, Virginia. As well as caring for his father, I want him to like the house as part of his heritage.”

Virginia got up from her relegated wing chair and stood nearer the fire, then slowly rotated her body to focus on Ragnar. Sensing this, he turned from Viola to look back at Virginia, his expression as ever serene, revealing nothing and unchanged even by anticipation.

“Good night, everyone. I’m going to retire with a book I found in your interesting library,” Sylvia called.

“Which book?” Viola asked.

“One covering four hundred years of Italian painting.”

“Ah...sweet dreams...with Botticelli’s *Primavera*,” Viola said.

Virginia silently watched Sylvia cross the living room toward the hallway, then redirected her attention to Ragnar. His composed expression was slightly altered, for he was holding Viola’s wrist in his hand.

“Speaking of paintings... It makes me think how Viola loves Turner. So many times I’ve found her snatching a little free time in London to visit the Tate and the National Gallery.” She looked patronizingly at Ragnar. “Turner is an artist who--”

“Is remembered for his late landscapes of brilliant light.”

“I see you’ve been discussing Turner with Viola.”

“*Nei*, we have not had time to speak of Turner...but it may happen at a calmer time. His dynamic, free-wheeling brush certainly ushered in impressionism...the abstract...the best of abstract as far as I am concerned. In the critical mid-nineteenth century it helped to have Ruskin legitimize him. Those blazing sunsets -- assumed to have been assisted by volcanic ash in the atmosphere -- turned gifted vision into canvasses of light -- natural forces over man...some homage to the Industrial Revolution. They might have been painted yesterday.”

Virginia’s face held a peculiar expression of incredulity, but she went on. “Yet...there is that blinding spirituality of an age. Have you ever seen the actual canvasses, Ragnar?” she deigned to ask.

“*Ja*. When I go to Norway to see my siblings, I sometimes stop in London to visit the galleries. I never stay long...the food.”

“British food isn’t to your liking?”

“*Herregud*, it is unfortunate...and hardly improves, unless you pay too much...even then quality is uncertain. I once saw a BBC cooking show that for me approached vulgarity. There is a great difference between larding up hash and the serious preparation of edible food.”

“I’m afraid British food is a cliché to be avoided.” Viola’s smiling reinforcement also came with a hasty attempt at diversion.

Ragnar squeezed her hand and went on. “Once, while punishing my stomach in a London pub, I thought of your brave explorer-collector, Frank Kingdon Ward, of *Land of the Blue Poppy* fame. This prolific botanist explored, in China’s Yunan Province and in Tibet, very dangerous high precipices and across deep wild valleys...providing us with a number of our wonderful azaleas and

rhododendrons. Everywhere, he agreeably ate local food but, while on leave, the poor fellow died of a stroke brought on in a London pub. I have always thought it was bad food.”

Viola could not help smiling but, steering away from this provocative subject, said, “I’m glad we all appreciate Turner. So often the light blazing on the horizon here, blazing on our snow, makes me think of his bold paintings...but at last I see nothing but the beauty itself...the beauty of nature.”

“*Ja*, that is best.”

“At the end of his life, Turner said, *The sun is God* -- he was forever exalted by its great light. When I first heard his remark, knowing full well he revered light, it still made me think of the Maya in Central America, who literally worshipped the sun as their god. They instinctively knew what modern science so readily accepts, that our sun is our making and our life, at least it will be for a long time to come...our fierce old star burning so bright.”

Finished with her observation, Viola dropped her head back and closed her eyes, experiencing obvious pleasure at considering the endangered but felicitous balance between sun and earth. When she lifted her head to look at Virginia, she saw a continuing ruffled impatience with the unexpected turnings of their conversation. She had almost forgotten how very stubborn Virginia could be.

“It is entirely possible to have too much Turner in one day of looking -- more difficult to study that way. Which of his paintings do you favor, Virginia?” Ragnar asked, extending her chosen subject.

Displaying a perplexed frown, Virginia answered, “Why I like them all...but...” As she paused to reflect, Viola shrewdly suspected she was searching for a pertinent but denigrating allusion. “Well, I suppose I very much like the *Story of Apollo and Daphne* at the Tate.”

“Yes, Virginia has a romantic taste for Greek mythology: Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,” Viola said, “staid, not my favorite Turner. There is false-hearted Apollo, once again after a pretty girl, pursuing beautiful Daphne, daughter of the River-god, Peneus,

who--”

“Saves her from Apollo by changing her into a laurel rooted on his river bank,” Virginia interposed. “What has Apollo then? Nothing more than a laurel wreath to remember her by. Isn’t it appalling what happens to fleeting lust when its subject loses purpose?”

Virginia, now smugly beaming with her cautionary analogy, had inadvertently reminded Ragnar of something amusing.

“Turner wanted the hound and hare he placed in the foreground of that painting to represent Apollo pursuing Daphne. Here on the farm it has been Wild Vi pursuing the hare.” Ragnar was laughing.

“And Apollo trying to save her from tularemia,” Viola added, giggling with a selfish delight she vaguely perceived as rude.

“What on earth are you two talking about now?” Virginia demanded.

“Not Welsh rarebit but juggled rabbit,” Viola said, by now nearly sliding to the floor with uncontrollable laughter.

“What, may I ask, has any of this to do with Turner?”

“You tell us,” Viola answered, trying to get control of herself.

Virginia slumped back in her chair and sighed. “All right you’ve had your fun. Perhaps I’ve misjudged...shouldn’t have judged at all, but I do know this, Ragnar: you can’t possibly know the person I have known for so many years, the Viola so devotedly goal-oriented, so in charge and knowledgeable...so very full of conviction when it comes to her work that--”

“Virginia, I’m not sure that was ever me but it isn’t now.”

“Because your head has been turned...you’ve been enticed into--”

“My God, that is so far from the truth. One of the first things Ragnar asked me was if I intended to stay here, and I said *yes*. I had no idea what was to come. As things changed, even Ragnar tried to make me reevaluate everything before--”

“Yes, the perfect method of control...a little rope to hang--”

“Virginia, who is the one seeking control?” Ragnar asked with a calmly forbearing voice. “Who is the one attempting to make up Wild Vi’s mind for her? If she is really as intelligent as you say -- and I know that she is -- why do you discount her ability to reason and decide for herself? Is it possible that this argument is more about what you want?”

“No, no, not at all. I’m sorry. I apologize for the liberties I’ve taken. I’m off to bed.” She glared back over her shoulder, “I only hope, Ragnar, that you won’t come to regret the wonderfully viable Daphne you’ve helped change into an immobilized laurel.”

“Oh for God’s sake, Virginia, that’s really tacky.”

“Sorry. Good night,” Virginia whimpered and fled.

“What a show...entirely melodrama.”

“*Ja*, but I think you better go work some of your magic without my troubling presence. I will go now and leave you to it...there will be less difficulty for you tomorrow.”

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After Ragnar left, Viola called Virginia back into the living room, hoping to leave Sylvia in peace, and began to explain, with as much consideration as possible, how disappointed she was.

“Viola, I’ve seen that you’ve got all sorts of problems going on here. I’ve seen that it was a very inopportune time to come, and yet I really did have your interests at heart. I think I did, didn’t I? You should have told me more about Ragnar. I’ve only just begun to understand a little about him. He’s absolutely stolen you away. I suppose I too might have given in if I were in your shoes. I may never get you back.”

“*I, I, I!* Do you see how you’re expressing yourself, Virginia? Ragnar is right. This is about *you*, not me.”

“Untrue! Untrue! I thought our friendship meant something, and the years of valuable experience you--”

“Our friendship doesn’t have to end, Virginia, only my work. When your head clears enough, perhaps you’ll remember what I’m saying now. It really isn’t any of your concern, but it was I who

had to beg Ragnar to take me on before I settled everything else in my life. He thought it was for my own good to leave me alone to do that. But you see, *Ragnar* is for my own good. I want to be for his own good. And that's that. And as to you and I, Virginia: yes, I've known you for years and years...I've no intention of allowing you to destroy our friendship with what I've come to think of as some incredibly mad fixation...temporary insanity?"

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Viola had finally sent a more subdued and reasonable Virginia off to bed, but was herself in a nervous state. She had no desire to lie alone in her huge bed and try to imagine what Ragnar must be thinking, and concluded that a cooling walk would bring some comfort. Once outside in the frigid night air, her narrowing vision of relief led her unhesitatingly to Ragnar's door. She had slipped into the darkened cabin as quietly as possible and was attempting to get out of her boots, with only the small night light by the door illuminating her wary effort, when Ragnar suddenly appeared, with sleep-mussed hair and wearing a t-shirt and gray sweat pants. He knelt down and helped her with her boots. She looked up at him with no desire to speak at all. He removed her coat, hung it by the door, then carried her to his bed.

"I've already walked to your bed several times, my darling."

"And now you have not."

When they were comfortably snuggled beneath the covers, Ragnar said, "Tell me this, Wild Vi: is there any truth in anything that Virginia said tonight? Have I kept you from a life you may later regret abandoning?"

"Darn Virginia! I was afraid of this. My answer is no, no, *no!* Absolutely not. I hope it's the last time you ask. There *was* some truth to something said after you left: that you had completely stolen me away. I'd love to think I've...done the same to you?"

"*Ja*, you know you have...*you know you have*. But you will only have to pay for that the way we pay each other now."

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“What happened last night?” Sylvia asked. They were eating a lunch Viola had made: turkey slices with Swiss cheese, mayonnaise, lettuce, and tomato on onion bagels, with cups of hot tomato bisque.

“We discussed the fine qualities of Turner,” Viola said curtly.

“Actually, Sylvie, it was all about Viola’s enthrallment with an unusual and...oh, *bosh!*...surprisingly sophisticated man of the soil.”

“And all the time I thought it was about art,” Viola said, glaring at Virginia with an ironic smile of warning.

“The art of love,” Sylvia interjected.

“Don’t worry, my dottily smitten friend, for the time being I intend to remain in the background and watch the show. I had no idea farm life could be so entertaining.”

“And I had no idea you could be so coldly indifferent, Virginia.”

“*Viola!* I’m rooting for you. I want it all to come out just as you wish...all for your happiness...everyone’s happiness.”

“How glib and syrupy, mother. Viola, I think your Ragnar is absolutely one-off. His silences are spot on -- you can actually learn things from them...silence in the right places that--”

“Oh shut up, daughter.”

“Sylvia, in all your years away at school, I never really got to know you. What a pleasure to see how well you’ve turned out.”

“Are you implying that with more proximity I might have been a bad influence?” Virginia demanded.

“Nothing of the sort. Why so defensive?”

“You’ve got mayonnaise on your chin, mother.”

Virginia at once applied her napkin while Viola and Sylvia shared a venting refrain of laughter at her expense.

“All right. Let’s call a truce. Viola, I’d like to use your computer to send some e-mail,” Virginia said, rising and tugging her bulky pale-gray sweater down over charcoal woolen slacks.



“Please be my guest. I haven’t time to do any writing now, so you can stay there as long as you want.”

ViOLEA was cleaning up in the kitchen when Virginia appeared and, having finished her e-mails, said she wanted to go into Hayfield.

“Sorry, I can’t now. I’ve got to stay here in case Marcus calls on the house phone. Why don’t you take Sylvia and drive in yourself. You’ve got that nice rental car just standing idle out there.”

“I believe I will. Do you need anything from the market?”

“No...still plenty of food around here...but get whatever you want...if you’re hungry for other things.”

ViOLEA was glad to see them go, especially Virginia, who seemed always to be waiting for her to undergo a miraculous transformation and begin packing to accompany them back to London. She had just gone outside to see them off, and, coatless under a cold gray sky, shivered a little in her brown turtleneck and corduroy slacks. A few green tips of intrepid tulip leaves were barely visible along the walk. She had knelt to examine them -- experiencing a sudden joyful affinity for reliable nature -- when another rental car pulled up. Her instant shock and anger must have been briefly in evidence as Marcus got out of a silver Toyota sedan and approached her. *Oh, damn, damn, damn! He’s done this on purpose, just driven up without any warning and caused me to greet him with anger. I won’t, I won’t succumb*, she insisted to herself, swiftly inducing a false smile.

“Sorry, I was going to call you on the way, but I discovered my phone was dead.”

“You might have called before you left Portland, but never mind.”

She tried not to stare too hard at her tall, beautifully made son, now even more the incarnation of a young, dark-eyed Hugh. He wore a fir-green rain parka similar to her own, and she smiled with spontaneous pleasure at the sight of this minor similarity. What else had they in common? She did not know, and that

thought caused another incident of regret at lost discovery, the slow pleasures of childhood revelations.

“You’d better come in and have some tea while I call Hugh.”

“Can’t we just drive there?”

“No, we can’t. Come in and I’ll explain a little.”

Marcus stood back a moment, looking up at the house.

“It was built by your great-great-grandfather, Felix Ender, who was a young architect in Germany...Schleswig-Holstein...Kiel and then Berlin before he came here. The stone house your father lives in is the first home built on the farm.”

Marcus followed her inside and sat at the kitchen table, showing no interest in examining the house’s interior. She filled the hot pot with water, prepared a tea pot, and said, “As soon as it’s ready will you please pour it. I’ll run up to my bathroom and then call Hugh.”

She had wanted to get away, up to her den to use the phone where Marcus could not hear. If only she found Hugh with an even temper, at least receptive to this sudden appearance with so little warning.

“Hell, let’s get it over with,” Hugh responded, and with that succinct declaration ended Viola’s nervous call.

Their tea was mostly drunk in silence, Marcus disinterested and annoyingly uncommunicative. Finally he said, “Well, you look in pretty good health. You plan to stay here now?”

“Yes.”

His long eyes traveled over her face, with his mouth held in an ironic smirk very much like Hugh’s. “That’s hard to figure, hard to believe. You don’t seem at all like the type to wash up here permanently.”

Every cold word he uttered was an attack on her nervous system, but Viola smiled and said, “I *am* the type...a farm girl right through the bone. Perhaps the way one starts out is the best way to finish.” Immediately she reminded herself that Marcus, quick and bright like his father, might suspect an insinuation that he too should finish here. An idea so hard to imagine she would never

have implied it.

“Please remember that your father has been ill...is still very disturbed by his own sorrows, the loss of two wives and a child, deep mental and physical wounds...terrible visions of brutal deaths. He’s easily irritated, and you must go slowly and be forgiving.”

“Yes, I understand. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Marcus stood up and stretched, so far every gesture some blatant form of acrimonious indifference toward her. *Punishment*, she thought, *all of this acting. How childish, how foolish, what a waste.* She stood up, maintaining her own aloofness, but it was not indifference, rather a soft compliance of misery and regret and love.

“Let’s go see the old man,” he said with a sudden boyish grin.

“I’ll lead the way in my truck.”

Violea gripped the steering wheel tightly and glanced from time to time in her rearview mirror, as Marcus followed her down the long field road, around the filbert orchards, into the barren, snow-patched woods, at last on the winding road to the stone house. *How strange, how strange this is*, she thought. *Oh, Marcus, I never imagined anything like it when I carried you inside me not so very long ago.*

Hugh was standing on the porch as they walked toward him. *My God, Violea acknowledged, they are indeed father and son, so very much father and son. What must Hugh be feeling now?*

Hugh came down the steps. Violea introduced them with a sudden proud smile, spontaneous, almost shy, all the while raptly attempting to hold back a relentless flood of her own powerful emotions. They stood a moment sizing each other up, then Hugh reached out his hand and said simply, “Hello, Marcus, I was very glad to hear that you exist.”

“Yes, I too...glad to hear about *you*. I knew you must exist. She never told me where you were, anything of you...except that you’re an intelligent man, and that I look like you...and I see that I do.”

“Your mother didn’t know where I was, Marcus. Come inside.”

“Yes, good idea, it’s cold out here,” Marcus said, turning to Viola. “Well, Viola, I’ll say goodbye, as I probably won’t see you before I leave.”

“Oh. Yes, all right. Goodbye, then. Have a wonderful visit. I’m so very happy for you both.” She turned to go.

“Wait a minute! I’m no exemplar of courtesy but this is highly indecent. Come inside, Lea.”

“It’s all right. Marcus is entitled to--”

“Goddammit, this isn’t just about our son; this is about all of us. Come inside.”

Viola wanted to protest but held herself still and glanced at Marcus, whose face was flushed and taut with irritation. She decided it would be best to please Hugh, remain long enough to relieve the tension of his outburst, then allay Marcus’ discomfort by politely taking her leave.

Hugh had made a large, roaring alder fire, and they sat down before it, Hugh and Marcus on the long davenport, Viola to the side in a wing chair. “What if I make some tea?” she said, standing up.

“It’s already made...in the kitchen...have to put it on a tray, with slices of the carrot cake you made, Lea. I’ve already eaten some. Delicious.”

“I’ll get it then.”

“No, I’ll get it,” Hugh insisted.

While he was gone, Viola whispered softly, “I’m sorry, Marcus. He’ll calm down. We’ve become quite good friends, you see, and he’s taken on the role of my defender. Don’t worry, I’ll manage to get away soon, and you’ll have all the time you want to get acquainted.”

“Are the two of you together now...or what?”

“No, no...that is...just good friends,” Viola said hurriedly, for Hugh was returning with the large, heavily laden tea tray. He walked slowly, haltingly. Marcus jumped up and took the tray from him, setting it on the coffee table.

The ensuing conversation was mainly about Marcus’ work in

bio-fuel research, interspersed with information concerning the farm, and the vagaries of the local weather. Mostly quiet herself, Viola watched the two of them, their earnest curiosity, their increasing ease at exchanging ideas. Her heart swelled with awe and pride; she was so happily rewarded she cared little that Marcus had shown no interest in her own past or present life. She hoped to leave any discussion of Hugh's private life for him to introduce later, after she was gone.

When she finally made her way to the door and was putting on her coat, Hugh came to see her off and said with a grin, "Thank you, Lea. Of course, I expect you back here several more times before our bad boy leaves. Have I your permission to tell him about you? I'm going to anyway...a few childhood memories...but fear not, it will all be favorable...and none of it a lie."

She discreetly pulled back his loose black sweater sleeve and examined with remorse the several-inch red scar on his arm.

"Dead subject," he assured her, looking into her eyes with the knowing expression of avowed culpability. "You did get my attention."

Viola placed her hands on his shoulders and stood on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. Over her shoulder, she saw Marcus solemnly watching them. Poor Marcus must be so confused. His enlightenment must now be left to Hugh's very capable rendition. "I trust you and I'm so glad for both of you," she whispered, squeezing his hand. "Goodbye, Marcus," she called, slipping out the door.

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"I hope we'll get to meet the two of them before we leave," Virginia said at dinner. Viola had just delivered spare information of Marcus' arrival.

"That I can't promise, Virginia. From here on I'm simply letting things develop without my intervention. I've been asked to return before Marcus leaves, but I think I'll let Hugh call me if he really wants that to happen -- I don't think Marcus does."

“Good lord, you’re a strong woman.”

“Not very but I’m deeply relieved...to see them together at last. Right now I don’t think they need me at all...if ever.”

“Oh, Viola dear, you can share me with mother if you need an ersatz offspring. I’m actually desirous of having lots of caring mothers. I can’t imagine why a son wouldn’t want one as good as you.”

“I wasn’t a very good mother -- it wasn’t allowed me -- but I accept your offer, you sweet thing. And by the way, thank you both for fixing this tender pot roast. The braised vegetables are nicely caramelized. I was far too nervous to cook anything..with very much success that is. I suppose it will take me days to really calm down.”

Much later, when her guests had gone to bed, Viola paced outside beneath bright moonlight. The hibernal moon peered down, vouchsafing a chilly knowing smile, then vanished behind gathering thick dark clouds. To think that her son was less than two miles away with his father. She tried to imagine how their relationship would unfold. It appeared to have gone well so far. She wished she could talk a little with Ragnar. He could identify important issues as deftly as a sage lawyer examining a new case, and was so understanding in the process, but this was his chess night. He had been keeping himself well away, so as not to unduly complicate things, staying in touch by phone, with that concise but steadily reassuring voice she habitually and ardently anticipated. Inexplicably, he was aware of nearly everything that happened here, almost the moment anything occurred, even *before* it occurred. He was presciently linked to nature’s faintest signals, those of earth and of erratic humans, more so than anyone she had ever known. *A self-actualized man*, she mused.

She sensed that something was different and looked up to find the sky closed, large white flakes descending faster and faster. *Oh here we go again, yet another onslaught of winter.* She hurried inside and climbed to her huge lonely bed.

Much later she awoke to find Ragnar’s arms sliding gently

around her. "I came home to an empty bed...thought you would need me now."

"Yes...but I remembered your chess night. You always know just when I need you...which is most of the time. Is it still snowing?"

"*Ja*, I walked here through it."

"But not barefoot."

"*Nei*, you *lille* tease...but you know I would do it to get to you. *Jeg savnet deg så mye -- forstår?* -- I missed you very much. *I morgen*, tomorrow, you will tell me how you are...how everything is."

"You're here now and for the moment everything is nearly perfect. I'd say it *is* perfect but you wouldn't let me. I may even in time learn to speak a little more of your first language."

"*Ja*, then you will come with me to Norway and look at a beautiful old *gard*, the farm...high green cliffs and deep dark fjords of childhood. We will eat different kinds of fish -- if there are any left. Let us warm each other, my brave peacemaker, then we will sleep."

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Two cold days had come and gone, and still Viola heard nothing from the stone house. She decided to think of this as a good sign, and was diverting her attention by taking longer and longer walks into the nearby forest. On this third day of Hugh's silence, Virginia and Sylvia had come along. They were well past the scene of Viola's autumn rabbit hunting. Now and then clumps of snow, overweighting the sweeping limbs of the big firs, sluiced down like airily fanning-out waterfalls, sparkling in whatever spangles of sun fell through the dense stands of evergreens. She wanted to reach one of the secreted meadows, summer havens now sleeping beneath the snow, where ancient oak trees stood branched against a friendly open sky, trees most elegantly garlanded with clusters of mistletoe. They were all heavily bundled up in coats and hats, Virginia and Sylvia wearing borrowed mufflers and gloves and old rubber boots. Viola was presently blazing a trail through uneven snow lying above a broad path wide enough to have easily

accommodated her truck. She knew this rough old path well enough, for it led to a fork that diverged to the abandoned cottage where Ragnar first lived. There was actually another road feeding in from the northwest that also led to the cottage; it wound through a corner of the woods all the way back to the highway, thus the cottage could be more easily accessed without entering by the long farm road running past the Ender farmhouse.

"This is really a large woods. You could explore and explore," Sylvia said. "I've seen a number of tracks."

"Yes. Still lots of wildlife a bit further in: foxes, rabbits, skunks, martins, porcupines, possum, deer, coyotes, cougar, probably a few bears...of course owls and hawks and smaller winged creatures."

"You say bears...and those puma cats? Now I'm getting nervous," Virginia said, turning in a circle, with careful scrutiny.

"In all my young life I was never bothered by anything except nettles in this forest...a few exciting encounters from a distance."

Virginia checked her watch. "I'm timing this for two hours. Now we're almost an hour in and it will soon be time to turn around."

"I thought Englishwomen were generally hearty outdoor types."

"Hearty, perhaps, but as to wilderness, no...not this London lady. Sylvia has done some serious trekking around the world."

"Never in this much deep -- uh, whoops! -- this much deep snow," Sylvia explained, righting herself from a topple into a drift. "I mean...uh...at least I was wearing skis."

"Walk where I'm walking, Sylvia. You're into drifts."

"I was looking for that noisy jaybird. How far are we going?"

"I think...instead of the first oak meadow -- quite a bit further in these drifts -- we'll detour down this cut in the trees; it leads to an old hired-hand cottage. I haven't seen it in years and years. It must still stand on the other side of that large basalt



outcropping.”

They stood silent a moment, looking up at a rising rock promontory where jagged gray clefts held irregular canted planes of snow. This higher mass opened up the woods, yet considerably elevated the tree-lined horizon, causing an overpowering shift of perspective that Viola found intimidating. She felt very much reduced in this surrounding, insignificant and held at the mercy of more formidable nature. The rising cold north wind, the steadily graying sky and shadowy dullness on the snow, augmented this hemmed-in feeling of circumscription.

“Rounding that rock might be an equally far distance,” Virginia said with increasing consternation. “Awfully deep here.”

“No, come on, just follow me. I know where the old road lies.”

They moved along slowly and in single file, Virginia and Sylvia staying close to Viola, so that they were all shocked at the same instant upon catching sight of the yellow wood cottage. There was a rusty red Ford truck parked at the far end of the low, tidily kept little snow-roofed house. Thinning pale smoke curled and blew away from an old-fashioned chimney that nearly covered one end of the cottage, a chimney made of lichen-stained oblong river stones.

Viola at once led her friends into a clump of pines, and away from the cottage windows. She pulled off a glove and reached under the flap of her coat pocket for her cell phone. But before she could punch in Ragnar’s number, she saw a man making his way from the house, rapidly moving directly toward them over a path of trodden snow.

An odd vision arose in her head. Hardly a rational vision, for she thought she was seeing a ghost, seeing her father: the same medium height and stature of her father, the familiar straight Saxon nose, stubborn outthrust chin, sensual mouth, the same piercing dark blue eyes. He wore a worn, thickly padded khaki jacket and a brown hat with furry ear flaps hanging loose over his ears. His brown twill trousers were tucked into black rubber boots. Kicking

crusty lumps of snow away from his stopping point -- was it a dispersal of anger? --, he closely scrutinized the three surprised, somewhat fearful but still highly curious women. Within seconds, he focused on Viola and said, "You are Viola Ender. I saw you once at your mother's funeral."

Viola, who had remained speechless, could only utter, "Yes."

"In that case, come inside and warm yourselves. I'd guess, by the look of you, you haven't gotten around to news of me yet."

Viola's mind was racing as they trooped along behind him in silence. He was certainly a relative living on her farm, therefore unlikely to incriminate himself by misconduct, but who was he exactly and what was he doing here? Surely Ragnar knew about him. For an instant she experienced the sinking effect of possible deceit -- an impulsive reaction Ragnar might have accurately ascribed to her father's tempestuous nature. She could at least refrain from a hasty flare-up of anger that would only prove counter-productive. Ragnar would have a solid explanation -- didn't he always? Still, by now she should have heard it. Quixotically, she wondered if there could be any more surprise habitations on the property, places where strange hermits had settled in, of course known to everyone but herself.

By the time they were inside the low-ceilinged cottage, and seated in rather lumpy chintz-covered Colonial-style chairs, a bit too near the somewhat smoky hearth, Viola had shrewdly drawn a reasonable conclusion. She waited to state her supposition, while the man, now free of outdoor clothes and wearing a green plaid flannel shirt, threw pine wood onto the dwindling fire. He then brushed his hands together and turned around, looking at her with a solemnly guarded expression, very disturbing, for it was her father's.

"You must be my father's uncle's son...the one who went to Viet Nam. We've never met. Weren't you living in Pennsylvania? I'm sorry I can't remember your name. But...why are you here on my farm?"

“You might well ask. I sometimes wonder myself. I’m sure your man Ragnar was eventually going to mention that your distant relative Roland Ender was living in his old digs. He’s followed my request for anonymity to the letter...of course because Martha wanted it...allowed me to live here in peace. I was in very poor condition, returned from that madness...sick in body and mind, and destitute. My wife left me...or left our relationship while I was gone. We had no children. She sold the house I had put in her name, and took what money there was...it was just as well. I emerged from that insane slaughter a deranged paranoid. I spent quite a while in hospitals.” He observed Viola focusing carefully on him, and Virginia and Sylvia glancing toward the door. “Don’t worry, I’m finally over that...but even after my necessary period of incarcerations I knew I had to be left alone. I could easily have accidentally killed someone -- was thoroughly trained to quite intentionally do it. I was at last studying...then teaching. Finally fleeing academia, I thought your father would let me stay on the farm, do a little work with my hands. When I got here, after hitchhiking for a couple of weeks, I found that your father was fully out of all this. I learned by bits and pieces how he’d treated your mother, so it’s even more amazing that she allowed me to...sorry.” He looked at Viola, then her friends. “Maybe I shouldn’t tell you this now.”

“I had no idea. Mama never spoke of you,” Viola said, ignoring his late-arriving attempt at discretion before her guests.

He lowered himself into a sagging padded armchair and threw back his head, closing his eyes as if there were no one else present, apparently arranging a certain vision of the past.

“She was a good woman, somewhat like me in temperament, easily subject to highs and lows of great pleasure and sadness. From the day I stood at her door she was all kindness, and -- without the slightest hesitation -- offered this place, advised me to fix it up as best I could. Looking back, I suppose she deemed busy hands good therapy. She even brought me food, until I told her to stop...said I could do that myself. I had some relief money from

the government. It's what I live on. I had meant to be a poet, you see -- if there is ever any volition involved in this strange vocation; it's a certain kind of brain. I was always the odd kid out in my big unforgiving family of house-builders...writing on every scrap of paper from the time I could handle a pencil. Can you imagine how Viet Nam affected a poet? -- no enemy fire necessary for immolation. I've never cared very much for funereal poetry; elegy falls considerably short of the grave. Walt Whitman dressed some wounds during the Civil War and made poetry of it, but that isn't the same as being a party to the *making* of wounds, the willful pulverizing of bodies in the name of misunderstood or jingoistic words; putative ideals made rotten. The Iraq war was of course a grab for oil, along with all the subsidiary feeders that make money out of war, or our corporate plutocracy wouldn't have gone near the place. Even former Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan said it was about oil -- he who helped ruin the economy. Support our fuel tanks. Ask no questions and you won't have to suffer more lies; you won't even have to vote. The power of our glorious sun wasted. Think of it: all the big hot deserts on the planet, hot and getting hotter, out there just waiting to collect solar energy for the entire world -- in lieu of trillions going down the war toilet. Sorry, I seem to have rambled on...the pitiful result of long silences in my hermitage."

Roland stood up and poked irritably at the fire. Viola thought they ought to leave. They had all stood up to make a polite retreat. It was an awkward situation. Like Ragnar, Roland had obviously lived on this farm much longer than she had. And, by an ingenious series of beneficent acts, Ender Farm really ought to be seen as Martha's very own re-creation, for her mother had clearly made the farm give more than foodstuffs, had made it a reparation of life's misfortunes, a restful place of healing and philosophical sustenance, forever bearing her impressive stamp of humanism.

"Do you write now? I mean, have you written things here that--"

“Yes,” Roland answered Virginia, staring at her a moment, perhaps hesitant to ask what he did ask. “Do you like poetry...read it? Well, if you like it you read it,” he added with a sardonic laugh.

“I’d like to read some of yours...probably we all would, wouldn’t we, Viola? Viola has a Ph.D in literature.”

“I’m not up to critics or criticism.”

“Neither am I,” Viola said, “I’d still very much like to read your poetry...with no thought of criticism.” Standing before a jarring resemblance of her eternally disturbing father, she found she was able to laugh with an empathic spontaneity.

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When they returned from their astonishing encounter, discussing it all the way home, Viola spotted a sheriff’s car parked below the walk at the front of the house. She next caught sight of a burly uniformed man going away from her door.

“Hello!” she called with some alarm as she hurried into the snowy front yard. “I’m Viola Ender. Were you looking for me?”

The husky middle-aged man extended a hand in greeting and said, “Hello, glad to meet you. Nope, nope, nothing serious. I was looking for Ragnar. He isn’t home...just wondered when he’s due back.”

Viola gazed thoughtfully toward the cabin, looked at her watch and said, “I think...he’ll likely be back in half an hour or so. Won’t you come inside? You could wait if you have time. My friends and I have been walking and we’re ready for some strong hot tea.”

Soon they were all sipping tea around the kitchen table. Sheriff Norm Hiller had introduced himself and begun explaining the reason for stopping in. More surprise followed, obvious in Virginia, who had deemed farm life in general a prosaic and surely uneventful existence, even though Ender Farm itself continued to disprove her assumption.

“I figured Ragnar mighta already told you what happened yesterday,” Sheriff Hiller said. He sat on the edge of a Windsor

chair Viola had always thought sturdy, but which now looked as if it might collapse beneath his broad girth. His cap lay on the table and he wiped his sweating forehead with a hairy, thick-fingered hand.

“No, he’s told me nothing. I’ve been so busy with other things that we’ve talked hardly at all,” Viola explained.

“Yeah, he’s not much of a talker, I know. Except for yesterday, that kinda talk he does real well...saved us some serious trouble...and sure’s hell saved old Simon Brown from doin himself in.”

The sheriff’s three listeners sat forward, leaning on their elbows with growing interest as Viola asked, “Who is Simon Brown?”

“Oh, sure, how would you know? Well, Simon’s kinda the town oddity. I’d guess every town has one or two of those. He’s a clever old crank who perks up whenever he thinks some local thing is goin off the tracks...he jumps right into it, tryin to keep Hayfield a little more socially minded. Fights everything from parking meters -- which we haven’t got yet in Hayfield -- to our potholes. You could say he’s partly responsible for the town’s public toilets...park benches and so forth. The old gent’s kind of a tolerated laughingstock, but nobody’d deny he’s civic-minded, sometimes pretty useful.”

“I see. Well, good for him.”

“Simon’s been real sick lately...never had trust in doctors. He baches in the family house just outside town on a few acres...the last of the Brown clan that used to be pretty important around here...years ago. I reckon when he got sick he decided his time had come...so he wasn’t hanging around for the final call...stopped in at the filling station and bought a can of high octane. He loves his house, all that family stuff in there, and didn’t want any of it in anyone else’s hands...furniture, old letters, possessions, whatever. Told Farley at the service station he’d had it...then went on home with the idea of burning himself up in his house. Well, Farley called me, and I called Ragnar. I knew Ragnar’s the only one he’d

listen to, if he'd listen to anybody. They used to fish trout together over on the Metolius. So Ragnar went inside there and talked him right out of his can of gasoline and into an ambulance. I just stopped in to thank Ragnar for doin that. Nobody wanted to see Simon go that way. We all kinda used to that ornery old cuss. They'll probably patch him up at the clinic and he'll go a while longer...or maybe send him on to a big hospital that can do the job."

"Now I remember the Brown place. A long time ago the Brown family had a lumber mill."

"Yeah, that's right," the Sheriff said, nervously lifting his delicate China cup and taking a clumsy sip; his broken-boned little finger was awkwardly curled. Viola had wanted to honor her guests with her mother's fragile Sunday breakfast tea cups, but now realized the Sheriff should have been given a large mug.

He looked up at the high white ceiling, studying the modest scaled-down chandelier of coiled black iron, then stared through the propped-open swinging door into the dining room. "Don't remember comin inside this house. Nice old place, real nice." He stood up. "You figure Ragnar's back now? I'll take a look."

"Let me call," Viola said, quickly standing up and heading off to find her cell phone.

When Ragnar answered, Viola said in a low voice, "Sheriff Hiller is here...he's coming over to arrest you for secreting evidence of forest dwellers."

There was a moment of silence and then Ragnar's culpable chuckle. "Tell him I will not surrender without an explanation to my boss."

"If I can't get him to haul you away, call me later...but I won't promise absolution."

"You will forgive me. You might even thank me...although any gratitude goes to Martha."

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Before leaving Roland Ender's cottage, Viola and Virginia had been given tastefully hand-printed little chapbooks containing

selections of his poetry. When the sheriff left, Virginia had scuttled off to read hers with a curious enthusiasm. Sitting at her desk, Viola opened the book at the introductory page and read:

*Hermit et Ars Poetica*

Mute voice not inept but no one to tell,  
For distance hard-kept alleviates hell.

The mind moved to scan the few words I write  
May glimpse a fused man subverting his fight.

Dark verses that limn some image of me  
Are seldom veneered with guile's harmony.

Yet herein I share what heart's ease I learn  
With any who care enough to discern.

She briefly closed her eyes, then quickly flipped past a few longer poems to stop at a series of tight little constructions. While reading one of these, she could imagine Roland walking through the forest, perhaps encountering a fallen giant:

*Wind's Warning*

The truth that I test  
Resides in a tree.  
The axe is a lie;  
Leave fir's fate to me.

The searing anguish leaping from an early poem must have been written shortly after his return from the war; when Roland was in no condition to deal with the fact that wife and home were no longer his. The rage and misery of this poem had perhaps brought some release.



### Desertion

The beast returned from hunt in pain extreme,  
To add but *castaway* to crippled mien.

Your poison's in his craw.

Your wounds still pain his jaw.

Just who are you to steal from his account,  
You prowling loose-tongued hellcat of the mount?

Did ere you come with sweetness and a soul,  
Or was his humble lair your only goal?

He'll find him some relief

When fortune hands you grief.

You swear your erstwhile animal's all stone,  
Explain then how you cut him to the bone.

By the time Viola had more carefully read the chapbook she wanted very much to have Roland as a friend. She knew he would be difficult, but also extraordinarily perceptive and imaginative and richly stimulating. If she could coax him out of his sanctuary for even a few hours, the unfamiliar environment she could offer might itself stimulate, even reward, this solitary, variously gifted poet. The palpable anguish, the luminous portrayal of cogently unique observations, the wonderful facility in deftly juxtaposing evocative words, all this leapt from the coarse-rag pages straight into her heart, yet the lyrical verses also fostered an acute and titillating intellectual excitement.

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“You should understand why I chose not to tell you about Roland for the present...when you already had so much to handle.”

“You thought he would remind me too much of my father.”

“*Ja*, you had a difficult relationship with Niklas. I thought being reminded of him might further upset you...ruin the peace of mind you were, *are*, trying to achieve. I decided it could wait. Roland is not going anywhere. He thrives in his forest cocoon.”

“Nevertheless, I think it’s time he came out and tried his wings in the society of others.”

“Even if you are right, solitude is his choice, Wild Vi.”

Ragnar had buttered raisin toast and brought it to Viola on a tray with tea. She was still in bed, his bed. He had wanted her to sleep late and away from the demands of her house -- she had cried profusely last night, a sudden forced spillage, the way the forest’s snow-laden branches all at once released heavy snow; thus driven to suffer Hugh’s cold silence, crying unavoidably with Ragnar. She believed Hugh was dissuaded from calling by his disapproving son, *her* disapproving son.

“I feel rested, much better,” Viola said, stretching her arms toward the late morning light. “Sorry I crashed last night.”

“Did I not ask you to stop the apologizing?” Ragnar was holding the empty toast plate, and on his way back to the kitchen. “Your crying may have helped...as long as you do it where I can keep it from getting out of hand. You need a lot of me and a lot of sleep.”

She smiled at his encouraging wink. “I can’t argue with that, my darling.” She was thinking how he had loved her to a forgetful warm oblivion hours earlier, then left her alone to drift back into sleep.

“Why, *why* can’t I overcome this and leave them be?”

“You know why. You love your son...it is natural to want him to love you back.”

“Even though I don’t deserve it?”

“Stop punishing yourself. You *do* deserve it. If Marcus could analyze the situation properly he would see that you do...*why* you do. I will get around to him, this pig-headed son of yours. We have not yet crossed paths but that is coming.”

“Oh, Ragnar, please don’t--”

“*Nei*, it is too late to exclude me. I am in your life and you are in mine. I am in *all* of your life, as far out as it reaches.”

“You’re an omnipresent wonder...if not saving a poor soul from self-immolation then saving me from my barmy self.”

“Effusive language from a careful writer...nice to hear, but please remember my selfishness...just as you attempt realism when you write. You have slept quite a while. Virginia has called here. It is noon and I imagine she prefers your cooking to her own.”

“Oh, that’s right, I promised to saddle up Legs and Mariner and take Sylvia on a gallop around the farm.”

“Ah, then let me handle the tack while you are having lunch.”

“Can’t I ever do anything for you?”

Ragnar laughed. “Have you forgotten this morning?”

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Surprisingly, Virginia had, out of impatient desperation, cobbled together flax bread bacon sandwiches with tomato and lettuce, and set aside one of these for Viola. The bacon seemed raw and she had left out the mayonnaise, which Viola added after a single dry bite.

“Do you know what I find intolerable? When you go to an English pub and order a sandwich, you generally get two dry slices of bread with the desiccated featured item lying nakedly between. If you then have the audacity to ask for much-needed condiments, they offhandedly provide a platter of skimpy little factory-issue packets of mayonnaise, sweet relish, or ketchup...or -- oh, I can hardly bear to think of it -- *marmite!* an odious brown paste that tastes like, in fact must really be, recycled axle grease.”

“I rather doubt you’ve ever tasted axle grease, recycled or otherwise, and please refrain from disparaging our food. Your people didn’t go through a war with only -- when extremely lucky -- pitiful tins of this and that. Frugality becomes a habit that is passed along.”

“But not undressed bread. You must all get over this. Tasty filling now abounds. You of the Earl of Sandwich have

scarce idea of one. Perhaps that's why he was defeated in the American Revolution."

Virginia, who was drying breakfast dishes, flicked the tea towel onto its hanger by the sink and said, "How rude you are."

"I learned it from you snobbish Brits. Your tribe really gets off on it. You've perfected it to a malicious art...the class thing."

"By the time we're through here I may be glad you're not coming back with us."

"Yes...well, whatever I can do."

"Oh, you snarky little stirrer. You don't mean that. Eat the damned sandwich however you please, and let's attempt a more agreeable conversation. Have you read your relative's poetry?"

Viola put down her sandwich and her frown became a broad smile. "Yes, yes, oh, *yes*. I plan to cultivate Roland a bit, entice him just a few degrees from his hermitage -- I do know how wordsmiths need their empty space. This farm has become a writers' retreat."

"Then why don't you leave him alone?"

"I only want to broaden his perspective a little, Virginia. Besides, I think I would occasionally enjoy his company...and he might be in need of ours too."

"Apparently he's been fine thus far as a literary lone wolf."

"How do we know that is so? Healthy humans are social animals."

"Are poets...*writers* healthy? I rather doubt it."

"You cannot judge the entire writing profession by my particular level of sanity," Viola said. "I *am* trying to climb out of the bin."

Virginia brushed at her navy turtleneck and sat down across from Viola. She drew back her lengthening straight gray hair, repinned it, and propped her chin in her hands, scowling quietly at Viola.

"My God, you fortunate woman, you have an administrator, a great chef, a psychiatrist, a devoted lover...an intelligent hunk of wisdom and strength...*incredible!* all of those qualities rolled into one

large male. How could you not recover? I do envy you...I *envy* you.”

In spite of this about-face concerning Ragnar, Viola's smile was unsustainable, for she had thought of Marcus, her beautiful son who apparently loathed her.

“I don't know what I'd have done without Ragnar. But, my carping friend, your daughter loves you...simply loves you. With all of her needling foolishness, that's still very clear. And for this reason alone, I consider you very fortunate indeed.”

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Viola and Sylvia were mounted on Legs and Mariner outside the paddock, with Ragnar and Virginia standing by ready to see them off.

“Sheriff Hiller told us about that desperate bloke, Simon Brown,” Virginia said, “I'm terribly curious as to how you got the petrol away from him, Ragnar.”

“I told Si that, with the outrageous cost of high octane, I would rather use it in my truck than let him waste an entire gallon of it on his whining self-indulgence.”

“That seems rather cruel.”

“You would have to know Si to understand how it works. He then complained that his failing body had betrayed his good intentions. I told him that there were still some fish left in the Metolius...and to get himself patched up so we could catch a few before they all vanish. ‘If you can be less afraid of seeing a doctor than of incinerating yourself, get on with recovery,’ I advised. ‘There is an ambulance outside and everyone is waiting for you to show your mettle. If you do not keep up your position as town vigilante, how do you expect all of your efforts to hold together around here?’ He whimpered a little more, then handed me the can and went outside -- no great drama.”

“Smashing...brilliant!” Sylvia said, clicking her tongue and moving off. Viola urged Mariner to follow, moving into the lead. She looked over her shoulder, smiling a tacit message for Ragnar.

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“This land is really so beautiful...snow-patched fields...the mysterious dark woods...some of the sky a lovely topaz blue...but above us those big wet clouds, running over us with fluxing wind shadows.”

“Yes, you must come back in the summer, Sylvia. I haven’t seen it here in a long while and I’m expecting a *magnum opus*. That’s the thing about sprawling land like this, the seasons...ah, the surprises, the delicacies they hold...never the least repetitious.”

Legs suddenly yanked the reins down, nearly freeing them merely to sniff at dry grass poking through the snow-crueted field’s edge.

“Don’t let him do that, he’s been well fed. He’s getting nervy because he isn’t ridden enough. I’m always on Mariner...but Legs is still decently reliable. He’s testing you.”

Sylvia drew up the reins. “Stop it, Legs, I’m going to be the boss on this tour of your duty.”

“Shall we go down to the filbert orchards or ride along the entrance road up to the highway?”

“The entrance road looks easier,” Sylvia speculated.

“All right, nice and straight, we can tear it up.”

Viola urged Mariner into a stretching gallop, and Sylvia then followed, letting out screams and nervous giggles. When they reached the snow-plowed pavement, they dropped down a little onto a shallow-scooped narrow track that ran alongside the raised highway. Now they were moving toward the west edge of Hugh’s woods, but from the main road’s southeastern side, some distance away from the hidden stone house. As they galloped along their horses kicked up snow and their hair flew out from beneath their caps, whipping across their faces. Viola’s temporarily carefree heart was beating with childish glee. A car raced ahead of them, dove into the slushy road shoulder and stopped. It was Marcus’ rental car. Hugh got out of the driver’s side. Viola reined in her

horse so rapidly that Sylvia unknowingly raced on ahead.

“Hello,” Viola called with uncertainty, nervous and unable to think of anything clever to add. Mariner was prancing sideways and jerking his head up and down in complaint of the sudden hard bit.

Hugh stood in the pale sun, smiling. He wore his black leather jacket, but was hatless and without the sunglasses he sometimes wore out-of-doors. They both stood watching Sylvia turn around and trot back. The door on the passenger side of the car opened and Marcus got out, bundled in a muffler and wearing his green jacket and a woolen hat. He nodded at Viola and stood silently watching Sylvia.

Again Viola’s heart leapt with admiration as she caught sight of her tall handsome son. His face was a little paler.

Sylvia looked on with curiosity as she brought Legs up beside Mariner. “Sorry, I didn’t see you stop.”

“Hugh, Marcus, this is my friend Sylvia Putnam, visiting with her mother, my London friend, Virginia.”

“Hello, Brit,” Marcus said, taking in her cheerful response and slowly displaying a wan grin. Viola saw at once that his voice and manner were different. He had a bad cold.

“Better get back inside the car,” Hugh said.

“Oh, Marcus, I’m so sorry,” Viola consoled.

“Just a nasty cold. Nice meeting you,” he said to Sylvia.

Sylvia moved Legs further along to the car and paused beside the half open window, talking to Marcus.

“Hugh, is he--”

“He’s fine, just a little sluggish from medication. I took him to the clinic...he’s okay. That’s why I haven’t asked you over.”

“But you could have called me.”

“No, I know you. If I’d called, you would have come rushing over with chicken soup or some damn thing. You’ve already had that rotten flu. I didn’t want to risk complications.”

Viola felt tears blurring her eyes and thought, *What a fool I’ve been. Hugh cares, he really cares for me.* At least she had that. A wave

of gratitude spread through her body, turning sudden relief into near maudlin emotion -- the result of coming down from an overactive imagination. Of course it was clear that Marcus had no interest in her. Probably Hugh had no time to do any mending, had been too busy dealing with Marcus' cold symptoms. Perhaps Marcus' attitude could never be changed; still, he was with his father. The reward of that was undiminished.

"He should be a whole lot better by tomorrow. Maybe we could--"

"Would you come to my place for dinner, Hugh? Would you?"

Hugh raised his right hand to rub his left shoulder, angling his head to the left, squinting at her in the bright light so that his remarkable jet eyes distinctly hinted of Asian roots. He grinned disturbingly, with his own subtle interpretation. "Dinner? Yes, why not? Marcus at your dinner table -- you'd like that very much, wouldn't you? He'll do whatever I say. Jesus, I'm feeling some tremendous power here. I could probably make *you* do whatever I want too. Couldn't I...in exchange for your son? Would you give up Ragnar for him?"

She was stunned and her heart sank. This was classic Hugh, the madness of experimenting dangerously. When he tested and taunted like this it was not just by an accidental whim for his own amusement, but a cunningly overt act for control, supremacy. She was more certain than ever that some of this went all the way back to constant brutal encounters with wild neighborhood gangs in his adolescence. Employing cruel fact, he appeared unaware of the indecency of it, or of the devastating effect. His sudden rashly demeaning, withering taunt had left her breathless.

"That was...not amusing at all...almost sadistic. You can't mean to...why are you doing this, talking like this? It hurts. A moment ago I thought you cared. Can't you see what you're doing? Don't you know why?" She attempted to rein Mariner away from him and said, "I'm going home." He reached up and closed his fingers tightly on the reins, asking, "Christ, now what



happened?” as if he really had no idea at all. “Sorry, I was only thinking...will you go on living alone?”

Again she was startled. “Things are fine as they are. Don’t do this now. Let go of the reins please.” She fought back tears.

“Lea, wait, get down off this damned horse, please. Christ, I...must be jealous. Goddammit, it was bound to happen. Finally I’ve sunk to this. *Stop!* I can’t stand it. Get down,” he demanded, quite easily pulling her from the saddle, for she wished to have no scene. He held her lightly, facing away with the side of his bent head pressed to her temple. His hair smelled of wood smoke. “Sorry, sorry, sorry.”

“Why did you say that, *why?*” she agonized. “You frighten me, Hugh. Oh you frighten me.” Her head was turned away from the car, but she knew they must be watching. This was painfully humiliating.

“Don’t think I like hurting you. Suppose I’m...resentful of what you have...of everything I’ve missed with you. We made a fine son, didn’t we? Forgive me. Will you forgive me? God, it’s cold out here. I’ve got to go...get him back to a warm room. We’ll come to dinner tomorrow. I’ll...make my respect for Ragnar clear to all.”

Now she was barely holding herself together, awash in sadness, sorrow for Hugh, for herself, for all of them.

“You’ve got to forgive my damned... Give me that...just that. It isn’t you...it isn’t. I know I have to take some of the blame...plenty of blame for...you know a part of me is always spewing out a damn lot of--”

“Come tomorrow evening, Hugh. Come at seven.” She remounted Mariner and said, “What do you like to eat?”

“Anything...just real food...especially if Ragnar is helping you cook it.” His pleading dark eyes were filled with the urgency of being understood, forgiven.

With vacillating emotions, she implored, “Please don’t make it necessary for me to go on forgiving you. I don’t want to have to do that. I respect you, admire you...all the feeling I’ve come to

have for you makes it so painful when you...” She had seen his expression swiftly change to mocking disbelief, and said, “No, don’t, please.” He shook his dark head, as if throwing off wild rote impulses subliminally governed. Defensive black eyes then reflexively displayed a silent relinquishment his unruly voice might have destroyed. Fearful of further upset, she offered a carefully constrained dismissal.

She halted Mariner by the car and said, “Hugh’s taking good care of you, Marcus. You’ll soon be over this. See you later.”

“Yes, goodbye.” His eyes went to Sylvia and he said, “So long, Brit, see you around.”

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Viola wanted to rush home, allowing herself to think only of the dinner Hugh had promised to have Marcus attend. She was mostly silent as she pressed Mariner into a swift gallop. Sylvia too was taciturn, not her usual ebullient self, pondering something. As they neared the house Sylvia said, “I didn’t realize how you love Marcus’ father.”

“What?”

“I’ve been intrusive. Pardon me, Viola. I just...Marcus was watching you, rather astonished, but he didn’t say a word. Still, I know so little of him why would he say anything to me?”

“I suppose I feel a very caring, worried sort of love for Hugh. That’s what you saw...me concerned with my son’s father’s well-being.”

“It’s...I feel sad for you. You’re right, Marcus doesn’t show much interest in you. It makes me so angry, especially because...”

“Because you like him.”

“Yes, except for his stubborn attitude toward you, I think I do like him. He’s intelligent and interesting...very good looking. He has a sense of humor...even with that wretched cold he was amusing.”

“I’m glad you think so. He’s never shown very much of that humor to me...only sarcasm. I’m so sorry that he has to suffer

unnecessary irritation at my presence. It's very tiresome to carry around such a hard knot of contention. I would love to have the genuinely friendly smile that others like yourself receive from him -- something so simple and easy to give that I fear will never be given to me. The woman he considered his mother, my aunt, recently died. She desperately wanted a child...I was pregnant at fifteen, going to school...unsophisticated and unable to see what was happening. My Aunt Hilda stole my innocent baby away long ago. How can I blame him? How can I blame her?"

"I'd blame her. I *do* blame her. She had no right to do that to you. It was selfish. She could have shared, allowed him to love you too. Viola, I think that was inexcusable."

They were at the paddock now, and dismounted as Viola said, "I didn't mean to whine, Sylvia. Forgive me if I did. I've just gone through some stressful experiences again and it seems to alter my mood. Did you enjoy the ride?"

"Yes, loved it. I want to go again."

"Of course. Perhaps we'll ride down to the old filbert orchards."

Sylvia brightened with enthusiasm. Denied her offer of help, she went off to have a warm shower and chat with her abandoned mother.

Viola saw Ragnar approaching and turned her head aside, but he would know at once she had been crying. Mysteriously prescient, unassuming Ragnar, so naturally refined, contained; he hardly deserved this constant exposure to a sorry collection of psychological cripples.

"Think I need a hot shower," she said, turning to dash away as Ragnar was quickly removing the tack. "Thanks for helping."

"Wait a minute," he said, leading the horses inside their stalls.

He returned with unusual haste and requested, "Come here...*koma*."

"No, go ahead, I'm going to--"

"Come with me to my cabin. I want to talk to you."

He took her arm, leading her along. "I will get you warm."

After he had made a blazing fire, Ragnar held her and explained: “If I had only seen your face I would have known you encountered Hugh, but he called me and said as much. He was well into self-contempt. He told me he had hurt you again, and that he wanted to atone for his demons. Marcus was sleeping, apparently from cold medication, and Hugh had started to drink. I told him to stop. He said he would. He loves his son and he loves you for giving him that son...and because you are who you are. Ah, Wild Vi, I do not want to find you crying so often. Can I give you no relief?”

“Please don’t try to leave me again or I’m finished. My heart is breaking with sadness for Hugh...for the impossibility of Marcus. But you...you’re so much of my happiness...nearly all of it. Can’t we just lie together before the fire a few minutes before I go.”

“*Ja*, we *are* lying together, are we not? -- what I have thought of...intended all day. You can stay with me tonight. Virginia and Sylvia will have plenty to talk about. How can you think I would ever leave you, Wild Vi? The time is past when I could offer you to Hugh, if that were ever possible. I will not give you up...as long as you are happy this way. I know I am good for you, and that Hugh is not. I know you love him in a certain way...and I know what you feel for me. It is there whenever you look at me...when you are in the same room with me...or when I am far out in the fields.

“Let me tell you what your mother said to me. It was this: ‘Ragnar, I know that one day Viola will come home to her roots. She will come to stay. Please be there to help her.’ I have never forgotten her words, the promise I made...and here you are. She knew her daughter, this Wild Vi I know. The thing I did not know, could never have known, was how I would so naturally think you mine, even as I took away that damn chainsaw...and after years of your absence. Kneeling there about to cut my pine, you made me think: *Herregud, look at this incredible woman, how intelligent, inventive, ready to take care of herself; place her in a difficult situation and she will overcome the difficulty.* I could not help remembering your childish

willfulness, but just then I thought you strong. Yet I was angry at you for deciding to cut my pine. I wanted to scold you for your thoughtlessness. Then, when I actually looked into your beautiful eyes, I was astonished. I saw that you were really glad to see me, *lille* girl...but you did not quite know it. I wanted to care for you...as long as I could. I am talking too much...have I convinced you of anything?"

She nodded, with a smile that was enough for Ragnar.

"Let us have a warm shower. We will eat and then we will sleep."

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Before Viola hurried home early the next morning, she discussed the evening's important dinner menu with Ragnar. His idea surprised her and made her frown with indecision. Could she make the sort of food he suggested special enough? Perhaps, but only with his help.

"I am a fish eater, raised on sea harvest from birth, and I happen to have a very nice sea bass in my freezer." With that, Ragnar got up from the breakfast table and went to his storage room freezer to find the fish. He returned in a minute and laid it on the table. "It is still early enough to thaw in time. I know that Hugh likes this fish very much, especially if prepared in the Chinese style."

"But what about Marcus? Would he like it?"

Ragnar dropped back into his Windsor chair and rubbed his Levi-covered thighs with freezer-exposed, spreading fingers. His smile of amused disbelief meant that she should have known the answer.

"As you have suggested, nearly the entire enigma of Marcus' life is his father. He will eat what his father eats, praise what his father praises...whatever pleases Hugh. You know this."

"Have you a special recipe in mind...would it be difficult?"

"*Ja*, I do and *nei*, it would not...if you let me do it."

"What else would we need...that I probably don't have?"

Ragnar got up and rummaged at the back of his refrigerator, pulling out a half-empty jar of black bean paste. “Ja, there is enough of this, and I keep my fresh ginger root frozen here in this freezer. I have garlic, dry sherry, and soy sauce, also peanut and sesame oils. Scallions. Have I any left?”

“I have some green onions in my refrigerator.”

“It would also be good to have parsley or fennel...carrots and celery -- these for the steaming. I assume you have carrots and celery. Have you any jasmine rice?”

“No rice at all, but the other things, except fennel, yes.”

“*Herregud*, Wild Vi, I will soon have to stock your kitchen. I think...between us we have everything needed.”

“Except you. I’ll need you in my kitchen.”

“Do you want me to come to dinner?”

“Of course I want you there, and not just because I need your expertise. I want you at my table, dear one, seated at its head...as the very essential part of me you are.”

“So at last I am to meet Marcus.”

“You must promise not to fight on my behalf.”

“*Nei*, I will not promise that...but neither will I ruin your evening...although someone might.”

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“Can we help?” Virginia asked in the late afternoon.

“No, my friend, I think it would be much better if you found books in the library and relaxed in the living room...read, talk, stare out the windows at nature...then I and Ragnar can get things started here.”

After her London guests withdrew, Viola opened the large refrigerator and remarked, “At least I think I managed to bring off this heavenly cheesecake recipe of mother’s. It’s turned out quite well...don’t you think?...creamy and very light. I’m so nervous I’m about to--”

“Why? The table is set. The fireplace is laid. Relax now.”

“I can’t seem to do that. I’m getting really jumpy...getting

absolutely flighty...jittery. What if I ruin something important...say something foolish? Oh what's wrong with me?"

Ragnar went out to unlock a storage box in the bed of his truck, and came back with a silver flask. He searched in the glass cupboard for a small cordial glass, then poured out a sparkling clear fluid. "Here, try some of this." He winked, grinning at her disapproving mouth. "Sip a small amount then drink it down."

"But didn't you tell me--"

"*Faen!* my *lille* parrot, never mind what I told you, swallow."

"*Brennevin!*"

"Now you will kiss me. I want to taste...you are the only woman who has ever shared my flask." He lifted her effervescing body and opened her mouth with his own. "*Ja*, you are delicious."

"I feel as if I've been hit on the head and warmed in the oven."

"*Nei*, only fed *brennevin* and kissed by the delivery man."

Violea was laughing now, ready to cheerfully do whatever it took.

Ragnar's blue shirt sleeves were rolled to his elbows. Below his tan corduroy slacks, Violea saw that he had donned his neatly maintained leather house clogs, often worn to avoid possible food spillage on her presently well-traveled terra cotta kitchen floor. He held her chin in his palm and studied her eyes in a moment of calming silence.

"Now let us honor the fish."

Violea did whatever she was asked to do, but mostly she watched. The sea bass had already been cleaned but not scaled, for its gleaming pearly-moon scales were part of the beauty of the presentation.

Ragnar bathed the sea bass inside and out with white wine, patted it dry and said, "For this recipe fresh fish is always used, but if the fish is flash-frozen immediately after catching, it can be just as good. This is usually done in a large wok, but I have brought my fish-steaming pan with its removable rack. The rack is covered with loosely raised foil to preserve the juices...we will then transfer

the steamed fish to your longest warmed platter for serving.” He looked at the kitchen clock and calculated the time. “You will have a small aperitif and visit while I plate the food. Your white burgundy served with the entrée. Tonight, probably the less alcohol the better. The rice will not take long and cook exactly as it should -- I brought my rice steamer.”

“I never thought how much equipment it would take to--”

“This is not the time for improvising with pots and pans. Take the weeping cucumbers out of the refrigerator, pour off the liquid and put them back inside. Next, we prepare the vegetables for steaming.

Not long before the guests were due, Ragnar had made slits along both sides of the fish, rubbed in pinches of coarse sea salt, then pressed into the cuts a thick purée of garlic, ginger, bean paste, and green onions combined with a dash of pungent Chinese five-spice. He stirred an amount of soy sauce and sherry together, then placed the fish above a bed of sliced celery, carrots, and fennel on the oiled platform of the steamer. The fish was then doused with the sherry mixture. It would steam for about twenty minutes, to be removed along with the steamed aromatics, just as the guests arrived. Before serving, the oils would be brought to a very hot temperature -- called *the breath of the dragon*, he explained -- then poured over the plated fish. Finally, cilantro leaves and thin slivers of green onions would be sprinkled over the top. This important garnish would be temporarily brushed aside in order to skin and bone the fish after its presentation.

Viola had gone up to put on an open-collared brown wool dress with a loosely pleated skirt. Her shoulder-length golden brown hair had been brushed into soft natural waves. She wore a single strand of pearls, small gold hoop earrings, and a thin gold bracelet.

The fish was just coming out of its steamy bath as she came into the kitchen. “Confucius would have nothing but praise for this,” she said, staring at the plump silvery fish and inhaling its exotic spicy vapors. The fish’s opaque eyes, fixed as firmly as ivory



cabochon gems, had undergone an ancient moon-eyed stare: final resignation to an honorable sacrifice.

“Unfortunately, Confucius is not coming to dinner,” Ragnar said. “You look beautiful.”

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The guests had been introduced and given small aperitifs before the living room fire. Viola was now back in the kitchen, checking on the state of the food to be carried into the dining room. At last she called everyone to the table and saw to the seating, reserving the large head chair for Ragnar. She had placed Marcus and Sylvia on one side and Hugh and Virginia across from them, leaving the far end chair for Ragnar, and placing herself at the end nearest the kitchen.

Ragnar had just finished drizzling the sizzling hot oils over the fish and garnishing it with slivers of green onion and leaves of fresh cilantro. He was spooning the jasmine rice into a gold-edged bowl.

Viola put the thinly sliced, sweet-vinegared cold cucumbers in a fragile porcelain serving bowl. Condensation beads quickly formed over its outside. She reached around Ragnar for a linen drying towel.

He kissed the top of her head and took away the cucumbers. “You will take in the fish.”

“No, you should.”

“*Nei*, you will. Here, take the platter...careful, heavy.”

“All right. Just don’t try to say I prepared it.”

“I would not mind if they thought so.”

She shook her head. “Hugh would never believe it.”

As Viola entered with the fish, Hugh squinted curiously at the large gold-edged platter. She placed it in the cleared center of the table between the candles. “*Tsen yú!*” he called out, surprised. “This is Cantonese steamed fish, sea bass. I’m impressed...and hungry.”

Ragnar eased through the swinging door, bearing two large

serving bowls and now wearing his V-necked navy sweater. “I first ate much the same fish in Guangzhou many years ago, when that food city at the mouth of the Pearl River was still called Canton. Now it has ten million people, ten thousand restaurants. Hugh has told me so; he will know how popular this fish is there.” He set down the cucumbers and rice.

When everyone had finished praising the sea bass’s crowning moment, Ragnar set aside the garnish, drew the skin away, deboned the fish and replaced its garnish. As plates were passed to him he gave each a generous portion of the aromatic tender white *Tsen yū* with its piquant accompaniments. Once that was done he fetched the iced white burgundy, walking around the long table to fill each tall tulip-shaped goblet. When he reached Hugh’s chair, Hugh suddenly stood up, at once catching Viola’s attention by this avowed gesture she recalled very well, the foresworn act of overt contrition. He had stretched out an insistent hand, causing Ragnar to transfer the wine bottle to his left hand to enable a brief firm handshake. Ragnar’s amused mouth then shaped a compliant acceptance, adapting to Hugh’s grinning ostentation with sporting forbearance. Viola easily imagined him thinking: *more nonsense*. She supposed they had not shaken hands since Hugh came to the farm as a young boy.

“Marcus, this is Ragnar Almestad, the man I spoke of who manages Ender Farm,” Hugh explained.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Marcus,” Viola quickly apologized. “In all the commotion I didn’t even introduce you to my friend, Ragnar.”

Marcus sat tipping the bowl of a teaspoon back and forth with his left index finger and ignoring Viola’s voice. In response to his father’s introduction, rather than her apology, Marcus looked up at Ragnar, with little congeniality and only a curt nod.

“Yes, I’ve heard all about you.”

“Not *all*,” Ragnar replied, with a grin that should have been disarming, and would have been in another circumstance.

Virginia and Sylvia, both clothed in dark, non-wrinkle travel dresses, were glancing at each other, but clearly attempting not to

look too obvious in their silent exchange.

Hugh lifted his full wine goblet and said, “In a Chinese household the wife is always the cook and paramount ruler of the kitchen. Everyone must agree that *zhèi yú zhèn hào chí* -- this fish is delicious. In which case, we must all drink a toast to our clever hostess.”

“I’m afraid you must all drink a toast to Ragnar for *his* beautifully cooked fish...if you like, later you can praise my dessert.”

“Obviously she couldn’t have done *this* fish,” Marcus said, looking hopefully at his father for tacit approval, but finding none.

“Not long ago your mother prepared the best stuffed wild salmon I have ever eaten. The accompanying shrimp sauce was the coup de grâce of her achievement,” Ragnar said. “It was so good I had to restrain myself from eating too much. She can do anything she sets her mind to, and do it with exceptional skill.”

Marcus’ face flushed with rising heat. “My *mother’s* no longer--”

“We thank both of you,” Virginia quickly interposed, raising her glass and extending it first to Ragnar and then to Viola.

“Delicious, Ragnar. You are *shao yú shao de hào* -- very good at preparing fish,” Hugh conceded. “Sorry...I haven’t spoken Mandarin in a while...that familiar flavor got me in a lingual state of mind. And as to Lea...yes, Lea is extraordinary. I raise my glass to you, Lea.”

“Would you like more rice?” Sylvia asked, turning to Marcus.

Wearing a dull look of introspection, he glanced sideways at her. He had been concentrating on the rush of curdling emotions flying hither and thither, and had temporarily forgotten her soft presence. The pupils in her wide-set grayed-blue eyes had dilated in the dim light, and a ruddy blush bloomed on her normally pale cheeks. She tossed back her shoulder-length dark-blond hair and handed him the rice bowl.

While Viola was in the kitchen cutting the cheesecake, Virginia came in and asked in a softened voice, “Would you like Sylvie and me to retire early...so you can spend some private time

with Marcus?”

“Thanks, Virginia. I was hoping to corner you and ask that you give me some time alone with my men. I don’t know how it will go; it may be my last chance to open his mind a little before he flies east.”

“Yes, of course. I see how recalcitrant he is. You know I think there’s something left out here...something quite serious. It must have been your aunt who blackened his impression of you in a very disparaging way. If you could get him to tell you why... Oh, excuse me, you’ll think I’m horning in again.”

“No, I already suspect what you’ve said. I hope he’ll give me a chance to...or just simply tell me what caused this nearly instinctive hatred...if he even knows himself. All the excuses I’ve made for him still seem feeble alongside this ongoing hostility. Maybe I can lead him out by some other route. I’ve lived longer and I have a few more rhetorical tricks in my bag.”

“You have wisdom...and a marvelous sound intellect.”

“Hmm, well, at least I’ve always relished philosophical discussions.”

Ragnar came into the kitchen, his questioning eyes on Viola. Discerning this obvious need of access, Virginia departed.

“Shall I leave you after the dessert, Wild Vi?”

“No, you’ve insisted we share everything and I want you near me this evening...even if you say nothing more. *I want you near...*the most important sentinel in my entangling forest...all this hot wind will never fell such...*immovable* strength. Right now I’m much too weak...enervating emotion. You own a contained overview I can’t achieve...drowning in all of this damned emotion.”

“I am not altogether patient, literary girl. I may complicate things. I will not allow his cruelty to you to go unchallenged.”

“It’s nothing new. I’m not as strong as I might be in a more removed situation, but let me see how much I can direct...control.”

Ragnar held her and kissed her, imparting a delicious sense of well-being. If only it could be sustained throughout this night.

When they had eaten their cheesecake, *perfect*, as Hugh called

it, Virginia rose and said that she and Sylvia were extremely tired and were going off to prepare for bed.

Marcus looked surprised, apparently having imagined a silent ally in Sylvia. She was obviously taken with him, except for his treatment of Viola, which she had made clear repulsed and disappointed her.

“Come and visit us,” Marcus quickly invited, but received only a weak smile from Sylvia, who then followed Virginia out of the room.

Ragnar threw an alder log atop the fire and positioned it with the poker, his effort silently watched by Hugh and Marcus, now settled in the wing chairs. Hugh had been making architectural observations of the Ender house, favorable ones for which Viola was glad. She was on the davenport with her tired feet slightly elevated at its edge, and quickly repositioned her legs to allow Ragnar to join her there.

Viola was unnerved to hear Marcus suddenly end the pleasant commentary on Felix Ender’s architectural cleverness. She discerned that this new tack was to be an assault on her through Ragnar.

“With all your apparent knowledge and worldliness, I wonder why you’ve stayed in this remote environment,” Marcus directed to Ragnar.

Ragnar laughed mildly and said, “Foreign birds sing here too. And, as Turgenev wrote in his novel, *Fathers and Children*: ‘...for a thinking man there is no such place as a wilderness.’ The simpler the life the better, the truer, one’s perspective...perhaps even one’s usefulness. Close to nature is a good place. Everyone has to be somewhere...and once there, measure out his worth and apply it in a very limited span of time.”

So, Viola thought, Ragnar will not remain silent, and has even depersonalized Marcus’ attack into something universally wise.

“I’ve tried to engage my *limited* time for good results,” Marcus said. “I’d like to see the planet going Green, but I have my

doubts.”

“I can’t believe, with all your assiduous research, you really feel that way, Marcus. You’re too young to be a defeatist,” Violeta said. “I thought *I* was the burned-out case awash in doom. *O tempora! O mores!* These are bad times...greed in the ascendant.”

“Yes, pigs must empty the trough...but am I that assiduous? It’s a job.” Marcus placed one leg over the low arm of his annoyingly constricting chair and threw back his head. Violeta felt that Marcus’ earlier enthusiasm for his work, when first he and Hugh had met and talked, belied this sardonic turn of sentiment. It must be false. Had her presence driven him to portray himself as damaged by her?

“Yours is an indisputably worthwhile profession,” Hugh said.

“In an absurd world, Dad.”

Much to Violeta’s relief, Ragnar held his tongue. She had already learned that one could not proclaim the absurdity of life as an end in itself, or entertain a personal sense of worthlessness, around Ragnar. That, he would not countenance. For him, avowed absurdity was only a jumping-off place for the active pursuit of social improvement, and always for rejoicing in life’s mysteries. He deemed human choice a powerfully advantageous tool, an essential freedom requiring vigilant protection. For Ragnar’s human animal, moral choice involved guiding precepts of knowledge and experience *ab ovo*, Violeta thought: from the beginning. As a child learns good and bad speech by mimicry, so will it learn virtue or the consequences of the opposite. This extension of the golden rule was also exactly her persuasion.

“Look at me...or don’t look,” Hugh said. “I more likely prove the absurd. Have I done anything worthwhile since I left this farm?”

“You’ve bravely informed a lot of people in important ways with your writing...from hazardous places that desperately need attention,” Violeta concluded, rising rather swiftly to Hugh’s defense.

“And what have *you* done, Lea? Quite a lot...speaking of courage. You’ve gone out among the world’s neglected masses and distributed books, promoted *knowledge*, in a number of dangerous places...being nearly destroyed in the effort.”

“Now I choose to employ my imagination in writing. As Einstein said, ‘Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.’”

Marcus’ face held a blank look. He sat up straight, dropping his elevated leg to the floor. “I thought after your literature Ph.D. you were living and writing in London.”

“No, not that often, but I sometimes e-mailed you from there, and of course you thought--”

“You could have explained easily enough.”

“I knew you didn’t want proximity from me. I was working for a London-based NGO, traveling around the world...trying to open a few schools and initiate reading programs. It was often necessary to liaison with food distribution in our efforts -- an empty stomach isn’t interested in words -- thus we had to deal with pilfering soldiers, governments, anyone with force...so: some extra risks.”

“All these years you have done this,” Ragnar said, but he was looking at Marcus as he spoke, his gray eyes dark as thunderclouds.

“Until I fell ill.”

“Ill?” Marcus said. “Oh, yes, you did say in your e-mail you’d been ill. I thought it was short-term...flu or something.”

“Sickened watching her friends killed, barely escaping death herself,” Ragnar said. “Your mother came home to recover from constant mental and physical exhaustion...and fell in love with her farm.”

“Yes,” Viola agreed, thinking how the viability of the farm was undeniably Ragnar. For her, to love her farm was to love him, just as his love for her must be inadvertently subsumed by the farm.

When Viola turned to look at Marcus, she found his face flushed with mounting anger. “You keep saying *your mother*. That’s painful, because the person I call my mother recently passed

away.”

“We regret your pain, Marcus, but your mother is sitting here before you,” Hugh said, yanking an old leather footstool near enough to accommodate his aching foot. “And you’d better recognize her unassailable worth...before she too is gone forever in this brief season of life.”

Marcus looked devastated, but sat in a moment of silence, gathering his defense.

“I remember how many times she wrote that she was coming to see me and never came. A rotten thing to do to a little kid.”

Violea’s heart raced and her entire body shuddered with the injury and unfairness of his remark.

“From my school I had to travel on several buses to get to Aunt Hilda’s house, and when I wrote that I was coming I always came -- I always wrote instead of calling, so you would have my letter to remind you. I would arrive at the house and be told that you were visiting with a little playmate, at the movies with a school chum, or away at some wonderfully edifying camp. Hilda would say: ‘Sorry, it was a last-minute thing and I had to let Marky have his happiness. I know you’ll agree it was the right thing to do.’ How many times did that happen? Almost *every* time. She wouldn’t even invite me in, but stood at the door, glancing at her watch and saying she had to go somewhere, a card party, a church meeting. I would travel the long distance back to school on those fuming buses, missing you terribly, feeling sorry for myself, and trying to hide my tears and frustration from those around me. I lived with a terrible wound of guilt, because you had no father, no normal family life -- as I saw it -- and I was too young myself to give you a decent life.”

After so many years without an opportunity to vindicate herself, the words had come pouring out. *What a waste. Oh, what a waste.* She must here and now stop herself from becoming a bitterly morose and ranting woman. She wanted to tell Marcus so many things, but in an intelligible, self-possessed manner.



“I don’t believe it. I can’t,” Marcus said. “Mom would never have done that.”

“Apparently *mom* did. Lea doesn’t lie, Marcus. What I just heard was from the heart. And if Lea hadn’t always loved you, would she even bother to bear her misery here in front of us like this?”

“My mom...your...your Aunt Hilda was very good to me.”

“I know she was, Marcus. I’m glad for that, at least. But were you home any of those times when I came with so much love to give?”

“When you wrote that you were coming I was home...unless, I mean, unless mom told me you’d changed your plans. You didn’t write often.”

“I *did* write often, and called, but I was rarely allowed to speak to you.” Viola jumped up and stood before Marcus. “I never changed my plans. I’d never have done that to my little boy. *Never*. Not as long as I could breathe and walk. You *were* my plans. I may have been young but I still had the powerful instinct of love.”

“If it’s true, why didn’t you confront her?”

“I was terribly naïve and afraid to tangle with Aunt Hilda, mainly because I had nothing better to offer you. I swore that when my early schooling was over you would live with me, through all of my college years I would have you with me. But by the time I could have just managed it, you had no use for me.”

“Well...I heard other things. That you...that you had wanted an abortion...that you were wild and cared about nothing but boys...and that mom had to beg you to let her have me instead of--”

“Oh, Jesus Christ!” Viola cried out. “I loved your father so blindly and naively, loved the idea of you so much, I would never have destroyed our child, never have destroyed *you*. I wanted you. Aunt Hilda never knew anything about me, except that I existed, not until mother called her to ask if I could come there and have you. Oh, my God!” She turned to Hugh with flooded eyes.

“I was her first love,” Hugh said. “I and no other. I was

selfish, young and going away to school. I suppose Martha knew how I was...worried about both of us...and loved her daughter enough to... Finally I have to believe she sent Lea away with decent intentions. I resented that unexplained severance almost compulsively...craved your mother's devotion...even though I knew I was going to leave. Lea was all trust and love, but I had no idea she was pregnant. Recently I was furious at her for not telling me about you...but we've finished with that, because now I understand how it all happened...*Christ!* Lea was a mere child. Later, I was nearly impossible to find. I had a different name. Marcus, you'll have to face the truth of our pasts...painful as it is. You were manipulated by a childless and selfish woman. She may have doted on you...even left us thankful that you were raised well -- if neither of us could do it ourselves -- but this is where authentic love exists, right here and now. You aren't so bad, son of ours, because of course we both love you."

Marcus turned his face away, stood up and rushed from the room.

"Marcus!" Violea called, preparing to follow.

"*Nei*/no, let him go," Ragnar and Hugh said at once.

"That was a lot to stomach in one blow," Ragnar added.

"You must let it sink in, Wild Vi."

They sat staring quietly into the flames for a while, thinking that perhaps Marcus would return. Finally Hugh stood up and said, "Well, I'd better go hunt up our son...he's probably sitting in the rental car. He isn't completely over his cold yet so--"

"Excuse me," Virginia said. She was standing across the room, having crept out of the hallway in her robe. "Some time ago Sylvie said she couldn't sleep and that she was going over to look in on the horses. She hasn't returned and I've begun to worry."

"Ah," Ragnar said, "then you will probably find Marcus over by the partially heated horse stalls inside the barn."

"Why there?" Hugh asked.

"Something I noticed at dinner," Ragnar said. He offered a

reassuring smile to Viola, who understood at once.

Virginia, remembering that Hugh's foot bothered him, asked everyone, "Would you let me go collect Sylvie? I can also tell Marcus that you're ready to leave, Hugh."

"I think that's a good idea," Viola said. "You haven't caused any bad feelings this evening, and if you turn up for Sylvia, Marcus will come along. It's far too cold out for him...for either of them."

"Then just let me do a quick change, and hand me a torch. I'll dash out into the cruel night."

"Thank you, dear," Viola called with some relief.

"At last I've been of some use," Virginia muttered as she hurried away to change.

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"Please stop the worrying, my nervous *lille* animal."

They lay propped against pillows in Viola's celestial bed. Upstairs, conveniently shut away from the downstairs sleepers, they had recounted and assessed the events of the evening.

"Marcus may be difficult a while longer but now he is yours."

"Do you really think so?"

"*Ja*...his anger is at last insupportable, only a bad habit. He will see that...come to realize that he has used you as an excuse for whatever shortcomings he may imagine in himself...no longer possible."

"I feel such excitement...such anticipation. But of course...I suppose there's no reason why Marcus should suddenly want to change."

"You cannot discount all the reasons why given on this night. Tomorrow you will have an interesting talk with Sylvia."

"Will I? Yes, I will. I'm so anxious...just contemplating the possibilities of everything...about to fly out of my skin."

"*Koma da*, my wild one, I will fix that. Then we will both sleep well."

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“Violea, I swear I didn’t want to hear...told him he ought to be talking to you, but it all came pouring out of him. I suppose it’s sometimes easier to expose self-incrimination to rather uninvolved ears. Poor Marcus is quite miserable. He was so certain of himself that now his confusion is monumental.”

“None of that matters to me, Sylvia. I’d sweep it all away in an instant if he were here right now. We have to start from this point and go forward. We’re so lucky there’s a place left to begin -- one doesn’t start a thing over; can never do that. One begins anew.”

“You’re wise, Violea. I’m very glad to know you. I told Marcus he was nothing less than extremely lucky to have you.”

“And I’m extremely lucky to have your friendship.”

“Marcus is stewing now...to the point of tenderness.”  
Sylvia offered this to Violea with admiring bright eyes, and a compelling smile with slight dimples -- the pretty coyness only youth obtains.

Seated at the oak kitchen table, they were lingering over toast, nearly burnt, and very strong tea, which Sylvia, with her ingrained habit of an English breakfast, so enjoyed.

“Where is Virginia?”

“She said she was going for a walk...I think a little way into the forest behind the house.”

“What? But she was so afraid in there...and I think it’s going to snow again. Look at that heavy sky.” Violea moved closer to the breakfast nook’s two high windows to stare across the dimming back yard, worriedly looking up at the high northern folds of snow-laden clouds, then into the ominous dark forest.

Sylvia tugged at her rose chenille robe and frowned with a slowly awakening realization. “Mother’s awfully taken with your relative’s poetry. Do you think she could possibly have gone--”

“Oh no!” Violea exclaimed. “That’s a good long hike, and what if she stray’s off the path? It’s snowed again since we were there. I’d better try opening the rickety gate -- seldom opened --

and take my truck in. Thank goodness Ragnar has kept that old lane cleared. Oh darn, Virginia, you foolish, sneaky woman.”

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“I was some distance from my place, chopping wood...saw something floundering in the trees...thought it was only a wild beast,” Roland explained, “but, no, it turned out to be this woman here.”

“Virginia Putnam, as you might remember,” Viola encouraged.

Virginia was huddling in one of Roland’s uncomfortable colonial chairs, holding a knotted plastic bag filled with snow on her ankle, which she had twisted in the snow-covered burrow of some animal.

“I still can’t make out what she was doing out there,” Roland pondered aloud, offering a questioning shrug to Viola, as if it were her responsibility to prevent things like this from happening.

“You might have asked me more directly,” Virginia said. “You would have learned that I had come to thank you for your poetry...to tell you how much I enjoyed it.”

“You were well past my cottage.”

“I’m afraid I got off course...a lot of trees in the way. I kept looking for the house and couldn’t believe it wasn’t there.”

“No, it’s *here*, as you see.”

“Virginia, why didn’t you at least ask me to drive you over?”

“You’re up to your neck in other affairs, that’s why.”

“Look, may I say something? Thank you for enjoying my poetry, for trying to tell me so, but...I’m not up to unexpected visits from poetry lovers...or, for that matter, from lovers of any kind. Dammit, I was afraid something like this would happen.”

“What on earth...you can’t possibly mean...good lord, I think you’ve been in the woods a spell too long, your judgment is fairly well skewed. Please come here, Viola, help me to your truck...before I really lose my temper. Once again normal life proves the gaping distance between itself and artistic genius.”

Roland picked up the melting bag of snow Virginia had thrown down and stood fingering it a moment, perhaps contemplating what use there might be in saying what he was about to say. "I am direct. It's the only way I know how to be in a situation like this. Anyone who comes around here looking for romance will go away empty...headed. It would be unlikely I'd...every shred of my energy is expended on my poetry."

Virginia flushed from her neck to the crown of her head and threw up her hands. "Let me get out of here quickly! You, with all of your touching phrases, are nothing but a self-engrossed liar."

"Isn't that how we live, with tasty lies thrown into the gaping jaws of an enormous shackled truth?...which, if not continually fed, would break loose and devour all the liars."

Violea gave no response, worried over Virginia; whose face was crestfallen, her intelligent smoky-blue eyes unfamiliar, humiliated.

With Violea assisting on one side, Roland took hold of Virginia's other side and brought her along all the way to Violea's truck. At first Virginia tried to pull away, but soon realized she would have to partake of Roland's help one more time -- nearly as tall as he, her angular frame was too much for slight Violea to handle alone.

"Sylvia will help you get me to bed," Virginia said in the truck.

As they bounced their way slowly back through the shadowy cold forest, Virginia began to weep. Violea had never seen her do this.

"Virginia, you poor silly woman...but you're absolutely right, Roland has been in the woods too long. His poetry is so fine -- he must have once known something of social graces...now long out of use. We'll just say nothing more of this. You know...I'm afraid your sudden appearance put him in a quite terrified state of self-defense."

Virginia wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "The awful thing is...the shameful, horrid thing is...I actually was attracted

to him. He saw that soon enough...then I as much as lied...and called *him* the liar. I feel so small and foolish. I did really like his poetry...*do* like it.” Virginia laughed, scolding herself through her tears. “Can you imagine, I thought I was bringing him solace.”

“He gets plenty of that just chopping wood.”

A huge clump of snow fell from an overhead tree limb and covered the windshield. Viola braked and turned on the windshield wipers. As snow continued to hit the windshield, she saw that it was now falling thickly and evenly from the sky. She accelerated with haste, desirous of escaping the woods before visibility was fully obscured.

Glancing at Virginia, she saw a quivering lip, and was surprised at the extent of Virginia’s discomposure. Perhaps it would help to make her a little angry, restore her feisty nature.

“Sorry to pile it on right now, but you’d have saved yourself this embarrassing little debacle if you had more carefully observed Roland’s fragile nature.”

“Oh, will you please be quiet, Viola!”

Ah, that’s more like it, Viola thought.

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Viola sat at her desk and tried to take stock of recent events. Everything seemed to be happening at once. Virginia was now resting in bed with her sore ankle, which had not swollen enough to require a trip to the doctor. Sylvia, purportedly reading on the chaise beside Virginia’s bed, seemed to be in a rather withdrawn dreamy mood, which Viola suspected resulted from her obvious interest in her new friend, Marcus, and her regret at being unable to commiserate with him in his currently vacillating sentiments. Hugh, although much improved by the introduction and acquaintance of his son, was no less haunted by a lifetime of debilitating losses and the unsatisfactorily conceived purpose of his own existence. Ragnar, on the other hand, went about quite sanguinely immersed in unceasing farm work and his busy outside activities; many of these endeavors Viola of late had hardly any

time to consider. If she noticed any change in him, it was that he more resolutely sought her attention on a required basis, required for both of them, for it was only Ragnar who could mollify her irritations and concerns. Whenever he desired a brief space of time with her, he would be deterred by very few extenuating circumstances, quietly asserting that they needed each other with equal force and benefit.

The Anderson girls had taken their horses off in their trailer for a mid-winter group ride, or Viola might have gone out riding, not to Hugh's place but out anywhere else, seeking nullity by plunging into uncompromising nature. In lieu of riding she took a walk along the winter fields of patchy crusted snow, ambling on toward the filbert orchards. She might have walked off in the other direction, into the forest to scold Roland, but thought better of it; although she, as her ill-mannered cottage-dweller's pointedly proclaimed landlady, could hardly imagine herself producing the same panicky effect that Virginia had. As she made her way along the edges of the open fields, she readily smiled or laughed out loud at this morning's pitifully farcical episode. The temperature had briefly risen and some of the snow had begun to melt, but the air was again chilling and the clouds appeared to carry more snow. She glanced off at large flocks of black crows squawking above distant dark patches of partially barren, recently seeded earth, then returned to pondering Virginia's dilemma. In a while her thoughts were interrupted by a throbbing engine, the jounce of wheels, the abrupt high squeal of engaged brakes. She turned around and saw Ragnar getting out of his truck.

"Looking at marauding crows, I found a lone canary in my binoculars...but too far away. You were laughing...or was it the inscrutable smile? -- more often scrutable to me."

"Aren't you too busy for the likes of me?"

"Not for you precisely. I work as I will...and plenty of that."

He held his sheepskin jacket clutched in one hand, putting it on as he caught up with her resumed forward motion, next drawing heavy suede gloves from a pocket and briskly working long fingers



inside.

He stood still and called, “Where are your gloves?”

“My pocket, I think.”

“They belong on your poor red hands.”

Without halting her walk, she pulled them out, sighed, and put them on. Meanwhile Ragnar had taken three long strides and adjusted his steps to her shambling feet. He looked down at her sideways.

“It just occurred to me, a few minutes ago, that I have hardly walked anywhere with you except between our two houses and the barn.”

“You’re going to walk with me?”

“*Ja*, I am.”

“Will you kiss me first?”

“A disheveled *lille* thing like you?”

He tied the loden muffler falling unevenly from her collar, pulled her flopped-over hat down and lifted her into his arms. The horizon spun around, the fields, the distant dark tree lines and aimed-for knotted orchards all sliding away askew. With the single-mindedness of a dipsomaniac, she closed her useless eyes to consume only this highly addictive drink, the ubiquitous, ever warm-fleshed plenitude of Ragnar. Her eyes opened into a limitless gray parity of distilled emotion, the afternoon’s silver slant of light filling those oceanic irises with the calm pearly chert cast diagonally overhead. He set her down, having no alternative. She had not wanted to return to earth.

“Why were you laughing?”

She held out her gloved hand, which disappeared into his.

“I promised to say nothing about it, but seeing how it’s you, a very circumspect man...I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to tell.

“What?”

“This morning smitten Virginia scrambled through the perils of winter, braving snow and fearsome wild beasts...heading toward Roland like a silly filly in heat. Oh, forgive me, Virginia, I’m so bad. Now you see clearly, my darling, how much I’m

laughing. I love it...I *love* laughing. Poor Virginia mildly twisted her ankle in a fox's den...or some deep burrow. When I arrived Roland had made her a snow pack for her hurting ankle. Hasty escape was on his mind...but why shouldn't *she* be the one to go? And why had his presumed landlady allowed this to happen? He panicked and read her off like a besieged movie idol. No romance for this heavily engrossed poet, thank you very much."

"And now I am laughing. *Herregud*, Wild Vi, you are a colorful storyteller. *Det var en ren farse*. Understand? -- it was entirely a farce. I like walking with you while that clever *lille* tongue obeys your curious mind. We will do this more often."

They continued on toward the filbert orchards, walking hand in hand in silence, occasionally glancing at each other to verify the fortunate presence of each. When they arrived at the tidy first orchard's edge Ragnar surveyed the trees with the assessing eye of a painstaking arborist, while Viola looked at the ramous branches thinking more of their dark green summer dress. Then Ragnar turned to her and cocked his head, gently mocking her dreamy absorption. She saw easily enough that he had left off thinking about the trees.

"This morning, while you were rescuing Virginia from herself, I was having pancakes with Marcus in Hayfield."

Viola could not have been more astonished, yet did not avoid speaking her mind. "And I thought you came into the field because of my siren song. Just more of your method...and me left out of it."

"*Nei siren*, you were right in the first place. I came here because you were laughing, and I am never immune to that. You were happy to see me, so let it be. This has turned out as good a place as any to speak of the other. You are left out of nothing, then or now -- I am standing here telling you everything."

"You're right...right as usual. I'm still happy, my darling, but dying of curiosity about Marcus. How on earth did you happen to--"

"Let us head back," Ragnar said, looking up at the sky. "I

think we are going to be snowed on before we reach my truck.”

“Goodbye for now, my lovely bountiful orchards,” Viola called to the quiescent filbert trees, as she and Ragnar turned to leave.

Ragnar smiled at her farewell. “They will reward you with a very rich harvest...for the siren of Ender Farms.

“As to Marcus, I met him on the street, coming out of the clinic. He asked me if--”

“Is he all right?”

“*Ja*, just a final check of his lungs. As I was saying, he wanted to talk to me, and so we had breakfast at my suggestion.”

“He wanted to talk to you?”

Ragnar stopped walking for a moment and took her by the arm. He then offered an observation, proposing a titillating but unscientific speculation: “If such an Asian trait could be called atavistic, you might say it has returned in your son. It is called *saving face*.”

“What?”

“As I said earlier, Marcus has developed a habit of anger where you are concerned...now it is an empty, useless, very counter-productive habit. It is clear that he wants to know you in a different way, the right way, but does not quite know how to do that without making himself out to have been cruelly insensitive and childish.”

“But I don’t care...I don’t care about any of that. If only he’d realize that all I want is--”

“Wait now. Remember that he is Hugh’s son too, and something like him: willful, unchecked, defensive...and falsely indifferent.”

“How is it that you like Hugh at all, I wonder?”

“I can identify flaws without judging the man unworthy, without judging him at all. I have plenty of flaws myself, Wild Vi.”

“No, you don’t. *You don’t!*”

“*Faen!* Am I forced to complain of love for its blindness? Now and again you must, kindly I hope, recognize the various

imperfections here.”

“If I do, it will be *my* problem.”

“If you cannot recognize my faults now it will not be good for our future...when you will know them all too well.”

“So...you know my faults now and love me anyway?”

“Of course. That way I can go on loving you more, not less.”

It had begun to snow and they quickened their pace, walking in single-minded silence. She felt his gaze upon her and looked up, blinking as flakes went into her eyes.

Ragnar gripped her waist, lifting her to his inclined head. “Let me kiss you with snow on your face. I will like remembering it.”

At last he opened the door of his truck and helped Viola climb onto its high seat. He started the engine and turned on the hot air blower, but in looking at her did not put the truck in gear.

“So now what am I supposed to do? How do I--”

“You let him come to you. He has to, and has not much time to do it. He will not leave it this way...very miserable with himself...and now perhaps becoming fond of Sylvia...who has essentially rejected him because of you.”

“Then it’s more about her?”

“*Nei*, my *lille* mother, it is all about you. Sylvia is a very nice possibility but you are forever.”

“Oh, Ragnar, this goes on and on.”

“Not much longer. Did I not say he was yours?”

“Do you know anything more...anything--”

“I have seen admiration in his eyes when he speaks of you; although around me he can have nothing else. *Ja*, the scorn is gone.”

“Oh, lord, am I going to cry now? No, *no*, I’m going to thank you...*love* you...thank you...you’ve made me happy again.”

She reached out to draw Ragnar near in their constricting space, but he was looking at the whirling flakes gathering on the windshield.

“*Herregud*, my sweet girl, we cannot forget where we are...or we will not get off this soggy field road until it freezes. We will go back to my warm cabin...and the hell with early supper.”

“Supper for carnal appetites?”

Ragnar was busy rocking the sinking truck tires. Snow and earth rooster-tailed into the sky as the truck roared away from the threat of gradual incapacity. Violea was laughing, laughing, laughing, and Ragnar very soon came down with her contagious ribaldry.

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It was the morning of the day after Violea’s walk in the fields with Ragnar. Earlier she had returned from his rejuvenating safe-hold to find Virginia limping around the kitchen, a lanky wounded bittern, burning toast, making tea. Sylvia, having read late, was yet asleep.

“Haven’t you any marmalade?”

“There’s a jar on the door of the refrigerator...just for you.”

“You don’t like marmalade?”

“Of course I do. Why are you so crotchety, Virginia?”

“Some of my ridiculous eagerness for a *new friend* is the result of discovering what you have, Violea. I’ve come to envy you with recurring waves of self-pity. I realize you’ve suffered quite a lot...but now you have that bloody good cove, a man for all seasons.”

“You and your British cant. Are you being facetious?”

“Absolutely not. The word is actually a Gypsy term, I believe, Romany for a fellow creature.”

“If you could only understand a little more. At first I wished for unconsciousness...aiming for subsequent revival with no memory of the constant brutal image of Robert. But I felt neither unconscious nor conscious...in limbo. Then I came to life as if by a sudden clap on the head, thrown into complete sentience by the existence of...by the inevitability of Ragnar. It couldn’t happen, but it did.”

“Yes. The more I know of your fellow, the greener I

become. You over there in your love nest...reveling in it, and I here floundering in a slough of self-pity, frightfully alone.”

“You always have *me*...and of course you have Sylvia.”

“Unfortunately, even a caring daughter cannot fulfill all needs.”

“I’ve already decided to invite Roland to dinner.”

“What!” Virginia exclaimed, nearly falling over her breakfast chair as she angrily yanked at her chenille robe. “Whenever that occurs, I shall be in our room until that bosky hermit departs.”

“No, you won’t. I’ve never known you to be a coward. You will be at the table with the rest of us...and in full and smartly entertaining possession of yourself, my dear...as if nothing at all has happened.”

“You’re making out like a theater director.”

“Great idea...then start getting into authentic character: the real Virginia Putnam is about to come on stage.”

Viola’s phone rang, and Hugh said in a soft conspiratorial voice, “Hello, Mother Lea, I’m sending our son over for bread, before we’re snowed in again. Have you any?”

“Yes, plenty in my freezer. But didn’t I put some in yours?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t looked. And never mind that. Prepare yourself to give the bread of life to your needy offspring, he who obediently believes I must have bread.” The line went dead.

“Oh, God. Virginia, dear, would you mind going to your room...staying there with your toast and tea? Marcus is coming over for bread.”

Virginia’s mouth dropped open and her staring eyes held a confoundedly stupefied look. “Bread? But...bread?”

No sooner had Virginia swept herself off with her breakfast tray than Viola heard the knocker clanking at the front door.

Marcus had begun by explaining that the changing weather made twenty miles to Hayfield for bread a questionable endeavor.

“No, you shouldn’t. Come in and sit by the fire in the living room while I dig a few loaves out of the freezer. I’ll set them on

the kitchen counter and you can take them after you've warmed up."

When Viola returned to the living room Marcus was arranging a fallen log in the fireplace. He set the screen back and brushed his hands together with an artificial, meaningless gesture of nervousness. He appeared so distraughtly uncertain that Viola wanted to rush over and put her arms around him. Of course this impulsive act would certainly have had a countering, and possibly devastating, effect.

"Your cold is better now...it seems...I think."

"No such thing as a better cold, really, but it's tolerable...I guess. Yes, actually, it's going away."

He smiled, apparently without any vitriol or irony. Never having herself received such a smile from him, she held her hands tightly together in her lap and wondered how it could go on.

"I don't know what I should call you. Viola doesn't seem right at all. I've never really called you anything...except..."

"Except something derogatory?...and now perhaps you feel some guilt. Please don't. What was once said or believed doesn't matter to me. The past is...the past. If you're thinking an apology is necessary, it isn't. I myself have felt enough guilt for all of us...but how could I ever apologize for your existence? I do understand."

"Yes, but I think I haven't been...very fair...for so long."

"Marcus, as to calling me something...say whatever feels comfortable to you. Hugh calls me Lea."

"My father's name for you...his especially. I couldn't call you that. Jesus, this is really--"

"Really of no consequence."

Still perplexed, Marcus turned up the cuffs of his charcoal sweater, then spread his fingers over lean thighs covered in new gray corduroy. He stared directly at Viola, his long dark eyes so like Hugh's, especially in Hugh's youth, that she was fascinated, realizing too slowly that she need not look away -- this was after all her son.

“Do you know how you got your name?”

“My name? I thought... No, I don’t know.”

“I was reading Marcus Aurelius at school and found him a very exemplary fellow.”

“He was that...the little I’ve read of him. I guess I spent most of my youthful pastime reading not literary classics but...well, from Darwin to Stephen Jay Gould...often E.O. Wilson...classics in their own fields. The accelerating world of science -- bio-science -- is so multifarious, complex...endlessly inviting concern and speculation.”

“Yes, I wish I knew more about it...but I was always quite fascinated by science...it was a way to keep my feet on the ground, informing myself with *Scientific American*...or sometimes the deep concerns of writers and activists like Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold...or David Suzuki -- of course a layperson’s pursuit...in what spare time I had.”

“Umm...yes, Carson and Leopold and Suzuki, focusing on biology, forestry, ecology...tasks bled out of them by universal apathy, human waywardness; more important than we could ever know...that exposure. Humans are very slow in coming to terms with their possible fate.”

“Did you ever wish to teach, Marcus?”

“No, I’m doing what I want to do...or getting closer.”

Viola, who was sitting on the large davenport where Marcus sat, smoothed her hand over the leather space between them and said, “How good it’s been to think of you there with Hugh...talking, perhaps something like this...about so many things...all the years that--”

“When I haven’t been sneezing or coughing or being an irritating presence.” Marcus grinned, an attempt to mitigate his discomposure.

“No, you couldn’t be irritating, not for your father...no, not ever. At last I’ve managed to give you both something of value.”

“You gave me life...and now my father. What have I given you?”



“Your rewarding existence.”

“It hasn’t been rewarding for you. You aren’t going to let me say much about all of this. My...your Aunt Hilda did spoil me -- you’ve seen that. She wasn’t very interested in intellect, but overly proud of me and...always caring.”

“Aunt Hilda had a sizeable amount of money from her father’s insurance business. I was glad she sent you to the best schools, gave you the best vacations...so glad for you. Mother sent me money for schooling, upkeep; beyond that, I had only love to give...no way to--”

“And you were -- *are*, I can see -- loaded with a moral conscience; saddled with it to the world’s benefit, you could say. All these years you’ve collaterally atoned for something that didn’t need any damned atonement...as you say, my *existence*.”

“*Rewarding* existence. Marcus, aren’t you happy?”

“Happy?...sometimes. Yeah, I’m fine, but I also have a moral conscience, a condition that makes me mad as hell a lot of the time. Sure, I know how to have a good time. I’ve had plenty of good times, but I’m happiest when I’m working hard toward something worthwhile.”

“We, all of us -- you, me, your father -- have that in common, don’t we? Yes, saddled with moral conscience.”

Marcus looked around him, then directly behind him, focusing on a fading sepia photograph placed between the lamps on the sofa table; it was of a gaunt, tallish man with a long beard. He wore a plain black suit with a flower, perhaps a rose, in his lapel, and on his feet were shiny high-topped shoes. Standing alone, he looked beyond the camera and into the future, with an expression of fierce determination. His bedridden wife Charlotta was at the time suffering with maladies that would soon kill her: a recent childbirth, following too many still-born babies; wear and tear from fastidious immersion in a multiplicity of heavy domestic tasks, accomplished only with hands, arms, legs, and back; also hectic periods of assistance when fieldwork was short-handed; and finally dulling consumption -- a term then employed for either deadly

tuberculosis or a degraded body wasting away. The photograph was taken at the joyful birth of the Ender patriarch's first healthy son, the celebrated child destined to become Viola's great grandfather.

"Is that...Felix Ender?"

"Yes, the German architect who designed and built this house, the self-taught farmer who cleared and husbanded a large portion of these three thousand acres. Once I thought I was lost to this land. Now I've come home...finally realizing that a bucolic beginning like mine can never be lost. You may call me rather a hypocrite, but I'll still remind you that this land is your heritage."

"I can't take that in. I've never thought about it...never thought about anything here. This has always been like a foreign country...foreign relatives having nothing to do with me."

Viola lowered her head, gazing upon the old Persian carpet and pondering both of their erroneous attitudes. She knew that she would indeed be a hypocrite to think of discounting her own *running away*, as Ragnar had first called it. She might have come back here with her little son, involved herself in the farm. But would Marcus have become who he now was, engaged in the world's problems in a learned, meaningful way? Why consider other possibilities? When still a very precocious young girl, she had begun to dream of going away to study, to work perhaps in distant lands, doing something meaningful that accrued to others. Along came her willful young lover, with all of his books and ambitious objectives, further augmenting her initial far-ranging determination. Ah, but unknowingly leaving her pregnant.

"Are you thinking of the past? I'm not blaming you for anything anymore. God, I wonder how you can feel as you do...when I can't imagine suddenly feeling that way toward you. I don't really know you. We've shared hardly anything."

Her body stiffened as she struggled not to say, *What had you shared with your father up to now?*

"Mothers normally love their children," she said.

"Christ, I can't even call you anything familial without feeling

miserable.”

“You needn’t feel you’ve betrayed Aunt Hilda, Marcus -- that’s what you’re feeling. You haven’t betrayed her by loving your father, have you? Love is expansive, isn’t it? It takes in everything it wants. You’re so like Hugh it startles me. But why should it?”

Marcus stood up and walked to the bay windows. It was beginning to snow. He held the gauzy, half-open curtain fully aside and spoke while looking up at whirling snowflakes.

“You think that’s bad...being like my father?”

“No, only difficult for you...so much harsh self-judgment.”

“I haven’t suffered anything like Dad...my God. And you, you’ve suffered too, haven’t you?”

“Haven’t we all? If we live long enough.”

“I’d better go, or I’ll get stuck on that damn forest road.”

“It’s a beautiful little woods, Marcus, the twenty acres my mother, your grandmother, gave to your grandfather.”

“Dad hasn’t talked about that.”

“Ask him. It won’t hurt you to know. It won’t hurt him to tell you. I’d tell you everything...perhaps I’ll have that chance.”

Violea brought the bread from the kitchen, having slid it into a paper carryall bag. “I set a frozen apple pie on top. All you have to do is put it in a hot oven for nearly an hour.”

“Thanks. Did you make it?”

“Yes, I’m learning to make batches of certain freezable things and handily store them...the way Ragnar does.”

Marcus had not brought up his meeting with Ragnar, yet he had wanted to talk with him. She wondered how Marcus felt about her present relationship; it was not the time to introduce that subject.

She walked Marcus to the front door, opened it and turned to him with a serious smile. “Will we talk more before you--”

“Of course we will, yes. Right now I’ve got an oppressive feeling that I’ve just treated you badly again...spoken wrong.”

“No, my dear, you’ve only been straightforward...honest -- much better than pretending...which I wouldn’t want.

“Hell...what can I call you and why is it so difficult?”

“Just blurt out anything that comes to mind, like *hey you* or *lady of the house*.”

“Well, you’ve got a great sense of humor. I like that, Ma.”

Marcus looked at her with astonishment. She stepped forward and gave him a brief, she thought, inoffensive hug. Holding the carryall bag, he responded spontaneously with one arm, then waved a hand over his head and went down to his car without looking back. How she wished she could see his face at that moment.

Inside, she leaned against the door, laughing giddily, shaking her head and rubbing away salty wet trails of amazement, along with heartrending pity for her son, and admittedly some for herself.

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“You bought five hundred acres with money from the maintenance fund...without telling me?”

“I am telling you now,” Ragnar said, swallowing coffee while seated at his presently paper-strewn but oft reasonably tidy desk. “Important matters go on around here, and you have been busy.”

“But *why*, why buy more land? Haven’t we enough already?”

“By now you ought to know that I would have a very good reason for hastily doing something of that magnitude. The old adjacent Robertson farm, on our eastern boundary, was about to negotiate with a patented grain subsidiary -- Robertson retiring comfortably in Florida while we all live in hell here. I had to work mightily upon whatever sense of decency was left in that distracted man -- he’s feeling the chill of the Grim Reaper and thinking of little else...stopped caring when his son died in the Middle East seventeen years ago. But there will be no patented grain growing in this valley as long as I and the rest of us farming this land have the wherewithal to stop it from happening.”

Viola sat forward in the chair before Ragnar’s desk, almost as if she were having an important interview -- for an occupation she was not inclined to assume or qualified to have.

“Didn’t I have to sign something?”

“No. I simply bought the farm and appended it to your title.”

“Well...you’ve done a good thing, haven’t you?”

“A damn good thing. The grain we grow here is a fine old Ender seed preference, disease-resistant and hardy. Grain is currently at top price on the world market, in high demand because so many growers have switched to corn for energy sources. If the weather does not seriously misbehave, you will make some money this year.”

“Didn’t we do well last year? I thought so.”

“*Ja*, we did; as you know, along with the orchards, close to two and a half million gross, but ongoing running costs eat into that pretty sum...as you also know.”

“How did you get Robertson to do it, I mean beyond your splendid powers of persuasion?”

“A lot of talk...more than I wanted. Finally I reminded that stubborn mule that his granddaughter is engaged to a young farmer in this valley...which he should have thought of without my help.”

“I see. You had the blade on him for a possibly permanent scar.”

“*Ja*, I did, my clever girl.”

“Not as clever as you, not by a hundred miles. You’ve got everything under control here...including me.”

Ragnar stood up and came around his desk, lifting Viola out of her chair and administering a long coffee-tinged brennevin kiss.

“See what I mean. You’ve--”

“Please do not start with that, my *lille* Ender hothead. You know I have no control over you.”

“What do you call this?” She looked into the subduing smoky-blue eyes, which seemed quite aware of their effect, and knew the privation remaining in her own eyes would win her another kiss; as soon given.

“I call this control over *me*, Wild Vi.”

“Maybe I should sit on the other side of the desk.”

“Ja, when you get your personal affairs running smoothly I will expect more hands-on input from my boss.”

“You’re already getting hands-on input.”

“Ah, you make me laugh too much. Let me give you some lunch.”

“I’ve been talking with Marcus, and I came over to share with you a little of how things went.”

“Then come and tell me while I feed you.”

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“So that is all to the good,” Ragnar said. He was tossing sliced cold beets onto his pickled herring salad.

“I’m starving. Feed me, feed me!” Viola cried.

“You are very happy today. Wait a minute, first have the hard-boiled egg slices...there...and now you may have your plate, greedy child.”

Viola dug in, loading her fork just as the plate was set down.

“Umm, umm, so good. God, this herring pickled in wine! I’ve never tasted better. Did you do it yourself? I suppose so.”

“You suppose correctly. Can you conceive of a Norwegian who could not pickle herring? It would be a disgrace.”

Ragnar whacked loose his black plaid shirtsleeves and rolled them again, more neatly, then sat down before his plate.

“Yes...maybe all to the...good,” Viola agreed, harking back to Ragnar’s first comment about Marcus’ visit. Her cheeks were bulging.

“Stop talking with your mouth full. You might choke.”

“Yes, papa.”

“*Herregud*, do not define me *in loco parentis*, not even to tease. I refuse to be surrogate father to a forty-four-year-old *jente*...girl. I am merely enough subjugated to want to see you eat well without harming yourself. Marcus is falling in love with you too. You see, he is completely astonished to discover this extraordinary *mother*.”

“No, no, he doesn’t even like me very much. He’s feeling guilty, because of his long and steadfast attachment to Aunt Hilda.”

“Ah, that is highly amusing. You are quite perceptive.”

“By that you mean the opposite.”

“*Ja*, you understand that much. Marcus told me you are too young and beautiful to be his parent. It seems he is so accustomed to an older maternal influence that he has great difficulty accepting you as his real mother.”

“Oh no, *no!* What did you say to that?”

“I agreed that you seemed young and were not bad looking, but said that you were nevertheless probably his mother.”

“Do you want me to choke? Do you, do you? You’re far more amusing than I.”

“At the moment I would rather be found amusing by you than anything else I can think of.” He handed her a paper napkin.

She wiped her herring-tinged lips. “Please don’t look at me that way. I can’t make love on a full stomach.”

“We will see if you can, you have not eaten that much.”

He pushed his emptied plate aside, then stood up and came to extract her from her chair.

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“You’ve never done anything like that before.” Viola was still in Ragnar’s bed an hour later. “You’re the hungriest man.”

“*Ja*, but you came to me hungry...and the recent scarcity of *you*, in mind and body, leads to such tactics. The advantage of waiting was only reasonable before I had you...now advantage is any given moment.”

“You must have been incredibly bad in your fiery youth. Those nosy women at the Grange had interesting notions of your history...but too generalized. All at once I’m after a few revealing particulars.”

Viola sat up, hugging a pillow and looking down at Ragnar, who was lying on his back, and had been smiling, his impatiently desired eyes restfully closed. He opened his eyes and looked curiously at her, blue-gray irises momentarily a cloudless high altitude of sifting reflective overview -- carefully selected history

then duly presented.

“My sex life was not very spectacular. I indulged the fantasies of a few compliant females while answering my own needs.”

“What a tidy little dismissal. Why did you never love my mother? She was so sweet...very pretty...so lovely when you first met.”

Ragnar sat up abruptly and leaned back against two pillows.

“This is uncomfortable talk, Wild Vi...somewhat vulgar. I liked your mother very much. We were confidants but, as you know, she never told me everything...certainly nothing about you. She was always my employer. I would not even entertain any other idea...never wished to mistreat generous Martha with my own self-indulgence. Our long and pleasant friendship was a far better course.”

“Is this employer your self-indulgence?”

“You are abusing my honesty, Wild Vi...strictly in a legal sense, you *are* my employer...the rest is fate...leave it at that. But as to the past, your father was... *Nei*, I am getting up now.”

“What? *What?* Please tell me.” Violeta tried to restrain him but found him powerfully intransigent. “Am I merely a compliant female?”

“Ah, stop that. You have no need of such games with me...and it is beneath you.”

“I’m not so very wonderful. I’ve made a lot of bad--”

Ragnar had turned to grip her shoulders with forceful opposition.

“You are exactly that...*wonderful* to me. Do you still not see how it is? I have a great deal of you...and you, my wild thing, have quite a lot of me. Of each other, we will never know everything, but that is fortunate. Who can ever really explain how love works anyway? -- how authentic love...*this* love, defies even the sanity of its subjects?”

“*Amantes sunt amentes*, succinct Latin -- lovers are mad, insane. No, really, isn’t nearly all of it just objective phenomena, natural



chemistry, an evolved biological process?” she rhetorically teased.

“So it is said, but those of us who know it quickly forget.”

“You’re still such a mystery to me, Ragnar.”

“Good. Let it be. You are a mystery to me...and that is best. I would not want new discoveries of you to end...ever.”

“Tell me what you were going to say about my father.”

“It was nothing. Perhaps you could say your father resented my presence -- *virile audacity* he once called it -- but he needed my stable endurance, my mind, which was always focused...my innate sense of farming, far exceeding his. Your grandmother too late admitted her mistake in sending him off to a deflecting education.”

“But if you never tempted my mother why would he resent your--”

“All right, *all right*. The widow who owned the bakery was pretty and clever. At one time, before your father, she was...with me.”

“Oh. Oh, I see. What happened to her?”

“When your father died she sold the bakery and moved away.”

“You wouldn’t take her back?”

“Of course not. That was over before your father. She wanted to marry and I did not...and I had no interest in running a bakery.”

“I don’t want to know any more about it. I’m sorry I asked. I’m such a hopeless idealist.”

“I told you not to pursue this. *Ja*, you are still an idealist, incurably, painfully so. I find it amazing. But maybe that is one of the many reasons I am drawn to you. *Nei*, not maybe, it *is*.”

“I only want to be yours, not as a fragile bird trembling in your hand, but to share this incredible life, give you whatever I can, sometimes be tolerated as that demanding little girl who swung from your thumb.”

“*Ja*, see what I mean? -- how deep, in how many directions this relationship goes? And yet human nature is so tangled with emotions that even the most refined attachment is not without

jealousy.”

“If I had sold the farm would you still want me?”

“That requires a more difficult answer, Wild Vi. You want to test me. *Ja*, I would still want you, but you might not want me.”

“How can you say that?”

“This valley’s heritage farm is...has been for a very long time, part of who I am...and that is mostly what you must love about me. Without this life...*nej*, what is the point of contemplating that?”

“You’re far more than this farm...a world of things. You’ve opened me up, *allowed* me to need you...by simply understanding me so well...and by listening to me, communicating -- that’s irresistible. I feel a responsibility to do more...but you ask so little of me.”

Ragnar shook his head and gently smoothed out her serious mouth. “You might say I have lived long enough to understand you, but it is all of the experiences we share, as well as our deep attraction, that is uncommon. You need no more responsibility than you want; you are always loved, always loving. Sometimes, inevitably I suppose, you will be the willful Ender, giving Draconian orders to your slavish employee.”

“Ender Farm orders from me? I don’t think so. You are a cool one -- butter would *not* melt in your lovely brennevin mouth.”

“Not so cool where you are concerned.”

He lifted her up from the disheveled bed and stood her on her feet, descending upon her with an emotive kiss, a prevailing literal kiss, wolfishly swallowing mincing ambiguities.

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“I’ve asked you nicely, Roland, but pretty soon I’m going to insist. My poor little canary nearly sank to its fenders in mud and snow driving over here, because you refuse to have a phone.”

“Use the highway entrance if you must come here, and why the hell should I have a phone? I would call no one and no one would call me.”

“I’d call you.”

“That’s why I have no phone.”

“You’re not indestructible you know and--”

“Jesus Christ! If there’s one thing I know it’s *that*.”

“And you might have an emergency...the way you’re always chopping wood or mucking about alone out here. Why should I have to worry--”

“I can’t afford it.”

“Oh you can too. It’s an attitude. You revel in a *Notes from Underground* sort of existence. Look at that broken-down truck out there you could easily replace with part of your assistance check. You spend money on almost nothing but food and the gas to get it.”

“Gas! That’s enough to wipe me out. But how do you know what I spend money on? Do you imagine some munificent publisher simply publishes my work on merit alone? Hah! I have to do it myself. I have to be my own press agent...just to share my pitiful work with--”

“Oh why are Enders so damned impossibly stubborn?”

“I hope you’re including yourself in this rant, Viola.”

“You’re the one ranting.”

Viola shoved aside a lumpy footstool and stood up. Her mission had been so urgent and peremptory she had not even removed her coat.

“It’s so nice that you have this place to write in, isn’t it?”

“Aha! Now I suppose you’re going to prey upon my ravaged conscience with a condescending display of your absentee generosity. It’s your saintly mother, Martha, to whom I owe--”

“Wait a minute, I’ll get you a cell phone...pay for it myself.”

“Why do you feel it necessary to involve yourself in my life?”

“We’re related. You live on my farm. You were actually much nicer -- relatively speaking -- when we first met. Is this all because you’re so wary of having a few friends who care enough to--”

“Ragnar is my friend...he has never minded dropping in here unannounced to see how I’m doing. I’ve even gone to his place.”

“So you do socialize. Well, good. I want you to come to

dinner tomorrow night and--”

“What? Dinner? Is that *woman* still over there?”

“How on earth can you be the same man who writes such deeply sensitive poetry?”

“My pitifully scrabbling gratitude rises to the surface of this demoralized sewer. I blush with humble thanks.”

“Oh don’t refer to yourself in that horrible way. I’ll simply have to go on reminding myself what I’ve read from you -- I’ve got a little currency where literature is concerned. And do you know something, Roland? Virginia prizes your poetry too. If it were not the case, why would she have floundered around in freezing cold weather, getting lost and even hurting herself -- suffering inevitable humiliation -- to visit a nasty curmudgeon like you?”

“Why indeed?”

“So you imagine yourself irresistible love bait?”

“My condition has nothing to do with a desperate woman.”

“As present head of the Ender clan I insist that you come and be a gentleman. In a few days Virginia will be back in London. You’ll have a long time to regret the loss of a once enthusiastic devotee.”

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Viola had just explained her intentions to Ragnar on her phone.

“What will you cook?”

“I’m making chicken cacciatore with basmati rice.”

“I will fry the chicken.”

“No you won’t. You will kindly throw wood on the fire and visit with my guests.”

“Listen to me, I will fry four cut-up chickens in herbs and bring them over early -- in my large paella pan. You will do the sauce.”

“Oh, Ragnar...well, I’m going to Hayfield in a few minutes. I’ve just been making a list of things I’ll need: tomatoes, onions, garlic, peppers, celery, tomato sauce, parsley, white wine and--”

“*Nei*, use sherry instead of white wine. Have you any?”

“Yes...some medium dry. Let’s see, what else?”

“Mushrooms, artichoke hearts, and olives.”

“Oh, artichoke hearts. Olives?”

“*Ja*, pitted dry salty olives. I will bring some. You probably do not have any artichoke hearts in oil. I will bring you a few jars, strained...I add their herbed oil to the chicken when I fry it.”

“My darling, I see that once again you intend to appropriate my production...the way to this man’s heart is through his choice chefdom.”

“You are beginning to understand that I like to cook for you and with you, as well as eat with you. I am on my way to take chickens from my freezer, then heading back out to the northwest field...to attack more drainage problems. *Hade*, busy hostess, careful driving. We will rendezvous tomorrow in your hot kitchen.”

“I’m eagerly aglow with your double entendre,” she teased.

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When *Viola* returned from grocery shopping, she set the last bag hastily on the kitchen table and reached for her ringing cell phone.

“Hello, Miss Ender, Roland Ender here...no longer a distant relative.”

“My goodness...Roland. How did you--”

“Apparently you’ve been telling Ragnar a number of things, half-truths, I’m assuming. He just stopped by and gave me a reconnected old cell phone of his, along with your number. He actually apologized to me for not thinking of it sooner, for God’s sake. The thing seems to work just fine...as you’ve answered. After Ragnar, you will be the next, and perhaps the last, to have my number.”

*Viola* was so pleased she laughed cheerily and welcomed Roland into the technical world of speedy communication.

Offering his number, Roland then said, “I’ve also had a few words of blatant innuendo from Ragnar on another subject, which

led me to conclude...I'd better show up for your dinner tomorrow. What time?"

"Yes, I forgot to say, didn't I? Please come about seven o'clock. And what a good friend you have in Ragnar, Roland."

"I may get around to telling you just how good. By now you've discovered that his devotion to Ender Farm and everything on it is mysterious and profound."

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Virginia and Sylvia were dusting, straightening the living room and intending to add leaves to the dining room table, while Viola was in the kitchen, hand-washing breakfast dishes. She was about to make the dinner dessert, having decided upon a pineapple upside-down cake. She pictured its caramelized top with a red maraschino cherry in the middle of each glistening pineapple slice -- a childhood treat -- and hoped to closely reproduce her mother's scrumptiously tantalizing recipe, with its crowning touch of freshly whipped cream.

In the late afternoon, when Viola had done the cake and just finished ironing the pale green linen table cloth, so that Virginia and Sylvia could set the table, Ragnar called from the back door, with his hands full. Viola attempted to take a huge loaded pan from him.

"Can you lift this? It may be too heavy."

"Of course." Its weight surprised her as she hurried to the counter with the heavy metal pan of foil-covered fried chicken.

Ragnar brought in two bags standing outside the door, then set about removing his coat and shoes and putting on his kitchen clogs. Shedding his big sheepskin jacket, a navy V-necked sweater appeared over a blue shirt. He stripped to his t-shirt, placing his sweater and shirt on a hook by the back door, and at once began distractedly to whistle. Viola smiled at his cheerfulness. She ran her fingers over his solid bare arms and reached up to straighten his mussed hair. He leaned to greet her with a hungry kiss.

"You smell good...like cake batter." He yanked at a stray

lock of her hair, loosened from its clasp, and winked at her.

“Pineapple upside-down cake batter.”

“A good choice for dessert -- I have eaten Martha’s.”

Ragnar glanced at her bare feet beneath her rolled jeans.

“Put on your thongs at least. We might have a mess in here.”

Violea fetched a pair of old thongs from the broom closet and said, “Roland called me with his new phone...your old phone.”

“*Ja*, I should have thought of it sooner. Or maybe I did and just forgot about it. I never like to interfere with his lifestyle. It is all part of his poetic persona.”

“Isn’t that a bit disingenuous for a man seeking truth?”

“*Nei*, let him be. He comes to his truth...and he is happy enough in his simplified existence...only his mind wants complexity, without too much disabling pressure from outside.”

“You’re absolutely right...I’ve discovered -- poetry has him.

“So now...I suppose you intend to watch me laboring over the cacciatore sauce...to see if I do it to your satisfaction.”

“*Nei*, I am going to *help* you make the sauce, and together we will do it well. Tell me what you want me to do.”

“*Me tell you?* You’re kidding.”

“I am not kidding. You will enjoy this more if you think of it as another way of making love...we already know that success requires some suggestion...harmony and good timing.”

“Well then...do you want to be the boss here or--”

“I want to be one of the lovers.” He held his fist beneath her chin and ran a finger down her nose. She found herself quite happily and excitedly encouraged by his easygoing, jovial nature.

“I’ve got a white chef’s apron. Shall I tie it around you and save t-shirt and slacks from spatter?”

“Good idea. You will not have to worry about your old red shirt and jeans. Do you not like wearing an apron?”

“Oh, sometimes I do...when I have on good clothes.”

“When you made hasenpfeffer I remember you wore one.”

“You remember that?”

“There is nothing wrong with my memory regarding you,

Wild Vi.”

“Careful...or I’ll go away and lie down.”

“And I with you.”

Within a few minutes and side by side at two cutting boards, they had prepared nearly all of the ingredients to be sautéed. As Ragnar worked she noticed that his face was again serene and very focused. His use of his own large chef’s knife on the tomatoes, celery, and garlic was so deftly swift and exacting she found herself pausing to stare, fascinated. He laughed. “I am not going to cut myself, *lille* girl. From necessity, I learned to be quick and accurate. Seed and slice the peppers.”

“I never thought you’d cut yourself. I was just...all right, julienne, do you think?”

“*Nei*, thicker chunks. This is a robust country dish.”

Violea finished the red, yellow, and green peppers and started on the onions. “Darn it, they’re making me cry.”

“Here, slice them into this bowl of water...and breathe through your mouth. Ah, let me finish, you look too sad.”

“What about these mushrooms? I brushed them off.”

“Just cut them in half...but leave the smaller ones whole.”

Ragnar next opened the container of strained artichoke halves and began cutting them in half.

“What oil will you use for sautéing?”

“I have canola oil for high heat...and we could add some of my best olive oil...or maybe a little butter for taste.”

“*Ja*, good, Canada-oil. Give me a large platter for the fried chicken. We will use the paella pan for sautéing and adding tomato sauce; then we can just put the chicken back and spoon the sauce over it.”

When Violea had poured the oil into the pan, she added butter and they waited a minute, looking at each other in wordless expectation, two admiring conspirators involved in a wager of skill. Ragnar then held a wooden spoon handle in the pan’s hot oil.

“What are you doing?”

“If it complains it is ready...and it is. First the peppers,” he



tossed them into the sizzling oil, “then the celery, then the onions, last: garlic and mushrooms. Finally we add the herbs -- dry oregano and chiffonaded fresh basil -- and the tomatoes, tomato sauce, dry salty olives, and artichoke hearts.” When all of this was completed in a par-cooked manner, Ragnar said, “Salt, pepper, and Worcestershire -- just a big splash -- also some lemon juice and one heaping tablespoon of brown sugar...maybe a few good dashes of cayenne. Let this bubble for three minutes, then we will add the fried chicken pieces. It can rest in the oven until the baking. What do you do then?”

“Well, let’s see...about fifteen minutes before removing the pan from the oven I pour the sherry over the top, yes?”

“Right...and when you take it from the oven you add...?”

“Freshly chopped parsley.”

“The final touch. What a clever *lille* cook you are.”

“And what a clever *big* cook you are...it’s a good dish for coordinated effort, isn’t it?...of course you did the chicken.”

“*Ja*, but you did the chicken cook.”

Viola laughed so shrilly that Virginia poked her head into the kitchen to see what had transpired, finding out nothing.

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The guests were all nearly sated with the highly praised chicken cacciatore, and were now more frequently taking their eyes off their plates to observe one another. Roland had decided to enhance his familial inclusion by walking around the table refilling wine goblets. He wore a tweedy brown cardigan, smelling faintly of mothballs, over a white shirt with a thin wine necktie, the tie slightly creased, as if lately pulled from the bottom of a seldom-opened drawer.

For a moment Viola thought she saw her matured father coming toward her, and found this unnerving: the same sapphire eyes glinting with black mischief, or something more sinister; the same dark hair, in which could be found tiny flashes of auburn in bright sunlight -- now graying amply at the temples --and newly

close-shaven, the same dark-whiskered stubborn chin tapered to a dimpled narrowness. *He even moves as Daddy did, coolly precise and determined, as if closing in on something that will not be able to get away.* She watched him approach Virginia and prepare to pour more wine into her glass.

Never looking up from her soft-voiced conversation with Sylvia, Virginia placed her hand over her wine goblet and went on talking. Sylvia, however, offered her glass with a polite smile. Salient actions, Viola noted, all being observed by Marcus and Hugh. Ragnar was merely cutting his chicken, with a pleased expression on his face.

“Good God! what was that thing? Possibly a large rodent!” Roland exclaimed, having just seen a shadowy gray blur streak across the room, circle the table, tap his pants leg, and speedily depart.

Viola initiated the laughter and the others joined in. “That was only our feline resident, Bugsy, performing his evening caper. He can be quite entertaining...if you don’t blink. He’ll probably slow down over his food bowl in the kitchen. That’s why I’ve left the door propped. He especially loves chicken skins.”

“Oh, a cat,” Roland said, “YES, handy thing for food scrap disposal.”

Without clearing anything but the dinner plates, Viola brought in the dessert. Each diner received a moist light square of crusty yellow cake, studded with a cherry-filled pineapple slice, accompanied by freshly whipped cream, placed at the side. Along with this gleaming, caramel-sweet, vanishing offering, everyone was drinking steaming Ceylon tea; except Ragnar, who had made his own coffee.

“I’ve never before eaten pineapple upside-down cake,” Sylvia remarked. “The shiny top is so pretty, and it’s delicious, Viola. I suppose you made it.” She had glanced at Ragnar, who smoothly verified her assumption: “This is as good as Martha’s, Wild Vi.”

“Do we call you Wild Vi?” Roland innocently inquired of

Viola.

“*Nei*, you do not...solely the prerogative of Ender Farm’s shy Norwegian,” Ragnar imparted, his amused voice accompanied by a mild chortle of laughter. Viola squinted, looking past the candles to have the smile he sent from the far end of the table. She also noted that Roland had now begun to study them both with sharp scrutiny.

The conversation then meandered from the weather to world affairs and back again, as the guests tried to overcome their sated lethargy.

Roland, who had said very little since his nominal faux pas, suddenly attempted to redeem himself. “Thank you for inviting me to this excellent dinner, Viola. One gets tired of one’s own mediocre cooking...and equally one’s own plaintive mutterings.”

“Do you talk to yourself too, Roland? When I first returned I decided that I would be able to talk aloud to myself as much as I wanted. I thought I was alone, you see, but I soon found that there were ears all around me...making it, for the most part, unnecessary.”

“For me, it’s still necessary,” Roland replied.

Viola thought of enlarging upon his remark but was prevented by Virginia, who had decided to change the subject entirely and draw information from Ragnar, who continued to fascinate her.

“I realize that in your early years you began collecting and reading a great many books, Ragnar...that you were looking at various cultures, at history and art around the world...but isn’t there a rougher side to merchant seamanship?”

“*Ja*,” Ragnar answered, “and you want me to expound. There is that morbid curiosity in everyone...to hear of degrading situations.”

“I hesitate to call *my* curiosity morbid...but perhaps, yes. Won’t you provide us with some minor tale of human miscreance? There must have been many.”

“*Beklager*, sorry...I would not want to bore Wild Vi’s guests

with windy tales of failing mankind.”

“We’re all ears, Ragnar, now you’ll have to,” Hugh urged.

“Please do tell us something we’ll never forget,” Sylvia begged. She glanced at Marcus who was grinning at her irresistible enthusiasm.

With one arm resting informally on the table, Ragnar leaned silently back in his chair and gazed at Viola. She raised telling eyebrows and shrugged, offering an encouraging little moue smile that tacitly conveyed: *I’m afraid you’ll have to say something.*

“If you like, I could speak of a brief incident of some mild violence that came to an acceptable end.”

“We’d all be fascinated,” Virginia said in a coaxing voice.

“Why don’t we first go into the living room and make ourselves more comfortable,” Viola suggested. Sylvia rose, and immediately began to gather dirty plates, and Viola said, “No, dear, leave everything. It won’t fly away.” Ragnar had already stood up to carry off the huge paella pan holding small remnants of the chicken cacciatore. “Back in a minute,” he said, heading into the kitchen to put the food into the refrigerator. Virginia followed him with the empty rice bowl. Marcus was busy stoking the sparking living room fire, and Hugh had selected a wing-chair, resting his foot on a hassock. He again thanked Viola for a delicious dinner, with Marcus adding over a bent shoulder, “Yes, really good food.” When Marcus had reset the fire screen, Viola settled on a large brown damask pillow before the blazing logs, then called to the others in the kitchen to leave the table alone and come at once. More chairs were arranged near the fireplace -- lethargic Roland, still quietly reflective yet appearing to enjoy this settled level of camaraderie, sat in one of these, a small armchair. There was also plenty of room on the large leather davenport, where Virginia placed herself, never looking in Roland’s direction. Sylvia sat down beside her mother. Marcus then casually sprawled at the end of the same davenport, occasionally softly saying something explorative to Sylvia, with his chin propped in his hand.

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“We had come off the Atlantic and sailed up the Tagus, or as the Portuguese call it, the Tejo River, to drop anchor at Lisbon. I was then twenty-three and chief engineer on a Bremerhaven vessel. I was looking forward to this layover because on previous visits I had discovered wonderful guitar music and very good fado singers in the quaint old Arab part of Lisbon called the Alfama...or up above on the hill in the equally old Bairro Alto. It should be added that today there are fado bars everywhere on that busy waterfront, expensive tourist traps with bad food and jaded singers. But in those days fado singers were serious about their songs of fate, and less well known, so that if you came across a sign: *Fado esta noite* -- Fado tonight -- or stumbled on a place that did not bother to advertise, no matter how rundown the establishment, you were likely to find something worth hearing. The *guitarra Portuguesa* is a large, very beautiful twelve-string guitar, pear-shaped, something like a mandolin. From the moment I heard its incredible tonal reverberations, I wanted to handle it...learn to play it.”

“Did you?” Sylvia could not resist asking.

“*Ja*, it is one of three guitars I own...the other two Spanish.”

Viola looked up at Ragnar, who was sitting above her cushion on one of the leather wing-chairs, with his feet on its hassock. She was thinking of his guitar-playing in her childhood: the smoothly plucked strings producing sad or lively songs, merely a background of sound barely noticed; she, being so often adrift in her self-absorbed world. Her eyes grew moist with regret -- *ah, the selfish folly of youth*. At this display, Ragnar cocked his questioning head and reached out to touch her shoulder. She smiled and whispered for him to continue.

“I was sitting at a rickety old table in a smoky but empty dark bar, drinking a glass of wine, listening to guitar playing and waiting for the fado singer to come and perform. Now I should say that often my mates liked to carouse and drink throughout the night.

After having done this years earlier, when it was novel because of my young age, I had come to the conclusion that recovery was a terrible waste of time when there was so much to see and learn; so that by age twenty-three I was not drinking very much and often went off by myself to explore a place at leisure. A whining young loudmouth, who had been eyeing me from his bar stool, eventually drank enough to stumble up to my table and introduce himself as the world's foremost bone-crusher. Apparently because of my size, these misadventures happened with disappointing frequency. Sometimes young men, running on excited hormones, were merely trying to impress their sweethearts; sometimes it was simply a bloody-mean drunk, as incensed as a ring-stuck bull, but without even knowing why -- their lives would somehow improve if they could only finish me off. Before this brute swaying before me even spoke -- in inarticulate German because he thought that was what I might be -- I knew that he was Slavic, Ukrainian it turned out.

“*Können Sie Englisch?*” I asked, for English was by then a universal language and his German was nearly incomprehensible.”

“You see, mother,” Sylvia blurted out, causing an expression of curiosity on Marcus’ face, for he had no idea why it was said.

“Sh, sh,” Virginia admonished. “Please go on, Ragnar.”

“*English? You bet*, the drunk said, *I speak stinking-fish-boat English all you like. Okay, I break you in half now, big guy.*

*Ja? Before even the singing?* I said. *I would rather just buy you a glass of wine and let us both enjoy the music.*

*I drink yours*, he said, then took my wine and drank it down.

*Now you buy me a glass of wine*, I said.

*You will make me do this how? While I wreck your body? Tell me why I do not spill your guts over this louse-dive.*

*Because you would rather hear something interesting than become an enemy with a broken face?* I suggested.

*You are going to broke my face, maybe? When is it happening?*

*Enough of this*, I said, and got up to leave.

“If you have ever been on the waterfront there, you know

that the ancient streets in Alfama are very narrow and cobbled passageways, often going up and down steep stairs or erratically climbing the hill to Bairro Alto. I thought I would wander onto one of the precipitous hidden climbs and look for another friendlier place to hear fado singing. The outdoor night life was, and still is I am certain, family-style entertainment. There is always something interesting going on, because people eat, live, and work in the steamy, narrow, food-saturated streets and marketplaces. No sooner had I helped an old woman steady her tipping laundry cart, then I heard the bawling howl of the bone-crusher at my back. I turned around and saw him charging me with both big red fists stretched out in front of him. *Dra til helvete, rasshø!* I yelled, merely to satisfy myself -- the punch he received in his solar plexus was to satisfy him. For this vulgar accuracy, I apologize to your guests, Wild Vi."

Everyone was laughing in choruses of hilarity, and Ragnar said, "*Herregud*, I am talking too much. Whose idea was this?"

"It was mine," Virginia said, hands spread at her throat, "and you really must go on. *Violea*, you should be writing this down?"

"I would have to be Joseph Conrad to do this justice," *Violea* said. "Then what happened?" she asked, resettling on her pillow and tapping quickly at Ragnar's pants leg, rather like Bugsy's play tapping.

"The poor fool was writhing on the cobbles, moaning and clutching his middle. Just when I was going to help him up, he regained his breath and said, *Beat my head into the stones or I kill you.*

*You are worse than drunk*, I said. *Never mind the stones, there is already something wrong with your head. Is it a woman?* He was young, like myself, and this was an easy assumption -- as in the fado: love or death. Ukrainians are very superstitious, even the educated ones, and he said at once: *Knowing this of me, you have the magic.*

*You fool*, I answered, *if I had the magic, I would not be here knocking you down and picking you up off the cobbles.*

"We ended up back at the same fado bar where it all began, and there we listened to the fado songs in between his garbled tale

of woe. He was very poor but had wanted to be a doctor and marry his sweetheart...had gone to sea to make enough money to study. While he was fishing far from home, his beloved wife-to-be married the boy on a neighboring farm. When his brother wrote him this unexceptional news, he at once fell ill, his dream ruined. He saw no reason to go on.

*All around you, I said, the lives of the disappointed are still going on, but life of itself is short enough; why should you die young for a woman who is happy without you? Or look at it this way: if you really want to torture yourself why not go on living? You will tire of that attitude soon enough. Meanwhile, my sorry friend, something wonderful, or at least interesting, might happen.*

“At the time, I doubted that he, in his inebriated state, had heard much of what I said. But, *ja*, in a manner of speaking, something positive was already happening. When he sobered up he remembered enough of my words to rethink his plight...carry out his plan alone.

“Igor did become a doctor...married a nurse and had three sons and two daughters...and now has well-educated grandchildren. We have corresponded for years, but I have never seen him since that fateful day, except in photographs. Between us we have enough stories to have supplied several Joseph Conrads. More than once he has written: *I am lucky it was you, or my brain would have run out on the stones.*”

Roland clapped and said, “This was something like a ballad.” He had been moved enough to break the thoughtful silence in the room. For the first time this evening, his demeanor was that of the poet stimulated with surging ideas.

“Yes, like a ballad,” Viola agreed, wiping at her eyes.

“Well, a positive story,” Ragnar said in a low voice, and mainly to Viola. He had briefly and discreetly clasped her hand.

“Endings like that are fixed in memory by the powerful emotions they can deliver...especially when they’re true,” she responded. “You told the story with such compelling realism I thought I was there.”

“That is because *I* was there. It is far easier to frame facts



than make a viable story from even a superior imagination...and even with sound writing skill. Is that not what separates all the novice stenographers of boring minutia from the true writers and poets?"

"Yes, but not in your case," Violea said. "Your story was very concisely made into compelling human drama. And to think that you would correspond all these years with a man who wanted to harm you."

"He wanted to harm himself, now he is content enough."

Roland studied Ragnar with admiring speculation, then observed, "Here's one among us who sports with words less than he tunes them for service, and so we must call him a true arbiter of useful language, as well as an authentic storyteller."

A silence fell over the room while everyone digested this, then Violea, smiling with Roland's observation, stood up and announced, "Listen, everyone...I've chosen a poem for Roland to read. Something I like very much. It should be read aloud by it's author."

Virginia looked upset and said, "Oh, but I wanted to ask Ragnar something more about his experiences. Just think of the marvelous stories already suggested, just waiting to be--"

"*Nei*, I am finished with my tale. Let someone else talk."

Violea handed Roland the chapbook he had given her and said, "Please sit comfortably in your chair and read this poem you call *Camellia*. I'm so fond of it, because it conveys a change of attitude with such a richly descriptive, sentient pleasure...it also marks the phylogeny of botany, of nature's marvelous goal to perpetuate itself. But finally, it reminds me of the magical journeys I made deep into the centers of flowers when I was a dreamy little girl."

"You are quite insightful, although I'm no longer surprised. But I had no intention of dominating the conversation with my poetry when I came here tonight to dine with you."

"Go ahead and read the thing," Hugh coaxed. "You probably know that in China, because the *Camellia* blooms in

winter, it's considered a symbol of strength. You've said next to nothing about your poetry during our mundane conversations at Ragnar's...I've never had a chance to know any of it. Come on now, Roland, you will have to entertain us for these good eats."

After the others had agreed and insisted, except for Virginia, who had moved to the far end of the room and was staring out a dark window, Roland cleared his throat and began to recite in a fluid, unexpectedly captivating voice, hardly looking at the page or the others in the room but staring into the fire:

Camellia

Enfolded red planet  
Ruling white night's garden,  
I shiver on sepal threshold  
In palest green grasp,  
Awaiting your ruby-tongued dawn.

Wind-jarred japonica,  
You charm this coldness to burn  
On fictive floral illusion.  
Foot-speed away from time,  
I cross veined cloud tiers,  
Tracking dove-tailed symmetry  
Toward blushing infinity.

On empty petal plains,  
Where damask-streaked dusk shears  
The edges of your mallow meridians,  
I meet the last rosy figment,  
Urging me to dance our fête  
Down wine-coursed canyons,  
Celebrating your red-hot prime.

Reeling below gilt-anthered towers  
Torched in twilight's fading flame,  
My carnal self feels soft dusting --

Pollen anodyne, old stellar gold.  
Intriguer now of future efflorescence,  
You set me dreaming of endless bloom.

Roland, glancing around the room, could not fail to see the wet glint on Virginia's cheek. He stood up at once, restless and eager to be off. "I think I'll take myself back to my sanctum sanctorum...stray words shaping...but elusive...midnight oil."

"Fine poets are so often incredibly self-centered!" Virginia cried out; her sudden retaliation apparently bewildering to herself, but easily construed as insensitive, even self-serving.

Marcus and Sylvia, who, after Roland's recital, had begun talking quietly and with a certain urgency, fell silent and looked up.

"Well hello, Virginia," Roland said with arresting force. "How is your ankle?"

Virginia muttered something incoherent and fluttered her hand.

"Yes, this poet is self-centered. It was finally possible to center on myself...after being encouraged to make blood and mayhem out of my fellow inhabitants of the planet. That was quite a leap...I've never soundly landed. Obviously, one may go from combat blood to the reading of poetry, but *not* to writing it. That -- for the longest time -- seemed an insane exercise in futility. With raw brutality in the ascendant, vulnerable poetry is the first thing killed...then, if you are me, you are left with little else. But please excuse me, I reiterate...perhaps further demonstration of self-centeredness. It's part of the reason I live alone. That way no one hurts but myself."

Roland stood a moment gazing into the fire, likely pondering his own deeply personal revelation. Viola was reminded of her father's devastating *cri de coeur*, at a stormy moment when her distraught mother accused him of coldness -- he wanted much more out of life than he had managed to get, an interminable craving at his wife's expense. Captured by this semblance of her father, Viola was moved to feel not only compassion for Roland

but for a frustrated man long dead. She remembered various small and intimate acts occasionally conferred on her mother: applying a bandage for some minor wound or rubbing her aching back, things done not as recompense but merely as wonted duty to a woman whom he had once explicitly chosen. Alas, this was not nearly enough. Now she had to override this physiognomic association with her elusive father, for Roland Ender was another man entirely: a purposelessly damaged, highly sensitive good man living with chronic pain -- intentionally and abruptly, he had helped end other human lives, had been inclusively responsible for war's meaningless carnage perhaps many times; acts compartmentalized at last to permit life as a wary poet. Virginia too had pain, which could not compare to Roland's, but pain was a relative thing, no more enjoyable in lesser amounts.

Virginia had vanished. Viola went to Roland and took him by the arm, feeling the arm stiffen, for he was not at all used to physical contact, probably guardedly afraid of it, afraid it would tap into the grief that could emasculate him. Grief kept him very busy -- he had learned well the harsh old stricture of Samuel Johnson: *Grief is a species of idleness*. If all the tenderness possessed was buried deep and only revealed in poetry, once, long ago, Roland must have overtly shown tenderness to his mother or his wife; thinking of this with rising determination, Viola said, "I couldn't argue against truth and beauty flowing so inconveniently from this lyrical head in the shank of the night, but you must come again, and often. We'll hope to inspire rather than steal your creative power."

Roland looked down at her, his dark-blue Ender eyes now reflecting a luminous depth further enhanced by the orange light of the fire, which gave them a tinge of violet. He smiled fully, with spontaneous appreciation. This hard-won but generous smile easily surpassed any she had ever received from her preoccupied, morose father, simultaneously evoking sadness and a small bright triumph.

"It's nice to know I've an exemplary relative nearby," he said, the gruffness much less prominent. "I'll probably want to return."

Then, in a silent moment of decision, he was moved to say more.

“For so many years Ragnar has been the focal point of this farm. A lot of time has gone by without you, *Viola Ender*. Will your guests tolerate a few more words from me? Well, I’ll say them anyway,” he went on, looking around the roomful of expectant faces. “For a long time I thought that Ragnar resented me to some degree for squatting here at dear Martha’s indulgence, but it turns out that he was simply leaving me alone to be what he thought I wanted to be. And he was essentially right. Last winter he stopped in -- as he sometimes does -- merely to see if I was still alive, I’m sure. He found me huddled in the dark before a skimpy log in the fireplace, with only a candle to light my table. You see the wiring had fallen to pieces in my old cottage and had ceased to work. He took me over to his place for an excellent roast venison dinner, stowed me away in a warm and cozy spare room...and then he...yes, in the cold wet dark of day and evening, Ragnar completely rewired my place -- all done while I availed myself of his copious and remarkably diverse library. The new wiring was completed within three days, along with the other work he was doing around here. You cannot imagine how very grateful I was, *am*, for this effort...and grateful as well to have discovered a trustworthy, undemanding, and highly intelligent friend.”

Ragnar, leaning on his hand with his elbow propped on the arm of his chair, had listened intently, with his ever-serene smile calmly in place. He laughed mildly and said, “It is my job to keep things up around here and that cottage was neglected, much to my disgrace, from the day I moved out of it. But I thank you, Roland, for your friendly endorsement. Coming to know you has been mostly a pleasure.”

As Roland prepared to leave, his discerning eyes went from Ragnar to *Viola* and back again. “Take care, Ragnar, I am a distant enough relative to fall unconscionably in love with my landlady.”

“Then save your conscience for me and keep your wishful urges distant as well,” Ragnar smoothly, smoothly answered.

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Marcus came to speak to Violeta in the kitchen, after Ragnar had been dissuaded from helping there and was attentively sent off to his cabin to catch some sleep before another early day began.

“Wow, you certainly *handled* that stony poet...our rather unusual relative. You softened him as easily as an emollient cuts through something insoluble in the lab. Presto! He was dissolved into smiles and talk...even to anticipating more of your company.”

“Pardon me while I laugh at the extraordinary irony of this.”

“Oh, I see, you think you’ve softened me too.”

“I’ve only told you the truth, Marcus...and will go on doing it, when allowed. Your discerning reason has softened you, my darling.”

“Less to do with reason than emotion, Ma.”

He stood above her, his faintly Asian jet eyes so penetrating, a black cashmere sweater complementing luscious waves of sable hair, his taut youthful flesh nearly heartbreaking in its ephemeral beauty, his expressive mouth no longer cutting or hard but smooth and gentle.

For a moment, they remained merely sizing each other up, gazing enjoyably with the special propinquity they now manifestly owned.

“Come closer, I want to tell you something.” He reached out to draw her near. Inhaling the slight leafy aroma of bay rum aftershave, she closed her eyes and lay her head against his chest, hearing both a strong heartbeat and forthright words: “I think I’m falling in love.”

Violeta lifted her head and said, “Oh, she’s lovely.”

“No, for God’s sake, I’m talking about my *mother*. I’m falling in love with my mother...in a very nice sort of wholesome, happy, secure, grateful way -- impossible not to admire *you*.”

“Impossible not to love you...as I always have,” she readily responded, her eyes brimming with a joyful kinship heretofore unimaginable.

“God...I was cruel to you.”

“I told you it doesn’t matter. That would be a waste of time, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, I’ve learned a lot. But then...I wonder if you’d...”

“What?” she asked, sensing some disturbance and lifting her head.

“If you’d think about Dad.” Now he was frowning.

“I do think about him. I care very much for him, Marcus.”

“Do you think you’d ever...I mean, if you could...”

“Oh, my dear, please don’t make the mistake of trying to direct our lives to your satisfaction. It’s a mistake the young make. They haven’t lived long enough to realize that life isn’t like a static puzzle with missing pieces...and if you can only find them again and slip them into place the picture will be complete.”

“It’s just that I feel sorry for him.”

“Even so, you must let him live and travel his own path...as I’ve done with you. You and I can love your father each in our own ways, do this just as things are. That caring, that love, is very important for him, for his health and happiness...but it cannot be contingent upon physical arrangements or logistics. You know that.”

“You’re right, of course. You’re happy then...with Ragnar?”

“Can’t you see that I am? Can’t you see what’s happened? It’s quite palpable, isn’t it?”

“Yes. And if he’s so good for you I’ve got to be in favor, right? -- as if I had anything to say about it; that would be some nerve...after years of thick-headedness. Ragnar’s an interesting man...he doesn’t waste words. Obviously he’s indispensable around here. He’s fiercely devoted to you.”

“And I to him. I’m not always so rational...the *Ender wilderness*, he calls it...immensely lucky he’ll put up with me.”

“Looks like he handles you pretty well.”

“Yes, very well...just as I need to be handled.”

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“I was standing in the hall last night, after I fled the scene,

and I heard Roland's testimonial of Ragnar. There at least is someone we know he cares for. So the poet is much more than a persona."

Viola refilled Virginia's breakfast teacup, and felt compelled to offer her concern. "Virginia, I have to say I think you're acting very strange. What can Sylvia be thinking of you right now?"

"Sylvia is currently preoccupied with someone who is, I believe, more concerned with his parents -- at least he's kind to my girl."

"I've never seen you like this. I've always found you to be reasonable...and solidly in control of your life, Virginia."

"What life? When have you thought of *me* at all?"

"I'm not going to stand for that. I've been quite supportive of you over the years. It's just that I've been so preoccupied. You know that very well. You can easily see for yourself what's been going on here. I warned you before you came that I was--"

"All right, *mea culpa, mea culpa*. I might as well admit it, I fell for that Prospero. At first I thought he was Caliban, but no! He's the master of all tricksters. His poetry, you see, was the decisive stroke. There's quite an exquisite little love poem floating in his chapbook -- you must have read it. Very telling. How on earth could he have written it, that irascible hermit?"

"Need I remind you that a wide range of animas are the province of the poet? And just what did you imagine you were going to do once you landed him -- you, a confirmed London dweller -- live in his little forest cottage, frying bacon and washing his underwear?"

With a recently more pronounced flair for histrionics, Virginia threw up her hands and exclaimed, "*Really!* How very distasteful. Lord *no*, something far more high-minded: mutual discovery in the rough heart of splendid nature, a profound joining of minds...perhaps bodies...then, alas, sad departure with a few irrevocable memories."

"You've missed your theater calling, Anna Karenina. You Brits are so great at theater."



“Look at *you*, Viola, you’ve got all the drama.”

“I’d gladly have forfeited a certain amount of it.”

“I know, I *do* know, and I’m sorry, my friend. But right now I see farce as all that’s left to me...and I am branded the foolish *arse* in every ludicrous scene I play.”

“Let’s return for a moment to your astonishing moral decay...didn’t you consider that leaving your snared love interest behind in the woods might be awfully cruel for so fragile a nature as his?”

“No, not at all. I imagined it would simply inspire more poetry. At least I could have been useful for something.”

“How can I help you, Virginia? What can I do? I did invite Roland here...although it was really for--”

“Yes, it was really for him not me. Never mind. I acted like a fool and therefore deserve to be treated like one. Do you see what’s befallen me? I came here as a serious, socially-minded working woman, with the hope of persuading my colleague and friend of many years how needed she was...how important she is to the work we do.”

“Yes,” Viola said with a fond smile, “I missed you too. I’m so glad it’s turned into an interesting vacation for you and Sylvia.”

“Oh, tosh!” Virginia said, putting down her delicate cup with risky force. “I’m going off to see one of your lovers.”

Virginia was dressed in heavy winter clothes, wool slacks and her thick gray sweater. At the finish of breakfast, she and Sylvia were planning to drive over to look at a lovely Chinese vase Hugh had offered to sell Virginia when he found that she had a great fondness for Chinese porcelain. It was a valuable and fragile old white piece painted with delicate red chrysanthemums, which Viola particularly liked. She had never mentioned this to Hugh, supposing it to have sentimental as well as intrinsic value, and fearing he would be torn by immediately feeling compelled to give away his treasure.

Viola heard the faint interruption of her cell phone and stood up, for a moment forgetting where it was, then remembering

that it was still in her coat pocket, her coat lying over the stairs bannister. She hurried into the foyer, punching on her phone as she climbed the stairs to her den. It was Hugh.

“Lea, please tell Virginia I probably won’t be selling the vase. I’m afraid I’ve just had a little contretemps with Marcus,” he related in a hushed voice.

“Oh, Hugh, why should Marcus care what you do with the vase?”

“No, no, get this: he’s discovered my *impecunious condition*, as he calls it -- not quite that bad -- and says I must not part with the vase in so deprivative a manner. I suppose you know that our son is loaded. He apparently lives on a handsome trust fund.”

“Yes, he has a lovely home in Boston and a considerable legacy from my Aunt Hilda.”

“Well now he’s sworn never to let me go hungry. Jesus Christ!”

“In what way does this trouble you, Hugh?”

“I don’t quite know...haven’t figured it out yet. There’s something ignominious about it.”

“I suggest that you simply relax, enjoy his company and get on with your writing when he leaves...so you can show him how exceptional your work really is when he returns this summer to visit us.”

“Well, you’ve got that all tied up nicely. So what about Virginia and the vase? What shall I do?”

“Virginia wants it if you don’t...nothing deprivative in that.”

“Then never mind, I’ll quote her a reasonable price. The vase belonged to my wife’s mother...it ought to go to someone who will enjoy it in a more detached manner than I can.”

“Virginia will take very good care of it. You see how easy it is to be divested of a difficult responsibility...just call me whenever you need a problem solved.”

“You may regret those words...when possibly some far larger problems start pouring into your ears.”

“I’ll always listen...always help if I can.”

“Good little Scheherazade. See you later.”

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Violea sat at her desk in her quiet den. Beneath her reading lamp, her left hand anchored the pages of Roland’s chapbook. She was studying the poem that had apparently encouraged Virginia to fall in love with its author:

Learnt Offering

I might have taught *you* things I know,  
My naïve eager child in love,  
My rascal dove.  
Instead, I took away your self,  
My forfeit pearl, my trusting elf.

I, polyglot, as you are not,  
Could speak to you in foreign tongue,  
Ovid unsung.  
I hardly listened to your cries,  
Or valued love’s world in your eyes.

Fate’s turnabout ruptures redoubt:  
This heart you disavow at last --  
Lesson held fast.  
Come back to me and let me give  
The love you wanted once to live.

Violea sat pondering Roland in his forest retreat. How very fascinating certain humans were. What vivid ingénue had once breathed such grievous longing into his poem? And how long ago? She had received sketchy information from Ragnar, learning that Roland had obtained a Fine Arts degree and that he had for a time taught poetry at a college in the Midwest. For a while she sat entertaining various scenarios involving a lovelorn student, finally deciding she was dramatizing private intimacies at rejected Roland’s expense. It was easy to conclude that his perfect poetic remorse

had made Virginia assume the role of that enamored young subject. Poetry so often precipitated riveting personal associations.

Gazing thoughtfully out her window, Viola saw, where a portion of the paddock was visible from behind the sprawling barn, that Ragnar was briskly leading Mariner and Legs in the direction of the tack room. She squinted with a more careful scrutiny and said aloud, "What on earth?" Within seconds, and while hastily dressing in her warm outdoor clothes, she was softly muttering, "Wait...wait for me."

When she reached the edge of the paddock, out of breath from running, Ragnar was already astride Mariner and had Legs on a lead rope.

"This is interesting," she called, hurrying toward the trotting away horses. "Have you taken up a new form of transportation?"

Ragnar looked back at her over his leather-covered shoulder, stormy eyes glinting from beneath the brim of the dark brown fedora he sometimes wore.

"Another one of those days. I had to walk back here from the west field. My truck is mired down in a foot of mud. I have reckoned this two-horse power enough to free it."

"At least you're smiling."

"That is you. But why not? I have had years of this. It is nothing new."

"Wait, I'll come. I want to help."

Ragnar laughed dismissively. "Wild Vi, all the help I need is here...two-horse power. Please let me get on with it."

"No, I'm coming. When the truck's free, who'll bring the horses back? Did you think of that?"

"Ja, I did. I will tie them to the truck hitch."

"Better if I bring them back. I can saddle Legs."

"All right, then come," Ragnar conceded, with an impatient clearing of his throat as he dismounted. "I will saddle Legs."

When they had reached the main road, Ragnar broke his preoccupied silence. "I do not like taking horses on the highway, but it is easier and much faster than going around the edge of the

brake. Be careful now and stay off the pavement; ride only on the shoulder.”

“I think I can manage.” Her tone was not very agreeable.

Ragnar laughed. “You do not bear admonishment very well...but why should I be surprised? In childhood you were far worse.”

Viola wished they were going around the edge of the brake, which she suddenly remembered was what they had always called her cherished deep forest near the house -- on any day in any light, the brake had a mysteriously inviting beauty when one looked into its light-spangled darkness from the open field’s edge. They rode single file over the loose and crunching snow-patched gravel, with Ragnar in the lead.

Viola called, “Your stirrup straps could be a bit longer, but you ride so comfortably.” There followed silence. “Ragnar...how did you get out of situations like this before the horses were here?”

“Generally, by not getting into them in the first place...for years we had horses around this farm, neighbors’ horses, boarding horses. I grew up with horses on our *Norske gard*.”

“Oh, your farm had horses...what kind?”

“Fjord horses that go back a thousand years. They are short, stocky, sturdy horses...their dun-shaded colors beautiful I think. When you left the farm we still had your horse.”

“My sweet Appaloosa, Berry. Oh how I miss my lively sure-footed Berry-berry. What happened to her?”

“*Nei*, never mind, Wild Vi. Just remember the good of it.”

She fell silent as they cantered purposefully along, eventually slowing Legs enough to get a question evenly delivered. “Why didn’t you call on your cell phone and ask me to bring my truck?”

“Your poor canary would end in the same condition as *my* truck.”

“Then why didn’t you take the large John Deere?”

“Fuel is too expensive to waste like that. And think about it. How would I get the tractor back?”

“I could have driven it.”

“I am not in the habit of calling you out for field work.”

“You need more help around here.”

“When I need more help I hire someone easily enough. Doing it that way is better...than having more people living on Ender Farm.”

“Yes, Ender Farm Sanctuary!” she avowed with laughter.

When they reached the truck, sunken in a mid-field concavity at the narrowest part of the west field’s expanding acreage, Ragnar said, “My four-wheel-drive was little help this time.”

Once again, Mariner and Legs would obediently earn their keep. The horses’ tack was smoothly double-roped, then the two powerful animals were coaxed along by Ragnar and Violea as they eased his big truck out of the dense and surprisingly obstinate lavender-chocolate mud.

Once out of it, they sat in the cab with the motor running, warming their bodies with blower heat, their boots caked with drying mud.

“Lips nearly blue...how will you kiss me with this numb *lille* mouth?” He reached into the glove box and took out his silver flask.

“Isn’t it a bad idea to drive around with that in the glove box?”

“I never do. On the road it is locked in my lock-box. Only on the farm on a cold winter day...such as this one. I took it out for you. Here, swallow a small amount. You have to ride back in the cold. I will worry about you. Please stay off the pavement and pay attention. Five years ago a farmer’s son riding on that iced highway was killed by a skidding semi. I shot the dying horse.”

She shook her head in dismay and took a single long swallow from his flask; the burning aromatic alcohol made her quiver and float.

“Aren’t you coming back now?”

“Not yet. I have to flag another hidden wallow for the hired subsoilers. When they finish we will seed again.”

“All these years you’ve been doing things like this...while I’ve been in hot dusty places of drought...grieving over bloated bellies.”

“All these years...waiting for you to come back.”

“No you weren’t.” Her mouth finished with a doubtful twist.

“I was expecting it -- it had to happen sometime. I never expected anything like this. Let me kiss you now, then get yourself back to the warm. Thank you for helping.”

His dispatching mouth was cool then warming, given in a freely engrossed manner irresistibly arousing, and not easy to abandon.

“Will you come to me tonight, my thirsty *brennevin* girl?”

“How could I not?”

“Come for supper and you will have dessert.” He winked at her and kissed her one last time, then reached across her and opened her door. She sat a moment with her head back, still feeling the warm impression of his mouth, the pearled gray-blue promise of his smiling eyes. By that time he was outside her cracked-opened door. “*Koma da*, come on, I will untie the horses and hand you the lead.”

Moving carefully along the highway, Viola’s mind lingered on Ragnar. Then she suddenly thought of Virginia and Sylvia, who would soon be leaving. She could not really fly off to be with Ragnar while they were at the house. She felt remiss, quite torn by anticipation. *Everything is always happening at once; in how many ways can I divide myself?* How different it might have been if Virginia and Sylvia had come next summer. So much could have been resolved by then, and poor Virginia might well have been much more even-tempered, friendlier and less willfully single-minded. Of course life was never so accommodating.

As Viola was bringing the horses up to the farm’s long driveway, an airy whimsy of minuscule snowflakes began swirling down. Dropping her head back, she smiled at the tiny prickles of ice. Just then wily Legs yanked the reins from her hand and trotted across the highway.

“Oh, damn you, Legs!” she yelled. Then she heard the long, loud horn of a trucker and cried, “Oh, God, no!”

She was now on the other side of the highway and moving stealthily toward Legs, who was jerking his head up and down and managing to shy away each time she reached for his reins. Lifting her left foot from the stirrup and edging far down out of her saddle, with all of her weight on the other stirrup, she got hold of one rein. The trucker passed swiftly by, still leaning on his horn and causing both horses to rear up in fright. Unseated, Viola was thrown easily into the ditch, landing on her right shoulder and rolling over hard against the far rocky bank. She got up rapidly, stubbornly cursing at the sharp pain and rubbing her shoulder. The two horses were now standing head to head a few feet away, in a calm sort of stupor. She edged toward them, not knowing how they would react and calling softly. Their large moist eyes stared at her with dumb uncertainty. Finally able to gather up all the loose reins, she cautiously pulled herself back up on Mariner, still keeping Legs in tow. The rest of the ride home was painful, putting away the tack even more painful, and removing her boots once inside her door was agony.

Viola heard Virginia and Sylvia talking in the living room, but silently climbed to her bedroom. She had gone through the kitchen and was holding a package of frozen blueberries on her shoulder as she mounted the steps. *Didn't I bring this on myself?* she silently posed, using rhetorical distraction against abused flesh. *Still hurts, fool.*

When Viola had swallowed an Advil and bathed in a tepid bath, she went downstairs to explain everything to Virginia and Sylvia. She walked in while Virginia was joyfully raving over her fortuitously acquired Chinese vase: *so reasonably priced*. They were shocked and wanted to examine her shoulder, feed her and put her to bed. They had already eaten and were content to read by the fire they had made, but only after Viola ate and retired with one of Virginia's Nembutals.

She refused. “Thank you both...but if you're happy with



your evening...I need to talk to Ragnar.” This explanation was followed by much frowning and scolding from her concerned guests, but their persuasions fell upon deaf ears. Accompanied by intermittent waves of guilt, Viola drove her truck over to Ragnar’s cabin.

He greeted her with a much needed but painful hug, then knelt to remove her loafers and slip on the moccasins kept nearby. Through all of this she gritted her teeth and smiled with watery eyes.

“You look as if something has disturbed you, Wild Vi,” Ragnar said, appearing to think it was her mind not her body in pain. “Is there something wrong?”

She could have answered with a steady rush of revealing words, but only smiled weakly and said, “I feel terribly guilty letting you fix my supper after you’ve worked so hard today.”

“I keep explaining that I have to eat, and it is as easy for two as one...actually easier -- it is more difficult to cook less than it is to cook more. Anyway, it is just a lasagna casserole I had in the freezer and a fresh green salad. What is the difficulty in that?”

They had finished eating and were sitting before a crackling pine log fire, slowly drinking a little hot mulled wine. Viola had been talking discursively, mostly about Marcus and Hugh, and sometimes about Virginia and Sylvia and Roland, while at the same time surreptitiously rubbing the back of her shoulder, where the pain was increasing.

Ragnar surprisingly interrupted her, drawing her near and looking into her eyes. His dilated black pupils had overtaken the cerulean gray, a steady look, almost demonically penetrating. She blinked.

“You are in pain.”

He turned her gently around and pulled up her sweater, swearing softly, “*Herregud!* What have you done to yourself? How did this happen?”

“What?”

“The entire back of your right shoulder is blue with bruising.

My poor girl, you are hurting so. You should be lying down.”

“I don’t want to lie down. That would hurt more. I took an Advil. I’ll take another.”

“I will get some topical pain-killer from my cabinet.” He stood up. “Are you going to tell me what happened?”

“I was so looking forward to being here tonight. Just as I got to our road...tiny snowflakes were coming down...fresh and wonderful on my face. Then I was thinking of you out there, cold and muddy.”

Ragnar led her into his bathroom and pulled off her sweater.

“I will be careful.”

She withstood his palpating fingers, realizing that he was trying to see if anything was broken.

“Nothing’s broken,” she insisted, wincing a little.

“*Ja*, I hope not. I meant to call from the field...left my phone behind. So...you fell off Mariner? He did not throw you off?”

“No...not intentionally.”

She began to explain the entire happening, rather as a writer with uninvolved overview might do, including a few explicit details. As she talked she saw that Ragnar’s sober face had become acutely solemn, and, when she reached the part about the truck driver, his serene Nordic face glowered with consternation.

“*Helvete!* I should not have let you come with me. *Faen!* You might have been--”

“No, no! You can’t be this way with me. I have to be able to do things. It was just a freakish thing, just--”

“Just *you*, dreaming into the sky and dropping the reins...with a damned semi barrelling down on you!”

“No! I told you Legs yanked the reins away, I didn’t drop them.”

“All right, all right. You do not ever have to prove yourself to me. I know how good you are...how capable...how much you know. But I should not have let you come today and that is that.”

“You want to turn this around and make it somehow your

fault. It was *not* your fault. And what about today? What about that? It meant something to me...out there...it seemed important for us to be there together. It was something that...oh, it hurts, it hurts!”

“I am so sorry, my girl, for your pain.”

“No! No! It’s my heart hurting...because it didn’t...today didn’t mean anything to you.”

Ragnar led her back to the davenport and eased her down.

“You are wrong, Wild Vi. I thought of you all the rest of the day...how good it was to have you with me. That thought kept me warm. I worried about you, of course...and that rightfully so. Please never discount my feeling for you. It is always here. I have only reacted with horror at what might have been. I am wondering how I can make you feel better. What can I do? Shall I drive you to the clinic?”

“No. I’ll take another pill and put on my robe. If you’re willing to have your arms around me until I’m asleep then carry me off to bed...that’s the way I’ll feel better...the only medicine I need.”

“Either you are too easy to please or you are trying to please me. Which is it?”

“I’m not always so easy to please...but you’re the one who can. And I love to please *you*...if I ever do.”

“You know you do...poor wounded fox.”

Violea took a pill from her pocket and went to get a glass of water, while Ragnar went into the bedroom to get her robe. He helped her remove her sweater and jeans and put on her robe. Stretching out on the long davenport, and wearing only his jeans and t-shirt in the warm room, he dropped his clogs on the floor and fitted her carefully into his arms.

“Now I will be quiet...let you dream while I think...what I am thinking now, my *lille* fool, is how amazing it is that you came to me tonight...instead of staying in bed where you belong.”

“Thinking is one of my favorite pastimes,” Violea mused dreamily.

“*Ja*, in that we think alike.”

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“Oh, Ragnar, this battered body hurts...in more places than my shoulder. Will you help me up?”

“*Nei*, I will not.” He raised her slightly, supporting her neck and said, “Here, swallow this pill with this water. I will rub more salve into your shoulder and you must lie still and rest this morning. Later I will bring you some breakfast.”

“I can’t. I’ve got Virginia and Sylvia there...and they have to leave soon. Damn! this is awful.”

“They will understand. I will go get them and they can have breakfast with me while you rest.”

“I never thought of that. What a great idea...thank you for suggesting it.”

“With you I am becoming more inventive...maybe you would say creative. Would you rather eat now or sleep?”

“Why don’t you go get them...then I might crawl to the table and eat with you.”

“You will not crawl anywhere. In a while I may carry you to the table...if you have slept enough.”

“I’ll be awake.”

“Maybe not. That was a Benadryl I gave you...harmless enough.”

“You’ve probably never even had a cold, what are you doing with cold pills that make you sleep?”

“I keep them especially for *vill* women who fall off their horses into ditches.”

“I remember that, I *remember* it. *Vill child*, you used to say. It means wild, unruly. Oh, don’t make me laugh. It hurts.”

“Then be quiet and sleep.”

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Violea grew drowsy and fell into an unusually deep sleep. She awoke then slept again, with awakenings becoming more

frequent, until she heard Virginia laughing in Ragnar's kitchen. She got up and went into the bathroom, once there deciding to bathe her face. When she crawled back into bed her shoulder was hurting, but more bearably. Should she take another pain pill? Her voice was too soft when she called for Ragnar, as if she were invoking an eponymous word for a personal incantation that could of itself bring relief. He came almost at once. She was surprised that he had heard her.

He sat on the edge of the bed and stroked her hair. She stretched out her arms to him and said, "Think I'm hungry."

He grabbed up her robe from the foot of the bed. "I am hungry too, so we will put on your robe."

"You haven't eaten yet?" she asked as he helped with her robe and moccasins.

"*Ja*, I have eaten. You know what I meant. I have fed Virginia and Sylvia Eggs Almestad."

"And left me to starve."

"Around here the last thing you will ever do is starve." He lifted her up and carried her into the breakfast nook, where Virginia and Sylvia were drinking coffee.

"I thought you couldn't stand coffee," Viola called out.

"Heavenly coffee...wonderful breakfast," Virginia answered.

Ragnar settled Viola into one of his Windsor chairs.

The two guests smiled, watching with interest and, on Virginia's face, Viola saw mild censure. *As if I'd done this to get attention.*

"Can't you walk, poor thing?" Virginia asked with slightly mocking but nevertheless real enough concern.

"Oh, mother, don't tease," Sylvia scolded. She clearly approved of Ragnar's self-possessed manner in handling Viola as he chose. "Mother and I've been enjoying this great cabin, which we'd both move into in a minute, if only we could. Ragnar, I've remembered that many Norwegians were carvers; did you carve the pine bough on your front door? Or perhaps the beautiful mantel over your fireplace?"

“*Ja*, both. An uncle introduced me to carving when I was...I think ten years old. Norsk carving goes back a long way, to the earliest Vikings, around eight hundred or so. It flowered in Norway in the eighteen hundreds, with church carvings. My door is cedar...my mantel stained basswood...which is the linden of the New World. It is very light wood with almost no grain. As you have seen, the carving is of grape vines twined with motifs from Norsk myth.”

Viola glanced at Ragnar, then away in confused surprise. She had not thought to inquire, never praised the beautiful work, even though she had, from her first encounter, loved the exquisite twining vines and strange patterns that flowed across the ruddy-gold fireplace mantel. She felt insubstantial, remiss and quite foolishly myopic, lowering her head to conceal her dereliction.

“I thought you said Ragnar gave away his books,” Sylvia said. “There must be several thousand in there...lovely expensive hardbacks. If only I could sit for days and days in that inviting window seat, staring at the chipmunks in the pines from time to time and reading, reading...absolutely nothing but that.”

“*Ja*, I wish I had more time to spend that way.”

Ragnar flashed his manifold wink at Viola, while setting her breakfast before her: tender caper-sauced poached eggs on lox over toasted bagel halves, most fragrantly, and so enticingly, garnished with sprigs of pale-green dill. Then, with the sublimely effective dispensation only he could offer, he set before her a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice and a carafe of hot English Breakfast tea. He tilted the heavy carafe and filled her cup. She looked up at him with gratefully brightened eyes, and knew that he wanted to kiss her, and wanted him to. Denying her barely suppressed wish before her watchful guests, he postponed her emolument with a secretive smile, a promise.

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“I had a short but interesting discourse with Hugh,” Virginia said. “That difficult man appears to care for you, Viola...in a number of ways unconsciously divulged...as you must know.”

They were walking into the living room, after Ragnar had brought them back to the house. Sylvia drove Viola's truck home, then leaned out of the cab window and asked if she might drive over to talk with Marcus. Viola was delighted to offer her truck for this purpose, considering it regrettable that the two new friends must soon part.

There was a slow deliberateness in Viola's effort at tapping ashes from the fireplace's metal grate, after which the tinder was methodically laid down. As the ignited flames climbed she joined Virginia, settled on the davenport after her help was rejected.

"You should have let me do that...with your sore body it can't have felt very good."

"I'm all through being an invalid...a person could turn into a very spoiled pain in the neck that way -- then, I'm sure you'd agree, there'd be plenty of pain to go around. This too will pass."

"You're not going to respond to my Hugh remark?"

"Hugh loves me in his way and I love him in mine."

"That was too pat. I do so thoroughly enjoy these rarely mundane conversations. More than ever I see why you can't be coaxed to leave this place...the worldly and fascinating Norwegian -- *fascinating Norwegian* I would perhaps have previously thought an oxymoron, but *no*: Odin, as Hugh likes to call him, the all-wise Scandinavian god whose spear never fails to hit the mark. Love for you oozes from his pores."

"That would be *me*...love for him oozing from *my* pores."

Virginia looked long and hard at Viola and said, "Can it be that you don't fully grasp Ragnar's remarkable devotion? Perhaps it takes an outsider looking on to see what's what."

"I'd have to be a thorough narcissist to be that secure. All I can do is go on loving, which was never a choice anyway...more like a blow to the head. But your volte-face *is* reassuring."

"Good lord, I do wonder how it feels...to be you amidst all of this, the object of--"

"Here and now it's both difficult and wonderful. I come with huge failings...a list of wounds...a persistently dark...sometimes

debilitating reasoning and awareness too much with me...what else? Influencing phases of the fickle moon, for all I know.”

“There must be some of the moon in it. I thought at first that Ragnar mostly wanted you in order to keep the farm -- forgive my simple, unflattering assumption. There’s nothing *simple* about it; it’s all very complex. You’re rather like a tempting idol-sacrifice caught up in the center of a giant spider web. Do you dazzle the spider into everlasting thrall, or does it have you for lunch?”

“I can refashion your cunning metaphor: the giant spider, being life -- not the *farm*, as you want to imply -- will in time have me for lunch. Your old theme is getting more creative, Virginia. Why do you make up these colorful stories?”

“Why write?”

“That question turns into *why do anything?*, but it still hurts.”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s what I always say...but Ragnar won’t have it because I say it too often; he, only, is allowed to apologize for *my* failings.”

“Ragnar, Ragnar -- yes, what a complete surprise. You and the farm are firmly inseparable to him. That’s the main reason why, even if I were so wicked, I could never steal him from you. Regrettably, the recurring desire to do so merely proves how very compelling he is when one is face to face with that sly magician.”

“He wouldn’t like to be called that. You heard his fado story. He’s far too realistic and sensibly practical for that sort of nonsense.”

Virginia brought her long legs up onto the davenport, bent her knees and drew her stocking feet against her left thigh.

“When I first arrived I thought, *lord, it should be easy to bring our grieving Viola back to her senses and snatch her from this dull hayseed haven.* Now I myself don’t want to leave. Your lingering early family’s ubiquitous holdover is so very interesting...and it’s you, Ragnar, Hugh, and Roland, apposed to bucolic nature, who make it so. I wish I could stay forever and simply observe the extraordinary aspects of life as it evolves here.”

“Come back this summer or fall, my friend, and observe



what has been predictable and what has not...the sameness and the irrepressible transformations that always dominate human endeavor...or happiness.”

“You’re far too wise, by a long, long way, to ever expect to die of happiness, my stubborn American phenomenon.”

“Wrong again, you incorrigible old Brit; I die of happiness more frequently than you might guess.”

“That won’t last forever either.”

“Not forever but, like me, just long enough.”

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“Marcus has invited me to come east and live with him in Boston.” Marcus, surely within earshot, was making tea in Hugh’s kitchen. Hugh looked in that direction, speaking from his easy chair. He had made no attempt to lower his voice.

Viola suddenly realized how much she disfavored this most surprising development, how much she wanted Hugh to remain in this stone house.

Crestfallen, she said, “Oh, will you go?”

“You look sad. Are you? I hope so.”

“Hope that you’ll be able to go?”

“No! Hope you’d be sad if I left.”

“I would be. I’ve liked thinking of you settled here in great-great-grandfather’s house. This place needs you...and I...like you here.”

She looked around her at the smoke-scented, fire-luminous, cave-like room, which today had been set in good order before she arrived, or more likely kept that way by Marcus, who did not at all approve of clutter. The tall front windows were filled with the exquisite melancholy of cold blue-gray-white winter, this violent periodic ruler not inclined to abdicate until it had subdued every trembling twig in its kingdom.

“How petulant you are today, Scheherazade, *liberator of your sex*. You liberated yourself from me, didn’t you? But I’m not going. The look on your face may be worth my decision...not

much of a decision. What the hell would I do in Boston?...get embroiled in something dilatory. When I decide to go somewhere I'll expect to return here."

Sitting on the davenport, but now far from relaxed, Viola gripped her forearms firmly. "If you go there, you may decide you prefer it."

Hugh stood up and came to stand over her; had he limped less? His right hand clasped his left shoulder, his pale ravaged face and burning jet eyes comprising a mocking grimace of scrutiny. "Jesus, I think you're worried. That's fucking choice. I'm not going anywhere for a while at least...even temporarily. I have things to do best done in Mann's consumptive environment...*Der Zauberberg*."

"That *Mountain* is not of this world. It's really a life-choice parable existing above the earth. Oh, Hugh, please don't refer to yourself or our beautiful farm using that clinical Medusa of human exposition. You're not Mann-manipulated Hans Castorp and this isn't *The Magic Mountain*."

"But it's not *the flatlands* either. You'll have to admit there are similarities."

"I've never considered them until you said that."

"Then you've left literature far behind."

"No, I very much need it but I keep it in its place. It doesn't rule my life...as you may have noticed from my pitiful history. In the end, I chose actions in the real world."

"Not quite the end...look where *that* got you...got *both* of us."

"I may have helped a few others...and if my writing could help--"

"What writing?"

"Over the years I've done an amount...again answering that need."

"About time...so I'll have something to criticize."

"I'd welcome anything you say, Hugh."

"Would you, *would you*? First, you can criticize *my* work."

"I wouldn't know how."

“Oh yes you would...and I expect you to.”

Viola gave pause, drifting back, with some resistance, into her literary world...noble ideals emasculated by subsuming reality.

“Now I’m back to the precision of Thomas Mann; he was enamored of the apotheosized Goethe. When I learned that Goethe, in service to his young prince, easily voted for capital punishment -- and especially in the beheading of a young mother who in a panic killed her newborn -- I was not so in awe of his thinking process.” She grimaced.

“So you expected the great Faust to leap out of his time capsule and express leniency in the sad matter of postpartum depression?”

“The highest definition of greatness must be thinking accurately beyond one’s time...but there has been no astute male intellect that could ever do it reasonably in regard to women...not Mann either.”

“Since when does great intellect presuppose equitable morality?”

“It presupposes reasoning power...a do-unto-others rationality leading to virtuous acts...in art as well as science.”

“Then C.P. Snow’s idea of the *two cultures*, literature and science, as hostile to one another doesn’t hold with you, doctor?”

“No, Hugh. Spare me scientific negation. Good literature must evolve too, finally dissolve the bonds of certain stultifying myths, ultimately advancing its merit and art in the service of viable reasoning...reason that embraces a deep respect for life.”

“Is this an exclusive argument?” Marcus asked, setting down a tray of tea things, including hard biscotti he preferred to rich cake.

“Ah, the tedium of listening to people who play with words.”

“I’ve written for science journals, but I wouldn’t call that *playing with words*,” Marcus answered his father. He knelt on the rug and bit into a dry almond biscotti, tidily brushing crumbs onto his small serving plate. “My kind of writing is quite another matter, I hope of some utility. I’d like to read what you’ve written, Dad.”

“I too,” Viola said. “I hope we’re not going to decide here

and now whether literature has any bearing on life in general.”

Before replying, Hugh took a sip of hot tea, his hand held over the steaming mug to warm cold fingers.

“Reading compresses time in an intensely cumulative manner, which may liberate the mind. Serious writing is a very different process, holding the writer and the written in a timeless zone of circular relativity -- the force begins in the writer who is then *force-fed* by the written, and so on.” He waved his hand in a circle.

Viola laughed and said, “Well yes, and in the writer’s head the written never ends when it ends. But who can recite a formula for the imagination’s teleportation to nonexistent events? -- simultaneously written as newly existing *real* events. Ah, *writing*, an extraordinary conundrum of self-expression and self-denial; an endless desire to communicate dense interplays of imagination, reason, and singular empiricism; the irrefutable underlay of any work being: *There I was! Can you understand? I did exist. Was it of any help? All of that came from me!*” Viola had delivered her sobering past tense cry of the temporal with an urgency that induced Hugh to finish for her.

“Art is long, life is short.”

“*Ars longa, vita brevis*,” Viola repeated. Latin phrases, she thought, were not sententious, but beautifully, acutely accurate.

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Riding home on Mariner -- having earlier decided not to shy away from dangerous possibilities because of her sore shoulder -- Viola was tranquilly considering her gentle, leisurely ride as a fine immersion in the wintry environment, both stimulating and healing. She was happy.

Marcus had volunteered, out of the blue, to communicate regularly by e-mail and phone, and, without any prompting, had reaffirmed his intention to return next summer. Her undaunted and proudly admiring love for him was now eagerly welcomed instead of censured. As for Hugh, she was very relieved that he

was staying put to write.

Surprisingly, Ragnar, always her utmost terra firma, was coincidentally her terra incognita, because he was so utterly self-sufficient, so thoroughly independent. Contrary to what Virginia believed, Viola felt that Ragnar could sustain himself reasonably undamaged in the most drastic of situations, including her removal. Her intermittent paranoia regarding his eventual devaluation of her was inescapable, a self-deprecation appearing at weak moments. It grew out of her continual exposure to his remarkable strength and impeccable judgment, and out of the extraordinary love that possessed her, admittedly coalescing with the effects of terrible loss and the hunger of a once-deprived child -- as Ragnar himself had diagnosed. It was as if he, her living history, were the only one who could understand and love her through this affliction. Yet how could he be expected to long admire one so afflicted? Her rational appreciation of him was boundless, possible separation from him like a death sentence. His influence fostered in her a desire to leave love as ungoverned as he himself was sovereign, even while fear of its loss continued to invade her contentment in subtle ways. Dread of accidentally revealing her apprehension was almost as disturbing as the fear itself. She would not cling. When her fear was too threatening she would deny herself his presence, the hard tempering of hot metal plunged into ice. It never mattered, for in his thoroughly straightforward manner of answering desire, he would then come looking for her.

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Mariner came to a self-motivated halt outside the tack room. He at once turned his ears and answered Leg's distant whinny of greeting. Viola dismounted and, still with some pain, was about to wrestle the saddle from his back when Ragnar's large rough hands grasped horn and cantle, swinging the saddle off. Scolding eyes, dilated to blackness engulfing the gray of dusk, glinted from beneath his dark fedora.

“Do you want to heal or go on hurting?”

Surrendering with her hands palms up, she followed him inside and went to lean against the wall and observe. He placed the big saddle on its trestle, adroitly shook and folded the saddle blanket, hung the bridle, then dipped out Mariner's mash and led him to his slightly heated stall; all done with an unbroken, effortless facility now quite familiar to her, but no less mesmerizing.

Perhaps augmented by her recent contemplations, a wild emotion was sweeping through her body, with such force that her horse-weary knees would not have held her up unassisted. When Ragnar finished she was still leaning against the wall, but now in a thoroughly altered state. He came toward her and she folded her arms in a hasty attempt to protect herself from giving too sudden acquiescence.

"You are quiet this evening, my Wild Vi. Are you all right?"

"Yes, fine...just glad to see you and--"

Ragnar had bent to kiss her. She laid her hands flat against his leather jacket and parted her lips, inviting a long sensual kiss.

"Violet...these beautiful eyes...better get into the warm."

She pulled his head gently down and kissed him again. A kiss of effusive hunger, exploring his mouth until he lifted his head and said, "You are giving yourself like a guilty woman, my girl."

For a moment she thought about that, stung by the supposed misreading of her unequivocal kiss, then understood and forgave. What was it like for him when she was with Hugh and Marcus? Not so easily a period of indifferent autonomy. Perhaps far more difficult than she had ever supposed. Could he be right? To cause hurt in him was unbearable.

"*Koma.* I have my truck at the other doors."

"No." Her fingers clasped his belt buckle.

"Wild Vi, it is too cold for this...stop...before I cannot."

"No," she insisted.

"You are still hurting...your shoulder."

"Hardly at all...only if you leave me alone."

Fully licensed to have her now, he held her against him with her legs wrapped around him and his hands trying to protect her

from the frigid concrete wall. She closed her eyes, dropped her head back and gave a softly exhaling moan, the shuddering release of erotic pain.

“Good? Is it?...I...cannot...cause more hurt.”

Her transported mind slowly returned from the experience of him to the delayed reception of his words, her involuntary cry of elation the only answer given. Her body collapsed against him, the low sound of his pleasure lolling in her ears. He carried her to a dim, wood-stanchioned stall filled with fresh straw, and there laid her upon an airy field-scented bed of rustling dry stalks. Pale yellow light from the tack room illuminated high white sections of relief-limed walls, bending and stretching shadows in odd ghostly configurations. A heavy damp chill hung palpably in the acrid livery air. She was not shivering at all. They could hear the stalled horses chewing contentedly on sweet alfalfa hay. He continued to kiss her, carefully holding the shoulder she did not remember, and stroking her body with a supple, experienced hand. Eventually, he balanced his long frame above her and settled gently over her, repeating the earlier primed coition that had started them down this ineluctable path. She lay thus covered in the cold air, her warm body filled with inconceivable ardor, its continuance now adeptly encouraged by this steadfastly indemnifying man. For a rosily blurred spangle of time she was in doubt of nothing.

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Famished when they reached his cabin, Ragnar immediately began to broil venison steaks, which had been left on the counter to thaw.

Virginia and Sylvia had driven to Hayfield to shop and see Al Gore’s film on global warming, *An Inconvenient Truth*. Viola had already seen it and recommended it highly. She would have seen it again, but had been invited by Hugh to come and spend dwindling time with Marcus. Those hours together had taken precedence over all else.

“Virginia said they’d eat in town. Everyone’s leaving...that is

Marcus and Virginia and Sylvia are. I'll really miss them...even miss Virginia's rants...of course, Marcus." Her voice was slow and thoughtful, for she was still dreamily pacified. She handed Ragnar a jar of steak seasoning, discovered in idly browsing his spice shelf.

"What shall I do with this?"

"Don't you want to put it on the steaks?"

"*Nei*, not these, just oil, salt and pepper, garlic and some rosemary."

Ragnar opened the microwave and stuck a fork into the roasting potatoes. He was hungry and very single-minded in his preparations.

When they had finished eating and were resting before the warm fireplace, Ragnar again focused more keenly on her world. But Viola preferred to focus attention on him, laughing at how expeditiously he had made his large steak disappear.

"You were a hungry man." She snuggled against his shoulder.

"And you were a hungry woman."

She turned her face up to stare sideways into his fire-lit eyes, and knew that he was speaking of the tack room.

"*You* do that...as you accuse me of doing things to you. I did think you...enjoyed me."

"What understatement. You barely know what I feel. It appears that I am besotted with you, and...when you act as you did this evening it becomes more obvious."

"When I haven't seen you for a number of hours that's always a consideration. Usually I'm in better control of myself."

"Why? Why deny me yourself? Generally, when Ender Farm gives me up, you may have me by the least hint...if the air temperature and this tender bruised flesh are not prohibitive. I use my time according to what is left to me, Wild Vi. I am not of a mind to put off anything. That is especially so if I can give you satisfaction...can have in return the pleasure of you."

"Satisfaction? What modesty, my darling. With you it's always...*euphoria!* Joy! Delight! The delicious luxury of...having



*you...after years and years of...*” She fell into a self-limiting silence.

“What?”

“Rarely even satisfaction. I don’t remember very much euphoria.”

Ragnar drew her close against him, folding his arms over her breast and nuzzling into the hair at her nape.

“My pretty sex, you have that now whenever you want...all of it. Always lose control when you are that hungry woman.”

“Why did you say I gave myself like a guilty woman? I don’t think it was true...I was only--”

“It was true. Unconsciously done, but true. I share you with others...in a manner of speaking. I know what your emotions are.”

“If that were the case why are you willing to put up with it?”

“What choice have I? I want you. But I should not have accused you of anything; one of the flaws I spoke of: my *faen* tongue.”

“Honest tongue, your *honest* tongue.” She dropped her head back and kissed him, touching her tongue to his. “Your *brennevin* tongue.”

“*Ja*, my *vill lille* sass. I am tired and must rise early. You too need rest. Let us go to bed.”

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“In the next few days you will be busy, tying up loose ends and saying goodbye. I will not enter your world for that while, but when you are alone again we have some things to talk about.”

“What?” Viola asked, laying down her fork with a cut of pancake still on it. “I got up at this outrageous hour to have the pleasure of you...before I crawl home to feed my sadly migrating birds...but now--”

“I will drive you; it is cold and dark out.”

“But now I’m worried. What is all this about *talk*?”

“*Nei*, I did not say it to make you worry...only so that you would come to me with the idea that we will talk when you are

rested.”

“About what...talk about what?” Her heart was speeding up as her appetite diminished, the airy pecan pancakes so delicious, simple, filling, but no longer so tempting.

“*Faen!* Have I misspoken again? You cannot be so anxious with me, Wild Vi. I do not want to start anything right now. Remember how I feel. Above, beneath...*around* everything, for me you remain the same. I have more reason to worry...but I never question your love.”

“How could you? How could you question it?” she cried, standing up. “It’s always there...so blatantly there...everywhere!”

“I am a lucky man. Sit down and finish your breakfast.” His subduing voice was even and calm, moreover, he was smiling.

*He’s seen this before, this pitiful comedy of overreaction. Come on, you hopeless case, smile back and eat his lovely pancakes.*

She sat down. Ragnar slid another pancake onto her plate and passed her the maple syrup. She immediately offered him an exculpatory wink, having so often herself experienced the swiftly restorative effects of his multifarious winks.

He cocked his head. “*Ja*, I have taught you how well that works.”

His quick smile then curved broadly into the desired effect, a choice pleasure, and for her: far sweeter than the maple syrup poured over his seemingly effortless sleight-of-hand hotcakes.

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Viola had risen early, having the previous night suggested that Virginia and Sylvia sleep late and expect her for lunch. She drove over to cook breakfast for Hugh and Marcus, not because she was very good at it, but because she especially wanted to talk to Marcus about something that had been troubling her. They were finishing her simple fare, seated at a sleek new Danish gate-legged rosewood table -- it and two Windsor chairs useful gifts from Marcus -- tucked conveniently below the woodsy back window, at the previously empty end of Hugh’s long narrow kitchen.

“The emancipation of women has finally condescended to indulge our breakfast table. We appreciate your effort, Lea. Are these eggs any better than yours, Marcus?” Hugh sat staring down at the last of his scrambled eggs topped with grated cheese.

“Your father is the most tactful man.” Violeta laughed and went on looking at and enjoying Marcus while speaking to Hugh. “Do you expect him to answer truthfully?”

“I can answer truthfully. They’re no better and no worse, but what I especially like about them is that I didn’t have to fix them. Anyway, I like your blueberry muffins...and no one can do much damage to scrambled eggs.”

“Don’t be too sure of that, Marcus. I once scrambled eggs for kedgeree that even Bugsy wouldn’t touch...rubbery eggs.”

“Jesus, Lea, why the hell were you making kedgeree?”

“I was used to eating it in London and foolishly believed I could get Ragnar to have it for supper.”

“God, wish I could have seen that...Ragnar’s *last supper*.”

In this instance Violeta enjoyed laughing at her own expense. “If Ragnar were here, he’d probably say that, had he eaten it, it *would* have been his last supper. He got me to throw it out, then fed me one of his great pizzas...barbecued chicken...delicious.”

“I’ve had his pizza...good like everything else. So even Ragnar wouldn’t do that for you.”

“Why should he? It was horrid. I was in bad form that day.”

Hugh swallowed the last of his tea and said, “Well, I’m off to Hayfield...plan to lay in a large store of supplies before Marcus takes his car away.”

“You know you can always use my truck if you need food transport, Hugh. Just let me know.”

Hugh sent her an intimating look, and she realized that he was going away to leave her alone with Marcus. Her immediate response was an elated beam of gratitude. She saw how this pleased him, how he lingered a moment longer merely to look at her and Marcus. She felt a pang of sadness at this but went on

smiling.

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“I really hate to leave Dad...even though I know he wants to get back to his work. He seems to like me.”

Viola was filling Marcus’ tea mug, and stopped with a look of amazement. “Marcus dear, he *loves* you. He’s thrilled to have you.”

Marcus swirled the tea around in the half-filled cup, then held it out for her to top off and said, “I hope I can live up to that.”

“You don’t have to do a thing...just go on being you.”

“All this devotion can’t go one way.”

“That very statement proves that it doesn’t.”

Viola sat a moment in silence, watching Marcus run his fingers through unruly waves of jet hair; his head was bent over the table and propped on his hand in serious reflection. She too pondered a while longer, quietly tugging at the sleeves of her blue jersey and absently fingering the collar of her gray Polartec vest.

Marcus looked up suddenly. “You’ve got something on your mind.”

“Yes. I don’t want to pry...not at all but...I’ve become a sort of additional parent to Sylvia; she’s rather taken to me and--”

“And why wouldn’t she? She told me she adores you.”

“Oh...that’s really nice to hear. Lately she’s looked sad. I don’t know why...but I wondered if it might be you, if perhaps she’s feeling sorry to leave and... I believe you haven’t encouraged her, except of course as a friend, so I’ve wondered if you have someone else. I know it’s none of my business, but you see I don’t want to encourage her either, on your behalf, if that’s the case.”

“There you go, fixing other people’s lives...or trying. I must have gotten a little of that from you.” Marcus had displayed a stunning white grin, rather ironic and fondly scolding. His smooth skin, tinged with the palest unripe olive in this winter morning light, dimpled slightly near the corners of his mouth when he smiled.

“Yes, I have someone...that is, not really but in a way.”

“I see...of course, why wouldn't you? All right...then I'll do my best to--”

“I'm not inclined to marry right now, Ma. You see...not anyone. I could fall in love with Sylvia easily enough. She's intelligent, really sweet, amusingly full of curiosity...enthusiastically engaged. I like that...and of course she's right in the middle of that tempting period of youthful beauty...fresh radiance.”

“Well...you have given this some thought. Oh dear.”

“Yes, *oh dear*. Maybe I've already fallen in love with her. But then there's my camping, hiking, spare-time special pal, Ruth...the girl I've done things with for the past two years. What do I do about her? Never mind. It's my problem. I know I'm getting on -- a lot of my friends are married -- but I haven't ever promised anything to anyone. So far, I'm happy the way I am...and damned busy...and now thinking about the two of you here. This present dilemma, or whatever it is, is more a matter of conscience.”

“Yes. But you're not that old; at your age you can still try things out without irrevocable commitments...look around, think long and hard about decisions...until something really special happens.”

“Maybe it has. I'm going to keep in touch with her. She knows that. I keep looking forward to seeing her one last time...so maybe when I'm away from her I'll realize how crazy I was not to--”

“Yes, you'll have time to think. I won't encourage Sylvia, only support her if she confides in me. I'll listen as fairly, helpfully, as I can. I'm going to miss you terribly myself, you know.”

“Hey, you're not getting rid of me...not at all. For Dad and you I'll always be there, *always*. If you need anything, at any time, I'm here. And I'm coming back this summer...looking forward to it. What a surprise, what an incredible holiday it's been. I've got a family.”

*Such as it is*, she would never say, but thought it with some remorse, immediately scolding herself for so bleak a diminution of their happiness. No, her life had never come near the childhood paradigm of *Mother and Father, Dick and Jane and Spot*; had anyone's?

The three of them somewhat delusively seated at the breakfast table, she having uncharacteristically cooked for father and son, made it easy for Marcus, and perhaps even Hugh to some degree, to reach the conclusion that they were definably a family in progress. Realistically, they were not at all; too many interventions, lacunae of the unknown, years of significant otherness. They were clearly incontrovertibly drawn together by kinship and powerful ongoing love, however, and such an enhanced line of descent could never again be relegated to its once divided condition. If Marcus chose to redefine the concept of *family* for his happiness, she would not be the one to dissuade him. This was, after all, a family farm, and there was a very long Ender history here, long at least by relative standards; and, flawed as it had always been, the lushly encircling symbiosis of Enders and their land had managed to survive to its present, if increasingly precarious, state; although in this and part of the previous generation, it could hardly have survived without the solidly comprehensive husbandry of Ragnar. He who was intrafamily but without its taint of blood.

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“Day after tomorrow we will be gone from your life, Viola, back to what is very familiar to us in London. Although...this place has become somewhat familiar to us too.”

“Not gone from my life...you’ll be coming back, I know you will. Remember I’ve already invited you to come in the height of summer...or else the fall...brilliant seasons.”

“Will you ever come to London?”

“I might...perhaps when we go to Norway.”

“Norway?” Virginia said with some surprise.

She and Sylvia were kneeling on the hearth, happily toasting marshmallows in the fireplace, which Sylvia found a sporting thing to do -- “Oh, like a campout,” she had said with quick enthusiasm, after Viola impulsively suggested it.

“Yes, maybe then, when Ragnar goes to Norway to visit the farm he owns with his brother and sisters.”

“I see. Is that all the traveling you intend to do?”

“I’ve already traveled so much. But perhaps years from now, when Ragnar is gone, I’ll travel. It’s likely that he’ll go before I do, and then I’ll want to get away from here for a while. I would much rather be the one to go first. I haven’t got his strength.”

Virginia rapidly licked her sticky fingers and laid on the hearth the tarnished old black-handled barbecue fork Viola had provided her. She stared at Viola with a flagrant blending of disappointment and disapproval. “How can you blithely speak of your beloved that way?”

“Not blithely. Ragnar’s made me do it. He wants me to be able to carry on when he’s no longer here...carry on with as much reason and pleasure as I can muster...using the rest of my life well. He’s told me that he believes Hugh will not marry again...that he’ll be of some comfort when he himself is gone.”

“That’s astonishing!” Virginia shook her head in wonder. “I’m continually amazed by that man...and rather amazed by you. By the way, you do have a great deal of strength. You may have collapsed temporarily in London, but you’ve also proven how strong you can be.”

“You’ve scarce idea how bad I was in London...before your rescue. And I can speak of the future, however difficult, because Ragnar is so very much alive, so...unconcerned about it himself.”

“Ragnar’s awfully healthy,” Sylvia said, gingerly pulling at her perfectly done golden marshmallow. Viola brightened at this positive assurance, drawing as much comfort from it as kind Sylvia intended.

“Yes, he’s healthier than all of us, I think...healthy in body and spirit. There must be so many good years ahead of us. Now that I’ve said it I won’t think of it anymore. He’s right, better to put it aside and get on with life. The future can never be known.”

“He cares what happens to you when he’s gone. You may think this quite normal but in my case Sylvia’s father never cared what happened to me. That’s Nevil, all for himself -- of course he cares for our Sylvie.” Virginia glanced fondly at her daughter.

“Once Nevil had an insurance salesman in to increase my life insurance. The unknowing agent suggested that Nevil increase his own on my behalf? ‘Why should I care what happens after I’m gone?’ he casually offered.”

“Virginia, that’s horrid. I never realized. I’m certainly glad I never met the man...sorry, Sylvia.”

“He’d probably have fallen in love with you,” testy Virginia surmised.

“Nonsense.”

“This has all been so interesting, Viola; well, more than that, *fascinating*. You’ve been rounded out in my eyes. I see a part of you I never knew, although I don’t know how much we can ever learn without sharing another’s brain. Still, I do feel I know quite a bit more of you now...and that’s why I think you’re going to need a far deeper personal fulfillment than you’re likely to get--”

“*Mother!*” This time it was Sylvia who silenced her mother, with the one word that allowed and softened her right to censure.

“All right, my dears, don’t gang up on me. I’m going to wash my hands...these gooey little treats. Then I think I’ll shower and go to bed...perhaps read enough to bring on sleep. Coming, Sylvie?”

“In a while, mother.”

*Here is the moment when Sylvia intends to confide in me*, Viola thought. She had gathered up the marshmallow things on a tray, and was heading into the kitchen. “Want a cup of hot chocolate, Sylvia?”

“Yes, thank you...my favorite childhood bedtime drink.”

“It may act on you like caffeine,” Viola warned.

“I don’t think it ever has...anyway I don’t mind.”

Very soon they were both leaning on the kitchen table, sipping their hot cocoa and remarking how soothing it was at the late hour.

Her dark pupils, dilated in the dim light, gave Sylvia’s pale blue eyes a steelier, more intense look of determination. Yet, with her slim milk-skinned body clothed in a black sweater and Levis,



she had been transformed into a wraithlike nocturnal enchantress. Viola recalled Marcus' precisely accurate observation regarding this period of beauty in a woman's life: *fresh radiance*.

"I imagine Hugh and Marcus loved having you cook for them."

Viola laughed. "Loved, I'm not sure, but I did manage a simple breakfast. They seemed grateful. It was a good time to talk."

"It's been wonderful to see Marcus' eyes opened...how he adores you now. I simply knew his good nature, his splendid reason, wouldn't allow him to go on any longer with the mistakes he'd made."

"I love him dearly," Viola said.

"I...I really like him...I mean, in so many ways. Of course, we've hardly had much time to..." Sylvia looked steadily at her, and Viola saw that her large darkened eyes were moist with emotion. "Do you know if he...does he have someone? Oh, I'm sure he must."

This was proving more difficult than Viola had supposed. She searched a moment for the least hurtful answer.

"He has a female pal, with whom he does a lot of leisure things...you know, the camaraderie of lively activities...pleasant pastimes."

Sylvia's face was excessively bright with good wishes. "She must love him dearly. How could she not? He's very nearly everything a woman could want. Lucky girl. It would seem almost impossible to find his equal in my world. That is...everyone is so busy and self-serving...and no one really cares very much about lasting--"

"He did tell me he intended to keep in touch with you. I think that means a lot, don't you? He didn't have to say that...so I know he values your friendship."

"Do you really think he'll get in touch with me? I doubt it. Why would he bother? I'm just someone from London who happened to--"

“Sylvia, dear, surely you have more self-confidence than that. And furthermore, please don’t cast aspersions on my son’s good taste,” she teased. “You’re a tempting morsel, my dear, a lovely person in every way. I can’t believe you haven’t any male friends.”

“Oh a few...but none I much fancy. Men on the make rarely want lasting relationships these days...it’s all just selfish libido and materialism. Even reasonably good male friends often seem to expect friendship to end in sex...they want their short-lived bit of cake.”

“Yes, it’s a male thing...and you are quite irresistible.”

“Love’s out of fashion now. It’s generally considered silly and romantic to trot out the fantasy of *falling in love*.”

Viola laughed. “That’s funny, I’d have sworn it was what recently happened to me. Those who warble such cavalier music have only to find it happening to them to quickly change their tunes.”

About to speak of Marcus, Viola took Sylvia’s anxious hand in hers, stroking the pale blue veins running beneath the surface of the pearly, nearly translucent skin. But Sylvia set her on another path.

“This is a pretty bracelet you always wear. I like these uneven little topaz beads...winking so cheerily from half-rough surfaces. They look as if they’ve just come out of the earth,” Sylvia said, running her fingertips over the beads.

“Yes, natural raw gems. Do you know...I’ve just thought of something. I’m going to tell you the story of this bracelet...when I’ve finished I want to give it to you. You’re the one to have it.”

“Oh, no! I couldn’t--”

“Wait, Sylvia.” Viola raised her hand. “When you’ve heard the story you might accept this...for the reason it’s given.”

Viola proceeded to tell the story, somewhat haltingly, for it held too much sorrow to be related with anything like detachment.

“So you see, it’s fortunate that you took notice, because this bracelet should be passed on, its story kept alive. Someday you might give it to a young friend, or your own daughter, along with

the story. It really is a responsibility and I could only give it to someone special. Will you take it please? If not I'll understand of course."

The long lashes of Sylvia's pale eyes sparkled with moisture. She reached out her slender pale fingers and gently slid the bracelet off Viola's wrist and onto her own.

"I'll wear it humbly, proudly," she staunchly promised.

"If you can find the time to come see us this summer or fall, your visit might coincide with some of Marcus' time here. Then you'd both have an opportunity to extend your newly developing friendship. If that were the case, we'd all have something really pleasant to look forward to," she added, squeezing the poignantly nervous young hand.

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Viola had managed to get Roland to agree to attend one last group dinner, actually not as difficult as she had expected. He appeared much more amenable to her request this time, as if setting a precedent for a more prominent position in her life. She felt subdued satisfaction in thinking that he might like her enough to compete with Ragnar -- he had lightheartedly suggested as much. Perhaps it was literarily helpful to so assert his ego -- her personal rationalization for her possible usefulness. Not surprisingly, Ragnar appeared unperturbed, neutralizing the effect by telling her that certain males encountered by her would have similar interests.

"Couldn't you be more specific?" she requested, her rooted self-reproach greedily in need of hearing something praiseworthy.

"Lust," he answered with humor, then, tactful after sensing her disappointment: "likely followed by worship of your intellect; depending upon the caliber of the admirer."

"Oh, you judicious man," she teased, laying her head against his back while he was sautéing the celery, green pepper, and onions for his own special creation of stuffed trout.

He had prepared twenty small trout fillets, from ten of the beautiful little speckled trout caught last year and kept in his freezer. They would be laid in two shallow, rectangular buttered glass oven

dishes. The stuffing began with a mixture of his lightly sautéed chopped razor clams -- dug in his own preferred and undisclosed spot on the Oregon Coast --, also tiny shrimp, white onion, scallions, a small amount of celery and green pepper. When the dried, salted and peppered bread crumbs were sautéed to crispness in butter, with a light crumbling of tarragon and a spoonful of lemon zest, this was added to the clam mixture, and a heaping spoonful placed on each flat fillet, which was then covered with another fillet, all to be later drizzled with melted butter and placed in a moderate oven for twenty or so minutes.

“I said I would leave you alone until your guests were gone, and here I am in your kitchen again,” Ragnar mused.

“You like it...you enjoy this or I wouldn’t let you do it.”

“*Ja*...nice cooking with you at my back. Let us make the sauce now and set it aside to be warmed before you serve the trout.”

Wearing an old blue shirt and Levis, Ragnar was even taller in his kitchen clogs, and Viola leaned up on bare toes to tighten her grip on his warm hard body. She let go quickly, thinking to escape his possible impatience, but he turned around and bent to briefly kiss her forehead before he reached for the sliced mushrooms.

“Not too much of you until the sauce is finished.”

“You could think of me as part of the recipe...sorry, sorry, I know you need to concentrate.”

“*Nei*, not any longer, not with this work in progress; it is practically rote.”

Part of the sautéed onions, celery, and green pepper had been set aside to be included in the sauce; to this was added minced garlic, more small shrimp, and the mushrooms, all of which Ragnar was now sautéing in a generous amount of butter. Lastly, he poured in a half cup of Sauterne and a splash of lemon juice, cooking this liquid down with a five-minute simmer while he cleaned off the counter.

“Voilà, sauce for your trout,” he said, removing it from the burner and placing a lid over the aromatic concoction.

“I made corn bread this morning, with roasted and peeled red peppers and creamed corn...and I’ve got small red potatoes halved and roasted, ready to sauté in butter, with fresh parsley and green peas.

“Then you are set. What are you having for dessert?”

“The other day Alfreda kindly left two frozen cherry pies on my doorstep. What do you think?”

“Perfect. One day soon you must have Bill and Alfreda to dinner.”

“I intend to. They’re so pleasantly down to earth...fun.”

Ragnar held Viola close and said, “I am going home now.”

“You *are* home. Home anywhere on these three thousand acres.”

“All right...three thousand and *five hundred* acres. I am going to shower and change my clothes. I will be back in time to place my trout in the oven. *Herregud*, put something on your bare feet.”

“I’m going to take a shower too...and then make myself so beautiful you’ll be unable to resist me.”

“You make me laugh, I can barely get out of here as you are.”

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“Irresistible...rich delicate flavors. I’m nearly finished with this, do I get another serving?”

“Give me your plate, Hugh, I’ll get you more,” Viola responded, adding as she left. “You can all make obeisance to Ragnar.”

“Absolutely. This trout is heavenly, Ragnar, so very delicate and sweet...*heavenly*,” Virginia praised.

Ragnar nodded acknowledgement, briefly focusing on her with a humored glad-to-hear-it smile, then went on eating.

Virginia had not yet spoken to Roland, but had promised Viola that she would make some restorative effort. He had spoken little to anyone, and was at the moment busily loading his fork.

“The potatoes and peas are great, Ma, and I sure like the

corn bread.” Marcus had had no difficulty in praising her effort; his plate was filled with both servings, clearly worthy of appearing as entrées. “Of course the trout, ah, the *trout*,” he said, laughing and pointing his fork at Ragnar.

“Well, we’re all in agreement on this delicious, one-off meal. Look at Roland, proof of appreciation without words. All we need do is watch him eat,” Sylvia said with a soft titter of laughter, which everyone but Roland took up. His mouth was momentarily full.

Viola had returned with Hugh’s second helping of the sweet little fillets. “The only thing I would argue is your very British adjective *one-off*, Sylvia. Ragnar has often done food like this.”

“Yes, I’m sure. I only meant--”

“You meant it’s an especially good dinner, and it really is,” Marcus said. Viola noted that he had winked at Sylvia, and she wanted to hug him for this supportive gesture. She herself had so many times enjoyed the curative benefits of Ragnar’s encouraging winks.

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“Our last meal here together,” Virginia said, “and how regrettable. I’ve really enjoyed these interesting repasts.”

They were all comfortably arranged in their usual places in the living room, silently watching Marcus gingerly place a log on the dwindling fire. Everyone waited with him to see how it would catch and flame. As the flames burst forth and climbed higher, flickerings of light danced over the shadowy room, sending intent faces alternately into light and shadow. The large room was lit mainly by this fire and a tall wrought iron candle holder in one corner, with three thick white candles lambently burning and wafting their waxy scent around the room. A dimmed floor lamp standing above an arm of the striped bay window davenport also added minimal light.

Marcus returned to his end position on the massive old leather davenport, where Virginia and Sylvia had been staring into

the flames.

“Tell us about your work, Marcus. Could you please? We’ve heard little from you and nothing of your work. Have we Sylvie?”

“Marcus told me some things about his work...but I’d love to hear more of course. It’s very important, I think.” Sylvia’s manner was constrained, and she spoke with a more formally polite attitude than previously shown. Viola was certain that Sylvia’s regrettably banished lightheartedness must be the result of learning of the mystery woman in Marcus’ life, his *lucky* pal Ruth.

Shifting in his chair to look at Marcus, and exhibiting ample pride, Hugh said, “Tell them about the oil plant.”

Marcus was hunched down with his navy sweater-covered forearms resting parallel on his corduroy thighs and his head dropped forward, a method of organizing his thought. After a moment he tossed back his head, dutifully preparing to deliver information to an audience he would naturally assume to be more polite than very much interested. Viola smiled at his obviously uncontainable enthusiasm.

“There’s a plant that grows like a weed...or *as* a weed; it grows all around the world now. In a lot of places, anyone close to the soil knows it, uses it in various ways, and, naturally, has a name for it...different names for the same plant...a plant with remarkable properties.”

“*Jatropha curcas*,” Ragnar said. He had been sitting quietly at the side of the fireplace in the big wing chair, his long legs propped on the footrest. Viola, resting on the huge stuffed floor pillow beside his chair, looked up at him in surprise.

“Yes!” Marcus said, also staring at Ragnar with considerable surprise. “How do you know about *Jatropha*?”

“I came across it while researching various herbage that might be planted on Ender Farm’s recent purchase: five hundred acres of tired farming land. The soil on that new acquisition needs some restorative care...needs to stop producing poor crops of alfalfa and corn, but it is perfectly good for a plant that does not

require much attention or nutrients, and *Jatropha Curcas* does not. A humble plant that could help point the way toward a happier planet...as Marcus will tell you. The new five-hundred-acre acquisition is in a wind shadow where there is not much rain...it is well drained land, closer to the subtropical climate this fairly drought-resistant shrub likes...actually it is a small, rugged tree-like plant that can grow to about sixteen feet. I am not entirely certain it would do well in our climate.”

“It probably would do fairly well, but we’re producing a strain that can flourish anywhere...even a damper, more temperate climate.”

“That would be good,” Ragnar said. “The only other problem I see is that its seed crop requires a system of processing allowing the extracted oil to be marketed...a system that does not yet exist around here. We would have to do it ourselves.”

“And you could,” Marcus said with an encouraging voice. “You’d need a Universal Nut Sheller to extract the oil.”

“It might be worthwhile. I am familiar with the mechanics of that simple machinery. The plant yields its seed crop in about a year, but it takes two or three years before it is solidly producing.”

“But it’ll produce for forty years, Ragnar...needs very little care and cultivation...as you must have discovered. *Jatropha* even produces its own pesticides and fungicides.”

“We use no petrochemicals on this farm...or near this farm. We have among us our hotheads, blockheads, troublemakers, but for the most part we have joined together to make this valley continuously vigilant of polluting runoff, including necessary phosphorous, which might jeopardize our water and watershed. *Ja*, maybe it is a good future for you and Ender Farm, Marcus,” Ragnar prophetically noted, “working at least five hundred acres of experimental *Jatropha curcas*.”

Viola was thrilled by Ragnar’s predication. She wanted to know a great deal more. The prospect flaming in Marcus’s eyes expanded her own rushing thoughts into roughly shaping ideas. Perhaps such a venture could become an area of local interest for



Marcus, one that would eventually bring him more frequently to Ender Farm; even more satisfying, bring him as a viable participant in the farm's ever more secure usefulness to a threatened planet.

"Where did the plant originate?" Roland asked.

"Central America," Marcus answered, "but it's grown for the most part in Asia and Africa...there it's known as Pourghère...surprisingly used as a protective fence against field and garden invaders...browsing animals. It's a poisonous plant."

"Well, this oil thing...how much does it yield, and how can it be used?" Virginia asked.

"That's the thing, the whole thing," Marcus said, his eyes alight with all that he knew. "The seeds are thirty percent oil, and that oil can be processed to create top-grade biodiesel fuel for diesel engines. Five hundred acres could yield about...well, a little over seven hundred pounds of oil."

"About eighty-eight thousand gallons of oil," Ragnar explained, revealing his previous calculations. He smiled, studying Violeta. Perhaps she had drunk too much wine, but her head floated with mounting speculation; a spreading optimism at once linking both Ragnar and the farm to Marcus and his wonderfully productive work. Here, amidst steadily impacting family history, flashed luminous ideas of enduring merit; their very real potential, she avowed, easily outlasting any ephemeral trickeries of wine.

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"Roland had no time for me. One can never get beyond that protective mask of mockery, sarcasm, irony...so tiresome. I did try well-intentioned flattery...to which he was impervious. He's in love with you and can see no one else -- they all are. I do wonder how it feels. Oh, you have so much here...a very commanding position."

"Virginia, this is ludicrous. Don't go away from me with these nutty ideas. I want to have you always as my friend -- you've been my best friend for so many years."

Virginia had asked to take one last stroll through the melting

brake, perhaps drawn toward undefeated Roland. She trudged clumsily along with her tall frame bent over and her lips held firmly together in a determined effort to remain upright. She and Viola had at first chattered discursively as they entered the brake, then gradually Virginia grew silent. The two of them and Sylvia were busy avoiding cascades of slushy snow as clumps of it, or splashes of melt-water, fell from the temperately sprung tree limbs.

Sylvia had remained silent, hardly listening, so lost was she in thought. Viola wondered if Marcus had said anything the least encouraging to her last night. Once she had seen them softly talking, but today Sylvia appeared no more heartened by anything Marcus had said.

“Shall we go all the way to Roland’s?” Virginia suddenly asked.

“No, mother. To what end?” Sylvia and Viola said at once.

“He might invite us in,” Virginia asserted.

“Then again, he might run swiftly away into the woods,” Sylvia wryly speculated. “Mother, if Roland were going to take an interest in you, mightn’t he have done it by now?”

“He doesn’t realize how good I am.”

“What if he does realize? What if it scares him to death how good you are? Your intrusion doesn’t incline to poetry, Virginia, but rather a large commitment...which I believe Roland unable to make.”

“I intend no commitment. That is cruel of you, Viola.”

“More realistic than cruel,” Sylvia noted.

“Have you given any thought to Tim McCready?” Viola asked.

“Tim McCready! Good lord, what about him? That graying old beanpole nattering around in the office?”

“He’s nearly the same age as you, Virginia. Your hair is also gray, by the way. Tim’s fancied you for years...although presently I can’t think why. He’s a darling gentleman.”

“He’s a stuffy old bore.”

“I’d advise you to be a little more conversant on your own

behalf...if not his. I've lunched with him a number of times...found his prolific stories of worldly experiences highly entertaining.”

“I've suffered through his hyperbole plenty of times.”

“You may have heard him talking, but you weren't listening in the right way or you'd have heard--”

“You really are exasperating. My years of constructive social effort do not extend to submitting myself to condescending personal attack from you...my so-called friend. At *my age*, telling me how to *listen!*”

“You don't listen well to me either, Mother.”

“I'm always the insensitive one, the foolish one, right? Yes, that's what I am, an aging fool. Oh leave me alone, both of you!”

Virginia rushed ahead, awkwardly rounding the bend in the road while clumsily hurling herself over and around numerous slushy puddles. They had already walked quite a distance, and Viola now believed that Virginia had actually set out intending to confront Roland. She and Sylvia rapidly followed, both hopeful of preventing another casualty, either physical or mental. They could easily make out Virginia's highly disturbed state as she floundered along, fixedly correcting her wayward course toward Roland's cottage. For a moment they stood in amazement as she pressed on, half falling to her knees in frenzied haste and at last stumbling right up to his door.

“Let me in!” Virginia pounded vigorously upon the weathered door. “Please let me in, I'm miserable, *miserable!*” she wailed.

“God, Sylvia, I've never seen anything like this. Not in my wildest speculations could I have imagined anything like this. Your mother was so wise, so helpful and composed when I was falling apart in London...and now...my God, what happened to that coolly collected woman...all of that exemplary self-control?”

“Too much control,” Sylvia said, staring sadly after her mother. “I ought to mention that before we left London Mother had a sort of confrontation with my father. She apparently

managed to insult him beyond endurance. He responded by telling her she was getting old and looked it. She took it very badly...and it really isn't true. Mother has held up rather well...her strength...her lanky attractiveness. I know she's been brooding over my father's unfortunate humiliation."

"Oh, no, I had to remind her that her hair is gray...damn!"

"Never mind, you couldn't have known...and it *is* gray."

"Her hair is lovely, thick and lovely."

They had both edged up to the little cluster of trees near the cottage, and were now hunched over and wondering if they should remain hidden there until they saw what happened next.

Roland very soon flung open the door and shouted, "Come in then, you raving mare in heat! Trot yourself off to my bed if that's all you've got on your rutting mind. I'll be only too happy to send you galloping to oblivion." He grabbed hold of her arm with a fierce grip and roughly dragged her inside, slamming the door.

"Oh, my God! What should we do now?"

"I suggest we turn around and go home," Sylvia said. "I think I've experienced enough of Roland to assume it won't go beyond some form of violent mutual satisfaction."

"Sylvia, I don't know whether you possess great wisdom, for your age, or have an incredibly naïve perspective."

"You know Roland somewhat, what do you think?"

"I just don't know what to think...I can't believe he's very dangerous...but am I blinded by the lofty morality of poesy? There've been some remarkable poets who were absolute bastards...so flawed--"

"He isn't really so flawed...remember how he appreciated Ragnar's kindness? I don't hear any screaming, let's go home."

"You're a cool one, that's your mother in there."

"Yes, Viola, with your presently silent put-upon relative."

"All right then, let's go. Virginia seems to have forgotten us."

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When Virginia did not return by evening, Sylvia began to

have second thoughts. They were scheduled to fly out the afternoon of the following day. Viola and Sylvia were sitting in the living room, keeping each other company while attempting to read, when at nine o'clock Viola's cell phone rang. She hurried to answer it, and was astonished to hear Roland's moderate greeting.

"Viola, I didn't want anyone to worry. Tell Sylvia I'll bring Virginia over in the early morning...in time for her to prepare for her departure."

"Yes...all right. How...how is she?"

"Quite calm, actually," he said in an even voice. "The woman seems to find great comfort in hearing my poetry read...is strangely mad about it as a matter of fact...of course has confused it with *me*; completely blind to my failings and...what a shit I am -- pardon me. Anyway, when we finished with...what we had begun, I kept her in bed and read her a pantoum I've written...apparently an aphrodisiac."

"Roland...do you realize how hard I'm trying not to laugh? You can't just speak like this and expect me not to."

"Go ahead. It is hilarious in a number of ways...disturbing in others. I, however, precipitated none of this. I merely decided that self-sacrifice was more expedient than the alternative."

"I see. I'm going to hang up now so that I can roll hysterically on the floor without damaging my phone."

"Have at it. See you later."

"Should we both roll on the floor?" Sylvia asked when Viola had related Roland's message. There was a knock at the door before Viola could think of a suitably ridiculous answer. It was Marcus.

After a polite greeting, Sylvia said, "Well, I'll leave you two and trundle off to my beauty sleep...have to rise early."

"You don't need beauty sleep. I came to say goodbye, Sylvia."

Marcus stood intently, with his hands in the pockets of his forest-green jacket, manifesting a fresh out-of-doors coolness, his beautifully night-cast raven eyes flashing at her with undeterred

insistence.

Sylvia flushed slightly and looked at Viola.

“I’m the one heading for bed. Good night, my dears.”

Viola smiled to herself as she climbed the stairs. It was far too early for her to sleep. She would write in her journal.

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Virginia was duly delivered at five the next morning, slipping quietly out of Roland’s battered truck in the frigid darkness. By six-thirty she and Sylvia were rolling down the long driveway in their rental car, setting off on their three-hour drive to the Portland airport. Viola walked down the house’s long porch, giving a final wave, then stood watching the car disappear over a snow-patched gentle rise not too distant from the highway. She was thinking how Virginia had sheepishly apologized for her *moonlight madness*, as she called it, excusing herself by explaining that her temporary derangement very likely had something to do with incipient menopause; she never alluded to her former husband’s cruel aspersions, or any subsequent effect his retaliation may have had on her normally reasonable conduct. Her *fascinating* visit to Ender Farm, she had added, concluded on the high note of an unforeseen unforgettable experience -- this high note to be understood as Roland. Viola had mentioned a dark bruise on Virginia’s wrist, but Virginia merely replied: “Excessive...exuberance. I’m keeping the experience to myself for the time being...for a bit of solitary reminiscing on foggy London nights,” she had added with a flourish of self-pitying drama. “I may decide to e-mail you an account later,” she tantalized.

Viola speculated, with ample humor, that while Virginia had failed to recapture her intransigent former colleague on her determined visit, she had at least fulfilled another deep yearning, bringing to vivid life a skewed version of an idle holiday fantasy, a wintry rendition of *Summertime in Venice*.

It was alert Sylvia who had presented a touching lovelorn expression at breakfast, revealing with refreshingly simple honesty

that Marcus had kissed her goodbye. “I’m not certain of the result of what was for me a really wonderful encounter, but I do think Marcus may try to keep in touch with me...when he isn’t too busy.” Viola had offered her quick assurance: “If he said he would, he will.” Upon parting, Viola had also conveyed her genuine feeling of loss, giving Sylvia a spontaneous motherly hug. At the same time, she struggled to keep from positing Sylvia as her eventual daughter-in-law, however welcome and felicitous she found even the remotest possibility of such an occurrence.

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Saying goodbye to Marcus was painfully difficult, as Viola had anticipated it would be.

“I’ve been so happy thinking of you at your father’s, always so newly and wonderfully within reach. Now, just when we’ve come to enjoy each other, after all these bereft years, I have to give you up. I don’t even feel very selfish about it.”

Marcus, who had already made his goodbyes to his father, was standing by his car. The day held a solemn chill, the sky overcast and threatening. This newly acquired departing son appeared to her remotely, somewhat enviably engaged, as if he had already moved on to the next pressing endeavor in his hardly fathomable existence. She was therefore deeply moved by his response.

He put his arms around her, swaying gently back and forth for a moment, warming them both, then spoke into her ear in a low resonant voice, as softly emotional a voice as she had ever heard from him. “You’re not giving me up, Ma...and I’m certainly not giving you up. I’m easily within reach in a number of ways. I’ll be back before you know it. We’ve got some fairly exciting ideas going here...for this farm...you and I and your Nordic chief -- what an interesting fellow he is -- without any pun: kind of larger than life. I should have respected your judgment on that score from the beginning. Ah, but I should have done a lot of things differently from the beginning, sweet Ma. Thank you for my father.”

She drew her requited head back and looked into those dark eyes, Hugh's eyes, now registering sorrow for the lost years.

"We won't cry over the past, not with the present in our grasp. I'm so lucky to have you, so incredibly proud of you, Marcus."

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They had eaten a rich and savory beef stew -- prepared when Viola phoned to say she was coming over later -- and were now propped comfortably together on Ragnar's davenport, *catching their breaths*, as Viola put it. Staring into the fire, and unconcernedly silent for several minutes, they had relaxed and digested their supper while enjoying the uninterrupted proximity of each other. The room drowsed in warmth. Complaining of the heat, Ragnar pulled off his heavy brown sweater and flung it accurately over the far arm of the davenport.

Viola threaded her fingers between his long fingers, which then curled over her hand. She studied them, powerful fingers chronically programmed to perform myriad skills, intelligently nuanced to near autonomy, the skin of his palms roughened by years of exacting usage, but the backs of his hands bearing the tan sheen of soft leather.

"When you first came to our farm I stood my ground, looking so far up at you...but I was actually quite intimidated."

"You soon found me harmless enough...at least where you were concerned, *lille* girl."

"I was fascinated...thought you might be that tall Jack of beanstalk fame. I often hid and watched you when you worked near the house."

"I often knew you were there...a *lille* fox."

"I wasn't the only one so intrigued. My tiny grandmother called you *der Riese*. What is it in Norwegian?"

"*Jette*. *Ja*, I knew she called me giant, but she was small, as you are. There are other men who fit the title better."

After a length of silence, she came to sense something ponderous in the air. She had not forgotten Ragnar's earlier



mention of *talk*.

"I have noticed that you hardly ever speak of Martha. Even when you first insisted on hearing about her you were not really sincerely interested in hearing very much. There is a wound of guilt in you at your neglect. I have known this from the beginning but said nothing of it, because you were immediately in need of resolving so many problems."

Violea sat up and turned to look into Ragnar's concerned eyes.

"And this is what you wanted to talk about?"

"Some of it."

She could not sit still and got up, moving close to the fire and staring at glowing edges of the alder chunk burning there. The guilt of her neglect was unbearable to attend for very long. She had never considered that her mother might die before she could bring herself to return to the farm. Even with death and dying all around her, she had been unable to imagine her mother perishing at so comparatively young an age. *I longed for her comforting presence all of those years...the letters I wrote...and the patiently encouraging letters she wrote back...what I've lost, what I've lost*, she pondered to herself.

"You act like you're on a sort of mission to reform me," she said, desperately holding in her emotions and not looking at Ragnar.

Ragnar, too, had risen and was now standing over by his long wall of books, which continued on into a semi-partitioned alcove. "I could not reform you...even if you needed it, which you do not. There were certain promises I made to Martha, as I have said, the promise to help you and..." He was looking up at the top shelf, which only he could reach without a step-ladder. Sliding his hand over a row of black leather-bound books, he then wedged his fingers in at either end and lifted the entire twelve or so small-sized books out in one compressed assemblage. He carried them over and set them gently down before her, on his coffee table.

"Except to dust them, I have not touched these since I put them up there...when I was asked by Martha to take charge of

them...a week before you came to her funeral. I have never read them, and why would I? Martha asked me not to...and knew that was all she had to say. She wanted me to give them to you when I thought the time was right. They are her diaries.”

Violea sat down in amazement, staring at Ragnar for some hint of attitude, then ran her fingers lightly over the unknown diaries. The tips of her fingers burned with the momentousness of this impossible obligation, misery already heavy in her chest. Her fingers trembled and she drew her hand away, as if further touch would cause unbearable pain. She could not blame Ragnar. He was only doing what was asked.

“I will put them in a carryall bag and you can take them home and read them at your leisure.”

“Do I have to?”

“That is up to you. It was Martha’s wish that you read them. When she told me, from her hospital bed, to take the diaries and keep them safe for you, her eyes were for the moment undimmed, cognizant, eyes very like yours, but not quite so unusual; hers a blue merely more shaded in the evening, without violet...but in daylight a sky-blue of frank honesty, of courage...which you can perhaps remember.”

“My God,” she muttered very softly, and then more audibly, “your directness is like a blow...jarring me right into her presence.”

“I am only the messenger. I wanted you to *see* her wishes.”

“Well, I have done...thank you.”

“Wild Vi, you should not be angry...but glad to have this much of her. There will be a great deal I am sure. Martha was a sensitive, very perceptive woman. You may have thought her weak. She was not. Physically, she was not as strong as you, but she was strong.”

“Why didn’t she send for me?” Violea cried out.

“She did not want you to come from some far place in the world and find more misery, to see her as she was, wasting away. This way you can remember her as the healthy, attractive mother you knew.”

“How kind...how kind of her...how kind we’ve all become! Now I’ve got to live her pain...when I loved her so. And you’re thinking: *How could you love her so and never come home?*”

“I was not thinking that -- you have your reasons. I was really thinking you may find good things to read in these small books, most likely encouraging words...sound truths. Martha loved this farm.”

“All right, I’ll take them...and I’ll *read* them,” she vowed with conviction, although with no less dread.

“I’ve missed you in all this recent turmoil, Ragnar.”

“*Ja?* We have not been strangers.”

She drew back, letting her eyes enjoy the entirety of him -- he, now clothed in faded Levis, white t-shirt, and shearling-lined moccasins. Her scrutiny settled on his solemn face, pure Viking reserve.

“Do you still...”

“What? You were not going to ask if I still feel the same, were you, my Wild Vi? *Nei*, I do not still feel the same. How could I? This feeling grows, does it not?”

“Yes, it does...it *does*.”

To have heard her own sentiment so ardently given credence was bracing assurance. Far more favorably rewarded than if offered a repeated young life without him, she presented an allusive smile that was for Ragnar a specific suggestion. Neither said anything more.

How trim and clean he kept his fingernails, for harshly indurated hands that knew the grime of rough places, supple hands of purpose, gentle hands of patience, lifting her as if she were no substance at all, carrying her into another province; a place where those hands were no less subtly experienced in the art of pleasure. In a playful moment, she had named his bed after the fortress where Odin was once high priest: *Asgard*, situated in the center of the universe.

Her mother's beautiful, sparing script swept across the vellum pages in jet-black ink, faithfully recording a daily procession of the experienced and observed, her swift-moving reflections sometimes wheeling in sudden backward flights or discursive high and low involutions -- diffident joy, brooding anger, sorrow -- script and message suggesting large and graceful flocks of starlings driven to erratic waves of indecision on relentless seasonal winds. The mundane and quotidian, the often startling, sometimes horrific data of a life, recorded as it was meticulously filtered through the sanely maintained mental construct of a courageously incisive, sensitive, suffering mind.

At first Violeta pursued with brevity, paying little heed to chronology, stopping only where later years contained Ragnar's name, and willing these accounts to be harbingers of good, as they usually were. Finally she steeled herself and settled down to read from the beginning. It appeared that her excited young mother had at first been very much in love with her dashing father, joyfully remarking on their newly joined lives and quite happily anticipating a future of children and farm life. She was also making a trusted companion of Niklas' mother, who was soon to share a number of her sorrows and grievances. Shortly before Ragnar arrived, things began to go horribly wrong. As Violeta read of these years, she wondered if even Gran could have known how bad things really were. Her heart bled for her mother's painful awakenings. *Poor Niklas, he does not want to be a farmer*, was nearly Martha's last kindness toward Niklas. Then Violeta read something that induced fierce anger, her eyes blurring above the pages.

*Niklas has told me that I must have a son. I must! He says our Violeta will be of no use, that we must have a strong young man who can take over the farm. He wants to leave here forever...insists he is suffocating under the weight of this place, as uninspired with it as I am the opposite. He says that with a son in charge here he could go away forever --- with another of his mistresses I presume -- go away but still have fulfilled the duties of his lineage. How could I have listened to this in silence? My God, he is so determined that he is willing to wait until the boy is strong enough. This potential savior will save*

*Niklas' face, retain the Ender heritage. Never mind about me, I remain unknown, my devotion, my education worthless, at last no more than an expediency. Perhaps it is a denominational madness, a morbid, fatally self-righteousness connected to the paternal tribe.*

Within a week of the deeply troubling entry, Martha had written: *How much more can I stand? Niklas would not let me leave the bedroom. He has been at me for two days. He keeps a chart of my cycle, comes to me with forceful relentlessness when he believes I am most fertile. I am completely exhausted, empty and so lonely. Poor little Viola; she is such a lovely child, will perhaps be as small as her paternal grandmother, but is strong and cheerful -- we are small strong women. I must be careful not to taint her with this wretched depression. A month later, she wrote: I've miscarried, had to sneak away to Hayfield in the unreliable old pickup, as Niklas will never let me near the new truck. Doctor Mount says that I am in very bad condition, wounded, exhausted, and that I must never have any more children. I don't know what will happen now. Niklas will have to leave me alone. I plan to confide in Gran...if only she can help me. I'm too tired even to run away, and where would I go? To his relatives in the East? Not to be trusted. They would send me back. I don't want to leave. I love this farm. How did I become entrapped in this madness? I wish there were someone still alive in my own kind family. What a naïve fool I've been. Only a small demonstration of love, or mere consideration, from Niklas might have kept me going, but now I think it's impossible.*

The next distraught entry was accompanied by a thread of hope: *I found Gran in the drying room of the barn, hanging her bundles of gathered cuttings. She was singing, poor thing, happy about selling her dried weeds to a few floral arrangers. Outside, our summer rain was suddenly a torrent. I intended to gently explain, but blurted out as abruptly as the storm, what has been happening. Disturbed Gran was taken unawares. She looked warily around, shaking her head at me and whispering that Ragnar was nearby loading grain into the granary. I wonder if he heard. I would never learn it from his face or manner, he is so circumspect. Gran whispered that she would certainly speak to Niklas. She doesn't fear him...both loves him and despairs of him. She alone can censure him without consequence to herself.*

*I haven't written here in a while. Niklas hit me and blackened my eye.*

*This was after Gran spoke to him. He was enraged that I went to her, further enraged that Ragnar might have heard. As soon as he hit me he went for a cold compress to put on my eye. He is beside himself, more so because I cannot give him a son.*

*This morning Ragnar threatened to leave, told Niklas he would not work for a man who beats his wife -- Ragnar has surely seen my black eye. Niklas fears him some but cannot let him go, as he needs him so desperately on the farm. I've come to realize that Ragnar worries about me. This is so humiliating. I wish I could confide in him, but it's far too private, humiliating. Ragnar was in the foyer. I stood near the top of the stairs and listened. Niklas hemmed and hawed and said, "It's in the blood, uncontrollable anger. Don't tell me you've never hit a woman." Ragnar answered, "Never. Nor will I. In the heat of anger, an adult should have learned to walk away from damage, not toward it." I thought that was wonderful. Niklas grudgingly apologized. But after Ragnar left he downed half a tumbler of Scotch and threw his emptied glass into the fireplace. He was so furious I fled into the woods, stayed away from him all day. Anger.*

The diary went on and on through the years, with comments on the seasons and harvests, descriptions of Martha and Gran and helpful neighbors sweating over large dinners, often holiday feasts. Martha strove to make the meals as sumptuous and as difficult as possible, to distract herself from harsh flare-ups with Niklas. She mentioned that Viola helped in the kitchen. Then Viola read something different.

*Today on my way to the library I saw Niklas on the street with his Jezebel. If only Ragnar had married her...but how can I wish that on him? I do understand. She's attractive...fairly intelligent. I used to talk to her. Now of course I never go into the bakery. I've always done my own baking anyway -- sweet Viola loves my warm cinnamon buns. I went into the library feeling miserable -- my husband walking brashly around with the queen of Hayfield while I am surely laughed at and thought a spineless fool. Well, am I? I sat with my hands folded on the table, couldn't see anything, trying not to weep and disgrace myself further. A man sitting across from me came into focus. He nodded. Beside him was a high stack of books on horticulture -- he had been absorbed in a book on rare gourds. In a while he began to study me, then smiled*

*and said bello. I realized he was our renter. I've never spoken to him -- Niklas had handled all that business, so I had no opportunity. I knew he'd been quite aloof. His wife died a while back, and I sent a card of sympathy. Beneath the reading lamp shone the most unusual face, elegant, framed with short, straight, coal-black hair...long dark eyes, deep pools of sorrow. Suddenly I was thinking of someone else, not thinking of myself at all. We couldn't talk there and he asked if I would like a cup of coffee. I said yes without the slightest hesitation. We ended up in a booth at Whalen's Drugstore. We talked and talked, avidly discussing anything that came into our minds, everything but ourselves...except in an oblique sort of way. He's so different, considerate and very intense...studying me with those remarkable dark eyes. I only wanted to listen to his nice voice, low and succinct. He couldn't know how comforting it was, lifting me out of this wretched misery. We both love gardening. He has a bright young son he wants well educated. I said my *Violea* was very smart. Such a pleasure talking that way. How surprising, how simple, natural, yet...what? Exciting? I can't stop thinking about him...Hume. We of course made no appointment to meet again, but he said he would see me at the library where he often goes on weekdays.*

Violea had forgotten she was sitting at her desk. Carried into another time, her mental screen searched through a vaguely known past. She had been in that past, yet completely and selfishly oblivious to so many of the events her mother described, a naïve child. She ran her fingers slowly across the delicate black script, too overcome to read any more. Her tired eyes overflowed and she lifted a curved wrist to rub away the moisture. She slipped a paper marker into the diary and closed it, blinking and staring out the window, down onto the wintry garden, her mother's garden, what was left of it.

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Violea walked slowly, with her head down, contemplating the diaries and trying to make some peace with herself beyond the nagging anxiety of them. Her own situation was quite improved, better than she could have ever wished, but what right had she to any of it? It was her mother, Martha's farm, *Martha* who should have triumphed. The neglect of her mother was unforgivable.

She did not even know if she had been somehow forgiven. Had Martha found any peace, or had most of her life been scarred too deeply to heal? She would have to read on to the end to find out. The dread of it lay heavy in her chest. She thought of Hume. Thank goodness for Hume.

She had almost reached the mailbox, her head hanging, her eyes absently fixed on gravel, when she heard the familiar short squeal of brakes and looked up to find Ragnar getting out of his truck -- nearly simultaneously putting on his sheepskin jacket, which he frequently removed while driving. Even this imposing transforming presence, so readily influential, so continually desired, would find the altering of her sad smile difficult at the moment.

"I have already gotten your mail. I emptied my box and then decided to bring yours too."

"All right, that's fine...thank you," she said, looking up at him with a rather dazed inattentiveness.

Ragnar opened the door on the passenger side. "Get in and I will bring you back, unless you want the exercise."

She lifted the Ender Farm mail off the seat and got into his truck, absently holding the mail on her lap without looking at it.

Ragnar glanced at her profile and hesitated a moment before putting the truck in gear.

"What are your plans for the rest of the day?"

She looked out her window and up at the sky, her gaze sweeping across the barren fields toward the house. No sun, a little wind, everything a solid even temperament of gray.

"I have none. Maybe I'll drive...somewhere...to Hayfield?"

Ragnar's mail was on the floor, in front of her feet, where he had tossed it to keep it separate from hers. He reached down and pulled out a thick padded envelope, holding it up. "I found the book inside this on the Net...and I was going to take it to a friend who wanted it -- something hard to find. Would you like to come with me while I make my delivery?"

"I guess...yes...all right."

"Ah, my *lillejente*, I have never seen so much enthusiasm."



His laughter abated and he said, "I am glad to have you with me anyway."

"I'm glad you came along...sorry I'm such a downer."

"*Nei*, you are not allowed to say that," Ragnar reminded her as he backed his truck along the entrance road and out onto the highway.

Gradually Viola had grown curious about their destination and looked at Ragnar, whose calmly fixed mouth appeared unlikely to reveal anything -- almost as if what happened from here on must unfold with her own judgment uncolored. Now equally silent, she awaited the outcome.

After nearly ten miles, they exited the highway and drove onto a narrow unpaved road that ran straight between two barren snow-patched big fields. Dormant untrimmed apple and cherry seedlings grew haphazardly along one side, and leafless wild rose bushes impenetrably hooked into an old wire fence along the other. The trembling Nootka branchlets, with shriveled brown rose hips still attached, hardly promised the small, wonderfully fragrant pale pink blossoms that would appear in summer. The road was rough.

"*Helvete*, I am going to see if the road crew cannot scrape this level the next time they pass by."

"But isn't it a private road?"

"*Ja*, it is."

"The farmer can't maintain it?"

"*Nei*, the farmer cannot."

They rounded the only curve in the road and stopped before a tall garreted dark gray cottage, with a broad peaked roof of cedar shakes, more recently applied, and winter-browned honeysuckle vines creeping over the weathered front and side. Solid shutters at the windows had once been painted a bright reddish color, mostly faded now, and bore down their centers faint green, mottled and thus rather sad, arabesque designs. The pebbly, unplanted yard contained in its foreground a single massive clump of plaintively waving pampas grass. Behind the cabin-like old cottage were tall Douglas firs, sighing in a mild wind as Viola and Ragnar got out

of the truck. An aging black Lab had moved slowly onto the porch, barking with a dispirited dutifulness.

“Pilot, old boy, it is me. *Nei*, quiet now. I would not bring an enemy to your door.”

“Pilot?” Viola said, “From *Jane Eyre*?”

“*Ja*, the right name for him. He is a wise old steersman.”

Ragnar patted Pilot on the head and the dog licked his hand as they climbed a few long steps leading onto the porch.

“Mary, it is me, Ragnar,” he called through the half-open door.

“Oh, Ragnar, my dear friend,” a surprised trilling voice replied.

Viola hesitated on the porch, and Ragnar coaxed in a softened voice, “*Koma*, Wild Vi, here is someone you will like.

“Mary, I have brought Viola Ender with me, Martha’s daughter.”

A woman Viola thought of as tall, with gray-streaked black hair hanging just above her shoulders and her shadowy body clothed in a long housecoat, perhaps an umber brown color, stepped from behind the door and stood in the semi-dark interior. “Come in, come in. We must turn on some lights. You do it, Ragnar. I’ll pour us coffee; the pot is still hot. Hello, Viola, I’m Mary Fuller. I knew your mother. Oh, I miss her a great deal, dear Martha. She used to visit me when she could get away.”

“I found Rimbaud for you,” Ragnar said. He tore open the envelope and pulled out the book, placing it in Mary’s hand.

Mary clasped the thin book to her chest, then ran her long, seeking fingers over the volume with obvious delight, flipping the pages and touching them with delicately sensuous fingertips.

“What a joy, what a joy. You wouldn’t think I’d care so much for this macabre young poet. He’ll always be young won’t he, this bad little genius? Thank you so much, my dear good person.”

By this time, Ragnar had turned on two lamps, one at either end of a long black davenport. Viola’s mounting supposition still

held some surprise at Mary's sunken eye sockets, which shone a sightless milky white. Perhaps in her mid-fifties, she had a pale, lean, lanky, and seemingly fit body, and bore herself with an easy grace, quite comfortable with her familiar space.

"I must pay you for this treasure, Ragnar."

"*Nei*, I ordered this book along with some others and do not even remember the price. I could take nothing for it."

ViOLEA glanced at Ragnar. She knew it was the only book that had come in the mail, presumably in braille, and that Ragnar had no intention of allowing reimbursement.

"Then you will take coffee and some applesauce cake, my dears. Do you like coffee, ViOLEA?"

"That would be lovely," ViOLEA answered.

She looked around the room. The wood floors were bare. There were no tables, no ornaments, no pictures on the ivory walls, only a tall broad shelf of books, a modern sound system, and comfortable-looking heavy dark furniture placed along the walls of the echoing long room -- why would a blind person want to deal with any more obstacles than these? Should she offer to help in the kitchen? She thought not. Mary had obviously lived for a considerable time without sight. ViOLEA thought of her mother here. What had happened to Mary? Was she blind from birth? How had Mary come to know her mother?

"Have you taken off your coats? I suppose not. Please lay them over the chair by the door. I'll get the coffee and cake going. It's easy to roll them in on my tea tray. How pleasant to have such a very special visit from my friend, Ragnar -- it's been a while -- and of course so interesting to meet you, ViOLEA, Martha's daughter. Ragnar, your voice is different. I think you're in love with this woman."

ViOLEA started then laughed and said, "The abiding country pipeline."

"No, ViOLEA, Ragnar knows I'm not often lucky enough to gossip. It was the way he spoke, so attentively...and the fact that he brought you here at all. But I think he must call you by another

name.”

“Yes...why do you think that?”

“He isn’t used to saying *Vi*...says it formally.”

“I have called her *Wild Vi* since she was five years old.”

“Oh, I like that. What a charming story it must be. Are you a pretty woman, *Vi*? I think so, your voice is pretty...soft, warm.”

“She is beautiful.”

“Yes...that’s the voice of love. By beautiful you mean she’s everything.”

When they were seated over their coffee, Ragnar and *Vi* on the davenport and Mary in a favored, well-used leather recliner nearby, with Pilot dozing at her feet, Mary said, “If I make you uncomfortable I can put on my dark glasses. But of course you won’t say so, will you? Although I don’t hear it in your voice...that discomfort.”

“I’m not at all uncomfortable,” *Vi* answered. “You’re not the first blind person I’ve met, Mary. I *have* seen a number of things you *would* hear in my voice. Blindness isn’t necessarily one of them, unless accompanied by a serious lack of medical care and starvation. I’d really like to know how you knew my mother.”

“I wish Martha had told me more about you. I met her at the Hayfield library years and years ago. I was young, an especially nervy displaced Californian, newly blind...and had recently learned braille. In searching for such books, I found there were next to none, and certainly none that satisfied my appetite for worthwhile literature. One day Martha overheard my woeful complaint to the librarian, and soon thereafter took it upon herself to see that the library was better stocked for the blind. She was a little demon about it. Anyway, we immediately became good friends. When I craved a work impossible to find in braille, she read to me...a book from her library...or Ragnar’s stacks. How I miss her, miss those times...not enough of them. We read and talked and...discussed many things. She was a lonely woman but she did do something about that loneliness. I was lonely too. Those times are gone

now...everything changed. Ah, we grow set in our ways, settle in...compromise until our comfort is a tight little hermitage of habit.”

“Who reads to you now?”

“No one...anymore...talking books. Well, not quite, Ragnar has sometimes read me hard-to-find passages...but he’s a busy man. I can’t ask that of him. You must know this very intelligent man is a marvel of strength and ingenuity...and kindness. Six years ago when my roof began to leak badly, he donated his precious time to expertly reshake it, in short order...one thousand eight hundred and sixty-four cedar shakes to keep my little pen dry.”

“*Ja.* Keeping Mary’s humor dry was well worth the effort. Her memory is one of the best I have ever known.”

“It has to be...so that I can recall passages I can’t live without. Your own memory is quite impressive, my friend.”

“I seem to be sitting in on a mutual admiration society.”

Mary bent an arm beneath her breast, propped her other elbow on the bent arm’s wrist and held her chin in her hand. Her thumb caressed the corner of a thin-lipped and sensitively supple mouth.

“Well, Viola, if you are anything like your mother you could easily become a member of this select society.”

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“Tell me about Mary,” Viola requested on the way home. “I’m insatiably curious. So far I’ve found no mention of her in Mama’s diaries. There’s something powerfully amiss beneath that blithely sardonic nature...something not entirely the result of her blindness.”

“Not entirely, Wild Vi. You are always quite insightful.” Ragnar picked up her hand and squeezed it. “You were good to offer to read to her. She will like that effort...I think especially the camaraderie. She has not many friends...her conspicuous intellect makes people shy away...she can also be impatient, mostly with the narrow-minded, but she is kind. A volunteer worker stops in once

a week to check on things and clean house for her. That woman, not her equal intellectually, is one close friend...I am another.”

“She adores *you*. But tell me more.”

Ragnar slowed to allow a tailgating semi to slide around him, then said, “It is a truth stranger than fiction, my girl. Not a good story...*herregud!* far from it. You have enough to worry about. I suppose I should not have taken you there so soon, but when I saw you today... I thought Mary’s acquaintance might be good for both of you. You will undoubtedly come across her named in Martha’s diaries.”

“You know I’ll find out one way or another. You did take me there, and you knew I’d be curious...might as well tell me.”

“More to think about?...all right, I will try to make it short.

“Mary was once a very idealistic, quite enthusiastic young English teacher working at a better-than-average high school in San Francisco. She loved literature -- still does, as you have seen -- and wanted her students to form good reading habits, concentrate on literary reading. You see, you have that in common.”

“Yes, but what on earth is she doing here, living in a quaint little cottage on a demanding amount of land?”

“Listen to me and you will find out. She fell in love with the school principal, another idealist, but did nothing about it until his wife ran off with one of the teachers. The principal had a spoiled son who loved his adulterous mother, hated his exacting father, and wanted to go to Harvard. He was a fairly decent student but lazy in Mary’s class, certain he had nothing to fear there because of her love for his father. After several warnings, she flunked him. Any idea of Harvard came to an end. The boy already resented Mary, because she was about to replace his runaway mother in his home, but when she flunked him he apparently became deranged and began to plan his vengeance. While alone with Mary, one night when the father was out, he pretended to forgive her and made them both a friendly drink. Mary was eager to have his approval and gladly drank with him. The drink was laced with a stolen drug used to stun animals.”

Ragnar looked over at Viola, whose hands were clenched, and said, "I am not in favor of going on with this."

"Oh, now you must. Please just get it over with."

"*Ja*, if I must. Eh...while Mary was lying on the floor, unable to move, he raped her...then...he held back her eyelids and dropped acid into her eyes, one small fatal drop at a time with an eyedropper. Sadly, the father, deprived of his arrested son, did not love her enough to have her without eyes. In fact, he told her that her face would always remind him of his imprisoned son. The publicity was more than she could stand and she fled north. The small farm of the widow Hillman, who went into a retirement home, was on the market and Mary bought it. The land has been somewhat clumsily custom-farmed for years. Mary lives sparingly on a dwindling inheritance from her parents. Both of whom were comfortable professors in the East.

"That is enough for now. Some day Mary may tell you whatever she chooses, or say nothing at all. She told me her story long ago...on a day when I discovered her drinking far too much whiskey and asked her to stop. It was very dangerous for her to be alone, blind, and drinking bad alcohol...delivered to her by an old bootlegger in the valley. She does not drink very much anymore."

Viola was silent the rest of the way, her mind running through a horror that had happened long ago but was for her completely new and vivid. She reasoned that the boy must have been deranged long before he was flunked, a monstrous sociopath. When they reached the house, she descended from the truck and stood rather distractedly clutching the mail Ragnar had handed her.

"Oh, Ragnar, the world is a dark place...poor Mary, poor Mama."

"But there is also light. Take your mail inside and come back to the truck. I will have you with me."

"I think...I need to go up and try to read Mama's diaries."

"The hell with the mail, please get back in my truck."

"Why are you so upset?"

"You know why. I cannot leave you as you are. *Faen!* I

thought only to give you a worthy friend but I did not think long enough. Get in.”

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Violea would have only a cup of vegetable soup, finishing that at Ragnar’s insistence. He had made himself a roast beef sandwich, and decided they would not sit in the living room or at his dining table, but eat in the kitchen’s breakfast nook and go straight to bed.

In the bedroom, Violea allowed him to deftly manage her unwholesome state as though caring for a sick child. He helped her remove her clothes, slipped her into one of his warm flannel shirts, then settled her within their usually unassailable Asgard. Recovering from an extended kiss, she lay drowsily snuggled against him. Hoping to make light of her still irrepressible gloominess, hoping to set his wary mind at ease, her softly arch voice belittled her tiresome condition.

“When you kiss me I don’t remember a thing. Where am I?”

Ragnar chuckled and said, “My clever fox, it does not matter where you are. You can rely on this Fletcher Henderson tune from America’s thirties: *Where there’s you there’s me.*”

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In the morning, Ragnar did not get up early as usual but lay with his back propped against his pillow, staring down at Violea.

“You are so beautiful, my sophisticated *lille* farm girl, soft and golden warm...a loving woman...but your head is a terrible problem. You see too much, know too much...are too empathic.”

“Isn’t that a lot like you?”

“*Nei*, different...I do not--”

“You *get on with it*. Yes...somehow you manage to see the whole thing and get marvelously on with it. I do try. Everywhere I look there’s a human story more startling than the wildest fiction.”

“Yesterday I made a mistake.”



“No you didn’t. I know what you wanted. You wanted me to get gainfully out of myself, and you had in mind the perfect catalyst...because the benefit could be reciprocal -- you gave Mary to me and me to Mary. I loved meeting her...am fascinated by her. What a triumph she is.”

“Her life was cast into a long dark tunnel...she has come through it by making her own light. She--”

“Gets on with it, yes?...and so gracefully. What an amazing exemplary handling of a terrible fate. That’s what you wanted me to see, isn’t it? I can read to her any time she wants. Reading good literature to someone who cherishes good literature is a very satisfying form of communication. No, it wasn’t a mistake, my darling.”

Her face was all smiling, wide-eyed reparation as she looked cheerfully at Ragnar. His demands were so often for her ongoing improvement; she must always remember to aptly demonstrate his success.

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“Before you finish with me I’ll be tough as your old boots,”  
Violea said at breakfast.

“I will never finish with you, and I do not want you tough as my boots,” Ragnar replied. He set before her a tempting plate of sunnyside-up eggs, two of them alongside a delicately butter-fried little trout.

“You mean I have to forever remain a work in progress?”

“You know what I meant.”

“You say that a lot.”

“You know a lot. Please eat everything on your plate.  
What are your plans for the day?”

“I haven’t had time to file a report yet, captain.”

Ragnar stood behind her a moment, laughing, then ran his fingers over the nape of her neck in some unknown speculation. He sat down, quite focused on the perfectly golden trout awaiting demolition on his plate. After a few bites, he looked up at Violea

with a question in his eyes.

“Will you be all right? Si Brown thinks he is well enough to do a little recreational fishing. He will probably need looking after. I have tentatively promised him a couple of days on the Metolius.”

Violea swallowed and offered a mocking smile. “And this perfect little trout is supposed to cajole me into giving you up.”

“You are not giving me up. Will you be all right?”

“Well, what am I supposed to say: no I won’t be all right? I’ll get into some dire predicament while you’re gone...run the farm into receivership...disgrace myself?”

“Do not even tease like that. Hugh and Roland are here, and I think you should be able to reach me on my cell phone if you need me.”

“So your asking was only a formality. You’re going.”

“If you told me not to, I would not go.”

“You know there’s practically nothing I would tell you not to do. Almost nothing.”

“Except go fishing.”

“You’ve gone away before.”

“Those trips were for specific reasons that involved you, but this time you are not feeling very--”

“Go...please go. It’ll be good for you...good for Si Brown. I can manage splendidly...by now run Ender Farm beyond even Alместad specifications. You’ll find that I’m the *reliable* Ender.”

“Do not condescend too low, my *lille* boss, you may trip over your tongue.”

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“Hugh, Hugh, your work is wonderful, wonderful! How good you are. I really had no idea...even though I thought I did. I read all day and into the night, so impressed I couldn’t put the weighty thing down. Of course, I’m not finished with it, but I had to dash over here and tell you what I thought.”

“You’re just hanging around here because Ragnar is gone. Did you know that he called me to tell me he was going fishing?”

Thereby obliquely giving permission to look after his inamorata. Incredible. Not the thing I would do. I'd hire a bodyguard. He probably called Roland too, pitting us against each other to protect his claim."

"Hugh! you are impossible...but I'm finally on to your mocking humor. Everything you've said is ridiculous. Your fine book, however, is far, far from it. I think it's going to be very well received."

"When I left that carefully weatherized scabble on your doorstep I had no idea you'd come bouncing back here so soon. I've been in a damn funk: postpartum blues. Of course, I don't consider it finished. Is it really any good?"

"I'll break into frothing encomiums every ten minutes if you like...that's what all writers really want. Unfortunately, not enough of them deserve that sort of response. Your work does."

"Let's celebrate. I'll take you out to dinner. You can invite Roland, if you feel unsafe alone with me."

"You're uncommonly amusing today. Well, I'm thoroughly delighted. Do you think he'd come?"

"Who?"

"Your concentration is off the boards -- my protection, your current rival, our poet in residence?" she teased.

"We'll see. I can call there...now that the Luddite has an earpiece."

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"Is this what is known as a steak house?" Roland asked.  
"And why am I here?"

"I've told you why you're here, Roland, after Hugh was too modest to explain. Must I put up with this schoolboy snark from you too?"

"I don't think I've ever been called modest," Hugh wryly pondered.

"A Snark is an imaginary animal dreamed up by Lewis Carroll, my fetching distant relative. I was once a schoolboy but

never a Snark. If I were a Snark I wouldn't exist," Roland put forth.

"Dodgson is your fetching distant relative?" Hugh said.

"Oh, the two of you are going to drive me up the wall. Help! Help! Let's drink a toast to Hugh's beautiful manuscript."

"How can I a drink a toast to something I've never laid eyes on?"

"Easy, just lift the glass to your continuously open mouth, tilt it and swallow," Hugh prompted.

"I can see this is going to go on all night," Viola bemoaned. "I suppose I'll simply have to get drunk and join in."

"No, no, you can't get drunk, you're driving," Roland sanely admonished.

"Well, we've finished eating, I'll drive you both to my place and we'll have a drink there."

"Only one?" Hugh said. "That seems rather puny after all the laudation I've been anticipating. Was it all a ruse to keep me from relocating in Boston?"

"Why should Viola care if you relocate in Boston?" Roland asked in a loud voice.

Viola was certain now that Hugh and Roland had drunk too much wine. She squinted across the shadowy table, at the wine carafe placed between the two of them; the second one and it was empty.

"Let's go, we're making spectacles of ourselves," she warned.

She was looking furtively around the darkened, candle-lit bistro-style restaurant, called *Booker's*, which must have come into being during the last few years. There were orange and blue neon lights in the front windows, mostly blue neon, which gave the indistinct faces of the Hayfield gentry, curiously looking on, the ghostly moon-glow paleness of haunting wraiths.

"Let's get out of here. I feel a distinct draft of hayseed halitosis from all those gaping mouths," Roland said.

"Sh, sh, *please*," Viola implored as she summoned the waiter.

"Whose paying for this disastrous repast?" Roland shouted.

“If you’ll both just take yourselves out to my truck I’ll pay and be with you in a minute.” Fortunately it was dark enough to hide her embarrassed blush as she signed the check.

Hugh and Roland were beyond embarrassment but marched obediently out of the restaurant, displaying the attempted hard concentration that allows the inebriated to imagine no one has noticed intoxication. She looked after them with a helpless smile, for it seemed as if they might at any moment break into a rowdy dance routine, Hugh’s very slight limp conclusively adding to the conspicuous singularity of their exit.

Crowded into Viola’s little canary and feeling no inhibitions, Roland began incoherently working through a stanza from an unfinished poem. Hugh, sitting next to Viola, looked at Roland then grimaced and rolled his eyes. He shrugged, sliding into a post-party mood, and said, “I can’t imagine why we did this, Lea. You’ve been wasted on two fools. Hell, it was my idea, wasn’t it?”

“Wasted, I believe, more accurately describes yourselves. It’s a little early for the maudlin stage, isn’t it?” As she spoke, Viola quickly dimmed her lights for a swiftly approaching car. Through most of the rest of their drive the road remained empty and dark.

Roland finally paused in his rambling and said, “Please speak for yourself, Sir Lang. I may be a little drunk but I am no fool.”

“You’d better just take us both home,” Hugh said.

“No, Roland has his truck at my place, remember? I’m going to make coffee and we can talk.”

“About what?”

“Anything...friendly talk, serious talk...whatever.”

“I don’t feel like it.”

“Are you ill?”

“No.”

“What’s wrong then?”

“Just don’t feel like talking.”

“Then you can lie on the davenport and listen to us.”

“Do you imagine that Roland is going to say anything of

interest?”

“My language is sparely measured, like my pen,” Roland protested.

“You don’t even write with a pen...do you?”

“My poetry is shaped with a number two lead pencil.”

“Christ! Lea, will you give me a drink at your house? You said you would.”

“That was before...Hugh, I don’t think--”

“Give me a drink and I’ll fall asleep.”

“By all means give him a drink,” Roland chimed in.

Finally inside Viola’s house, Roland became immediately prostrate in Ragnar’s favorite chair, his feet on the footrest as he sluggishly reentered his normal taciturnity. Hugh was gratefully horizontal on the long leather davenport, his dark eyes drowsy but following the actions of Viola. She occasionally turned around, sending him a comforting smile as she arranged firewood, finally striking a match.

“Have to locate my truck,” Roland muttered.

Hugh lifted his head and said, “You can’t hold your liquor, pal.”

“Not used to it...jars the image...raises hell with meter, funks the soul. Don’t see you dancing around...delivering a...dialectic.”

“I’m not that drunk, not on a little wine...just coming down from brain drain. I’m on the ascending path of Tao, approaching the esteemed inaction of Lao-Tse...the highest calling.”

Viola had remained on her knees, watching the fire. She stood up, replaced the screen and said, “There...nice. Now for the coffee.”

“You haven’t forgotten my Scotch?”

“Oh, Hugh--”

“Give him his damn Scotch,” Roland interrupted. “Like to see how he acts when he’s really drunk.”

“Want me to help you to your truck?” Hugh snidely taunted.

“Now come on, you two, stop circling each other for the kill. This is just a friendly little celebration, remember? Hugh, you

wrote something beautiful...and you've written beautiful things, Roland, so why don't we just share a little bonhomie?"

"Not if it comes in a bottle," Roland said.

"All right, my friends, is it safe to leave you long enough to make the coffee and--"

"And my drink, please," Hugh requested. "I'll drink it like a pious choirboy."

"Don't try to sing like one," Roland pleaded, "my damn head hurts."

"I'll get you an aspirin," Viola called as she left the room.

When Roland had downed an aspirin and some coffee, he said, "I have a strong feeling I will need to apologize profusely tomorrow."

"Apologize for nothing you can't help," Hugh advised. He was more content now, propped up on a large pillow and pacified by relenting Viola's beneficent offering of Scotch and water.

Bugsy hurried into the room, as if late for an appointment, his tail up and heading straight for Roland. He climbed up on the footstool and sniffed Roland's shoes with delicate fascination.

"He isn't used to street shoes," Viola explained.

"Shall I take them off? Hugh's wearing his."

"That's all right. You're both exempt."

Roland reached out to pet Bugsy, who leapt down and ran away. "Silly cat."

Roland sent Viola an odd questioning look. She was now sitting on her customary cushion by the fire, at last enjoying her own Scotch and water, without apology, for she had drunk very little wine at the restaurant, making certain they would all get home safely. Despite the uninhibited volatility of her companions, she felt a reassuring happiness and contentment in their company. Pondering what particular thing Roland had on his disarranged mind, she said, "Roland, you're staring at me."

"Don't stare at her," Hugh warned, "It's offensive."

"I was wondering if you'd heard from Virginia."

"Not yet," Viola answered, continuing to sip her Scotch.

“I’m afraid I was a little rough on her...but...she encouraged me and...apparently enjoyed it.”

“What did you do, violate her person?” Hugh chaffed, clearly assuming he was being outrageous.

“Damn near...except that I was the one eagerly seduced. Goddammit, pounding on my door like that while I was right in the middle of something difficult. She virtually asked for it...and got it.”

Hugh straightened up and looked at Roland. “Jesus, an entirely new image of you is forming in my head. I assumed you were past the goatish phase...had finally achieved a celibate poetic nirvana...of sorts. How disappointing.”

“Sorry, I’m not a monkish saint, although minor research reveals plenty of debauchery in those arcane old charnel houses. We’re all of us pitifully driven animals...for most of whom healthy sex is immensely important...well, from time to time. You’re the celibate one, aren’t you?”

Hugh glanced at Viola and said, “Don’t get too personal, Roland. I’m not the one baring my libido here. Sickness destroys desire like water on fire.”

“A rhyme, how memorable.”

“Forget it, Roland.”

“You needn’t explain anyway. I’ve been there.”

Hugh turned penetrating eyes on silent Viola and held her dissenting gaze quite steadily. “Our obviously smitten maid of the manor is the only one here both mentally and physically in love. You haven’t said a word, Lea.”

“And I’m not going to, unless you change the subject.

“I have learned a great deal from your brilliantly deduced conclusions about China, Hugh. I’m looking forward to reading the rest.”

“Yes, tell us about that and stay off sacred territory,” Roland advised.

“China is grooming and booming and birthing, devouring every resource near and far while belching toxic fumes into the



biosphere. It has joined the Capitalist Tooth and Nail Club and the product-mad facilitating hordes...the former soon to become rogue dinosaurs of disaster, the latter merely asphyxiated, frozen or desiccated.” Hugh lay back and closed his eyes.

“Hardly nuanced but dismally poetic,” Roland adjudged.

“What conclusion did you finally reach? You left that to the reader. Is there no hope?”

“I’m tired, Lea.”

“Now he’s drunk,” Roland said.

“Dammit, I said I’m tired. I know how to drink and I’m not that drunk, you bibulous novice.”

“Novice? I’m quite a bit older than you. Wine gets to me. If you don’t want to answer Viola, maybe you should...a...crash.”

“Look, there’s only one thing China could do to stop the path it’s on, one last great leap, this time successful, that would give it a healthy moral standard and make it an example for the world. It would have to take an entirely new path, but China’s leaders are terrified of any change that radical. It would have to leap right over us by profiting from our mistakes instead of our capital. With a brave enough leadership, China could be a forerunner of positive change. Its leaders have the power to do that. They could do it faster than we can with our stultifying, time-consuming checks and balances and corporate interference -- in this case, our legislation’s the downside of democracy -- except they’re inveterate conformists and don’t know how to use their power so creatively. That’s why their hellbent economy runs parallel to a trammeling political fist. Get it while you can before the sky falls, but keep your mouth shut. It’s the exact reverse of what my son wants: eco-friendly sources of energy that create prideful employment and a green world handled with active reverence. China wants what they think we have. In a way you can’t blame them. It appears they’re getting closer to the way we used to be and, quite ominously, we’re getting closer to the way they used to be. China is a beautiful and varied country with a sizeable aggregation of very old, uniquely interesting histories, but it has a staggering population and too

much poverty. Most Chinese officials, if asked in confidence what China's main problem is, would instantly say: *too many people*. But suddenly they've got a materialistic class of aggressive rich young entrepreneurs; for some it looks rosy, but just as suddenly the sky is gone and what the hell happened to the water? The only reason they care that our credit economy is failing and the good times slipping away from us is that they now finance our materialism. But they're also in a position to avenge their past if we get too careless. After all, weren't those Western gunboats up their rivers a while back, sniffing around for lucre, drugging and terrorizing the populace? Full speed ahead Han people. So unless we get very inventive very fast, we're heading straight for a mortally wounded biosphere, and a population downgrade that will finally provide all of us with total equality; but whoever is alive at that point will be living in conditions far worse than the Stone Age."

"I'd love to hear what you have to tell us when you're not swimming in booze," Roland said.

"You can read the unabridged version when his new book is published."

"This event has all been somewhat interesting, my fellow celebrants, but I think I will have to leave now...before I sober up enough to sink into the inevitable hangover."

"I'll follow you in my truck on the old road, Roland. Now please don't be offended, you'll be doing me a favor. I'll be able to sleep without imagining that you've run into a tree or driven off a cliff."

"There are no cliffs on the way to my place...on either road."

"But you see, you might not be on the way to your place."

"Hell, I'm not that drunk."

"Shall I come too?" Hugh asked with no sign of interest.

"No, just stay here and rest. I'll attend to you later."

"Sounds promising." Hugh lay back down and closed his eyes. Viola gently covered him with the afghan lying over the back of the davenport. She was certain he would be asleep before she and Roland were even out the door.

Roland drove very slowly and cautiously, but with surprising accuracy, as if daring her to find any loss of faculty. Departing his truck, he waved her off with a downward thrust of his hand and disappeared into his cottage. He would probably not feel very creative in the morning.

She had just put her truck inside the garage and closed the door when a tall figure advanced from the penumbra of the yard light: her longed-for silver-haired Norseman, as if summoned from the wintry folds of the nocturnal stratosphere by sheer wishful thinking. Here was the physical signification of something she had done right; here within range and sauntering toward her the epitome of the rational and sound, of loving humor, wit without hurtful sarcasm. Cast alongside the lingering experiences of this uncommon evening, the salient reasons for his powerful attraction were sharply intensified, leaving her breathless. She hurried to meet him, consumed with warmly spreading relief, a boundless joy.

Fairly leaping into his shearling-covered arms, she cried, "I'm so glad to see you, so glad, *so glad!*"

He laughed and said, "For this, I will go away more often."

"Before you kiss me you should know that I had a little wine in Hayfield with Roland and Hugh, and a glass of Scotch when I got home."

"Why tell me this? You do not have to report to me, Wild Vi."

"But you see...Hugh is asleep on my davenport."

"Ah...you can tell me about that while we walk to my place. Are your shoes up to it?"

"Yes, yes, see? I just put on my loafers."

"Hugh was very tired, probably drank a little too much -- Roland certainly did. I'm not sure I should leave Hugh lying there."

"He is an adult, he will be fine...for a while at least. He probably needs to sleep."

"But how will he get home?"

"If you want, go leave him a note. Tell him to call me in the

morning and I will take him home.”

“All right. Come and wait for me.”

Viola found Hugh sound asleep and still covered. She carefully pulled off his shoes and stuck her note inside one of them and her cell phone in the other, placing them on the floor below his head. He looked so peaceful her heart stirred with compassion. Ragnar was quietly raking up the coals in the fireplace and adding another log. They tiptoed out and walked away from the yard lights into the inky blue darkness.

When she stopped to look up at the fingernail moon, tipped behind thin gray threads of cloud, his fingers tightened around her ribs. “I want my girl,” his low voice entreated. He turned her into his arms for a long kiss, freshly cold then warm and arousing.

Unable to see well in the darkness, she stroked his indistinct face with her fingertips, cold whiskery skin. “Umm, *brennevin*.”

“And your flavor is Scotch but you are not at all drunk. How was your evening? You have on your pretty wool dress but no coat...and you are shivering. Why did we not get you a coat? Maybe I was enjoying looking at you too much.”

He took off his big coat and wrapped her in it. “Ragnar, it weighs a ton!” she cried, laughing so elatedly she knew his shadowy smile was mostly for her effusive pleasure at his return.

“I did have a coat...then, when I went out again, I had heat in my truck. I was in a hurry to follow Roland, driving himself back to his place. He isn’t used to drinking very much...tries to avoid depressants. I felt responsible because we invited him. I’m sure at the beginning he drank merely to be congenial; then of course the wine promoted more drinking...as it always does when men begin trading insults.”

“Before a very desirable audience. But you were a good caretaker.”

As they walked along hand in hand, Viola explained her unusual evening, reliving her amusing experiences with bubbly, humorously detailed enthusiasm, then starting at the beginning: Hugh’s manuscript discovered on her doorstep on the morning

after Ragnar's departure.

At his cabin, after coats and shoes were removed, he lifted her once more into his arms. She laid her cold face against his flannel shirt and muttered, "You smell of the cab of your truck...of fish...of the sweet river...of pine trees and mountains and--" His impatient mouth had silenced hers, but in a while she drew back, uttering, "You taste of my Norseman, back from far ultima Thule. You taste of my darling."

"You are that," he said, carrying her to his bed.

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Virginia's e-mail arrived at last and Viola read: *I want to thank you heaps for putting up with your interloping friend and colleague. I suppose I must somehow face the unpleasant realization that I am not going to have you back with us. But if you should ever change your mind...ah well, you know the rest. Sylvie and I are still, of course, talking about lovely Ender Farm and its astonishing residents. Marcus sent Sylvie a Valentine card, which my pining princess carries around in her purse -- I have not been allowed to peruse the message therein, but cannot deny intense curiosity. I myself am pining, Viola. I wish I had gotten off to a better start with Roland. He was right, everything he shouted at me was true. You see Nevil had demoralized me before I left London, and I felt old and, yes, desperate. Roland, at one point in our crazy encounter, actually told me I was attractive. However, I'm sure he's lost all regard for me, if he ever had any. He could not possibly have any respect for me after the way I acted, throwing myself at him. I don't suppose he's mentioned me at all. You see, lying alone in my bed at night with plenty of time to contend with insomnia, I've come to realize that I'm terribly attracted to him. I love his poems and I even adore his irascible façade. Surprisingly, he's quite a good lover -- astonishing for such a hermit. I was made quite happy. Oh what a wrench, and how I miss that aspect as well. But you were quite right: I cannot imagine living in his cottage as a sort of housekeeper, patiently waiting for his creative indifference to subside for a few hours; not that he would ever let me anyway. I wish I had an address for him. I could at least apologize -- even so, I don't regret what I did. I'm afraid I was awfully jealous of your recent happiness, still am. For that, I sincerely apologize, because you deserve every bit of it. In regard to*

*all of this madness, I'm sure you thought I acted like a wonky idiot. Well, my dear, tolerant friend, please keep in touch with us, and please give my best to Ragnar -- I simply could not bring myself to dislike him, even for stealing you away; in fact, I'm actually fondly fascinated. His character is solidly true and natural, and yet there's something magical about him, but don't tell him I wrote that. Thank you for everything. Could we really come and see you in the late summer, or more likely the fall? Love for now, Virginia*

Disregarding any argument Virginia might have put forth, Viola printed out a copy of the message and laid it on her desk. Her fingers tapped thoughtfully on the printout as she stared out her window. Virginia knew perfectly well that she could send a letter to Roland care of Ender Farm. It therefore seemed clear to Viola that the comment about his address was intended to reach Roland's ears by her own efforts.

At last the sun was fully shining again, but upon a land made wet from a night of near-freezing rain. Below, every earthly thing winked and sparkled with cold jewel-like droplets. The brave new buds on the shrunken and gnarly old fruit trees appeared to have swollen ever so slightly. Viola hoped they would not be too badly discouraged by a frosty setback. She carried her telling printout downstairs and stood beside the coatrack at the back door, folding Virginia's message into quarters and slipping it into her coat pocket.

Not until she was astride Mariner did she pull out her cell phone and call Roland, so certain was she that he would not refuse a visit.

"Roland, are you unapproachably engrossed in something? I'm on my way over. I've heard from Virginia."

"Will you settle for reheated coffee?"

Finally clasped within Roland's lumpy sofa, Viola said, "I'm going to give you a nice old davenport in perfect condition, from Daddy's bedroom, hardly sat upon. It's actually in the way, and I intend to rearrange the room for guests. This abomination you have here always tries to swallow me."

"You won't mind seeing me on your father's davenport?"

"No, I think he rarely sat on it. You resemble him so much,

physically that is, it seems to me it already belongs to you.”

“I don’t know what that means but I’ll let it pass...and think about it later. I’ll take the damn thing if it makes you happy.”

Roland got out of his easy chair and refilled Viola’s mug, setting the insulated pitcher of coffee back on a black-tarnished, dented silver tray. He appeared to have quickly changed from his regular work sweats, for he was wearing a creased pair of brown corduroy slacks and a moss-green Shetland sweater, which smelled faintly of moth balls. He once said he always wore sweats when working at his desk. Studying him, she thought this was what her father would have looked like if he had lived to be Roland’s age, Roland being about the same age as Ragnar. His face was more lined than Ragnar’s -- it must be a genetic proclivity, for Ragnar had certainly spent more of his life out-of-doors. Roland’s face bore distinct signs of the ravages he had been through -- the deeply furrowed brow and angle-bracket lines at the corners of his mouth, corners which, in curving connately toward a dark-whiskered chin, more often than not gave an inaccurate impression of disdain. She had noticed that the puffed flesh frequently present beneath his steadily overworked eyes was prone to disappear with rest. The pale gray at his temples enhanced the slightly gray-ticked oily jet sheen of his black hair. While manifesting hardship, his face was still striking, the eyes evincing an inexorably intense intellect, a glinting dark blue so like her sardonic father’s she was continually fascinated, often stunned. The twisting, puckering revelations of his mouth, signaling harsh unvoiced sentiments or mocking humor, were absolutely reminiscent of her father.

An anticipated question revealed itself in Roland’s markedly petitioning sapphire eyes, but he would not broach the subject of Virginia. Viola went to her coat, hanging over a kitchen chair, and came back with the folded printout. His curious eyes flashed expectantly over the unfolded paper. She smoothed it and held it out, noticing for the first time that his right hand was scarred, likely another war wound. He read her offering slowly, handed it back and looked at her with an expression both contentious and amused.

“So, you’ve performed your duty coming here.” Casting himself back into his chair, he fell silent.

“Yes.” No point in arguing over what Virginia intended.

“In the fall...hmm. Then she can stay with me a few days, see how she likes housekeeping.” He laughed. “That will cure her of any imagined paradisiacal arrangement.”

“Roland, don’t you feel a little more for her than that?”

“She was grateful enough to be agreeable in bed -- a very memorable performance. What else do I know of her? She’s your friend, that counts for something -- I trust your judgment. Unsurprisingly, I feel a few incipient stirrings...but nothing close to those I have for my landlady. What foolishness...I’d have to stand in line, wouldn’t I? Pardon my crass attempt at humor. Ragnar wouldn’t tolerate this at all.”

“Must you refer to me as your *landlady*?”

“A droll mistake. I’ll never say it again.”

“Aren’t you pleased that Virginia wanted to apologize?”

“She should have. I know she is not a vulgar person, if that is what she meant. She’s an aging creature, with all the miseries of that irreversible condition...like all the rest of us.”

“Oh, Roland, have you no more compassion than that?”

“What the hell am I supposed to do, long for her eternal presence? You know that isn’t going to happen. Neither of us will change our lives. I like what I have here. I’m quite content, especially since you’ve appeared on the scene and inveigled me out of my burrow. Maybe I incline to you because it’s in our Ender blood...no, it’s who you are.”

“You prefer the rewards of the impossible. You can have the dear old impossible any way you want it: the pleasure-dome of Kublai Khan; a splendid mirage in the desert; the banishment of time -- all without lifting a finger.”

“Not quite, I have to lift my fingers to make poetry. But you’re right...another thing I so admire in you: you know all about the magic of the impossible; you see its rewards and are able to express them in the most appealing ways. Yes, you too are the



beguiling impossible, desideratum for your son's father, and for myself. Hugh is aware -- rather instinctively, quite unwillingly -- of his forfeiture. His illness has, fortunately in this case, prevented him from fully realizing how much in love with you he is...or how it makes him ill-tempered and even cruel."

"Don't say that. It mustn't be true and it's terribly painful."

"Your pain, directly proportional to the truth."

"I came here because I believed that you cared a little for Virginia -- you certainly seemed concerned about her the other night. I wanted to do something useful...not hear these things."

"You did what you were expected to do. Thank you, I do care a little for Virginia -- she can write me if she wants. I can't bear to see you unhappy, and therefore should have kept my mouth shut...usually I do. Meanwhile, I'll look forward to next autumn's compensations...if I chance to be alive then. As long as you stay here with us, we'll be content enough...perhaps. You complement our lost Martha...as sweet butter enhances bread...shared bread our deliverance. That memory is good. She was our beloved and generous benefactress of the possible."

Violea rode home clicking her tongue and nodding her head in perplexing thought, nearly exclaiming aloud to herself. Roland had been a provocative mixture of camp, cynicism, and outspoken sincerity. His acute observation of Hugh had pierced her heart, his praise of her mother soon acting as an emollient. But worry over Hugh persisted. She remembered that Marcus had intimated the suspected turmoil in his father. Probably this visit to Roland had been a misadventure. She was not inclined to tell Ragnar that Roland had fancifully expressed amorous feelings for her, a caprice unfortunately advanced through the inadvertent agency of e-mail from Virginia. She had finally convinced herself that his untimely declaration must be largely self-amusing hyperbole.

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Within two days of her visit to Roland, Violea was in far worse trouble than her attempt to promote Virginia had incurred.

Too late, she realized that she had done something inexcusable, from which she might not recover. How could she have been as insensitive and blunted in her own thinking as she had sometimes accused others of being? Just before she sank into remorse and regret so devastating that any self-mockery would seem a luxury of clear thinking, she briefly considered herself to be a hapless protégé of the *Quiet American*: this in the matter of good intentions gone awry.

It all began when, while pausing on a Hayfield sidewalk, she looked up and found that she was standing right in front of the local employment office. How convenient. Why did she not simply go in and order up a worker for Ender Farm, a permanent employee who could free Ragnar from some of the more routine and time-consuming efforts that took so much of his time? Very soon explaining the farm's need to an older, harried employment agent, while seated before his cluttered desk, she added that she would even be willing to house the worker in one of the farm's cabins. These huts, on the far edge of the brake, had once been inhabited by hop pickers when the farm grew hops many years past. The neglected cabins were likely to be in terrible disrepair, but one of them could certainly be fixed up comfortably enough to billet a strong young bachelor who did not mind roughing it a bit for a fair wage. Fixedly staring at her, the white-haired office manager, who had greeted her and introduced himself as Eric Peterson when she came in, continued to study her with an oddly perplexed expression that appeared to include surprise; nevertheless, he promised that he would get back to her if the right candidate showed up in his files, could be located, and was presently available for work.

For several days she heard nothing more, and then, after two days of total silence from Ragnar, she was stricken with a sinking malaise, a fearful sense of something ominous about to descend. She had called several times and found that Ragnar, who always responded promptly, refused to answer her call. In the evening, she put on her outdoor clothes and walked over to his cabin. The jagged black sky threatened rain or sleet and there was a cold wind

blowing as she climbed up onto his deck. At that moment, she remembered that it was Ragnar's chess night, but the porch light, which was normally left burning, especially on Wednesday nights, was not on. She muttered softly, "Oh damn, I've done it again."

As she was turning to leave, the deck light flashed on and the door opened. Ragnar stood before her without any greeting, his tall silhouette blocking most of the light at his back, so that she could not clearly make out but only intuit his demeanor. That was enough. At this point in their relationship she could so readily sense the vibrations of his temperament, usually dependably even and agreeable, that the shock of his anger was like a painful blow.

"Oh...I just remembered it was Wednesday...so I was going to go back to the house."

"*Ja*, you had better."

"What is it, Ragnar? It's as if I don't know you."

"And as if I do not know you."

"Let me come in, please."

"*Nei*, it is better if you go, better if I am not around you now."

"Please...I don't understand why you're so angry."

"*Ja*, I can be angry...even at you, Wild Vi. Go back to your house and think about why that is. I do not want to be around you now...not with this much anger. Go."

"Is it...it can't be about the employment agency?"

"*Herregud! Faen!* I will let you know when I feel more like talking." Ragnar stepped back and closed his door.

Violea's eyes ran freely as she stumbled toward the house. Her cherished mainstay had cast her away as carelessly as an old shoe.

"All of the love gone, all of the love just for one foolish mistake," she whimpered, bawling until she could hardly see where to step.

Once inside the house, she paced up and down still in her coat, so distraught she had begun to wring her hands. She needed to talk, oh how she needed to hear another voice, a considerate,

understanding voice -- the voice of Ragnar. Desperate, she called Hugh, explaining what she had done. How could it possibly be about the employment thing? she implored, childishly seeking consolation while fully aware of her dishonesty.

“Christ, Lea, if you wanted to bring him down why didn’t you just shoot him in both legs? And by the way, Eric Peterson is Ragnar’s chief employment agent, the man he does business with when he needs a worker for a special job.”

“Oh, God, oh, God,” she moaned.”

“Now get ahold of yourself. You know Ragnar, and you know that he’ll talk to you when he’s ready. You, my poor little fool, will just have to wait until that happens. If I were really mean-spirited, I’d say you’d done yourself in, but I haven’t the slightest doubt that he sent you away for the opposite reason.”

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Viola called Mary Fuller and explained that she had so enjoyed meeting her she wanted to visit again, perhaps to share some literary treasure by reading aloud to her. “I really miss that high level of camaraderie,” she explained, trying not to sound as desperate as she felt. Mary responded with warm enthusiasm and told her to come any time. “You may have guessed I’m always available,” she encouraged, with a remarkably unencumbered ring of laughter that shamed Viola into further self-reproach.

Within the hour she was on her way to Mary Fuller’s nobly fading, dark old fairy-tale cottage. What would Mary choose for her to read, she wondered, really more desirous of Mary’s voice than her own.

“*The Eve of St. Agnes?*” Viola said, setting down her tea mug.

“Yes...I believe I have it nearly memorized, but I’d like to hear it recited in the euphonious timbre of your scholarly voice.”

“What intimidating flattery,” Viola replied with some misgiving. She was somewhat nervously considering the special importance that refined sound held for Mary. “It’s a long time since I felt very scholarly.”

“But it’s in your voice...except today there’s something else, a little strain, I believe. Maybe this reading will be good for you.”

Lanky, dark-haired Mary was settled back in her black leather easy chair, with slumbering, grunting, hoary Pilot lying on the floor near the footrest. She wore palest gray wool slacks and a thick sweater of the same color, which repeated the authentic streak of light gray partially crowning her high forehead. All of her simple clothes were laid out on an ample table in her bedroom, according to their use and color, she had explained, adding that she had not enough clothes to cause a delaying confusion when she dressed, and liked it that way.

Sitting at the end of the creaking leather davenport and reading with the book raised to the correct distance from her glasses, Viola found oral interpretation faintly reminiscent of a long ago small college seminar. She read with as much nuanced attention to the other-worldly mystery of this romantic poem as could be achieved in her present spent condition. Keats always astonished, although she much preferred his odes. As to the exquisite outpourings of his short creative life, she thought perhaps it was to some degree the overarching awareness of his fatally inescapable family illness, tuberculosis, that facilitated his singular poetic vision of the mysterious natural world of man and earth. Such refined perception, shorn of life’s wasted years, was at the time very likely misunderstood by most, perhaps vilified by the obtuse. In any age, an affliction threatening to close one down prematurely could hasten, sensuously and aesthetically, inherently exceptional insight.

She had almost finished, immersed in the poem now, yet with a pervasive personal misery heightened and growing more prominent. When she reached the line: *Awake! Arise! My love, and fearless be, / For o’er the southern moors I have a home for thee.*, her voice broke and she stumbled into: *She hurried at his words, beset with fears, / For there were sleeping dragons all around,...* She glanced up at Mary -- who, at the change in her reader’s voice, had lifted her head from the back of her reclining chair -- then cleared her dry throat and

proceeded carefully to the end of the poem.

“There’s a promise in those *ages long ago*...which triumphs over the last cold word. We have the lovers fleeing in the storm, as near to a positive ending as Keats could fashion. Thank you Viola, you inflect with delicate perception...even when troubled by something.”

“I’m sorry. To you that would be obvious I suppose.”

“It didn’t harm the reading...may have helped it in some ways.”

“With your acute understanding, it would be easy to blurt out something personal.”

“By all means. What am I good for if not as a listener?”

“Good for much more than that, Mary...but since you’re so aware of my...state...maybe I could...”

Viola then found herself recounting what she had done to Ragnar by her insensitive rush into presumed helpfulness.

“So you see I’ve stuck my nose in where it certainly didn’t belong...never bothered to consult him...then...devalued a business relationship by overriding his authority...cast aspersions on his performance, even belittled his judgment and strength. God, I’ve really--”

“But, Viola...you’ve come to know very well what you appear to have done, and that’s exactly what he wanted you to see...not his anger but your carelessness...which I suppose could be excused as mainly an impulsive act of exuberance...in the most unfortunate sense.”

“Yes...I’ve never seen him so angry.”

“Anger, of course, in proportion to his love for you...ah, the disappointment at imperfection in the loved one. I certainly heard that love from him the other day. He wouldn’t want you near such anger, I’m sure...would much prefer you to think about it away from him...which is just what you’ve done.”

“I’m still miserable, Mary. After all these years of believing myself to be carefully considerate of others, I flatlined on the most important person in my life. Banishment is...incredibly painful.”

“Yes, separation from the beloved, however short, is a most unbearable punishment. In your case it won’t be for very long.”

Remembering Mary’s history, Viola weighed the pain of separation that Mary must have experienced. Perhaps for a time it had been worse than finding herself blinded. Her courageous new friend was never to be reunited with the man she had loved, who had turned out faithless.

When Viola finally drove away from Mary’s, she was not necessarily feeling better about Ragnar, but very thankful to have acquired such a marvelous friend. A fortunate acquisition that, she reminded herself, was the result of Ragnar’s concern for her, and for Mary.

In the evening she decided to send an e-mail to Ragnar, and wrote: *Forgive me, my darling, I only meant to do something good; instead, I did a stupid, spur-of-the-moment, short-sighted thing. It didn’t take me long to fully understand my error. Now I suffer over perhaps irreparable damage, over how easy I’ve made it for you to stay away from my miserable self. Your devastated Wild Vi*

Viola sat at her desk, leaning on her hands and staring down into the garden. The outdoor light made very sharp dark shadows and unnaturally bright surfaces as it streamed over the mournfully etiolated winter plants. Such chiaroscuro austerity constrained perspective, stark and inescapable, abetting the hopeless feeling of loneliness.

She could neither look at her writing nor write, presently cast down by the seeming futility of the process. Objective literary speculation briefly supplanted awaited absolution. There was the cathartic simultaneity of love and death connoted by figurative language -- *liebestod*. Head and heart could embrace the beauty of prime myth, myth formed by the earliest primal initiative, which sought to capture the mystery of life in a net of universal metaphor, and thereby delineate and vivify mankind’s yearning quest; allegory as precept, a Tristram-Arthurian template for the romantic age of noble conduct. Modern counterfeit versions of the redeeming emotion named love were abundantly prosaic, facile, and vulgar.

Authentic love was presently in need of an exclusive metaphor. But this was not her personal difficulty, to which she incurably returned. Her own sweet-riving paradox was the conflation of love's sublime release with its ineluctable dependence -- the price of love.

She was still sitting in her den nearly an hour later, when Ragnar entered her house and noiselessly appeared beside her desk. Her unresolved fate had at last materialized.

She looked up with surprise, some consternation, but joy at his presence, whatever presence he saw fit to display, his face, hungry and tired, hardly reminiscent of anything for its lack of serenity. She was afraid to let her impulsive tongue form a single word, not even an incoherent murmur, thus mirroring his own examining silence. His hands swiftly nullified any speculation, gathering her up.

Ducking the curving alcove doorway, he stepped into her bedroom and deposited her on the edge of the high four-poster, then stood back. His overwhelming frame was rendered less imposing by settling below her on one bent knee. For a moment he was completely still, his left hand spread over his horizontally balanced thigh, very much as if halted mid-action by a sudden keen appraisal. Was this a posture of reevaluation? The penetrating blue-gray eyes, the equivocal mouth, might now convey conditional acceptance, or more likely charitable resignation. She blinked and tried to see. What was it that she was supposed to understand? *Have I fallen so far in your eyes?* she wanted to cry out. Her own eyes were opened wide and mesmerized by his steady scrutiny. She gradually realized that he was simply enjoying her, after a miserable separation. He threw back his head and briefly closed his eyes. When the chert gaze again fell upon her, his mouth resumed its familiar cast of smoothness, that princely self-command that could never exist alongside anger. Beholden, she pronounced his name as an invitation, the end of their unbearable estrangement. He gently grasped her ankle and pulled her down into his arms, then resolutely set about removing her clothes. A frenzy of incaution



overtook her; her hands shook as she clumsily tried to unbutton his shirt. When they were both fully unencumbered, he placed her back on the bed.

Resting his back against the pillows, he held her easily astride, emboldening her covetous release with unconstrained pleasure. Their renewed exchange had exceeded mere selfish impetus, becoming a coition of sublimely compassionate intimacy. When his hand grasped her neck to bring her thrown-back head forward, she offered a dazed smile, her assenting eyes vaguely aware that he wanted her to keep their ensuing physical completion. Her sense-diminished vision flared and effusively burned with an adrenaline-distorted glimpse of selves in ravishing climax. She hovered at the pinnacle of wild joy: the drug of choice, as myriad numbers had attested. Here and now, choice was not a haze of escape, but a zealous coupling. Both fulfilled, he gripped her tousled hair, tugged her head back and eased himself away from her, exhaling a deep intake of breath. They rested supine and speechless, not touching until their breathing slowed; then he drew her back against his warm damp flesh, threading pleased fingers through her tangled hair and fitting her head beneath his chin.

She was possessed so completely, had so completely taken his consuming self into her, she could utter nothing conciliatory, propose nothing more in her defense; perhaps enough had been said.

In the measured voice of assurance, of complete access and satisfaction, his few amused and contrary words ended their short alienation: "You see how easy it is to stay away from you."

She laughed softly with the inspiriting reward of that voice, his lightly mocking irony alluding to her penitent e-mail. Her gently inveigling laughter was as soon answered by a kiss, another and then another in lingering repetition. With serious smiles, they continued to savor the enduring stimulus of renewed intimacy.

"Please let me just this once ask to be forgiven."

"I have forgiven you, the moment you understood. That is why I am here, to have you, have *us*...hold onto all of this and stop

wasting time.”

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Violea had crept away from Ragnar’s sleeping body at an hour outrageously early for her. She was finishing the preparation of his breakfast when he came into her kitchen, throwing back his head and shoulders in a luxurious stretch, then yawning.

“I would have cooked for you, *lille* early bird.”

“I thought it was my turn to.” She handed him a mug of coffee.

“As long as it is not kedgeree. Mm...good coffee. What is all of that stuff?...smells tempting.”

She laughed with secure, realigned happiness, and said in a warm, slow voice, “I couldn’t fail at any of this, could I?”

He checked inside the pans atop her stove: crispy fish cakes, fried potatoes and onions, delicately poached eggs, and gently warming old-fashioned biscuits to be served with creamy sage and pepper gravy.

“*Herregud*, when did you learn to make fish cakes? Let us plate this feast, I am starved.”

When they had finished eating in the breakfast nook, she said, “I’ll clean up this mess while you make a fire in the living room.”

“*Nei*, I have to help here first...pay for this uncommon common food by rolling up my sleeves.”

“You’ve already paid...oh how you’ve paid. Go make the fire and settle yourself on the davenport. Please let me do this.”

Ragnar was stretched out on the davenport and staring into the snapping fire when she came into the living room and handed him a mug of steaming coffee. She sat down and watched him drink, then snuggled against him in silence, occasionally turning her head to look at him.

“Something is on your mind...always that is so, but what now?”

She sat up and rubbed her eyes.

“I’ve been thinking...I wonder if you’d...if we should...you’ve never said anything...but I wanted to ask if you’d...”

He sat up rapidly and said, “*Herregud*, what is this? I have never heard you more uncertain.”

She stroked his wrist bone and looked into his questioning eyes.

“Ragnar...I could still have a child if you wanted--”

“*Nei*, you can forget that, all of that stress on your beautifully aging body...not to mention years of...what gave you this idea? My worldly woman, you are not longing for a child at your age?”

“Not especially...I only wanted you to have a chance to--”

“You are all the family I need...*you*, woman-child. Your amazing generosity is very much appreciated but I have no need of fatherhood.”

“Yes, as long as you won’t regret...I suppose you’re right. I could never produce another Ragnar anyway.”

“Or another Wild Vi. Everything is fine the way it is...more than fine, is it not?”

“Yes,” she said, with self-mocking laughter, “but I had to ask.”

“Are you satisfied now?”

“Yes, very. Sometimes I...I wonder why you put up with me.”

“With this relationship comes a challenging project: to see if it is possible to end the habit of self-abuse in the beloved.”

She puzzled before her response. “Like an experiment?”

“I said a challenging project. I expect a positive result.”

“You’re very sure of yourself.”

“More sure of you. You are frowning.”

“There was just one other thing...I mean that I can think of at the moment. Should I...should I straighten things out with Eric Peterson?” She had watched carefully upon suggesting this, but his face retained good-humored equanimity.

“*Nei*, I have taken care of that.” He touched the tip of her nose with the knuckle of his bent index finger, and said, “Keep this

busy nose out of it. Any reasonable thing you want done I will do...but think about it before you decide, Wild Vi...and talk to me first.”

“I love you,” she intended as explanation; wrongly placed and seeming too facile, a truthful diversion by which he was not diverted.

“*Ja*, be careful with that pretty excuse...at least it may have caused you to make a decent breakfast.”

Her mouth was agape, then gasps of laughter ensued as she tried to drag him from the davenport, a liberating playfulness that fed upon itself. In the debilitating throes of his own laughter, he ended her mischievous test of endurance, swiftly capturing her in a restraining embrace, but carefully indulgent and with the pleasure of both in mind.

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March was fast approaching when one day Viola looked out her breakfast nook window and watched a large truck loaded with lumber slowly moving beyond the outbuildings and using the soggy but now passable field road to travel around the edge of the brake. She quickly put on her coat, for the winds were fiercely blowing. As so often portrayed in the high, sloping winter valley, this March would probably soon be sweeping in like a pouncing wildcat. She jogged down to the end of the holly lane to see if Ragnar’s truck was there. Luckily it was. Hurrying on, she found him kneeling on his deck, wearing soiled jeans, an old work jacket and a rolled woolen cap; repairing a sump pump, partially dismantled and laid out upon spread-out, weighted-down newspapers; this cranky old pump normally functioned in the damp cellar below the big barn’s north wing.

“Why don’t you do that in the barn workshop...where you can have some woodstove heat and no wind?”

“Too far away from the coffee.”

“I just saw a truck loaded with lumber over by the brake.”

He wiped his grease-stained hands on a soiled old rag and

looked up at her with an unusual smile, one she thought reservedly subdued.

“*Ja*, I intended to mention that...then discovered this nasty piece of work...dead...it needs to be running now...almost finished.

“But you could tell me about the truck...what it’s doing there. So you know about it...it’s all right?”

“*Ja*, sure I know about it. Could that happen without my knowing about it? My girl, please leave me to this now and come back for supper. I am making spare ribs with wild rice and cole slaw.”

“Uh-huh, the appeasement of food. So, you won’t say a word?”

“*Nei*, because it involves more explaining than I have time for right now. Nothing unaccountable will happen between now and supper, Wild Vi.”

“Except that by then I may have no appetite.”

“Nonsense...come here, my girl, and kiss me goodbye.”

“Are you going somewhere?”

“*Nei*, you are.”

She leaned over and kissed him with her hands behind her back, then slipped her hands into her pockets and descended his steps. Her cold lips were throbbing with that lovely brennevin inducement and the faint flavor of coffee, both virile and arousing. She heard him whistling as she walked away, until the wind rushed against her ears.

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They had both finished gnawing on deliciously tender, sweet-vinegary, smoky spareribs, then cleaned up the kitchen, having eaten quietly, hungrily, without much conversation, and were now sitting on Ragnar’s big red leather davenport, settling their busily digesting stomachs and enjoying the peaceful fire.

“What did you do after you left me swearing at that *svarte* pump?”

“Swearing? When I left, you were whistling.”

“*Ja*, that was the kiss...then it was back to swearing.”

“Is it working?”

“I hope so. I have resurrected it one more time, but I am afraid its days are numbered.”

“I rode over to see Hugh...wanted to see what he was doing with his manuscript. Just as I suspected, he’s begun tinkering with it again. I’ve told him it’s perfect.”

“I would not think a very serious writer would ever use that adjective in regard to his or her own work.”

“No...you’re quite right...never, *never*.”

“I should mention here that I was strongly tempted to ride in the other direction...investigate the meaning of that lumber truck.”

Ragnar appeared about to tell her something of interest, while she remembered how she had thought of riding around the brake instead of to Hugh’s. She had been uncharacteristically afraid to do it, just now considering how easily she became afraid of anything curious or inexplicable these days; then too, the sharp severance resulting from her most recent mistake was still highly influential. Perhaps when she left her exacting position behind in London she had left her level head as well. No, her level head had finally lost its balance with the end of Robert. For years she had known him as a friend, yet never got to know him as a lover, had thought it was all ahead of them. But that was over; even reliving a few good memories increased the sorrow of something lost before it had begun.

She was continually amazed at her revival: her recognition of Ragnar. Having been mentally cast into a somber gray wilderness of memories suggesting life’s end, to have found him blazing in her path, so largely alive, was like unexpectedly encountering a rare wild bird that sang one into a brilliantly heightened reality: not a false paradise, not a place at all, but an existence in which all the sharp colors of the earth were sung back to life with a few exquisite notes. Possible expulsion from this luminous existence was fearful indeed.

He placed her hand on his knee and pressed his hand over it.

“Frowning again...prone to worry needlessly from your

illness. The way I acted was the only way I could keep you from my anger while you came to see its cause. I know you understand that.”

“Yes...as usual I was the cause. I’ve come to fear so much.”

“You will not remove your fears by avoidance.”

“I suppose not...but I still want to put my hands over my eyes, huddle under the covers...escape anything not absolutely positive.”

“*Herregud*, nothing is absolutely positive.”

“I know that...oh, how I hate the race of man for its willful childlike ignorance, its innate beastliness. Once I wanted so to change things, to abolish ignorance, now I simply rage with total frustration...which translates into fear...fear in the face of my own frailty, impotence.”

“You conquer fear by meeting it head-on and immersing it in ice.”

“What?”

“Like annealing the hot metal of a sword: the fear becomes your strength, because you have fixed it with your cold knowledge of it; then you can use it against whatever threatens.”

“Wonderful analogy...fear understood as a companionable weapon. So...I suppose you learned to do that in your difficult childhood.”

“I rarely think of it. My childhood was not so bad...but *ja*, sublimation of the fear of stagnation took me out into the world. Now let me tell you about the lumber truck.”

“What lumber truck?”

He laughed, slid his fingers into her hair and held her head while he looked into her eyes. “You are a tease...but irresistible when you do that.”

“When I say, *what lumber truck?*”

He cocked his head in amusement, then drew her against his shirt front, which smelled of wood smoke and fresh cedar, mingled with pine-scented soap. She rubbed her cheek over the soft warm flannel.

“Mm...I’m happiest near you...like a warm animal in its den.”

“Come out, then, warm animal and listen.”

Another restorative kiss of reassurance left her with her head inclined against the upholstery and her eyes briefly closed. He sat back and stretched out his legs.

She opened her eyes wide. “So...now are you going to tell me something?”

“*Ja*, I am. Have you considered all the years I have been on Ender Farm, trying to keep it a while longer from what is very likely inevitable? *Nei*, you did not even know I was still here. This kind of farm is a dying institution. I am still surprised by how prescient Martha was in believing you would come home.”

“You didn’t think I would?”

“I hoped you would. I am the one who told Mira to write you that Raymond was retiring. It was not necessary for you to know that, but I wanted you to come. Without your return, I knew the farm would eventually be lost...and even *with* your return -- I thought you might come home to sell it. I had decided I would try to find and recommend to you a farm family to buy it...when the time came for its sale.”

“*No!*...all your work in vain.”

“*Nei*, not if the buyer would keep it intact as still Ender Farm and work is good for life, never in vain. I have enjoyed my life: steady hard work done in harmony with the earth, with the quick seasons...and the chance to study whatever I wished...quite a lot of study...and my necessary privacy...along with strong interest in the community. Companionship? There was always someone...but never with the deep understanding you and I have, the love -- there can be no other to share what we share. I have even wondered if Martha was prescient enough to see this too. Who can know? We often give to the departed our own desires.”

“I’m still reading her diaries, learning things. I intend to share some of them with you.”

“If you want.”

“Is this really about the lumber truck?” she teased.



“I am getting to that. Before you...sleepwalked? into the employment agency, my niece called to tell me that her son, my English-speaking grandnephew, Peter Karlsen, had just come to America, gotten a green card, and wanted to work on the farm...and I--”

“Another young Norwegian émigré.”

“There are almost as many Norwegians in America as there are in Norway, around three and a half million of us...the rest, approaching five million back in a country now prospering from oil. But Peter is driving from New York...a big strapping boy who has worked on our farm in Norway. I should say that eventually he wants to be a student, but presently he is willing to merely avail himself of my library in his free time. I thought about this for a while. I did not know if you would like someone from my family working here on the farm...thought you might come to think I was taking advantage of our relationship and--”

“Ragnar, how could you think that?”

“It took quite a while for you to accept that in wanting you I had no other motive but that wanting. And I am still not entirely certain you fully believe it. I understand of course...because of my position and because of what others say...it is easy to assume--”

“Not for me...not any more.”

“I was angry at what you did, but at least I learned that you were determined to hire a domiciled worker. When I calmed down, I decided to please you by doing what you wanted. A cabin, of those four still standing near the windward side of the brake, is being restored. I could have kept him here, but you know I am a lone wolf.”

“You wouldn’t even let *me* live with you, would you?...or let yourself live with me...*me*, rattling around in my big old house.”

“Where you belong.”

“Strangely enough, I suspect you naturally assume you belong everywhere, anywhere -- I mean in universal attitude, familiarity with the world. You’ve probably never even thought of it. You’re part of the great *mare liberum* -- you must know that

Latin term.”

“Of course; with my seafaring history, how could I not? It means the open sea. And in attitude you yourself are there, Wild Vi. Let us not talk about the logistics of our proximity here. It appears to be insoluble enough to leave the way it is...for the time being. You have me any time you want me.”

“I know that...and you have me.”

“As to Peter, he can live in the cabin and work for you...if you so desire.”

“Work for *you*, my darling, and I do so desire. Oh, you are such a cautious man. I suppose I’m to blame for that too...these wild and very unpredictable emotions constantly in play.

“*Nei*, I am not quite as cautious as I am stubborn, stubborn enough to believe I can help you, at least enough to restore your *amour-propre*.”

“How fortunate that you believe it...so do I. I’ve been trying to recall if I’ve always been...emotionally difficult. I’ve had little time to consider my early conduct until now, but I think so.”

“You have always been sensitive, empathic; that does not change. It quite often occurs with high intelligence...knowing too much. You are a challenge, Wild Vi...a stimulating challenge good for life.”

“Practical, that.”

“In regard to you, practical is not the word I would use. It would have been far more practical not to have you in my bed.”

“Was that possible?”

“*Nei*, it was not...especially after you invited me.”

“And so we desire many of the same things. Do you realize how you make me want to exist in the present, most *vigorously* in the present? Like the previous me: a goal-oriented world-fixer. I was far more optimistic back then -- day by day, one workday at a time, increments of forward motion -- that is, until I became completely the reverse.”

“In considering the value, the future of human existence, there are only two choices: pessimism or optimism. Why not the

latter?”

“Shall I give you a list more conducive to pessimism?”

“I could probably give you a longer one, Wild Vi, but why? It serves no purpose to complain...unless it inspires some positive action.”

“I’ve always assumed that I had a viable amount of control over my life. I loathe determinism. It goes along with an obtuse mind, a shoddy little brain -- *let us throw up our helpless hands and beseech the sky to watch over us!* Surely it must be a positive sign that I’ve always embraced Sartre’s idea of free choice.”

“Fine, then get on with it.”

“My darling, how I delight in your unsurprising advice.”

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None of the old hop-pickers’ cabins, situated at the curving northeast edge of the brake, could be seen from Viola’s house, so she drove there one day to check on the concluding renovation, her truck rattling over the rough field road. The grandnephew, Peter, was due on the following day. She was immediately involved in watching Ragnar hang blinds at the four broad windows of the freshly renovated, plumbed and wired little cabin; set off from the others and chosen because it stood away from the wind-thrashed trees and below a more protective knoll rising at the edge of the planted wheat fields.

Viola was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bunk house’s newly planked floor, on a smallish unworn brown wool Berber carpet, which Ragnar had once used in his tidy den. She watched him, mesmerized, his long arms, covered with gray flannel rolled to the elbows, half-raised and moving deftly over the blind fittings. The room, smelling of fresh cedar and sawdust and bright new fixtures, was rife with a clean, positive atmosphere. A fire burned in the pot-bellied stove.

“I’m afraid I’m not much good at interior decoration. I never had time for any of that...with years of running around...and never a very interesting nest. I’ve slept in some rather rudimentary

places.”

“This shipshape berth is now comfortable warm shelter...no serious interior decoration called for here.”

Ragnar stood back, with his hands shoved into the back pockets of his Levis, studying the wide-slatted redwood blinds he had just hung.

“Those look very nice...a good choice. You’ve got a knack for making things very cozy and pleasant, like your cabin: simple, comfortable, functional attractiveness. I’ll give him more quilts for that pretty oak bed...an unusually long twin size. So, he’s your size?”

“*Ja*. He resembles me when I was his age. This is the bed I once slept in before I got tired of pared-down living...too narrow.”

“I found a lot of Gran’s amusingly slapdash quilts in an old chest, so I can supply plenty of extra ones...cheerful at least. I don’t know about linen.”

“*Nei*, I have more of this, the right size.”

Violea looked across the room at the spare kitchenette, and said, “I suppose you’ve stocked that small refrigerator.”

“*Ja*, plenty of food from my freezer...as much as it will hold.”

She gazed around the room, while enumerating essential appointments. “A table and chair for dining...some of your old china and kitchen things...a lamp and a comfortable reading chair...a storage shelf...a radio. Is there going to be a television?”

“*Nei*, he can read my newspapers, journals, and books. If he wants a television, computer, laptop, he must do it for himself.”

“How’s the bathroom?”

“Basic facilities...the shower unit easily set into place behind that door in the corner. I have hung some towels.”

“It smells new and clean...no clutter of the past...inviting.”

She stood up, a little confused by growing anxiousness. Another person on Ender Farm, but this time from Ragnar’s clan. What would his grandnephew require of Ragnar? What must she sacrifice to that blood relationship? *What sort of love would ask these questions?* That was really the cause of her anxiety. Feeling this

possessive, she must stay away, remain alone until she regained level ground.

“Well, I guess I’ll go back -- you don’t need much input from me. Everything looks ready...anything left to do?”

“*Ja*, there is. Before I give up my old bed I want to have you on it...as I have dreamed there of satisfying the undiscoverable...in an earlier rendition of the me never satisfied...until now.”

He laughed at such a spontaneously prolix revelation. His voice had been undemanding, yet unequivocal.

Her surprise swiftly evoked a coy little smile, then thrilling anticipation, followed by grievous curtailment, suspicion that he must have read her anxiety; sweet promise tarnished by rooted self-criticism.

“I thought you said it was too narrow.”

“For sleep not for love...not if you are that close to my skin, my nervous sparrow.”

He opened the stove and threw in another log, then turned to her with explicit eyes clear as crystal, eyes that could burn right through her with visceral waves of heat. She remembered a lovely nature film capturing the reverent gray eyes of a solitary male wolf, eyes innately furtive but looking not at stalked prey, looking quietly above night shadows, with more hunger than vigilance, at a large, mysteriously arousing moon.

“I should go. I’m not entitled to this...*you*...or your pretty bed...even less the praise of your eyes...not as I am. I’ve--”

“*Koma da*, my girl, come. I do not want to hear any more. I will trim this fear of change...I always do, I have to, it has become part of my job...repairing your self-judgment. You are making more trouble for yourself, Wild Vi. Think of those years in the world before you were ill, *you* in control. I know that damaged emotions limit choice, but try to exercise what you espouse of Sartre; *choose* not to be this way. The only important change is the deepening of our feeling, nothing else. My beautiful intelligent *lille* animal, you have a huge amount of life left in you, an enormous amount of love; come here and share it. *Herregud*, it is so easy to

do. I want to love you on this bed.”

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“What’s this scar on your arm? I never noticed it before.”

She was postcoitally and blissfully lying with her back tucked against Ragnar, cradled in his arms. The inside of his right arm was slightly paler than its tan outside, therefore the ivory scar she had just discovered less easy to detect. She ran her fingers over the long, barely distinguishable disfigurement.

“What is it?”

“From a broken arm.”

“No! I don’t want it there...don’t want you to have any scars, to have ever suffered any breakage.”

“Trying to make me perfect again? -- I am not. *Faen!* you cannot have me a paragon above the rest. I am quite a flawed animal, broken in places and far from what you imagine.”

“I don’t have to imagine...you *are* above the rest. To me you’re perfect -- not in the absolute sense but in how I feel. How did it happen?” She stroked the palely knotted thread of scar, while her uninformed pain grew lavishly empathic by a limitless imagination.

Ragnar brought the arm in question up over her chest, his thumb and four fingers turning her chin enough to accommodate a kiss.

“If I am perfect then nothing happened.”

“Please tell me.”

“Love is blind...nothing happened.”

“Don’t tease. Please tell me. I’ll do anything you want.”

“You silly girl, will you bargain so much for such a small return?”

Ragnar sat up, leaning against the pillows and stroking her hair.

“A plow, perpendicular to the ground, fell on my arm. You see, more proof of Newton’s theory.”

She rolled over and balanced her chin on his chest, looking up at him. “But how? Why? You aren’t a careless person.”

“Ah, these beautiful alexandrite eyes, blue, green, violet. I am glad they are not the eyes of your father...the one who broke my arm.”

“What? Now you’ll have to tell me.”

“Eh, Niklas was plowing and had come to the end of a furrow; the plow would not turn over when it was lifted. It had caught up a long stone marker, its blade held fast. I was nearby and I came over to free it, *was* freeing it, when your father dropped the hydraulic lift; the heavy metal plow arm plunged down on this engaged arm...snapped the radius and fractured the ulna. If my arm had been under the blade it would have been swiftly severed. Fortunately, I was not mindless of what I was doing.”

“Oh, God, it makes me sick.”

“It was long ago, and I was young enough to heal quickly.”

“Why did Daddy do that? *Why?*”

“There are only two explanations: hasty carelessness or...it may have been that he wanted to punish me. Probably both were causes.”

“I can’t believe he could be that ruthless.”

“Unconsciously, perhaps. A few days before the...*accident*, his mistress had a spat with him and wanted to avenge herself by coming to my place. Nothing happened, I asked her to leave. About that time, he arrived to spy on my cottage in the woods -- he was never realistic when suspicious...or otherwise. Possibly their spat was about me. Anyway, he saw her leaving my place...what she had wanted him to see...the petty, foolish motives of jealousy and avenging anger.”

“It must have been a virtual operatic drama around here. I think I do remember seeing you with your arm in a cast. I had no idea.”

“*Nei*, you did not. And none of it was of much interest to me either.”

“You managed to remain above it?”

“I tried. But when you are too often made the subject of contention it is not easy. Poor Martha attempted to get into the fray. I prevented that, knowing it would only make trouble for her. It was she who drove me to the doctor that day...Doctor Mount.”

“Oh, Doctor Mount. He must have acquired voluminous knowledge of everyone in Hayfield and environs. What a tight little world of misery...and how much trouble we invented in our nugatory idiocies.”

“Not you, my girl, your innocent head was in the clouds. It is pitifully ironic that you eventually suffered most of all...by falling in love with a troubled and equally undeveloped young man you once thought exemplary. You should not place your men so high above you. We have a long way to fall.”

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Peter, the very essence of strength and health, appeared in a crisp white shirt, gray dress slacks, and polished loafers. He was nearly as tall as Ragnar. He spoke English with a strong and quite entertaining Norwegian lilt. Viola liked to look at him, his large hands topped with tiny pale hairs, his golden wavy locks crowning a rosy-cheeked, smooth-skinned, long, rather serious face. She so enjoyed the curious, intelligent attentiveness of his very slightly epicanthic, northern gray-blue eyes. Each time he shyly presented a captivating smile, with an ironic cast of innocent awareness, she was stirred to a yearning ache of vicarious pleasure -- glimpses of Ragnar in his beautiful youth.

She had offered to make a dinner for Peter, but Ragnar declined, explaining that he would prepare the welcoming repast at his place. “Oh...then...you don’t want me to be there,” she said. “*Ja*, you will be there. He must meet you...see how things are with us, everything open and natural, so that he is able to occupy his mind with the business at hand, and not engage in idle speculation.” At this Viola had been a little surprised. “And what might that *idle speculation* be?” Ragnar laughed. “Are you worrying, Wild Vi, at my offhand choice of words? I only meant that he will not have to



guess about us. He will enjoy knowing. And very soon some of Norway might know a few things.” Again, Viola was surprised. “Haven’t you ever said anything about me to your family?” She was feeling some disappointment, as if he had failed to properly validate their relationship. Ragnar smiled, unapologetic but with understanding. “I say hardly anything about my private life...I say hardly anything altogether. I have told you I will take you there, very likely show you off with insufferable vanity.”

With a more contained devotion, she had been presented to Peter Karlsen when he arrived at Ragnar’s, just in time for dinner. Complacently, but deferentially and with a subtly communicated intimacy, Ragnar made her special importance to him unmistakably evident. This felicitous handling of their situation, done as a very natural process -- a familiar smile, an affirming wink, a genuinely inspired word of praise -- along with his sternly avuncular display of affection for Peter, further augmented her ongoing fascination with Ragnar. By dinner’s end, she wanted to sit quietly detached, observing with utmost pleasure the interaction of what she had provisionally come to think of as the two Ragnars.

They were lounging postprandially in the big cabin’s living room, digesting buttery-tender roasted leg of lamb, which Ragnar had served with tender fresh asparagus and the delicious surprise of Hasselback potatoes.

“Our family looks forward to Ragnar’s rare visits. Then he cooks for us wonderful things we do not normally eat...but when we are liking this food too much, off he goes for a long season, and leaves us to our boring old ways.”

“Most Norwegians are creatures of habit,” was Ragnar’s arch comment.

“I thought you would have cows to milk,” Peter remarked.

“Long ago the farm had a number of cows, then only one, but even that cow became impractical...less time-consuming and expensive to buy milk for personal use. We always had a few steers for our beef.”

Ragnar had looked at Viola as he spoke. She realized that

the cow she had devotedly tended must have given no more milk to Ender Farm after she left. Knowing how she adored her gentle cow, another pet, her mother would never have written her of its disappearance.

“Wouldn’t a milk cow be nice?” Violea suggested, thinking how opportune it was to have a young man predisposed to the handling of dairy cattle.

When she was eight she had been given a heifer she named Poky, ultimately the family’s source of milk. She asked to do the milking when Poky came fresh after her first calf. Niklas later bought a milking machine, then a pasteurizer and a separator. She had to wash the separator equipment twice a day, in the morning before she went to school, cleansing all the stainless steel cups and threading them on their big hanger pin to dry. All the new milk equipment stood on a long wide counter in the pantry. While the pasteurizer sounded its final muted plunges into the frothing hot milk, she would stand on tiptoes at the counter, looking out the small high window, determining the nature of the day. Very often cold morning fog drifted stealthily through the garden; any bright sunlight always tempted her to play truant and escape into the woods. Beyond the alluring white-framed view, beyond her rural horizon, beckoned the unknown, sensuous and provocative with endless possibility. *If she could only recapture a measure of that excited anticipation; if only partake of an innocence that imagined life went on and on steadily improving; if only revive the heady certainty of those inchoate green years -- now hardly imaginable unencumbered by embittering experience.* She had been a primitively territorial, sybaritic animal, gamboling carelessly over the graves in the local cemetery, where the thick-blossoming trees and the prettiest flowers grew.

“Such a supply of books...I did not expect this. *Jaevlig stor!*” Peter exclaimed, having hastily gotten up to examine the long wall of books.

“Do you want a milk cow?” Ragnar asked sotto voce. He looked across the room, amused by Peter’s joyful exploration of his books.

“The butter, the cream, the *cheese!*...Mama’s snow-white soft farmer’s cheese. I suppose it would just be more work for Peter.”

“*Nei*, he would not mind. He expects animals. Will you be wanting chickens back on the place?” he teased.

“Never! Never! I haven’t forgotten all that crowing of Mama’s rooster...at hours when I preferred to be sound asleep. Only *you* would be up and about...then and now.”

Ragnar, who rarely wore a watch -- *the farm runs its own clock*, he maintained -- glanced over at a dark oak school clock, hanging on the wall that divided the living room and den from the kitchen.

“Time to allow Peter his rest; he has driven a long distance. I will drop you off and lead him over to his cabin.” His voice then softened: “Forego roosting until your cock crows.” He winked.

“What pleasantly pastoral implications we are fortunately enjoying tonight.” Her voice was also low but she was unable to suppress her laughter.

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Peter was comfortably installed in his cabin, and a pretty new Guernsey was grazing with Mariner and Legs; the cow was regularly brought into a refurbished stall in the barn for milking. Viola had suggested a milking machine, but Peter enjoyed his hands-on effort. “It is only one cow!” he exclaimed to Viola and Ragnar. Peter, who had lived a life of sharing nearly everything with his brother and two sisters, was thrilled to have the restored cabin all to himself. Happily sequestered there with one or more of Ragnar’s books, he was hardly ever seen when not at his chores. He had turned in his rental car and purchased an old green Ford truck, with which he methodically tinkered in his spare time.

Brought to the house each morning and evening, the milk provided a memory-laden domestic pastime for Viola. Seeing her at this work, pleased Ragnar very much. Her cottage cheese made from separated-milk clabber was fairly easy to produce, but she was trying to perfect her mother’s white farm cheese, the exact taste and texture more difficult than supposed.

The milk was shared with everyone on the farm, any excess taken to a motherless newborn calf being weaned on the March farm. Roland expressed raves of gratitude for the rich cream in his coffee. Hugh, nursing his Asian tincture of milk-intolerance, was not as fond of milk but did agree to taste Viola's cheese, then testily pronounced it unfit for human consumption.

"You're not a proper judge, Ragnar says it's getting better," she rejoined.

"Ragnar must be delighted to see you performing the role of busy little milkmaid," Hugh lightly mocked.

"Take care you don't provoke my literary sensitivity. By the way, Ragnar's arranged for me to teach a writing and lit class at the Hayfield library, hardly a worthy pastime for a milkmaid."

"Or for *you*...a waste of time, stick to your writing," Hugh admonished.

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Ragnar was lying in Viola's bed, where he had stayed too long. Because, he explained, he awoke to find her calling for him in the middle of a disturbing dream. She had expressed relief at being freed from something terrifying -- although soon forgotten -- then slept a little more and awakened happy to find him still there.

"This is a good time for your class, now that spring is on the way and slumbering winter minds are waking up," he suggested.

"Wouldn't it have been better if I'd done a class in the dead of winter when there was not as much to do?"

"*Nei*, it is not so easy to get around in snow and ice. Folks like to stay close to home. This is a good time...or you would have to wait until the fall. I have already checked with Britta, and she has posted a sign-up chart for those who are interested. She also included a short questionnaire with the chart, and the signers so far appear to be more interested in a writing class than in literature *per se*."

Viola bristled, clenched her teeth and smiled acquiescently.

"How nice of her. Yes, *per se*, as literature would naturally overlap with writing in my class. So Britta tends her province."

Ragnar held her against him, his rough fingers stroking her neck, as if smoothing ruffled feathers.

“*Ja*, she is a civic-minded bibliophile -- like us, Wild Vi...to a narrower degree. She dreams of a library full of book lovers.”

Violea found Britta’s apparently unbiased aplomb admirable, if disconcerting, and fell into silent thought. *I wonder if Britta and I will ever have a real conversation. Perhaps she thinks he’ll tire of me, or I’ll tire of him, or go back to London...or drop dead.*

“You are thinking too much on this subject.” He gathered a hank of her hair and turned her head for his huskily consuming kiss. She was lost in it, forgetting her peripheral rival, yet had very briefly wondered if some of his quick hunger was intended as a distraction; yet, in love’s fervent sway, Ragnar was never so pettily cunning or distantly motivated, and she as soon remembered this.

She had slept fitfully, and perceived his usual tracking hunger as somewhat mitigated, his irresistible will to have her modified by her apparent lassitude. She would not be cloying. How could she make him understand that it was he who transformed her with his uninhibited aggression? Neither serious forwardness nor subtle intimation were part of her nature, for she always wanted things to occur naturally.

“Do you think I’m fragile?” she asked, surprising herself more than Ragnar, who answered, “*Ja*, I do. I have to be careful with you.”

“Not too careful,” she said, playfully nipping his shoulder.

“You wild fox, you will draw blood. Stop it now. You are playing with fire.”

“You wouldn’t hurt me, would you?”

“Silly *jente*...but I will love you hard. Is that what you want?”

“What I always want is more of you.”

His grasping hands were firmly on her; she received them with a shuddering love, instantly consuming. Those rough hands contained even her history; under the cool auspices of a sagacious brain, they retained and exercised so many skills, hands educated by years and years of muscular flexion, subtle dexterities pertinent to

the tasks of seamanship, engineering, farming, and the taxing rawer demands of each; concurrently ingrained were consistently expert culinary achievements, the surprising mastery of artfully delicate woodcarving, and not at all lastly, a uniquely canalizing linkage of brain to musical fingers, those smooth-jointed long fingers nimbly plucking strings.

Never in recent times had she heard him play any of his guitars. She suddenly wondered why this was, how it was, and where they were kept in his cabin. At the moment she intended to ask, she was distracted by the arousing tactile message delivered by his ever resourceful hands.

Later, drifting into a voluptuous warm drowsiness, she once again considered how they had been indeterminately enclosed in a circular domain of history, how this innocent beginning on a parcel of earth called Ender Farm led to the unpredictable. More clearly than any other vision out of the past, she could recall the courteous young Ragnar's first humorously formal clasp of her scampish little hand.

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At the new Hayfield library, in a modest meeting room with a sizeable blackboard, and a high row of windows interjecting a noisy rainstorm, Viola looked out at the staring faces of her rather oddly assorted participants.

There sat Mary Fuller with her dog Pilot. *Why Mary!* she wanted to exclaim, *you could teach this class yourself.* "Hello, Mary," she called, "so nice to see you. What a surprise." The tenor of her voice projected a hesitant question.

"Socially hungry and curious," Mary frankly responded.

There was a young farmer, who, she had been told at the Grange supper, was essentially a hermit who had returned from wandering the earth to take over his deceased parents' small farm. There were Mira Anderson's two blushing granddaughters, May and Linda -- she wondered if they had been advised to show up. And, lo and behold, there was beaming Alfreda. Viola waved and grinned. Most astonishing of all were Hugh and Roland, who had

just walked into the room and sat down.

“Now really,” she scolded, strolling up to them, while they laughed with devilish hilarity. “Do you intend to remain here?”

“This will be one of the high points of my life,” Roland said. “I can’t wait to be enlightened.”

“My sentiments,” Hugh said with a devious grin.

“If you stay, you two will have to behave yourselves. This is serious business I’m about here.”

“Oh, we certainly expect that,” Roland said in lowered voice. “In fact we respectfully demand it. We’ve both concluded that, judging from our accrued experience of you, you will surely be precedent-setting...and, we hope, entertaining.”

“Blame Roland,” Hugh said with a self-exculpatory shrug.

The other participants looked on with interest. Soon they were asked to say a few words about themselves: three farm wives, curiously eager to satisfy artistic yearnings; Simon Brown, who had gone from a desire to immolate himself and his entire history to a consuming urge to dash off family entanglements related to the bygone lumber mill era -- also to include his supposed sui generis fishing tales; three high school boys who sorely needed extra points in their literature and English classes, two of whom quite smugly anticipated effortless careers in journalism and writing -- the other boy, although culturally hungry, intended to eventually manage his family’s farm. Then the door opened one more time and everyone turned to look as Peter Karlsen walked softly into the room, giving a gently apologetic and deferential nod of his head. Ragnar must have had some influence there, although Peter had already shown a fondness for the written word. Fifteen persons altogether.

Having learned all of their names, Viola stepped away from her podium and said, “You know what, let’s move all of your chairs around that big table in the corner, and get more cozy. Then I can join you.”

When the table was pulled out and the relocation completed, she asked, smirking at Hugh and Roland, “How many of you have ever had a writing class?” Hugh and Roland did not raise their

hands, but a number of others did. “Well, I should warn you that we have two currently modest, quite sophisticated men of letters joining us here. And one brilliant former teacher. How fortunate for all of us...but perhaps unfortunate for them that they may be expected to lend some credence to my precepts. If anyone has a problem with a concept, or doesn’t clearly understand what has been said, I hope you will raise your hand and ask for clarification.

“First, let’s talk a little about your reading backgrounds, so that we can more accurately elucidate where we are here.”

One of the aspiring young journalists raised his hand.

“Yes, Gary?”

“What do you mean by elucidate?”

Without blinking at his cocksure smile, Viola said, “This is your senior year in high school?”

“Yeah, then I’m headed for the U of O.”

Viola pushed up the sleeves of her gold sweater, her choice of top a little too warm for the room, and placed her hands flat on the large table, for a brief moment posturing disfavor by locking her arms straight. Her pointed context had made the word so understandable that she half believed Gary was clowning for the pretty girls.

“Gary, I think you weren’t listening carefully enough. Right now you would be far better served to take yourself over to the library next door and look up the word giving you trouble. That way you’ll never forget the definition.”

Gary shook his curly brown ringlets with surprise, offering a crooked grin, then slouched back with stubborn intransigence.

“No, I mean it. This isn’t a punishment at all, but rather an attempt at improvement...for your benefit. Please go right now, and when you come back be prepared to use the word accurately in a sentence of your own making. You can stun us all with your special interpretation.”

There was a long silence as the others waited for Gary to rise from his chair and slink out of the room.

“Do you expect him to return?” Roland, who was sitting



next to her, could not help asking in a low voice.

“I imagine his credit shortage will bring him back,” Viola answered cheerfully. She looked around the circle of faces. “By the way, please bring good dictionaries along with you next time, and feel free to use them to elucidate the meanings of any word giving you the least bit of trouble. While dictionaries are a good place to ground your understanding of definitions, they are after all only a starting place. The meaning of a word is chiefly revealed by its context.

“Now, tell me the names of some good books you’ve read...memorable, stimulating, a favorite, a classic...whatever.”

“*A Confederacy of Dunces*,” Hugh said.

Viola gave him an admonitory glance, but smiled. “New Orleans and Boethius in one incredible mix of sound philosophy and hilarious wit.”

Roland, not to be outdone, immediately supplied *The Horse’s Mouth*. “I’ve never had to exploit others that severely to pursue my art...as the painter Gully Jimson did in the novel...it is humorous.”

“The question of how much should be sacrificed for art has sometimes been answered by fairly outlandish examples of human conduct,” Viola said. She was beginning to wish that Hugh and Roland would go away. They could certainly have no interest in writing tips, but appeared to share an annoying curiosity about her method of teaching.

“I sure do like Dickens,” Alfreda said.

“Yes, the timeless human comedy...abiding heart and stock treachery.”

When a number of other books had been named, Viola felt certain that most of those mentioned had been, at one time or another, assigned reading. So, not all serious readers, therefore a challenge as would-be writers. Mary fortunately drained away some of the disappointment by first mentioning various Russian novels, then the novels of Thomas Hardy, at last revealing that she often enjoyed the *finely nuanced, so impeccably acute perceptions* of Anita Brookner.

Violea was about to question the class on writing practices when she heard Peter Karlsen's accent rise above the low buzz of voices arguing over books worth mentioning. She was willing to allow an amount of this disputation, because her students were discussing the right subject, but had been about to stop the flurry.

Peter's distinctive voice promoted a commanding silence in the room, as if offering his support. He wore cords and a heavy hand-knit crew-neck brown sweater, and was sitting forward with his long legs bent away from his desk. His summer-blond hair had a bluish winter cast beneath the cold fluorescent lights, and his pale blue-gray eyes flashed dark glints of keen attention. The room grew silent.

"I have enjoyed the work of Sigrid Undset, work written before her conversion to Roman Catholicism -- *Kristin Lavransdatter*, her Nobel success in 1928, was very good, but I like most *The Master of Hestviken*, finished later...very accurate descriptions of the Middle Ages...a time of much human violence, but really good."

Violea smiled with recognition and deep pleasure, feeling a warming camaraderie with this shy, very earnest and no-nonsense Norwegian.

"You undertook some extensive reading...yes, and in the process you certainly encountered a remarkable portrayal of your historic roots. Sigrid Undset, partly because of her early exposure to her father's archeological efforts, then to the *Edda*, was a writer uniquely cognizant of the rich past of Scandinavia. Her research and sensitive writing skill did the rest."

"I've read some -- while I was traveling around -- but maybe this class is too far above me," the reluctant young farmer sharply interjected. He was thin and tired, and now appeared discouraged, yet had been hungry enough to show up.

"You've read and you've traveled, Jim, so it seems as though you reach for things you want...there's nothing to stop you here."

He lowered his head, digesting her observation in silence.

"But now...can someone tell me a few important elements learned in previous writing classes?"

One of the middle-aged farm wives gave a swift upward yank of her gray turtleneck's sagging collar, cleared her throat and announced a bit cautiously, "Write what you know, always use the simplest words."

"Thank you, what I expected to hear. Those are precepts that--"

Gary had lumbered into the room and was standing beside his desk, his arms folded tightly against his footballer's chest.

"All right, Gary, glad you're back. Go ahead."

"If I could use *elucidate* in a sentence I would probably not be in this class," Gary said with a curt toss of his head.

"A ridiculous non sequitur. Did you really look up and *read* the definition?"

"Yeah."

"Then let's have the sentence...*using* the word, not referring to it." Glancing aside, she saw Hugh and Roland simultaneously yawning. As soon as class was over, she was going to have a talk with them, encouraging their permanent absence. "We're waiting, Gary."

"Uh...could you elucidate all this fuzzy stuff?"

"You haven't yet convinced me that you understand. Try again."

"Okay...a...my dad never really elucidates what he means when he tells me to clean up the garage."

"That time you knocked it just far enough. Thank you."

"Now I should say that, in regard to Donna's former advice from her teacher -- you did respond with: *write what you know and use the simplest words* -- I'm going to dispense with those precepts. You should already know how to do both of those things, and aren't they rather like getting a gold star for showing up? Carrying on with that advice might forever leave you a stenographer with a static, very limited vocabulary. What I want to do in this class is encourage your imagination and your perseverance in achieving a realistic art form. You are not here to learn how to write a diary. Your first assignment will be to write something that comes directly

from your imagination, and which has nothing at all to do with the tragicomic situations of mates, relatives, children, pets, or travel. No stories about Uncle Walt's bumper crop of flesh-eating plants, Aunt Juliet's ill-fated romance, or vengeful ghosts in the attic. I'm not interested in length, only worthy achievement. And when I speak of imagination, I'm not talking about an escape into vague sentimentalities; I'm talking about very different areas of thought and vision, into which you may not have tapped. Try to write from the vantage point of a distant planet -- or more precisely, from a new frontier in your mind. Try to remove your socially colored glasses and look at things in a different way. And while you're doing that, search carefully to find, not the simplest words, but the most appropriate and accurate words for what you mean."

"What if nobody understands the word?" Donna asked.

"What if? Who do we blame then? In this way you will learn how to use words so that, failing all else, they can be fairly accurately understood from the context in which they are placed. Now remember, I do not expect to see ludicrous concoctions of polysyllabic words thrown at the page, in an attempt to dazzle me with a specious clutter of balderdash."

Roland let out a barely audible little bark of laughter.

"Obviously, you will always know more about what you're writing than your reader will know. The point is: your choice of words is all your reader will have available, so make the words do their jobs. This effort presupposes a palatable moderation of verbosity. In other words, don't go hog-wild with a thesaurus."

"Jeez, that's hard, really hard to imagine anything," the other young journalist-aspirant, Colin, said. "Can we use our dreams?"

"No, then you're simply back to being a stenographer of a fragmented haze, merely confusing and probably boring us...and your dreams only mean whatever you decide they mean. Sigmund Freud notwithstanding, there is no template for dreams but the one you make for your own dream experiences -- the patient must *agree* to the psychiatrist's symbolized interpretation and its relationship; that is hardly a generalized proof of anything. However, back to

the point, you can *invent* a character who has a relative dream. But when you've created a story character who has a dream, that act is another matter entirely, complex and contingent -- if you feel up to that you'd better be prepared to symbolize the character's dream association as pertinent, however gradually revealed...so that the dream extends the character, advances the story, and is not merely self-indulgence, or flashy filler."

"Then there's nothing left," Colin lamented.

Violea laughed and shook her head.

"Except the voluminous, open-ended world of your free *imagination!* Imagine yourself or someone else as somewhere else, being someone else doing something unusual, purposefully but very differently. Imagine anything. *Imagine!* Attack something, expose something, with a really inventive metaphor, perhaps even the extended metaphor of an allegory.

"Think of Franz Kafka's monstrous human insect. Kafka was a cerebral writer of jarringly stark and detached realism. He portrayed a mysteriously unfolding pattern of bereft existence, with detailed imaginative power, thereby creating an incredibly lucid *unreality* that laid bare overarching truths -- certainly the truth that motive can be innate and vague...if ever the least discernible. In his supremely watched world, God-motive is never discoverable. This may sound confusing, yet his work will resonate for all time. If you've carelessly learned to say that something is Kafkaesque, or dream-like, without really knowing what Kafka was doing, read his work. Beginning with the frankness of his black humor, you will soon see that he is different, surreal without intending it, for he is looking at the quotidian, or becoming it, with a clinical precision richly amenable to endless symbolism. Only Kafka could write like Kafka -- sorry for the tautology. His highly imaginative work represents an astonishing awakening of conscience, and I'm afraid this briefest glance presupposes a lengthy discussion for another time. I only mention him at this moment to jar your minds free of convention...and perhaps to whet your appetites for different ways of looking at the human condition."

“Darn it,” Simon Brown said, “This isn’t much use to me. I was hoping this class would put me on the right track for writing some fairly interesting family stuff.”

His wrinkled, flabby, round little face was bunched tight and curdled red with impatient anger. He rubbed his watery faded eyes with a childish choleric petulance, then thrust his split-nailed, rather fragile fingers through unkempt shocks of thinning white hair.

“Simon, this class might do you good. Try it before you judge.

“Oh don’t look so frightened, everyone...*nearly* everyone. You’ve merely been asked to climb out of your boxes and explore where there are few familiar barriers...only a delicious infinitude of possibility. It’s a bit scary stepping into space but that’s part of the impetus. It’s really quite exciting. Here you’re free to unloose your imaginations. *Free!* Now all you have to do is use your intelligence to communicate your chosen narratives in uniquely interesting ways.”

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After the class, Viola, Hugh, Roland, and Mary were sitting around a table near the back wall of *Booker’s* -- Peter had politely begged off, explaining that he had to grocery shop and get up in time to do the milking; Alfreda, too, had apologized, saying her daughter was at the farm with the grandchildren, staying overnight. Mary, brought by her care-giver, intended to ride home in Roland’s truck; Roland had brought Hugh, so it would be quite a cozy ride. Viola pondered offering to take Mary home, but really wanted her to get to know Hugh; both could stand another intelligent friend. Viola told the waiter, “Just decaf for me.” Hugh and Roland and Mary were having tall, foamy Oregon-brewed beers. “Only one,” Roland promised Viola.

“I’m afraid you two--” Viola began, but was at once halted by Roland.

“We know what you’re going to say. Don’t worry, we’re not coming back to your class...as much as we’d like to. Mainly because

we have our own writing to do. It's true we came there as curious voyeurs...maybe to tease you a little, but also to lend our support."

"Mostly, we were curious," Hugh said with his usual candor.

Violea blew gently on her mug of boiling-hot coffee and said, "Involvement appreciated. Has your curiosity now been satisfied?"

"I wonder if your class realizes how lucky it is," Hugh said.

She could have hugged him, not for bolstering her scholarly ego but for his atypical dispensation of kindness. Her eyes were near spillage, but in the dim room she thought neither man would notice. She continued to define her quick emotions as raggedly unpredictable.

Hugh leaned near her diffident body, his voice low but now roughly protective, as if scolding an edgy child, "How can you be coming apart at this point, when you were so damned in control of that motley class?"

Roland and Mary had heard Hugh, so she announced with a laugh, "I thought I knew what I was doing."

Roland grinned broadly. "We thought so too...you avoided talking down to them, in a very provocative manner."

"Intentionally. I really want any slackers to self-motivate and reach up. Understanding does not come by repeating what is already known, or easily accessible."

Violea turned to observe Mary, who was quietly listening. She had worn narrow black-framed dark glasses and was dressed in a trim black pantsuit of soft thin-woven wool. There appeared an intriguing dilation of intensity in her demeanor just now, the flaring of a ponderously complex mental habitation. Her rather dense shoulder-length clean black hair merged with the room's shadows, except for the silver streak; the dark hair slid forward with a glint as she reached down to pat Pilot. Her practiced palest-olive hands interested Violea, the joints swollen some but the fingers long and gracile, often stretching out in delicate visual investigation. The discernable features of her stoic face had been agreeably formed and were altogether quite evenly proportioned, if somewhat gaunt.

Mary knew Roland and his poetry but had never met Hugh.

“You could be teaching my class, Mary.”

“Perhaps, but not nearly so effectively, not after what I heard tonight. I was swiftly captured. I’m afraid I’d have been very conventional in my approach. I’m eager to return...with a scrap of invention I’ve long been working on...it might do...you can tear it to pieces.”

“I wonder how I’ll keep this up.”

“Are you serious?” Roland said. “When you confronted that class, you were...hmm, I was going to compare you to certain historic female exemplars of strength, deep perspicacity...and artful articulation. But, aside from classic myth, no useful pantheon of such comes immediately to mind.”

“That far too hasty observation might be construed as male chauvinism, Roland dear...not that I deserve any such comparison.”

“Sorry, I didn’t say that very well. In your professional and academic persona, you appear as wise and instructive as Portia.”

She looked doubtful but amused. “Now you’re vindicated, Roland...and I’m profoundly beholden...but not yet off to the law courts.”

“I agree that Kafka’s writing was unique. His self-absorbed struggle, which gratuitously helped form his style, was regrettably submissive to what I would define as cosmic indifference,” Hugh offered. “He was immersed in, or more likely trapped in, rampant defeatist dogma once found credible. In my own present pathetic incarnation, I too am something of a defeatist, but I could never be victimized by theological yearnings.”

“At least, as he says in his diary, he was not *led into life by Kierkegaard*; he *was* influenced by that *great Dane*,” Viola responded.

“Perpetually attempting to adjust one’s mental anguish to the imagined dictates of the *unknowable* is not at all my idea of sanity,” Hugh responded.

“Yet Kafka’s realism remains universally relevant, especially his remarkable renditions of stultifying, inescapable routine...the tragic inescapable self.” She might well have argued for: Kafka’s



palpable sense of alienation; the influence of his autocratic father; his acute depictions of absurdity and helplessness -- the always tacit compliances of life --, but fatigue had found her and she was finally too dull for a sharp discussion.

“I hope you won’t be disappointed in us,” Mary adjured, seeming to speak for the class while telegraphing personal concern.

“But Mary, I hope you won’t be disappointed in *me*. I like the interesting mix we’ve got. Simon Brown is really a caution. Peter was a surprise. He came dutifully, but I think he enjoyed himself. He’s well-intentioned, very promising...the sensitivity, the interest. His deliberate literary background is very encouraging.”

“The young Ragnar,” Hugh said, looking at her with an uncanny accuracy that left her silent, having no impartial retort.

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As it turned out, Viola drove Mary and Pilot home, Pilot lying on his blanket placed in the truck bed. Roland had politely suggested that Mary would be far too uncomfortable crowded into his rattling truck.

Mary was in good spirits and happily prone to express her appreciation of the evening’s benefits. Eventually, she grew more thoughtful.

“Roland’s enchanted by you. But Hugh...with that man I sense you have some deep connection.”

Viola looked at Mary, who’s erect body revealed nothing but an impassive posture of endurance, almost as if she would rather be the one driving.

“Hugh is the father of my adult son,” Viola said. She had begun to contemplate the extent of Mary’s perception.

“Ah, yes,” Mary easily responded, with a preternatural lack of surprise. “That poor man is unwillingly in love with you. It seems to overwhelm him.”

After this disturbing reaffirmation, Viola offered nothing more. Others purported to know something she did not want to consider, surely then Ragnar did, which troubled her only a little

less than her confusion over Hugh. Ragnar had her categorically. She could not do without him, or would not. She already saw that the classroom provided her with a certitude Ragnar had obviously intended, a stimulating sense of purpose, or at least of a definable existence. But, once again she was forced to confront the difficult interconnections of her present life; she felt weak, clumsily inept, and sad.

“I’m sorry. You’re used to Ragnar’s brand of frankness -- he’s generally more selective and considerate. But we both aim for truth. Viola, I had no right to say what I thought, to be so frank unnecessarily...and at your expense. I *have* ruined a few inchoate friendships that way...mistakenly assuming I could perhaps deepen a fine new acquaintanceship by revealing proficient intuition.”

“A proficiency you’ve made into a very enviable prescience. But it won’t ruin this friendship, Mary. I like you too much.”

Viola then related a little of her history with Hugh, briefly advancing a less personal account that would not betray his trust.

As if to compensate for this disclosure, Mary, now in an agitated state of avoidance, said, “I’ve not said much about my past. Even to bring it up is...difficult...but I suppose Ragnar has told you how he learned...a long time ago when I was very drunk I managed to say--”

“Yes, Mary...nothing further is necessary, *ever*...unless it’s a help to you in some way...then of course I’ll listen at any time.”

She thought how Mary’s past remained in the remindful present, willfully kept at bay, yet a toxic balloon of threatening horror, causation forever attached to and floating above its black result. However remarkably managed, there could be no denial of psychological damage. An ongoing task of Mary’s life would be the wooing of that damage into tolerable submission.

Mary clasped her hands and fell silent, then said with a cool laugh of righted composure, “Your assignment is a challenge, but I’ve got plenty of time for it.”

At the darkened little cottage, Viola asked if she should come to the door with Mary.

“Oh, no, Pilot and I will do just fine; this is very familiar territory. I hope you’ll find time to visit and read to me again. I could easily come to require your lovely, intelligent voice.”

“You don’t even have to flatter me to make it happen, Mary. I enjoy it immensely. See you next Wednesday.”

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Viola was tired but overstimulated, distressfully excited and unable to attempt sleep. She thought of Ragnar, probably still at his Wednesday night chess game with Bill. As she paced through her house, in and out of the kitchen -- not hungry yet wondering if she should nibble on something -- then into the living room, Buggy more or less accompanied her. But her crazed little escort was engaged in a wild hither-thither madness, repeatedly returning to tag her with a swiftly faint tap of his paw on her calf. “You little goof!” she called after him, her amusement sliding into the relief of laughter.

She made a small fire, using a few cones and smiling at the memory of her earlier gathering: Ragnar complaining of pitch on his hands. She must have begun to love him at that moment, but without understanding it, her anger at him really the fear of loving, fear of a thwarting acquiescence while caught in the throes of her imagined competition for the farm. All this essentially going on unconsciously. He had understood.

Selecting one of her mother’s later diaries, she settled below a reading lamp on the big leather sofa. An exhausted Buggy then charitably settled down with his paws on her lap, purring loudly. For a moment, she stroked his thick fur and softly cooed at him. He blinked contentedly, his warm rough tongue responding with a single swipe at her hand. She opened the diary and flipped back and forth until she found Mary’s name, backtracking to see where the relationship had begun. There were disturbing parts of Mary’s past related, already familiar to her, which she rapidly skipped over. Apparently Martha had shared a number of her sorrows with Mary, and had concluded that Mary’s generous and wise commiseration

was helpful to Mary herself. Then she came across a passage that startled her. Martha had speculated that Mary might be in love with Ragnar. *Oh please not another damned entanglement to tear at my heart*, Viola pleaded. *I want Mary as my friend, not to taunt her, not to taunt her.* She fell into a troubled sleep beneath the bright lamp, leaving the diary opened and turned over across her stomach. Becalmed Bugsy had curled up against the pillow at her head.

In the morning she awoke in her bed, with Ragnar sleeping beside her, but only vaguely remembered his arrival, closer to a dream.

“I have slept too late...because your student kept me awake last night...with nonstop praise for his teacher. When I returned I found him waiting impatiently at my kitchen table...with a German chocolate cake from Murrilton’s, to celebrate his new adventure in the heroine’s classroom. You see how everyone falls in love with you.”

“And with you,” Viola said. She sat up and propped a pillow behind her, then looked into his eyes, blackly dilated. She dipped her fingers into his tawny-flecked silver hair; waves thick and curling fluidly through her fingers like a viscous cooling brook.

“Did you happen to read that open place in the diary before you carried me off?”

He grabbed her stroking hand and kissed the small knuckles. “*Nei*, I did not...I would not. I put it aside and focused on what interested me.” His smoothly insinuating smile was now playfully distracting.

“It was about you, aren’t you curious?”

“Mildly. It is the past.”

“Maybe it isn’t.”

“I see you are going to tell me.”

“I don’t know if I should.”

“Then do not. *Koma*, let me kiss you *god morgen*.”

“Oh, Ragnar...my God, these entanglements...*entanglements*.”

“What now? Is it Hugh?”

“You’re just like Mary, with your devastating insight.”

“Mary saw that Hugh loves you?”

“I don’t think it’s true.”

“You know it is true. He thinks he should go to Boston to be with Marcus for a while...then to China. I think it is mostly you.”

“Oh, don’t let him, don’t let him! I want him here on Ender Farm...safe and busy in great, great-grandfather’s stone house.”

“How am I to contend with this?”

“Please, please!” she begged, clasping her arms around him and burying her head against his chest. “Don’t think of giving me up. I can’t take it, I can’t stand it. I love him...but not ever like this...not this way, ever, *ever*. I need you. Nothing equals this, *nothing!*”

“*Faen!* you are a volatile thing. It is not a matter of giving away my love, too late for that. My selfishness would trouble me more if I believed Hugh could make you happy. Ah, my poor *lille* educator. *Herregud*, if only your high intelligence could speak to your wild emotion. Stop this...shaking like a trapped hare. Stop or I will feed you lutefisk for breakfast. *Ja*, smile at me now -- how could I give this away?”

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“Is this lutefisk?” Viola asked. She yawned, staring at her breakfast plate. Ragnar had just served fish with poached eggs.

“Sleepy-eyed tease, you know it is not lutefisk. It is finnan haddie I brought from my freezer last night. One food the Scots do very well: smoked haddock -- unless you are in high praise of oatmeal. I have creamed this elegant fish very lightly, adding to the sauce a dash of nutmeg along with a bay leaf.”

“I’ve never had it before. God, it’s delicious, so tender and sweet and smoky. Why are you so attentive today?”

“Am I not generally attentive?”

Ragnar sat down with his coffee and slid his fork into the fish. His silver head dipped over his plate as he employed his knife and fork with a quick and purposeful finesse, occasionally looking

at her and nodding with the pleasure of his own expertise. From time to time she managed to study him without his awareness of it, secretive looks that left her with an expansive, indefinable longing. His navy-blue plaid flannel shirt was unbuttoned several inches below his rugged throat. When he abruptly tossed back a wisp of unruly hair, the thick cords of his neck were drawn taut as rope. She reached out and ran caressing fingertips under his freshly shaved jaw as he was chewing.

“Do not flirt with me while I am eating,” he warned, but his laughing blue-gray eyes flirted back, with far more than tolerance.

“A wolf at his meal. You’re up to something.” She pushed back the sleeves of a turtleneck marled the gold-brown color of her hair.

“Please finish your breakfast.”

“I’m finished. You always give me too much.” Her plate was two thirds emptied.

Ragnar eyed her over his coffee cup, chicory-gray depths of iris discharging a carefully advanced motive...something definitely afoot.

“Do you remember how to milk a cow?”

“Of course...it’s the sort of thing you never forget.”

“I want to take Peter fishing.”

“I knew it! I knew it! Oh, you are devious, *devious!* Now I’ve got to take up milking. Milking!...not simply taking care of gallons of milk, making butter, cheeses...and never mind teaching! What’ve I come to? *Châtelaine* of the barnyard! Soon I’ll have no time to write.”

“You will have time. A busy person always has more time than a do-nothing. You will even have time for me.”

“Oh, you’ll see to that, won’t you?”

“I do not have to see to it.” He winked at her. “I can hardly get you out of bed.”

“So you want to go away from me then?”

“*Ja*, I need a rest from you,” he teased, pulling a wayward coil of her hair, then standing up to rinse the plates and silver.

“You once said you’d take *me* fishing but you never have.”

“I will take you fishing...when the weather is better so I do not have to worry about your health. Wild Vi, you would not like this damp cold.”

“All right go. But don’t expect the welcome you got last time you went away.” However playfully stated, she immediately regretted it.

He merely laughed. “What? that pitiful display...leaping into my arms? This time I will expect much more than that.”

He drew her swiftly from the chair and leaned her against the counter, dissolving any lingering conflict with a long ravishing kiss.

“When next I see her, I will expect my *lille* milkmaid to be the kissed one here. This one, here on earth with me. Plenty of love, nature, farm cheese, fish, the written word...all that matters.”

The jesting voice, so facilely merged with an allusive style of personal conceits, had plainly articulated a more healthful intimacy, an intimation to be heard when out of sight, as an echoing freshet rushing in and out of a cavernous mountain can be steadily heard then reheard unseen. Only after his departure did she hear that echo of intent, the wise voice of advisement and healing: vigilant maintenance of the important, pared down to lasting pleasure.

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“Marcus, it’s lovely to hear your voice,” Viola said into her cell phone. “How are you this week, dear?”

“Busy, very busy...but not enough to forget my Ma...I just called Dad...hard at work on his manuscript.”

“Which, as you know, we all thought was finished. Are you getting out at all? Any sign of spring back there?”

“Spring barely teases, that’s it so far. But I jog through the weather’s muck anyway...jogging alone these days...had a falling out with Ruth. Unfortunately, she came across snail mail from Sylvia.”

“Oh, that is unfortunate. Best not to snoop.”

“I said something similar and that was the gist of her anger. Can’t blame her...after all this time and lax me uncommitted to

anything. I suppose the fact that I'm not is the summation of our relationship."

"Don't worry, dear, you're irresistible, she'll come around."

"Not sure I want that...kind of looking forward to seeing Sylvia later this summer...or maybe at a conference I'm attending in London."

"When is it?"

"End of May."

"What a fine opportunity. Of course I'll talk to you before then, but please let me know how it goes."

They talked a while longer about her class and the farm, and the men on the farm.

"You'll never believe this but presently I'm milking our cow."

"Jesus, what about Peter Karlsen?"

"He's off fishing with Ragnar...due home tomorrow night. It's good for them really...and Fern and I are becoming quite fond of each other. She gives very rich milk...wonderful for butter and cheese."

"Incredible. Don't wear yourself out. You should be writing."

"I am writing, and teaching. I think Ragnar's been very cunning. Probably all of these activities he's slyly engendered are making me healthy."

"Sure...anything he has a hand in is bound for good results. I want to talk to him more about Jatropha. But I'd better get off now. You're always telling me things in my head, pretty Ma. I'll call you soon...I've come to care for you quite a lot...should've been easy."

"And how I cherish those words. You always have my love; take care and call me soon."

For the nonce, she felt buoyant and very much in control of a few more aspects of her life. But not of Hugh or his plans; he was the  $x$  in an equation that might never be solved. Was he really thinking of going to China? Why had Ragnar said that unless it was true? She decided to drive over to Hugh's for a luncheon visit.



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“You’re back in the saddle...well not quite...but now you’ve got everything nearly the way you want it,” Hugh said.

“That sounds too godly for the likes of this failed mortal.”

“You don’t really think you’ve failed, do you?”

“Not entirely...there’s still hope in the culinary department.”

Her self-mocking grin lingered as she plated their food.

Lunch had just been heated in Hugh’s oven: tasty lasagna, a two-cheese, fresh basil recipe, which Ragnar had taught her to make and which she had, an hour or so earlier, taken out of her freezer; and a green salad she had quickly tossed in her own kitchen and brought along.

“This is good,” Hugh praised, with his chin propped on a navy corduroy elbow as he waved his emptied fork. “I’ve been forced to feed myself but I’ve never embellished necessity.”

“You don’t always eat just sandwiches do you?”

“Whatever’s handy. I’m not into the food mystique; it’s fuel.”

“But it might as well be pleasing, healthy fuel.”

“The voice of the Master.”

“Oh, Hugh, please grow up.”

“Now you think I’m undeveloped...some truth in it. My initial anger at you was anger at a little girl and her mother. And I, that very young victim of betrayal, got myself fixed in a formative period that stayed in my head...for years coloring every thought of you.”

“How sad that makes me...but I understand, Hugh, you don’t have to go on apologizing.”

“It’s more than that. Saying it makes it a fact...one I have to deal with. You *were* a *child*! My God, you did so well for yourself. How you must have struggled...you’ve even managed to care for others.”

She laid down her fork and studied Hugh with a searching

look of concern, but also with a deep sense of relief.

“When you’re able to think beyond yourself, to project into others, it means you’re getting well. It’s happening to me...and in your case it’s certainly true.”

Hugh’s long black eyes held onto her as if trammeling her in a palpable restraint, an intimidating look. He could easily do that.

“Healing?...that’s you and Marcus. And you’ve spent years caring for others, it didn’t just happen yesterday. It’s amazing to suddenly find that I have a son...for God’s sake, he looks like *me!* I have a grown son who looks like me.”

“Yes.” She smiled, her voice gone soft. “And he has quite a lot of your temperament, your impatience...and your brilliance.”

“Have you any good memories of Ender Farm, Lea?”

“Yes, oh, yes...except that...”

“What?”

“Every memory I have is of something uncompleted. I suppose...I *know* all of life will be that way. It’s the problem of time...the forward motion of time. You always think you’ll get back to something and of course you never do. But even if you could it would never be completed...so it isn’t just time. We cannot *complete*...but foolishly dream on...in far too many directions...as if we’ll still be kicking three hundred years from now.”

“The thought is horrifying. We change, Lea, you know that. We metamorphose into a number of different people in our short lifetimes. Nothing is static, least of all humans...you and I have changed and changed...our bodies, our minds...until we can hardly recognize our naïve beginnings...but still there’s a little left in us of what we were.”

Viola washed the dishes while Hugh went out to repair something on his motorcycle. She finished and went to stand at the back door window. He was working under the lean-to, wearing a heavy peacoat with the collar up, but no hat, his hair occasionally falling over his eyes. She felt a desire to bring him a warm hat. His graceful fingers were so purposefully engaged, often gently explorative, as if the cold machine were alive and sensitive to his

touch. Now and then certain abrupt gestures suggested his quick exasperation, disgust -- a flinging back of his hand or a tight-fisted raised thumb tapping against resistant metal. Watching him, she felt a welling of love sweep through her body, and wondered how it would be now if they had behind them years of marriage to each other. Long ago at their beginning she was aware, and knew now more than ever, of the broad scission between them -- differences of sentiment, of grievance, perspective, motive, even the order of their priorities --, a divide over which she could not step. A lasting pairing was perhaps always an unrealistic consideration, which he must by now have admitted to himself. This caused sadness in them both, although Hugh may have chosen not to ponder too deeply its reasons. Even with the long break in their association, it was not difficult to assert that he had always been volatile, always discontented, filled with a nervous, overreaching urgent energy, his brilliant mind forever searching, yearning for some intangible thing that was insidiously buried deep in himself. Year by year, to this were added the hellish assaults of external forces, both physical and mental wounds, resulting in a terrible despair and a clinging hard bitterness. His life here was very likely the most settled and least demanding existence he had ever known, a self-confrontational, lonely existence forced upon him.

“What was all of that about?” she asked when he came inside.

He yanked off his jacket and tossed it over the coatrack by the door. Flinging back loosely disheveled hair, he answered in an impatiently dismissive voice, “It began with a dead mouse...well, no, originally a live mouse...trying to warm itself against the fatally hot engine.”

She burst into laughter, then said, “Oh, poor little nipper.”

“Yeah, you would,” he said, moving toward the sink to wash the black grease from his hands. “Sympathy for the mouse...none for me.”

Her smile faded as she thought, *if you knew, you wouldn't want to know*. She poured out a mug of coffee and handed it to him. He

slouched in one of the chairs at the compact little rosewood table Marcus had bought, and looked up at her with eyes like glistening hard obsidian forever imbued with its forging fire. She sat nearby and leaned on her hands.

“Why do you have a motorcycle instead of a car?”

“I like the close contact with things around me...the shocks of nature. The punishment keeps me awake, alive...even focused. Rain, snow, moving metal and exhaust fumes, that goddamned blast of freezing wind, temporarily cancel a hell of a lot of other stuff...worse.”

The steely casement of asperity in which he had reflexively wrapped himself was probably fortunate, for she had wanted to put her arms around him and hold him until his nerves stopped cruelly firing.

“Don’t look at me with that wise Ragnarian evaluation.”

Her lips curved into a tight-lipped little smile of denial.

“For a chronic bachelor, that man handles you with more skill than an experienced husband. You do know that he *handles* you?”

“I’ve known from the beginning. Why complain when the intent is honorable and the result improvement...or at least possible improvement?”

“No, it’s improvement. He’s only succeeded in making you more desirable to every male in the county. I wonder if he realizes that.”

“If it were true he’d be the first to let me know. But *my* how you do exaggerate.”

Hugh stood up, folded his arms and turned away to stare out the tall alcove window behind the table.

“I’m thinking of going to China.”

“No you can’t!”

“*What?* The devil I can’t. I need to fill my purified nostrils with that familiar industrial stench...check out the creeping new infrastructure and...see what the flummoxed, but always in-control, government, and the seething populace are up to...visit friends.”

“Please don’t go.”

“Why the hell do you want me hanging around here? You want to torture me with your happiness?”

“I want to share it with everyone on the farm.”

“You can’t do that...not with me. Along with everything else, are you also a mooncalf?”

“I’m so glad you’re well enough to want to go back there, but please, please don’t.”

“You’ve got no right to talk to me like this, Lea.”

“You belong here in this old stone house. You belong on this farm. You belong--”

“Not to *you*, for Christ sake! For me, belonging anywhere is arbitrary.”

“I’m afraid if you go you won’t come back.”

“You’re not as well as I thought you were. You still need props, but I’m not one of them. Anyway, I’ll probably come back, sooner or later. There’s Marcus.”

“Please, Hugh, I love thinking of you here.”

“You selfish woman, you want everything.”

“Didn’t you just tell me I care for others? I care for you.”

“Well that’s nice, but you’d better explain it to Ragnar.”

“I have explained it. Can’t I care for you? Isn’t that all right, Hugh? You could stand some care.”

“Not from you. I can’t stand it from *you*.”

“Why?”

“Didn’t you just tell me to grow up? Grow up yourself. You think you can simply go on bringing me lunch while Ragnar is fishing or off managing things?”

“Don’t you want me as a friend?”

“No! No, too difficult. How can you be so perceptive, so intelligent, and so stupidly blind all at the same time?”

“Aren’t you nearly describing yourself? I’ll always be there in my house. If you need anything, I’ll always be there.”

“If I *need* anything? Christ, Lea, go home. And don’t ever concern yourself with what I’m doing with my life.”

Overcome by sadness, frustration, an overwhelming inability to resolve anything, Violeta put her head down, resting pillowed by her arms on the table, and began to quietly cry.

“Oh fine, you know I can’t stand that. You aren’t well...this flimsy constitution you have. You need help. Stop, Lea. Please stop it, goddamn it! I’m not going to comfort you. I’m not going to put my arms around you. And you damn well know why.”

Hugh went away and came back with her coat. He waited for her to finish blowing her nose into a paper napkin.

“Here, put this on and go home. Thanks for lunch. Try to leave me alone.”

When she finished buttoning her coat she put her arms around Hugh and looked up at his angry face, his black eyes piercing her heart with disgust, his body held in rigid restraint.

“I haven’t asked very much of you,” she tried.

“Except the impossible.”

“In many ways we’re bound together as long as we live, Hugh. Even if you married someone that would be true.”

“I’ll never marry again. That game is over...fortunately.”

“You won’t leave without telling me, without--”

“I’ll tell you goodbye.”

“I really don’t understand what you want of me, Hugh. You don’t want me constantly around you. You can’t want any sort of arrangement you’d consider impossible...or I’d consider impossible. Am I only good as an object of your anger? Your anger is so demanding...so very exhausting. A few minutes ago you were almost a friend. Can’t we--”

“I can only stand so much. Are you going?”

“If I have to go like this then say what you feel.”

“You know what I feel. It’s way beyond friendship. You want to put the knife in and twist it around, don’t you?”

“Oh, I know you don’t love me, of course not. You could never love me and be as cruel as this. I think you must still hate me.”

“If that works for you, think what you want. But no, you

want to hear me say it. You want to leave here with my seal of approval. You apparently want to reduce me to a useless drudge of mush while you--”

A furious rage of distaste, anger, retaliation took hold of her. She struck the flat of her fist against his shoulder, not very hard, merely attention-getting contact, but so spontaneously she was at once mortified. He was smiling, with a grim triumph that froze her heart.

“There! It’s what you understand best, isn’t it? That’s why you don’t understand me, Hugh, and why we could never have each other, because of this...because this is what happens. I’ll go home and suffer now because I’ve done an unkindness to you...because I care so for you and, that, you don’t understand at all. We can’t ever communicate anything...and it breaks my heart. My God, I really thought we’d gotten beyond this.”

“How can you be this childlike person...this floundering raw mass of emotion, when that mature woman I saw was so coolly, so intelligently, so expertly in command of your class?”

“Don’t you see that *because* I’m this I’m that?”

“Take off your coat.”

She stared at him with fearful uncertainty.

“I’m not going to do anything, take off your coat.”

“Are you--”

“It’s all right, I drove you to hit me, it didn’t hurt, so stop thinking about it. Please take off your coat. You can’t go now...I need you here. I don’t want to be alone like this, that’s all. So I’ll make a fire and we can sit over there and stare at it for a while...until we’re back to...whatever it is you think we have. You’ve done that before, haven’t you? I’m not asking much either.”

In the shadowy cave of the living room she quietly watched him kneel and make the fire, almost weeping at every discernible movement of his fate-abused hands and body. As the roaring fire climbed, she focused on his gleaming jet hair, the startling gray at his temples, this dominant dark trait the veritable source of Marcus’ beautiful thick waves -- the chance result of genetic furtherance,

the infinite progression of slowly evolved humans, generated from composite gene pools bound to divide, to flare up, burn bright so briefly and then become extinguished forever. They continued to stare into the flames, mutely dreaming in a roiling silence.

He gave a deep sigh and said, "You're right, there's not much of a place for you in my irregular life...but you're here."

In a while he took her hand and held it. She drew up her legs and laid her head against his shoulder.

"Do you want to hear it now?"

"I only need to hear that you're my friend...always...you're always my friend and you know that I care very much for you."

"Ah, Christ! I'm always some kind of friend...and...you know that I care for *you*...but...you don't know how much."

"You're very circumspect...so we have a special mutual love."

"How are you able to love me in any sense at all?"

"You don't realize you beg to be loved. I see the value in you."

"Dammit! it still feels like you want a helluva lot from me."

"I give good value in return."

Even with the firelight dancing in his critical eyes, they had remained dark wells of chary disbelief. But her coy answer had made him focus on her with an astonishing grin of awe, that rare heart-jolting grin. The least that could be said was that she had given him the temporary bromide of humor, and that he might go on accepting her alternative medicine.

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The final evening of milking. First, mucking out the barn amidst the pungent smell of manure and nostril-burning straw dust, wielding a heavy pitchfork to spread out the raspy-dry fresh stalks; the same familiar old shiny-tined fork once held in both her grandfather's and her father's more adept hands. She had become grateful for these meaningful tasks, eager for the peaceful rhythm of morning and evening milking. In this way she could perhaps recapture a little of her past, and occasionally share the work with



Peter Karlsen. Her forehead lay against Fern's velvet-soft warm belly, while contented Fern chewed her clover hay and oat mash and generously gave forth the steaming rich fluid of life. From time to time Fern turned her head back to look curiously at her, blowing her wet nostrils and staring with enormous, limpid brown eyes, gleaming amber cabochons blackly set in her inquisitive buff head. Viola stripped the remaining milk from the shriveled teats and stood up. Grabbing the squat milking stool, she set it aside, then lifted up the frothing warm bucket and turned around, startled.

Ragnar, in his shearling jacket, had been leaning against the door jamb with his arms folded. He unfolded his arms and came toward her, reaching for the bucket. She set it down and leapt at him, wrapping herself around a fair amount of his towering frame.

"I thought you meant to deny me this...you strange *lille* thing."

She could not answer or think of anything clever, nearly sinking into the straw with waves of emotion, clinging to him half for the needed support of her unhinged body, half for the pleasure of contact. She looked up at him with blurring eyes. He lifted her high enough for a brief kiss, then propped her against the rough-planked stall and kissed her slowly, over and over until her diminishing self-awareness dissolved in his zealously unquenchable greeting.

"I was enjoying your words, milkmaid. Did you know you were singing?"

"Was I? Actually singing or just humming?"

"You were singing...another of your made-up songs...lyrics and melody very much your own, I think."

She made no attempt to stanch the slightly prickling flow of giddy embarrassment. "How do you know it was very much my own?"

"I listened to the words...which surprised me. One day I will chord your song for you...if you can sing it again for me."

Ragnar set her down, picked up the milk bucket, and they went out into the darkness. As they went along, her quaint melody

repeated itself in silence, now no longer her own, she realized: the lyrics emblematic, the gifts of winter, the uncertainty of spring -- yearning praise, a desire to stop time and relive its prizes, melody of promise, pure and brave, like the small ephemeral snowdrops she had found partially hidden, shyly asserting themselves above the mossy ground in the old winter orchard, tiny green-fringed white bells, expectantly vibrating in a subtly changing yet still cold wind. Undeniably, her spontaneous song sprang from the influences of the man walking beside her, from the man himself.

He helped with tending the milk -- she had first asked if he was too tired.

“*Nei*, I am not tired at all...but you look it some. Are you?”

“I was too tired to say so...but now I feel rejuvenated.”

“Have you eaten?”

“Yes, enough.”

“Then let us go to bed.”

“But have you eaten?”

“I will eat when we get up.”

“I’ll get up when we eat.”

“*Herregud*, I have missed you...missed your sassy tongue.”

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Viola had successfully produced another breakfast: Virginia ham and orange-zest buttermilk waffles with fresh-made butter and warm maple syrup. She was pouring his black coffee when Ragnar appeared. He immediately opened the waffle maker and broke a waffle in half for both of them, his toughened fingers unconcerned with the heat.

“You are getting pretty good at this,” he said after several waffles. “Even the coffee is better.”

“You should try it with Fern’s wonderful cream.”

“I am too inured to black java, but I enjoyed your fresh butter.”

“I have to get up early to be pretty good for you.”

“You are not still tired?”

“A little...*good* tired,” she offered with an insinuating smile.

“There’s a fire laid in the living room. I want to go in there and snuggle on the davenport...not even wash the dishes.”

He refilled his cup, then she followed him into the living room. She settled down on the wine afghan flung over the cold leather, while he lit the fire. It sparkled and crackled, roaring over a few of her cones and fuming out a viscerally delightful aroma of burning pitch.

When she was lying with his arm over her, and his coffee placed in a reachable spot, she turned her head and watched his face.

“Did you take Peter fishing for him...or for me?”

His fire-lit eyes, retaining the depth and color of misty-gray far blue hills, were at once recast in finer concentration; his wonted indulgent smile becoming slightly more serious.

“That is only a few words for a limitless subject, clever girl.”

“Answer me in fewer.”

“I went fishing for both of you...and even for myself.”

“After you happened to mention that Hugh was going to China.”

“I thought you would want to know...so you would have a chance to stop him if you could. Did you have a difficult time of it?”

“Why did you think you had to go away?”

He sat up and slowly turned her around in his arms, keenly watching her.

“You already know some of that. All right, maybe I went away partly so you would have to milk Fern...have to keep your mind on inescapable duty, like your now less frequent writing class...anyway, I knew you would come to like it. It is good for you.”

“But why go away instead of--?”

“You know that too. When you argue with Hugh you often come apart. The unfortunate combination of love and misery. But you cannot always run to me.”

“Oh...yes,” she said slowly, closing her eyes in thought.  
“That isn’t fair to you at all. I’m sorry.”

“*Nei*, look at me.” He pushed back her hair and lifted her chin. “I want you to be able to stand by yourself. It is part of getting well...laying aside a crutch. You have done it before, you know how it works. It was just my way of having my hand on you while you settled things...in case you stumbled.”

“Fern? Fern was your way of having your hand on me?”

His face returned to its humored serenity and he chuckled. “*Ja*, Fern was that. I can see you are fond of her. Peter showed some concern.”

“Peter? He didn’t think I was capable of milking--”

“He thinks you are capable of almost anything, just as his uncle does. But he thought you would think he was shirking his duty.”

“As a matter of fact, I’m quite reluctant to give up Fern. She has magical qualities.”

“*Ja*...she makes you sing...without even realizing that you are doing it. You are very affected, favorably influenced, by things of nature. And that is fortunate...for you and for me.”

“Ragnar...I have to...God, I'm afraid to, but it's time that I tell you something...should have told you a long time ago. But...you won't like me.”

He laughed. “Too late, I like you.”

“But if you knew...” Her face grew hot and she squirmed away from him. “When I first returned to London so ill...after Robert...I thought I couldn’t go on just being...my life seemed hopeless, dismal, absurd. Mama was gone, my grown son lost to me...everything black. Not being alive seemed better than the slow knife of guilt...so much bitter cynicism--”

He drew her back against him, his arm bent around her and his long fingers stroking her ribs. “I know that.”

“You know what?”

“It goes with depression, wishing for death. Why do you think I raced through the snow barefoot?”

“You knew? You’ve known?”

“*Ja*, when I said you were fragile I did not mean only your size, *lille* girl.”

“But how could you love a person so weak, so damaged?”

“You are not some unknown *person*, you are Wild Vi, whom I first met when you were five years old. You were not wishing for death then...had no idea what death was -- you were fiercely and willfully alive. You are not wishing for it now...are you?”

“You know I’m not.”

He bent his head in weighted thought and she saw how deeply he was struck by what he would far rather lay aside.

“In London you chose life...*Herregud*, saved yourself for this. Your depression comes and goes but comes less and less. When I saw you were back, and so single-mindedly about to cut down my pine, I recognized first your strength and reasonableness. I saw a very determined woman with misery in her beautiful eyes, hurting but reaching out with positive motivation -- that is the life force. My reaction was like a painful fist in the chest. That I was angry at myself and thought having you inadvisable meant nothing at all. I could not have been more surprised -- that complicated feeling had never taken hold of me.”

“You couldn’t see what a mess I was?”

“*Ja*, I saw problems, of course I did. I saw too much else to give up on you. But even if it had not turned out this way I would have helped Martha’s daughter. I have always understood lust well enough...enough to please myself, as well as make a hungry woman happy that way but--”

“How well you know that, how well you--”

“Let me finish. In all my life I have never known anything like this...nothing even approaching it. The phenomenon of you I realized at once: the eager child still there, alongside a brave woman determined to prevail over rough times...the special intelligence I admire in both. Sometimes you need to be that child again, and sometimes you invite harmful introspection. You often want to be comforted, told what to do. I do not mind that...find it curably

demanding...perhaps too pleasing for me for your own good. But it is mostly a temporary situation, because you are really so capable. I accepted your impulsive anger because it meant you were fighting for life. And at first I was fighting not to have you, not to lose control -- the surrender authentic love must undergo -- because I thought you could not reciprocate. That was my sarcasm, which you first took as dislike of you. If you had been well, had been your perceptive self, you would have seen that the sarcasm was something else. I wanted to lose control with you -- but only if you wanted it -- finally I did. Ah, you can make me talk.”

“Yes...I love to make you talk. When you do I listen very carefully, learn a great deal. Tell me, will I lapse into bad behavior again?”

“*Ja*, probably. But we will deal with it.”

“Oh, I was teasing a little...you’re really serious.”

“*Ja*, I am. But what is between us is like armor, so your anger or my anger will have no lasting effect.”

“I think you’d prefer to have me exercise a more puritanical restraint, a more, let us say, Norwegian demeanor.”

“And what might that be?”

“It might be you.”

“*Ja*, and it might not. The Norwegians I know would heartily disagree with your droll rendering. And as to you, *lille* firebrand, do not wear any puritanical mask around me. I very much admire your honesty...anyway, by now I am used to putting out your fires.”

“Do you know you often make me feel very young and playful?”

“Maybe the reason for your childish identity is that you were a child when you first knew me. You were conditioned to become that teasing imp because you got results...took great pleasure in getting responses from me: a few scoldings, but more often you made me laugh with your deviltry. Now you can enjoy whatever makes you happy, Wild Vi.”

“Nearly everything you do makes me happy.”

“Nearly?”

“You’re secretive.”

“Everyone is that...but mostly I am just quiet...reflective.”

“Yes, it’s the nature of this Norse beast,” she teased.

“Unless encouraged to speak by an irresistible force.”

“Do you remember when the yellow jackets stung me? I thought of it recently. I think I was about ten years old. You were digging fence post holes, and I ran to you in a cloud of raging bees.”

When he examined her face closely she instinctively held still, trying not to blink. Could he see that child running barefoot over the field, screaming in pain and fright, the angry bees stinging the miserable little foot and ankle that had blundered into their nest?

“*Ja*, I have thought of it...while trying to remember what I could of you...the pain and tears in those pleading eyes.”

“You stripped the bees from my ankle, then grabbed me up and ran to the house. Gran was the only one home and she was taking her nap. In the kitchen you searched madly through the cupboards for baking soda, then you ran cold water into Mama’s mopping bucket, dumped in the box of soda and plunged my foot into the solution. You added ice cubes. It began to feel better. I thought you could do anything.”

“And last November I found you stung again.”

“It took more than baking soda this time,” she mused, then laughed and said, “A few warm showers.” She looked at him with wonder. “I had no idea I was coming home to you...mythmakers call it *kismet*.”

“From an old Turkish word. But Martha thought you would come back; perhaps I did too. It is not so mysterious, is it, my girl?”

He passed a rough open hand gently down over her face, closing her eyes, then stopped to trace her lips with his thumb. Perhaps once more trying to see that little girl running across the field.

“You know so well how to treat me.”

“There is no time for mistakes.”

She fell silent, then said, “It isn’t so easy to deal with the loneliness of the self, the inscrutable self; how have you done it?”

“We’re all condemned to the solitude of existing alone inside ourselves -- that large part of us so mystifying to others, and often even to ourselves. Maybe it is done by an evolving balance -- deep ocean inside, and outside: its broadly socialized surface. But for myself, I have always liked the fathomless *inside*; for me it is a very large space that I roam. I am happy enough there.”

“You don’t really need me.”

“Wild Vi, you taunt this *elskovsfull* Norseman only to get denial. *Ja*, this *smitten* man. You are the exceptional gift, so rarely encountered.”

“You mean like lagniappe?”

He laughed. “*Nei*, not something extra but the continuous gift of spontaneous love...full of surprises, persistent, addictive, but also fixed in my interior world...in that way you are inseparable from myself.”

She saw how these moments allowed them the comfort of parting with the secure anticipation of coming together again, to go about daily business holding them to the external world -- Viola: assessing her students’ papers and her own writing, or reading to Mary, talking to Alfreda, keeping in touch with Marcus, making white cheeses, answering Virginia’s cannily humorous e-mail, or arguing importantly with Hugh and Roland; Ragnar: busily engaged in checking field drainage, rate of spring growth, budding orchards, methodically, expertly repairing countless breakages, or away on farm business in Hayfield -- sometimes gladly taking Peter along with him -- and, when finally at rest, playing chess or solitarily sipping brennevin over an engrossing book. The private space of each was carefully respected, but at night rarely was one of their beds not empty. They sometimes joined together to cook more seriously and were about to do it again. Viola had invited Alfreda and Bill March over for dinner. She had also asked Hugh and



Roland and Peter. Hugh had declined, but Roland thought it a ripping good idea, possibly stimulus for a poem.

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Ragnar and Violea spoke in culinary voices in her kitchen. Roland had not yet arrived. Bill and Alfreda were seated alongside Peter on the davenport in the living room, warming themselves before the snapping fire and sipping glasses of port. Alfreda was presently leafing through a thick old Ender family photograph album. Violea leaned toward the loosely sealed swinging door and listened to Alfreda exclaim with surprise and delight, as she came across familiar events and remembered characters. She managed to hear Alfreda say, "Oh, here's Ragnar, leading...hmm, that must have been Violea's horse." Violea was not yet able to look at the album, having no idea what she would find and how it would affect her. She was tempted to hurry into the living room to view the snapshot of Ragnar with her horse, Berry. She recalled nothing about the time of the photograph.

Ragnar, at work beneath a noisy fan, appeared not to have heard. He had already sautéed the arborio rice with oil, butter, and onions, and was adding fish stock.

"Bill likes rice but Alfreda was raised to think of it only as pudding," Ragnar said with a nonjudgmental, rather fond grin.

"Her range is limited but what she cooks is very good."

"How do you know she'll care for *Ragnar's risotto*?"

"You must trust me. She has eaten other versions of my rice."

"Right. She's crazy about you...would eat anything you cook."

"Scant praise for my cooking. Do you like the scallops?"

"They were so huge I cut them in half."

"Fine. How long have they marinated in the sherry?"

"Two hours...in the refrigerator."

"Take them out while I heat up the pan. What did you think of Marquis de Béchamal's sauce?" He gestured toward a back

burner where the covered sauce was being kept warm.

“You’ve done it really smooth, just the right thickness, I think. Delicious. I tasted it.”

“I saw you. I always taste. Cooks have to taste.”

Ragnar stood with a hand on his hip, smiling at Violea then checking the pan. He wore a blue work shirt with the sleeves rolled, clean faded Levis, and his kitchen clogs. His concentration was calmly removed from even the slightest concern at feeding a table of hungry guests. His placid blue-gray eyes flashed over her with an amused satisfaction she would describe as the pleasurable assurance of knowing what he was doing with scarcely a doubt of complete success. Briefly, he assessed her apparel, donned only moments ago. She wore a shiny new pair of black ballerina-style flats, pegged black velvet slacks, and a loose silk shirt of brilliant turquoise, which richly complemented her clean and flowing golden-brown hair.

“Why do you not go into the living room now that you are so glamorous? You cannot cook in these nice clothes.”

“You don’t want me? Can’t I be of further use? They’ll think I can’t do anything, won’t they? You know they will.”

“What shall I answer first?” But he answered nothing verbally, merely snatched an apron from a hook on the inside of the broom closet door and tied it around her, remaining at her back a moment, holding her waist and sweeping aside her hair to kiss her neck. “*Vakker*,” he muttered. “You are beautiful and you smell like violets. Where are my capers, pretty girl?”

“Fridge,” she said, reluctant to move, then slowly turning to fetch them. While she was at the refrigerator she took out an arugula salad and set it on the counter. She had made it with thin peach slices, candied walnuts, and dabs of chèvre. Her chilled peach nectar and lemon vinaigrette stood on the counter ready to be tossed into the salad. She sprinkled it over the arugula leaves, splashing a little onto her apron. “Whoops.” Ragnar sent her an I-told-you-so wink.

He slid the drained scallops into the hot pan, causing a noisy

sizzle beneath a puff of white smoke.

“Your salad looks very tempting.” He finished chopping a few fresh tarragon leaves, tossing them over the searing scallops, along with quick dashes of Sauterne, then added cut-up parboiled asparagus.

They could both hear the front door knocker being loudly attacked and Viola said, “Oh, Roland’s here. He’ll insist upon not missing the port. I’d better get the door.”

Ragnar turned down the heat and added the al dente rice mixture to the scallops, then began spooning in the capers and finally the satiny béchamel sauce, to which he had added grated Gruyère.

“*Ja*, we’re almost ready here.” He untied her big white apron, quickly unwinding it from her slender body and sending her whirling into his arms. She laughed and clung to him a moment. “Go, *lille* hostess...before I have to repair that door again.”

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Everyone was in the living room, resting after the highly praised dinner. Ragnar had put on his gray crew-neck sweater and was at the hearth, tending Viola’s dying fire.

“I can hardly wait to gloat at Hugh over the ambrosia he missed at your incredible table. I’m sated,” Roland announced. “What a team you and your enchanting little sous-chef make in the kitchen, Ragnar.” He was again happily playing with words, thus merely being himself.

Alfreda and Bill March stared at him, in definite accord with his praise but with curious indecision. With their green exposure to this known-of but not ever addressed, surprisingly flamboyant hermit poet, Viola sensed certain polite reservations.

“Are you going to have your garden again?” Alfreda asked Ragnar.

“*Ja*, just northwest of my cabin near the canes of raspberries and the boysenberry rows...the same place I always have it.”

He replaced the screen and came to sit in his favorite chair,

with Viola settled on her large pillow nearest Ragnar and the hearth.

“He darn near single-handedly supplies the food bank in Hayfield with his surplus vegetables. As a matter of fact, weren’t you the one who started the food bank, Ragnar?” Bill March said.

“Ulterior motive,” Ragnar answered with a grin. “Food should be grown close to home and shared around freely when there is excess. It is fresh and healthy...and that simple local practice will become more and more important...especially with production costs and uninspected produce flooding the laissez faire market.”

“I’ve been thinking I’d like a vegetable garden,” Viola said.

“I will prepare a place in your back yard...where I did the same for Martha every year...unless you want to play in my big garden. There is always plenty to do there.”

“You might boss me too much, or disapprove of my poor performance.”

“He wouldn’t boss his boss, would you, Ragnar?” Roland teased.

“Oh, Roland, *please*,” Viola begged.

“All the rabbits are fenced from my produce,” Ragnar slyly tempted.

“In that case I might well play in your garden,” she answered, with a suggestive wink and a titter of laughter.

“You’re a quiet one, Peter,” Alfreda said with admiring eyes.

Peter turned to look at her, and Viola looked too. Her tinted fuzzy red hair stood up with an innocently disheveled hint of girliness, and her sky-blue eyes were open wide, giving her a look of fresh surprise. Upon first greeting her, Viola was taken aback by her bright scarlet sweater and slacks, which had seemed to clash with her wind-mussed thinning russet hair. Now accustomed to it, Viola liked the effect, liked even more Alfreda’s unconcern with possible sartorial blunders.

“I very much enjoy listening,” Peter answered with a shy grin. “And it is good for my English.”

“Your English is a darn sight better than my Norwegian,” Bill March asserted. He laughed merrily and explained that what he knew of Norwegian he had learned from Ragnar, whose Norse taciturnity often taught him more than any noisy argument.

“Hardly says a word at the chess board,” he added.

“Who wins?” Peter asked.

“Sometimes he lets me win,” Bill joked. “This guy doesn’t like to lose. He’s got a helluva lot of devilishly clever moves in his repertoire.” Bill tugged at his baggy royal blue crew-neck sweater, then threaded his fingers thoughtfully through his curly gray hair -- the hair still showing tints of its once flaming red. “Oh I’ll have to admit when he does lose he’s pretty laid back about it.”

“The game is after all only a fun mental exercise,” Ragnar commented.

Bill shook his head in disbelief and laughed heartily. “Well, I’m damn proud of myself when I beat you, pardner...usually only happens when you’re working on some other problem at the same time.”

ViOLEA immediately wondered if lately the problem had been her.

“There are three of us here who were in ViOLEA’s opening class,” Alfreda diverted. “That was sure an interesting evening.”

ViOLEA was not certain she wanted to talk about this, better to keep that pedagogic persona within the confines of her ongoing class. She glanced at Peter, whose face had lit up with enthusiasm. Finally he was preparing to speak, but on a subject she would rather have left in silence. He was preempted by Roland.

“In many ways I’m sorry I didn’t return, but I’m afraid it would have been a different sort of class with Hugh and myself there.”

“In what way?” ViOLEA questioned, suddenly professionally defensive.

“I do not think so,” Peter interjected. “Miss Ender has very good control of her class. And we are all really--”

“Peter, please call me ViOLEA...at least.”

“I was showing respect for my teacher.”

“*Ja*, good for you, Peter, I am certain she deserves it.”

“You’d be more certain if you came and sat in on one of her classes, Ragnar,” Alfreda suggested.

Ragnar grinned with surprise, as if such an idea had never occurred to him. “I think Wild Vi would not like that...and I would consider it impolite.”

“So you thought we were impolite when we came to show our support?” Roland asked.

“*Nei*, I thought you were amusing yourselves...perhaps at the teacher’s expense.”

“You mean like two naughty schoolboys?” Roland quipped.

“Returning to the effectiveness of the class,” Peter earnestly interposed, with an undeviating maturity that captivated Viola, “your class has been very...a...encouraging...and a different way of thinking...sensible and wise...useful. I am liking it very much.”

Viola lowered her head and fingered her crushed pillow. She had blushed, unwilling to respond, unable to wield the assertive assurance that came to her so facilely in her classroom.

Ragnar laughed and said, “You forgot to mention that your teacher makes good cheese.”

“She does,” Peter said, with an ingenuously serious fidelity, “better than my mother’s.”

Ragnar had deftly released Viola into laughter. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, did you start this, Alfreda?” she accused with a soft giggle.

Alfreda responded by changing the subject again, bringing up Mary Fuller. “I was glad to discover her in your class. I don’t run into her very often. I’m not so sure Mary finds me such an interesting person but I find her so.”

“Sorry,” Viola said, “I should have invited her this evening.” She looked at Ragnar to see how he would respond.

“Britta has taken her to Portland to hear the opera *Tosca*.”

“Ah, forceful Puccini,” Viola commented, trying to remain unmoved, “inspired by cruel plots, he induced the most luscious

noises -- the last great Italian composer.” Simultaneously her heart had plummeted. “I didn’t know Mary and Britta were such close friends. But of course, why not?”

“They do not see each other very often,” Ragnar said.

Violen’s face flushed with disillusionment, then the irritation of feeling excluded from even an awareness of things transpiring. Raw emotion next manufactured a helpless discontent with Ragnar, he being apprised of communal matters she knew little or nothing about; a state of affairs especially true within Britta’s exclusive and quite well-developed network. Could it be that Britta had newly taken up with Mary because she knew Mary was Violen’s recently acquired friend? Or was she being thoroughly ridiculous, perhaps paranoid? Why consider it at all? Oh the exhausting imbroglios of provincial environments, the endless rounds of gossip, petty jealousies, traducing cruelties; proceedings far more personally entangling than the familiar detached condescension of superior Londoners -- generally found to be indifferently all-inclusive in their habitual snobbery and denunciation. She wanted no part of any of this. It was like setting one’s foot in quicksand.

“In all these years I don’t think we’ve ever talked,” Bill said to Roland. “I’ve seen you in Hayfield a few times, from a distance.”

“I’m a cave dweller,” Roland replied. “But Violen’s taken up the hapless job of socializing me. I do go East once in a while, just to renew acquaintance with what’s left of my family. The first time I did that some years ago, my prosperous brother said, ‘We thought you were dead.’ Of course his familial devotion incited a poem.”

Perhaps believing herself cleverly provocative in getting at the root of something, Alfreda asked, “What is poetry, Roland?”

“Now I’m obliged to teach the mystery of metrics?” Roland exclaimed with much laughter. “I suppose your question is more rhetorical. Nevertheless, you may have thought it was a collection of unusually arranged words often made to rhyme.”

“More than that,” Alfreda coaxed with soft chiding.

“Yes, much more...besides image-making or versified irony, it is a rhythm -- a cadence and a discordance -- which must be

heard, even when read in silence. When it works, poetry is a *perfect storm* of the imagination -- the words, structure, image, and sound, producing emotive mood; all coming together at the command of a unique mental epiphany, and creating a possible explosion of vivid recognition -- ideally affording the highest satisfaction. The acute silences in poetry, effected by punctuation and linear changes, also convey meaning. Ah, poetry, an artistic condensation and vital refinement of language, sometimes resulting in tears or laughter -- because we are all human: moods of instant association...this feat usually accomplished, no matter how seemingly foreign or oddly juxtaposed the poetic components.”

“Why is sound so important?” Alfreda went on.

“Ask that same question not as if you are curious but instead as if you are angry at me. Then ask it as a question to which you already know the answer.”

“Yes, I see.”

“Obviously by inflecting or intoning sound, you’ve created variable meanings from the same components in the same order.”

“We do it all the time,” Alfreda said, “and hardly ever think of it. Then too, the rhythm of poetry is like a song.”

“Yes, a very old and artful technique for reinforcing obtuse memory. Of course, rhythm tunes the brain to high emotion.”

“But if you had to explain in one sentence what would you call poetry?” Alfreda pressed.

“The highest form of human expression.”

“And what is a poet?”

“Ah, now you are into alien waters broad and deep. I would not belabor the depth, but you have seen how we poets must always communicate our peculiar impressions using fresh metaphors and uncommon parallels.”

“We all use metaphors.”

“Absolutely. Metaphors, similes, figures of speech...you couldn’t say much, advance much thought, without them.”

Violea was enjoying this so much she had remained still and silent, thoroughly approving Alfreda’s rudimentary investigation,



and Roland's entertaining method of instruction. She looked at Peter, who sat eagerly forward, earnestly absorbing his rich new environment -- he, just then inspiring her own simile: like a healthy young oak tenaciously maturing in a nutritious open meadow, with space enough to extend its tentative green branches in all directions.

"I suppose life isn't fully lived without poetry," Alfreda said.

Ragnar, who had been leaning on his hand and listening with interest, said, "You have ventured into an ontological question of human existence, of its nature...so relative and subjective there can only be endless responses to your supposition."

"Well, then give me one," Alfreda said.

"What does *fully lived* mean in that context? Did pygmies in their beneficent wild forests once live their lives fully?"

"They likely had their special sort of poetry," Roland wryly suggested.

Ragnar shrugged and laughed. "Yet off my point, Roland. But, whether or not they did, that primal life may seem like poetry to us now. Your concept of poetry must have its distinguishing boundary."

"It does," Roland answered.

Alfreda reached back and took up the chapbook of Roland's poems, discovered earlier on the sofa table, and began searching for a poem.

"I was looking through this little booklet...and wondered about one of the smaller poems in here. I wouldn't dare ask you to explain it, Roland, but maybe our teacher could tell us what she makes of it."

Violea raised up on her pillow, then settled back facing Alfreda and said, "Sorry, Alfreda, I'd never presume to--"

"By all means," Roland interrupted, "I'd like nothing better than to hear Violea explicate one of my poems."

Alfreda handed the chapbook to Violea and pointed out the poem.

"Ah, yes, I'm fond of that poem. It really tells us why poets love to immerse themselves in poetry...very concisely written. Well

I...let's have Roland read it first."

He shook his head but then shrugged and said, "Oh, give me the damn thing." Identifying the poem, he recited without looking:

*No Time For The Poet*  
Time is close relative,  
but no kin  
to the word family  
I live in.  
The moment races not,  
creating,  
yet runs at high speed,  
abating.  
Zeno's paradox reigns  
when I stay,  
penning new lyrics  
astride day.

"All yours, Violet," Roland said, leaning back in his chair.

He was smiling, but with little suggestion of irony, merely of encouragement. She noted his keen interest in hearing from her.

"Well, for me it pretty well explains itself, and I'd rather resist this sort of deconstruction...but here goes.

"This is all about the chameleonic nature of time in relation to ourselves in certain states. At the beginning of the last century, when Rilke went to Paris to write about Rodin, he adopted a sort of dictum he had borrowed from Rodin: *Il faut travailler, rien que travailler* -- It is necessary to work, nothing but work. He had discovered the secret of devoted and persevering effort, which Rodin knew, that to immerse oneself in a beloved task cancelled everything else and made time stand still. In the first verse of this poem the poet is saying that while time is always relative, as per Einstein, it is not a consideration regarding his life, *id est*: his *work*, when he is doing poetry. In the next verse, he reinforces this proposition: noting that while he is creating poetry time vanishes, but when he is

finished or waiting to write again he becomes aware that his life is racing to its conclusion. So, in the final verse, we come to the most famous of Zeno's paradoxes, which you may remember from your inspiring schooldays: the one about Achilles racing a tortoise he has given a headstart and can therefore never overtake, because when he arrives where the tortoise is it will be gone -- false, of course, because Zeno was dazzled by a word picture that left out the actual speed of Achilles. Nevertheless, the image makes great poesy, and here the poet is neatly saying: time will never catch me while I'm in the act of penning new ideas, for then I am astride the day, I ride the day into oblivion, time cannot overtake me."

Viola shrugged and gave a little moue smile as she glanced at Roland. He was smiling broadly, involuntarily displaying a surprised cast of admiration, which began to embarrass her. She looked askance, then fell into laughter at his unusual attempt to quit irony.

"What manner of woman is this? I couldn't have done it better. How do you feel about that, Alfreda?"

"Enlightened but a little out of my element," Alfreda replied.

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Ragnar was making grilled corned beef sandwiches when Viola arrived to share his lunch. It had snowed indecisive wet flakes, and he left off his preparation in order to remove her snow boots. He liked to hold her foot in his big warm hand, stroking each foot to blooded warmth with a studied tactile pleasure, always sending a shivering thrill through her body. She experienced this as another of his many and utterly spontaneous ways of making love. He removed her thick woolen stockings and reached for her shearling moccasins kept nearby.

"Never mind those. I am braver barefoot. I crave to walk around that way on your wonderfully warm floors."

He scrutinized his kitchen floor. "Is it clean enough?"

"Totally, constantly, and perhaps even obsessively, clean

enough.”

“Seamen are clean; as Melville wrote: they *would not willingly drown without first washing their faces*. You are mischievous today.”

She walked to the counter and picked up an empty box, perusing it with interest. It was the box the sauerkraut had come in. Ragnar bought his sweet, caraway-seeded sauerkraut in boxed cooking packets, at a little Norwegian shop in Hayfield. The brief instructions stamped on the box were printed in Norsk. Viola haltingly read them aloud, her brow knit in concentration, her voice very soon sending Ragnar into deep-throated protests of laughter.

“*Herregud*, I must teach you to speak my native tongue.”

“*Legg posen i en kjele med kokende vann*,” she cheerily intoned in a singsong voice, reading below the helpful pictures of cooking instructions.

“Stop! You are murdering my language.”

“*Klipp opp posen. Hell surkålen i en bolle. Ferdig til servering*,” she continued with lilting playfulness.

“Are you having fun, my loony linguist? You are making great fun for *me*.” He drew her curved back away from the counter and held her fast against him, kissing her neck while she still held onto the box.

“*Nei, nei*, I can understand this.”

“If only you could *pronounce* it. We will have to work on that. Some things you say very well. You are quite good with many languages.”

He returned to spreading slices of rye bread with dabs of mayonnaise and sweet mustard, then piled on thin slices of corned beef, followed by the drained caraway-sauerkraut topped with slices of Jarlsberg cheese. He ended with the top slice of bread lightly pressed down, and laid the two sandwiches in a pan of heated canola and olive oil.

Viola loved to watch him in his kitchen, or in her kitchen, and could become quite mesmerized, regularly finding an assured, graceful economy of movement, experienced rote actions directed precisely at obtaining the swiftest yet most effective results. He

could keep a steadily demanding number of preparations going simultaneously, always with perfect timing and rapidly shifting attention, moving back and forth in a swift choreography that left her breathless.

“There’s not a thing you do that’s wasted effort.”

“The quickest road to the stomach. Here, eat this without wasted effort.” He set her plate before her, on the kitchen table.

When they had finished and were drinking their tea and coffee, Ragnar said, “Last night, good-natured Alfreda may have declared herself out of her element but you were very much in yours.”

She saw that his serene face was slightly more intense and serious, his darkened eyes less blue than gray, reticent but very penetrating.

“How do you mean?”

“When you analyzed Roland’s poem with such acumen, you were very much in command. I am well aware that you are really a fine teacher. It is not surprising that Peter has become a devoted disciple. Maybe I have been selfish to want you *penned up* here on the farm -- not to make an obvious pun. Perhaps you should be down the road at the University of Oregon, Professor Ender.”

“You say that so easily.”

“*Nei*, the last was not easy to say.”

“Are you trying to send me away from you again, for some utterly ridiculous noble reason?”

“I only want you happy with yourself...free to realize your remarkable potential. I could not be the one to thwart that.”

“I have *realized* enough. If you truly want me happy then you must leave me where I am, on Ender Farm, near you, and hardly *penned up*. I’d rather you were selfish, if that’s what you call loving me.”

“What I call loving you: the joyfully unpredictable challenge of a lifetime, Wild Vi. You always give me plenty of incentive.”

Very often, when immersed in her mother's diaries, Viola experienced a strong feeling that she was about to come upon a central truth, unable to dispense with the notion that Martha's faithful recordings were leading to a large revelation, and that its collective sum would register meaning far greater than the teasing fragmented parts over which she pored. *But, Mama, haven't I lived long enough to recognize this expectation as naïve and childish?* she sadly apostrophized. When she had finished with the diaries, if one could ever finish, it would be up to her to find her own truth in them, for truth itself was nearly always perplexingly many-sided. Still, she held onto her willful conviction of an overarching guiding principle yet to be named, while continuing to search for and digest every scrap of meat in the varied rich broth of Martha's perceptive Ender Farm renderings. Here was sound proof of the history her mother had once related: that Martha had been quite a serious student when the handsome young Niklas first encountered the vivacious little Martha Herz, met while conversing with mutual friends on the expansive emerald-green Lawn at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Both of Martha's parents were then already dead, having perished in a hotel fire while on a business and pleasure trip across America. They had left her a small legacy, and Martha was taken in by a kind but rather severe unmarried maternal aunt, a well-educated and retired surgical nurse, who sternly warned Martha that she would soon have to support herself. But then, while still at college, Martha fell in love, visited Ender Farm, and became enchanted with the idea of at last having a family of her own, a family to be richly and beneficially nurtured in her credulous version of wholesome country life.

One day Viola discovered a passage that astonished her, and which she read over and over. Near the end of her illness, Martha had written: *I ask myself, what do I know of my worldly daughter now? She escapes me in understanding more than time and distance. Without qualification, I love what I know of her, what I remember. I see her little face holding such worry, such concern over my well-being. Oh that Niklas and I could have made her formative childhood a secure, happy introduction to the*

*world. I did manage to keep quite a lot from her. Yet I do believe it was her uneasiness that created social awareness, a desire to attack grave adversity, if not here then far beyond Ender Farm. Still, how my girl loved to tease and laugh -- I remember that well. She sometimes tormented Ragnar with the merciless hunger of a child in desperate need of paternal attention, which angry Niklas, with only a son in mind, could not, or did not, care to give. Ragnar understood this very well, and tolerated her incessant mischief with a wonderful kind of invincible humor. He took none of her impish shenanigans personally and responded with gentle reprimand when things got out of hand; as they often did, because Viola could push so hard for attention. Luckily, my pretty child was irresistible as well as cunning. She was so hungry that I myself could not feed her enough. How I wish that I could be alive and well when she finally returns. She will return. And Ragnar, who is now so much Ender Farm, will be here of course -- he is so healthy; never, in all the years of his fondness for brennevin, have I seen him even tipsy. What will it be like, when the two of them come together on this enduring family land? Perhaps it will be a very fortunate thing. Despite dear Ragnar's incredible independence, perhaps they will need each other equally.*

“I won’t cry, I’m not going to cry any more over this,” Viola vowed to her empty study, in a high pitying voice of amazement. She then wept with an amount of grievous relief -- her crying so private an act as to be hardly admissible to herself --, throughout the day continuing to tearfully smile, whenever her wise mother’s auspicious speculation surfaced. Perhaps this was as close as she would come to a pointed message from Martha.

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Viola closed a little tan cloth-covered book and squinted at Mary resting back comfortably in her recliner, with graying old Pilot snoozing contentedly near her footrest. The easy chair Viola was sitting in was placed beneath a sedate black-shaded floor lamp, the only light in the room. She had just finished reading to Mary *The Aspern Papers*.

“Ah, that is good Henry James...not that there is bad, not with that quick, profoundly alert mind in play. James himself did

say: *No good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind.*”

“A well-constructed novel should have a beautifully drawn and distinctive architecture, which advances the story so deftly as to be inseparable from the writer’s meaningful revelations.”

“Yes, Violeta, I like that. Every novel should be a work of art, or why do it at all? Unless of course the writer is motivated by fame and fortune...and merely a shallow counterfeiter...plenty of those always around. I have never found Henry James’ *art of fiction* narcissistically ostentatious or convoluted, as some judge it...instead I find his works profoundly thoughtful, mentally stimulating. On the other hand, I find most of Hemingway’s ingrained journalistic style unimaginative and stamped with pseudo-masculinity...plenty of contrived honor...a latently romantic denial of romanticism, of course chauvinistic...and rather boring to boot. But, once again, a matter of what one likes.”

Violeta laughed and said, “Hemingway and James, there is the difference between a naked light bulb and a Murano glass chandelier -- with the latter, one has aesthetic beauty to enhance illumination.

“*De gustibus non est disputandum,*” Mary said, leaning forward to pat Pilot, who had awakened with a low whine, “but with this handy expression of personal taste I couldn’t excuse *tastelessness.*”

Violeta paused in thought a moment and then decided to venture into very different and more uncertain territory.

“Did you enjoy *Tosca*?”

Mary wore a black velveteen sweatpants suit, which had made her disappear into the black recliner in the sparsely lit room. She put her hands on the shiny leather arms of the chair and sat up straight, very quickly and without even bothering to raise the chair’s back.

“Who couldn’t enjoy at least the cathartic power of that dazzling opera? *Amore*, sex, jealousy, murder, and of course the denouement of a cleansing suicide...fortunately a body other than one’s own. All of this done with -- the reason we go -- thrilling voices...thus: memorable glorification of tragedy, which may serve



to comfort us...temporarily.”

A silence followed Mary’s pronouncement, and Violea then decided she would say nothing further, never alluding to Mary’s association with Britta. She was very soon surprised, for Mary had readily intuited.

“I come across Britta mostly at the library, and it was a nice interlude; that is: to be suddenly invited out. I suspected ulterior motive, having never before been asked along, but I went happily. On the long drive to and from Portland, and during the overnight stay at the Benson Hotel, I learned much that transpires in our neck of the woods; most of which I already knew, but I’m not inclined to trade information. I merely listened...myself never mentioning you or Ragnar.”

“That was kind of you. I wonder how you already knew so much, in this solitary world of books and walks along your tidy woods trails.”

“Ragnar hacked out those paths for me and Pilot a long time ago, when I told him how I loved the sweet breezes...the smell of earth and growing things...birdsong...sitting in warming sun. He made me a nice bench. I should not have let him work so hard. He had enough to do.”

“Consideration is part of his nature. He thrives on it.”

“I rather think he thrives on you now. And as to how I know as much as I do, I have a chatty housekeeper. As she carries out her duties, I’m unduly exposed to my gossipy little friend’s constant flow of information...very likely often distorted by the time it reaches me. I’m compelled to hear revelations like: Emma Fraser’s ailing old dog was finally put down, after developing an incurable taste for her neighbors’ chickens...and reserved Marvin Johnson recently bought Viagra from Fitz at Whalen’s Drugstore -- my God, how that shy old bachelor must have blushed with daring! That sort of desperation only arouses heartfelt sympathy. See how easy it is to fall into this sort of thing.”

“Hurrah for twaddle!” Violea cried, clasping her middle and finally apologizing for such uncommon bursts of helpless laughter,

her spirited volubility arising partly from Mary's inability to witness her gestured response.

"So your housekeeper, Clara, is your pipeline to the world."

"I must say I've listened haphazardly...until lately...when I began to hear unavoidable things about you and Ragnar and Britta."

"I imagine so." Violea had attempted a voice of unconcern, futile, for Mary had another highly developed sense of vision.

"It doesn't matter, Violea, none of it matters...really. Britta is a fairly decent person, usually...but for her intimacy is mainly a dependable pattern, has to be immutable. She refuses to accept that Ragnar's relationship with her has always been mutable, more platonic, an exchange of needs. Ragnar must have had no thought of ever falling in love...their rather loose relationship was mostly one of proximity, comfortably available, reasonably undemanding."

"I'm afraid I'm sitting here cringing like a maimed animal."

"You're too empathic. Britta is a strong, very purposeful Norwegian, with airtight convictions of the proper sort of health and sanity."

"But you see, I have never had that kind of certainty about myself. I question everything. What you've told me only means that, with her seamless rectitude, she will always be right. She will never give up."

"Give up what? She doesn't have Ragnar...has never had him. And why do you care? My God, what a teacher you are. I can't believe I'm talking to that same person. By your considerate manner, astonishing intelligence, this luscious soft voice I hear, I easily understand why Ragnar feels as he does. You ought to love yourself a little more."

"I haven't loved myself very much...if at all."

"You must now...at least to a degree...if you respect Ragnar."

"Much more than respect...I'm beginning to love life again."

"Life includes care of self. I too love life...no alternative; but it was very hard for me. I almost succumbed to alcohol."

Violea stood up and knelt by Mary's chair. "Oh, Mary, let me hug you. Even that might seem selfish but I feel very close to

you.”

Mary reached out her arms. “Well then, let’s share some of that exuberance...but never stint in your criticism of the odd work presently flowing from my word processor.”

It was during this earnestly affectionate exchange that Viola glanced through one of Mary’s little diamond-paned glass windows. She was astonished to see Britta getting out of her car.

“Britta?” she muttered. “No! Did you invite her here, Mary?”

“What!” Mary exclaimed, standing up. “I swear I didn’t. She called me yesterday and offered to bring over some books I wanted. I told her to come Wednesday. God! I did mention that you were coming over to read today. Oh this is brazen. You don’t have to see her at all. I’ll take the books and send her away.”

“No, she’s already seen my very conspicuous truck and...I suppose it would be cowardly of me. I’m not afraid of her but I don’t know what she intends. I just hope it isn’t messy for you.”

“It won’t be. I’ll see to that.”

The first words out of Mary’s mouth when she opened her door were less than friendly: “I thought you were not coming until Wednesday.”

Britta stood there fresh and vigorous, divinely coiffured and pantsuited in tailored hazy-soft cream wool, probably cashmere. Her upswept silky cloud of hair swirled atop her head, showing obvious attention to sveltely refined neatness; her pale blue eyes gleamed with indomitable determination, accenting her rose-tinged cheeks.

She stared past Mary directly at Viola, who wore loafers and blue jeans below a bulky black sweater. *At least my hair is clean and brushed*, Viola thought, offering a quirky *c’est la vie* smile.

“I’ll bring the books to you in a minute, but may I come in?”

“Please just bring the books,” Mary said. But this proved no detraction, for when Britta returned with five or six books she had to walk inside to lay them down. She was staring at Viola so intently the books slid awkwardly off the edge of a narrow little

table placed along the wall, scattering on the floor.

Violea knelt to retrieve them, placing them back on the table. She at once had a feeling that she ought to prevent the slightest unpleasantness from occurring in Mary's house, thus she prepared to speak in a surprisingly matter-of-fact voice.

"It's a beautiful day...with the sun and not much snow on your woods paths, Mary. I suppose Britta would like some tea, so while you make it we'll take a little stroll in the gorgeous sunlight."

"Violea--" Mary began, but Violea had already put on her heavy jacket and gloves and was heading for the door. Britta had looked down at her smart beige flats and grimaced.

"I will just get my coat from the car," Britta agreed.

The copse of evergreens and a few bare deciduous trees, just beyond the tall firs in Mary's back yard, revealed a manicured sepia floor, for the small bushes left standing were only beginning their spring buds, and the sunlit paths were still cleanly visible. All of this tedious clearing and path-making was Ragnar's handiwork, Violea reminded herself as they went silently along -- lanky Britta bent forward and examining the ground for the safest places to plant her immaculate shoes. They came to a weathered red cedar bench. Clumps of frozen snow were scattered throughout the woods, and even in the piercing morning sunlight the brittle air was very cold. With her gloved hand, Violea brushed a crust of hard frost from the otherwise clean and dry bench.

She had quite effectively taken control of the unexpected, displaying an unperturbed bearing, this from years of conditioned, and finally automatic, responses to sudden difficult situations. Briefly assuming her past persona of ameliorator, allowed her to acknowledge the inescapable humor and absurdity of the present circumstance.

When both were seated on the bench, Violea looked down around her feet, at an ample and neatly spread oblong of frosty filbert shells.

"I think these shells must be from my own filbert orchards. What a good idea. I'll remember to use them on our garden paths

at home.”

Britta sat with her back very straight. She had donned a long alpaca coat of tan, and her hands were clasped in her lap with a rigidly uncompromising formality.

“You have a number of admiring men residing out there on your property.”

Violea held up a thick-gloved hand to shade her eyes as she looked directly at Britta, almost regretting the cadence of Norse in her speech, for she loved it so.

“If you had known my mother you would realize where that inclination for sharing healthful land began.”

“Her charity is well known around Hayfield...a longsuffering woman.”

“Yes...all manner of news, however distorted, rapidly travels every which way in this inquisitive county of my childhood.”

“By now I know it so well I could have been born here.”

“But somehow it isn’t quite the same, is it? And your Norse roots, I’m sure, are memorable to you.”

“As Ragnar’s must be to him.”

Violea laughed, heating slightly at her blunder. “I believe they aren’t so kindly memorable...although in him beneficial...in a number of ways. He’s been a very praiseworthy steward of Ender Farm.”

“You are not tired of your farm yet?”

“Never...I could never grow tired of it.”

“You don’t miss London, your travels, your work?”

“Not at all, Britta.”

“You must intend to return to it when you’ve had enough of this.”

“No.”

“I wonder if I’d been married to Ragnar if you would still have tried to take him from me.”

“I’m afraid you’re not aware of... For a while I didn’t even know you existed. But surely you must know Ragnar is already married...to Ender Farm and his long life there.”

Britta stared off through the trees, then briefly at Violeta, then at her clenched hands. “And by the farm you think you have him.”

“When I returned I had no idea Ragnar was still on the farm; that’s how removed I was from everything here. I badly needed to heal. He’s helped me a great deal. We do share an unforgettable past. I really don’t know how to say this any other way, Britta: it has happened that we’ve come to love each other deeply. That depth of love and understanding is something quite new for both of us. We were very surprised.”

“I too was surprised...since Ragnar has been with me almost since I arrived here over six years ago.”

“But *how* with you? Was he really *with* you? I know you’re good friends...that he’s enjoyed your company.”

“What can you know of it? I should never have been so indulgent, so permissive...so lax. I should have married him.”

“Pardon me, but did he ask you?”

“He would have if I had acted differently.”

“I don’t think so. Ragnar will not be pushed into anything. That night we met at the Grange, I rather unwillingly overheard your friends say that you yourself believe he won’t...so on that we agree.”

“But you think he’ll marry you?”

“I’ve hardly thought about it. It isn’t necessary.”

“Then...it’s simply going to go on as it is?”

“This is terribly personal, Britta, but you certainly deserve the courtesy of an answer...and I’ve given it. I can only repeat what I’ve said.”

“In regard to *you*...and your class in Hayfield, I’ll continue to do whatever Ragnar asks of me...and live with my mistake...but I’ll regret forever not making him realize--”

“Oh, Britta, wait! Trying to force someone into something can’t be love. And why was it your decision to let things go on as they were? Was it because that was actually as far as *you* wanted it to go...that ultimately you really prefer your independent life? As I

said, at first I didn't even know about you. When I found out, I agonized over all of this. I didn't want to hurt anyone but--"

"You very carelessly ruined an excellent relationship...by not ending your seduction when you found out we--"

"There was no seduction. I was too ill to even consider such a thing...if I were ever that sort of person. I don't believe I ruined very much. I think at bottom you only wanted what you had: a well maintained friendship. You still have that."

"And at least that much I intend to keep."

"So be it, Britta. I have friendships of my own, and I know how important they are."

"I think you would like to have *all* the men at once. You--"

Viola laughed and said, "You don't know me, of course, or you could never cast me in such melodrama. Apparently you've conveniently invented some other person with my name. Maybe you ought to give Ragnar more credit for his judgment. He does know who I am."

"*His judgment!*" Britta cried, waving a dismissive hand, an amount of her assurance crumbling away. "It's this younger...this seductive little body he finds--"

"Now you're allowing emotion to cloud your own judgment. Ragnar's discernment was far more profound...and I don't think of myself as young at all. Oh this is so unnecessary. Come on, we're going to run into each other quite a lot, why don't we call a truce?"

"*Ja*, we will run into each other, and you will find that, if I do not understand *you*, I understand social amenities very well. I will never make a spectacle of myself on your account."

"No, you have an admirable decorum few possess, and how nice you look today." This sudden assessment was not meant to be disingenuous, although they both knew that Britta had made herself as attractive as possible in an attempt to display her physical worth as Ragnar's erstwhile companion.

"I know Ragnar could never keep an acquaintanceship with someone who isn't kind, Britta. I look forward to the day when you'll kindly tolerate me."

“That *will* be the day,” Britta said, standing up.

She opened her coat wide and drew its flapping edges swiftly around her, then set off without looking back. The sun had begun to warm the exposed path, softening the frozen mud rising between the surface of wood chips. In her distress, Britta had carelessly allowed her foot to sink into the brown slush. She cursed softly, and Viola, walking slowly behind her, could not restrain a faint smile, but she took no real pleasure in watching the muck ooze into that lovely shoe.

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Britta had not stayed for tea, curtly apologizing to Mary and rushing back to her Volvo station wagon. Viola and Mary were left to discuss this disturbing happening over Mary’s tea and currant cake.

“Why do I feel that Britta considers passion unseemly?” Viola asked, now back in her chair beside the black-shaded lamp.

“Because she does consider it so, Viola, and especially in you. Overt passion is a messy sort of display that leads to quite unpredictable circumstances. She needs to be in as much control as possible.”

“How on earth can she enjoy opera?”

“Oh, she doesn’t care a thing about the libretto, merely the voices, the music. I think Ragnar did somewhat improve her sense of humor. She was born into a strict Lutheran family, and the next best thing to the church was the library. Dare I gossip like this? Well, I think I’m justified in increasing your understanding. In her own manner, she fell madly in love with a Norse churchman. They never got around to marriage, but he jilted her sometime later, for a pretty young girl in the choir, and that’s why she fled so late in her life, reinventing herself in her tidy library in rural America.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“I thought she needed some loosening up and bought her a number of harmless looking but wicked little aquavits, after our night at the opera. A perfect opportunity to *let her hair down*, as we



weren't going out on the highway until the next day."

ViOLEA could not help a grateful burst of laughter and said, "Oh, Mary, is Britta quite religious? Ragnar certainly isn't."

"Apparently not. It seems that when her lover deserted her she deserted God at nearly the same instant. So you see, her rogue churchman may have unwittingly promoted reason."

ViOLEA responded with an appreciative laugh at this shrewd assessment, then took a sip of her English Breakfast tea and said, "You were going to tell me something she said about my class."

"Oh, yes...she's heard all about your teaching methods and believes them very unorthodox. She said she couldn't complain to Ragnar because he would only defend you. I can tell you right now, ViOLEA, that the women she knows in your class have told me they're captivated by your teaching. They say they always learn surprising and worthwhile things when you lecture or critique their papers. I, of course, share their sentiments and love coming to your class."

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The sun continued to glaze the cold-locked farmlands with a deceptive honeyed light as ViOLEA drove back to the farm, mostly with her eyes fixed thoughtfully on the road and her mouth held in an amused little smile, sometimes tightening with a frown. What an unexpected morning. All of those odd events had transpired in an amount of time that now seemed much longer; it was not yet even noon. Perhaps she could lunch with Ragnar. She very much desired to be with him. When she drove up to his cabin, she was still trying to decide whether or not she should say anything about Britta. There was a small unfamiliar car parked near his truck at the far end of the cabin, and she thought perhaps it belonged to Simon Brown. Ragnar had told her that Simon had bought a small new hybrid and had been bragging mightily about its efficiency. She hoped he wasn't presently complaining to Ragnar of her *highly unusual* class. Was it possible that riled Simon was Britta's unhappy informant?

As she came up onto the long deck, she heard the faint sound of plucked strings, which abruptly stopped. She glanced through the window into Ragnar's living room. He was standing in faded Levis and gray sweatshirt and clogs, holding the neck of large gleaming blond guitar in one hand. His other arm was fixed around a beautiful young woman with a long thick braid falling off one shoulder, hair luminous and pale as ripening oat sheaves. This rosy-faced, clear-skinned creature, taller than herself, wore a pale blue jacket, cinched at her slender waist, and a little sky-blue and white knit cap perched attractively on her head. She lifted her pale hand and placed it on Ragnar's shoulder; he bent and kissed her on the cheek. He subsequently appeared to glance over the young woman's head toward the window. Viola ducked away. Had he caught the dark shadow at his window, identified her? She did not know, could no longer reason it out. The now dream-like vision she had indelibly recorded wavered tauntingly in her confusedly pounding head. Everything else was shutting down. Her crisp sun-struck world, so unhurriedly moving toward spring a moment ago, was transformed into a miserable colorless haze of hostile indistinct shapes; the heavy cold winter had mournfully returned with a dismal pall of menace. How could the blood so rapidly pound through her head without rendering her unconscious? In a blank, automatized manner she had turned her truck around, then, in what seemed only an instant, she found herself driving rapidly over Hugh's narrow, frozen woods road. She looked up in dazed incomprehension at the smoke coming from the chimney, checking to see if she was really where she thought she was. Next she was stumbling from her truck, leaving the engine running and dashing clumsily up to his door, knocking and opening it at almost the same instant.

Hugh was sitting at his computer, with dark-rimmed glasses on; he tore them off with swift impatience, tossing them across the strewn printed sheets covering his desk, and grimacing at her with obvious inhospitality. Then, as he more closely scrutinized her distraught face, he quickly stood up.

“You’re white as a ghost. What’s happened?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” she muttered in confusion.

“Lea, what’s wrong? You’re scaring the hell out of me.”

“I’m...I don’t feel very well.”

“Did you come here in your truck? Shall I drive you to a doctor?”

“Maybe you could just get me...I wonder if I should drink something. No, no! I don’t think I should.”

“Lea, tell me what’s wrong.”

“I think...I’m going to vomit.”

When she failed to move, Hugh put his arm around her and led her into his towel-strewn steamy bathroom. He lifted the toilet lid and she slid down on the floor and vomited all of Mary’s cake and tea. He handed her a warm wet rag, and she absently wiped at quivering lips. Shakily standing, she rinsed her mouth with a tooth cup of water and went back into the living room. She began to pace back and forth, with trembling hands shoved into her pockets; sometimes looking at the floor, sometimes out of the window, but registering very little.

“You’re a wreck, take off your coat and lie on the couch. I’ll cover you with the blanket over there.”

She never reached the point of removing her coat for, with one last glance, she saw Ragnar’s truck pulling up beside hers. He turned off the motor she had left running and slammed her truck door.

She ran into the kitchen, calling out from behind the door, “I’m not here, I’m not here! You don’t know where I am!”

Hugh had gone to the window. “It’s Ragnar. What the hell do you mean you’re not here? He’s parked next to your truck.”

“I don’t care, I don’t care, I’m not here! You don’t know where I am. Please, Hugh, *please*.”

Ragnar knocked on the door and entered without waiting to be received, just as Viola had done. She peeked through the crack at the kitchen door’s edge, and gasped for air she had failed to take in. Ragnar had not bothered to put on the coat he carried in his

truck, and was still wearing his clogs, which he rarely wore while driving.

“Hello, Hugh, where is she?”

“What the hell is going on? What’ve you done to her?”

“Nothing. You know I have done nothing. Tell me where she is or I will start looking.”

“That’s a hell of a condition I just saw for *nothing*...vomiting in my bathroom.”

“Please tell me where she is, Hugh. She is hurting for no reason and I want it to stop *now*.”

“I’m not supposed to say...maybe she’s behind the kitchen door.”

Viola saw Ragnar striding across the floor, and ran out the back door, away from the lean-to and into the woods. Never had she run so fast, as if she were ascending far up into the cold sky and could fly away, just managing to escape familiar reaching fingers of destruction, as she had done all of her life when pursued in dreams. *What a fool I am*, she muttered aloud, *what a foolish aging woman I am*. She came to a little stream she had not known about or forgotten, and leapt across it, running along its meandering edge and through numerous rough patches of constantly refreezing snow, partially melted but freezing again. When she reached her chosen asylum, a thick-trunked leafless old maple deep-rooted in the rising bank, she pressed her weak body into a fold at the far side of its broad trunk. She stood breathing heavily in the painfully cold air, trembling in fear of discovery and thinking how incredibly absurd this was.

Ragnar loomed before her, dragging her away from the tree’s partial shelter.

“You pitiful woman, you know nothing about defensive measures. Even if I had not seen you in the distance or never considered this maple, I could have followed your tracks. If I had not gone back to the truck for my coat, and was not wearing these damn clogs, I would have reached you sooner...you hiding from *me*, Wild Vi?”

“I wish I knew more defensive measures...dammit, it doesn’t

matter. Let me go.” She struggled, knowing it was wasted effort.

“*Nei*, I will not let go of you yet. You are badly in need of a rational influence...so you can learn how ridiculous you have been.”

He opened his shearling jacket and drew her firmly against him, easing his chin over her crown of tangled hair. She then knew that both of their hearts were fiercely pounding.

“You have plenty enough sense to find out things before running off like a mindless wild thing.”

“I don’t want to know.”

“*Ja*, you *do* want to know. Stand still now and let me tell you. You saw me with my grandniece.”

“Of course, your never-before-mentioned grandniece just dropped in from Norway.” Her heart lurched with the sudden pointlessness of her inane act. “Your grandniece?”

“Karin, she is a music major at the University of Oregon. I see her so rarely, with her busy young life, that, most unfortunately, I forgot to mention her. She has always been interested in my Norse songs and came today to record one that I have played for her in the past. She is a good girl, intelligent and talented. She has gone now, but when she comes again you can meet her. You will like her.

“*Herregud*, let us get out of here. It is too damned cold for standing around beneath this tree. You can warm yourself at Hugh’s fire before you go home...and explain yourself too, while you are at it. He believes I have done something terrible to you.”

Viola was miserably ashamed, certain she had fallen to a new level of outrageous impulsiveness. She lowered her head, furious at the cold wet trails on her cheeks, tears large enough to be seen splashing on patches of rotting maple leaves. Just below, nearer the stream, she spied a fragile clump of wild violets, the tiny green stems now beginning to show their reddish-violet buds as the plant vigorously forced itself through a melting crust of snow. She knelt over the brave little growth, stretching out her fingers to touch the tender buds: subtle inchoate beauty, their delicate tenacity bespeaking nature’s incredible secret of procreative strength, an

undeterred right-against-might strength she so desired. Unable to look up, she gratefully addressed this humble diversion: “Oh, Wild violets...early.”

“*Ja*, your namesakes...defiant of stronger forces...and more trusting in the nature of things.”

She looked up then, into black pupils floating in the dove color of the sky, but burning, burning into her heart. He would know at once the answering self-abasement in her eyes, pathetic. She looked away.

They walked back without saying anything more. *Viola* had spent this time trying to frame a single meaningful sentence. Nothing came to her worth saying. Half of her self wanted only to be near him, but the other half, in charge now, sorely needed to get away from blameless judgment. Standing alongside him she had never felt so small.

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Hugh was laughing as she had never seen him laugh. His pale face was now sanguine and gleeful, and his narrow black eyes flashed with enjoyment. He had served his two chilled intruders steaming coffee.

“My God, you’re entertaining. It was well worth being interrupted for this touching light opera performed in my living room. Probably a good thing pretty little Karin missed the result of her innocent appearance. So, *sturm und drang* before lunch, what’s next on the program?”

“*Beklager* for the intrusion, Hugh...*manga take* for the coffee. I am on my way out of here. Wild Vi will have her truck. *Ha de bra.*”

“Hmm,” Hugh contemplated, after Ragnar had said his goodbye and abruptly departed, “sounded like he was headed for Norway...he didn’t seem to have his usual sense of humor.”

“Can you blame him? I’m in abject disgrace. I’m going home and try to reevaluate my mental state. I wasn’t even able to apologize.”

“Try not to sulk, Lea, it’s a big waste of time. I could have mentioned to Ragnar how it ruins you to contemplate his possible desertion.”

“He’s already learned that quite well...on several unfortunate occasions. Very soon he’ll wish he was back with Britta...simply for the peace of mind.”

“Don’t be silly, he’s been broadsided by a stunning intellect attached to a diminutive body of familiar history. You broke down a door that can no longer close...not on you.”

“That sounds far too tactically manipulative for the likes of me. I simply limped home last November...the rest was owing to the amazing fortune of serendipity.”

“Probably at first, but ultimately not for Ragnar. He works at it...knows just when to give you your head and when to rein you in to keep you from going over a cliff. I’d be far more inclined to try and help myself to you but for him. I know you’re in a better place.”

“But then you...you must know you’ve just demonstrated one of the definitive signs of...authentic love.”

“Maybe so...I’ve never tried to define my generous restraint.”

“I’m beholden to you, Hugh.”

“Let’s return to you, Lea: you ought to calm down, your system is still out of whack.”

“Yes, it could well be that from here on my *out of wack* system will believe nothing I say.”

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Violea sat stiffly upright in the center of her wine leather davenport, with the afghan pulled around her. She wore her old green robe and remained in semi-shadow, with only modest light from the fireplace to illuminate her oppressive state of confusion. Bugsy had decided to forego his romp and curl up passively near her feet; he was purring loudly, having no inkling of the inhibited unrest of his mistress. She had forced herself to start a fire, in need of a distracting task, although it had called for effort she could

barely summon. Her body was still cold. The coldness of defeat? Hugh could sometimes be quite inaccurately bombastic; his recent assessment of the degree of Ragnar's amorous enthrallment was not to be trusted. She did believe Hugh's personal revelation, and felt nervously grateful.

*Apparently, in certain circumstances, I have no reasoning power at all...only a wretched stupidity. On the way home from Mary's, I thought I would now merely be trying to imagine what Britta had in mind. We do have to live in the same county. My concern there must have had some effect on how I responded when I looked through Ragnar's window. I've fallen lower than the floor beneath the carpet. I wish I were talking to Mary, dear Mary, so very perceptive...and so eminently sensible...possessing a sixth sense I will never know.*

Gradually she became aware of noises in the kitchen. She jumped up and hurried toward the sounds. Ragnar was heating an unexpected dinner on the stovetop. He had brought it over still warm: a savory brown stew; cut-up vegetables and chunks of beef simmered to tenderness.

When they finished quietly eating Ragnar's ingredient-rich, rosemary-flavored dish, ladled into familiar heavy white bowls -- Syracuse crockery residing in the glass-framed cupboard since the earliest days of the house -- he handed her a mug of hot mulled wine; also brought over and reheated in the microwave. He then gingerly clasped her free arm and solemnly guided her back into the living room and onto the davenport.

The spicy hot wine was a good idea, relaxing her enough to allow a more realistic overview of the day's strange, dream-like events, but this clarity also brought further regret. She watched Ragnar position a fresh alder log on the fire, his obscuring frame half-kneeling to strike the log down onto the coals with the heavy iron poker. How taciturn they *both* were now. Gone was her garrulous chatter, gone her slower verbal ponderings of abstract speculations. Her uncertain mind squirmed with tortuous new writhings, straining back to the moment when she might have fittingly apologized. An apology from her no longer carried any weight, having occurred so many times. To make it now would



most likely belittle its meaning, but, even worse, not to make it suggested a presumption of the right to go on being mistrustful, and without consequences; a presumption that was no part of her.

Ragnar sat down beside her, turning to her to make her look directly at him. The somber blue-gray eyes, always so stirring to regard, shone with much more than concern; there was hurt, but along with this an undaunted perseverance. His gray-sweatered arms were loosely crossed, his supple but roughly abused hands deliberately massaging toil-hardened upper-arms. He threw his angled head back a little and continued to gaze at her with eyes that, by the slant of his head, appeared half closed; hard scrutiny canting low across high cheek bones firmly set beneath weathered tan skin. She came to think this penetrating gaze an attempt to assess the strength of her mental condition, her physical ability to withstand what he would say. His low voice startled her, impatiently intoning a waning constraint.

“Even if you did not know who it was, I wonder how you could imagine me fooling around with a near child.”

“I didn’t think, I didn’t think at all. I--”

“Fooling around with *anyone* when I have you...I have *you*.”

“I saw you kissing a beautiful young woman and I--”

“Kissing my grandniece goodbye on the cheek. You do not trust me. You should have come inside, none of that would have happened.”

“Ragnar, please forgive me, *please*. I so regret all of it...wish I’d had the sense to come inside and act in a normal manner. I was in a more fragile state today...more than usual because I...”

“You are very insecure right now...with your reckless high imagination, this is obviously a dangerous combination. What were you going to say? Why were you in such a fragile state?”

“No, never mind, I didn’t intend bringing it up.”

“*Nei*, I want to know,” he demanded with an uncommon insistence.

Violea leaned on her hand, her elbow propped on the sofa arm, and slipped her thumb into her mouth, biting at the cuticle.

Ragnar drew the hand away and held it in his. “Wild Vi?”

“I was reading to Mary...had finished reading to Mary, and Britta turned up. She was bringing books for Mary, but Mary had told her that I was going to be there today and to bring them on Wednesday instead.”

“All right, but why should that bother you so much? You will likely run into her many times.”

“No, but you see...oh, you don’t understand at all, do you?”

“What should I understand?”

“That Britta is filled with malice toward me.”

“Britta? I think you are mistaken.”

“Let me tell you, then, let me tell you what happened. Or should I not? I don’t know, maybe not. I won’t be a damned tattletale.”

“I already know you are an honorable person, *tell me.*”

“It was cold and messy but we went outside. Britta was so insistent on meeting with me that I feared something unpleasant would happen in Mary’s house, so I suggested we walk along the trail you made...to the bench you made. There we sat -- Britta very handsomely done up in a lovely cream pantsuit beneath her alpaca coat, and me in my old jacket and jeans.”

“It does not matter what you wear -- in this faded robe you are a fine thing to behold, to me or anyone else. I suppose she only wanted to feel confident; she is that way. So you had a good talk?”

“Oh, Ragnar, don’t you get it? She wanted to know if I didn’t miss my work...if I wouldn’t soon be leaving Ender Farm.”

“Wishful thinking.”

“She...said you would have married her if she’d insisted.”

This appeared so surprising that Ragnar actually laughed.

“I never considered it, nor did we ever speak of it. Poor exacting Britta, few husbands could long withstand her hidebound regimen.”

“She believes that I have you because of the farm...and she finally said that I’d seduced you and ruined a fine relationship. She seems to think that I live in a kind of seraglio of men here...all at my

beck and call. I complimented her on her superb decorum and attractiveness, told her I believed she was a kind person...and said I looked forward to the day when she would kindly tolerate me. She said, "That *will* be the day," and left."

"I will tell her that if she cannot maintain that decorum and kindness you spoke of it is better not to come near you again."

"No, no, please don't say anything to upset her. She does need your friendship."

"Which she apparently expects to make into something else." Ragnar sighed. "I thought I had made myself clear. I have told her how I value her friendship...never have I claimed anything more."

"So you see, I was trying to sort out what I'd really done...if I'd done anything she accused me of...certainly not intentionally. I had been in quite good control all through our meeting, and even sensible. I tried to tell her what you mean to me, of your help, of our deep and...unexpected attachment. Nevertheless, I did feel guilt. So I was coming to you, almost single-mindedly coming to you...I knew you'd help, even if I told you little or nothing of what happened. Then I came up on the deck and saw you...my mind went blank. I was baffled and...completely blindsided. I've been ridiculous, haven't I? I've ruined any confidence you had in me. Perhaps you won't forgive me."

"Another thing I appreciate in you: your generous honesty. Every honest person must finally admit of jealousy when it arises. I have a more valid reason to feel that ruinous emotion, do I not? Let me apologize for Britta. You treated her fairly."

She looked hard at him and could read nothing beyond his familiar equanimity, yet his steady return gaze seized her attention with such ease he could as easily process her unspoken question. At last he grudging a smile, meaningful enough for merciful release.

"*Ja*, my girl, you know the extent of my feeling...even when you make yourself ridiculous and hide from me."

He held her against his solid chest, while she burrowed her face into his downy-thick sweater, warm soft wool smelling of

cedar and wood smoke.

“You love me?” she muttered in a low wondering voice, blissfully reassuring herself.

He chuckled. “More than that, *min kjære*. Did you not already know that? It is the reason I am here.”

“I wonder...would you have been so steadfastly kind to me if you had not expected to...if we had not become lovers?”

“Of course...and that is something you should already know. You deserve kindness. We are not *lovers*...per se. Our relationship is far more deep-rooted and constant than the fickle uncertainties of lovers.”

He stroked the nape of her neck with his thumb, until she shivered with a swell of excitement. She felt his long fingers clasp gently around her neck as he drew her forward into an extended kiss, arousing but also profoundly assuaging. The words that he next spoke were utterly startling.

“My girl, would you feel more secure with some kind of ceremony? If we married? I have always thought it useless -- impossible the way I have lived -- *ja*, I still think so. Until now, I never seriously considered it. I would do it for you, if it would give you--”

“No, Ragnar. For your own reluctance...your wonderful self-containment and endearing freedom, I would not do it. I thank you, but I want us to stay as we are. Nothing else is ever needed...nothing else.”

“It would not change us...the way we live. You should not fear it...if there is any benefit in that legal abstraction *marriage* -- a few words spoken, a few printed on paper; we both do frequently give high credence to the written word. Obviously, it is also an emphatic statement to others. You may change your mind at any time, Wild Vi, when you have thought about this. Mostly I am considering what can be done to make you feel stronger and more secure...paradoxically, perhaps even more free. I am set in my ways but my ways include you.”

“Right now everything is perfect.”

“Careful with that word. You are still uncertain of me.”

She saw then that his serious face had altered somewhat as he considered something apparently amusing.

“I have held you on my lap, Wild Vi.”

For a moment she was puzzled, and he looked at her closely to see if she understood.

“You have read Nordic literature: the great skaldic lore of the Vikings; the lays of the Edda; Snorri Sturleson’s *Heimskringla* -- *The History of Kings*. You must know that when a Viking suitor took a woman onto his lap it meant he wanted her as wife.”

“Yes, oh, yes!” she affirmed with soft laughter, content again, lethargic without languor, her off-kilter disposition realigned; the mere idea of his suggestion being quite sufficient for tranquility. She stood up and stretched, reaching her hands above her head, which loosened the tie of her robe. She retied it, perhaps now inadvertently seductive, for he watched her with appreciative and forbearingly anticipating eyes.

“When you are made warm and secure and confident...and your head is working properly, there is no other like you.”

This induced a smile, a ruffle of laughter. “It’s you. *You!* No one like *you*. *No one!*” Tossing back her unruly hair, with an ephemeral spurt of energy, she rubbed her curled knuckles into the fatigued base of her complaining spine. “Oh what a mentally exhausting day. My damn emotions have run through nearly their entire syndrome. Then at last you, with your...*awareness*, natural cunning, calm sanity, you smoothly dissolve the entire problem. Whoosh! all gone...mysterious as Odin.”

He frowned a little, then smiled dismissively, never appearing to consider for long this exalted name-calling Hugh had begun.

“Is your back hurting?”

“Yes, the small of it...right there...this aging body.”

“Poor old thing...upstairs, *vakeker* Lorelei, I will rub your back until you fall asleep.”

“Exactly what did you call me...besides a singing German maid?”

“I meant beautiful enchantress -- perhaps not to a world that does not know your magic but to Ender Farm...the center of *our* world.”

“Odin has swallowed Ender Farm,” she teased, concurrently aware of the accuracy in this loaded conceit.

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“*Nei*...not on the edge of the pan. Shall I teach you how to crack an egg? Hold the egg thus and crack it broad side down, flat on the counter surface. Then open it with the fingers of the same hand, like this, if you can...and you should not have shells in your food.”

“That was cool finesse, but I don’t think I’ll ever be able to do it. Crack the other four and let me watch; it’s thrilling.”

“It is not showmanship but pragmatism.” He laughed and swiftly dispatched the eggs into the hot pan.

Violea had decided it would be a pleasant thing to have sunny-side-up eggs with ham, orange juice, and honey toast for breakfast, simple and old-fashioned, like her hearty childhood breakfasts on cold mornings.

Ragnar had already made his coffee and her tea, while she was drying her hair after their shower. She made the toast as he picked up prowling Bussy and held him high in the air, with a single hand braced under his pale soft belly. Bussy wriggled and snapped his busy tail, while Ragnar cradled him in the crook of his arm and rubbed his plump little stomach.

“*Ja*, fat cat. Do not let him get too fat. He is not like my slender girl who must sometimes be coaxed to eat.”

When they had finished breakfast and were still lingering over their coffee and tea, she noticed Ragnar wearing one of his freighted looks, possibly suggesting current plans that included her.

“Today I will be taking stock of things, recording plantings, a full day out surveying with the advantage of this fair dry weather.”

“Surveying?”

“*Ja*...not the kind accomplished with a theodolite, but with a

notebook. Your varied land, if untended, inclines to detrimental changes. Along the way, it is the job of your manager to look for those in need of extra attention...before they get out of hand.”

“Mm, I thought you had something in mind that would include me.”

“I do. Your farm is far too large for surveying on shanks’ mare. Instead of taking my truck and risking mud, I thought you might like to ride our resident horses...they could both stand some exercise.”

“I’d love it...but first I have to register a complaint.” She waited, attempting to give her teasing mouth a serious cast.

Ragnar, not fooled by this mock seriousness, merely laughed, staring back at her. “Well, what?”

“You’ve never played your guitar for me. I’ve never even *seen* any of your guitars...except through a window...and long ago.”

“*Ja?* That is easily fixed. Later, if we are not too tired when we get back this evening, I will play for you. Meanwhile, why not think about the song you were singing when you were milking Fern. I would like to hear more of your voice. Do you remember that song?”

“Of course...I remember most of the songs I’ve made up in my life. After they’re invented I hear them like earworms.”

“Did you do a lot of that?”

“Yes...created as I sang, still do...something like the way a poet does it...instantaneously...usually a joyful response to some wonderful experience.”

“You are full of surprises.”

“I often want to say that about you.”

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They had been out more than an hour and were descending a prominent swell of land beyond the brake. High above the vast open field floated an opal membrane of streaming clouds, webbed across the vaporous cerulean ether, forming and reforming ghostly and ornate settings for irregular misty-blue gems of sky. These

idly drifting patterns teased at the drowsing winter sun, freeing it from its cover from time to time and releasing a rage of solar power, shafts of dazzling light shooting down and scouring the earth to a piebald splendor.

Ragnar dismounted and drew an oversized flat wallet from a broad inside pocket of his shearling coat. He unsnapped the scarred and weathered brown leather case and took a silver pen from the pen holder in its crease. From between its minutely spiral-ringed pages he next removed and unfolded a loose printout displaying lined spaces with numbers inside, broad sections joined together in irregular shapes.

Viola dismounted and stood beside him to study what he held.

“What’s that?”

“This is your land, my girl, Ender Farm.”

“Ah...all of those odd little shapes.”

Ragnar gazed out across the field, his eyes contemplating something, then wrote in the section representing this field. “Not so small when you are standing here...each of these sections has a sequence of planting. You know that we rotate crops.”

“Yes, of course, I remember...to prevent erosion and pests.”

“*Ja*, and also certain weeds. By rotating we break the grip of parasitic pathogens and contaminating weeds. But weeds are important for healthy pollinators; we need pollination for clover and alfalfa; that is why we leave hedgerows for the bees. All pollinators are now threatened by viruses and contamination, so our beekeeper has to know good entomological practices. Pests favor certain plants, and if the grains are planted repeatedly in the same place, a thriving pest infestation soon becomes seriously detrimental to a healthy crop. Some plants have shallow roots and some do not; shallow roots facilitate soil loss and phosphorous pollution. After harvest, we leave the stubble in place to hold the earth from erosion.”

Viola gazed at the light-hungry green tips shooting out of the chocolate earth. As in childhood, she loved the magical fringe



of new grain softly greening the tilled fields. “Which grain is this?”

“Winter wheat, the Andersons’ last planting in the fall. This area has its own microclimate, generally, somewhat dryer -- the mountains over there block moist winds. It will harvest in late spring.”

“Winter wheat,” Viola said, enjoying the familiar sound of it; she was remembering the early fall seedings of her childhood. Resting her eyes on the sloping fingers of tree-lined dark ridges, stretching down from a chain of looming blue peaks, she repeated: “*Winter wheat*. It’s important to the world...a very ancient grain.”

“*Ja*, it fed medieval Scandinavia before a lesser age of ice returned. The word in Old Norse is *hveiti*.”

“White winter wheat. In Latin it’s called *siligo*, I believe from the Latin word for pod: *siliqua*. And here our refined old grain still flourishes to feed a hungry world. Our healthy winter wheat.”

“And we will try to keep it that way in this valley.”

He crouched down, balancing on his booted toes, and lifted a handful of moist dark soil, crumbling it through his fingers.

“We will seed *bygg* here next: barley...harvested mid-summer. Then the low part of this wetter section will go into clover...soon plowed under to restore the wet-leached soil.”

He stood up and jotted something down on a spiral page of his notebook. Viola leaned over his hand, for she had never seen very much of his handwriting. “Oh, you write in Norse!” she exclaimed with surprise. “Your writing is beautiful...but Norse?”

“*Ja*, when I write anything by hand I write in Norse. It pleases me to use that early penmanship.”

“Will you write me something in Norse? Will you, please? I’ll try to translate it myself. I’d love to have Norse words from you.”

His calm mouth curled with amusement as he snapped the note wallet closed and slid it back inside his breast pocket. He brushed off his hands more thoroughly and ran the backs of his

fingers gently across her cheek, then put on his gloves and stood laughing at her.

“You want a statement from this captive Norseman already at your feet? You amusing thing, will I also have to read you my redundant epistle? What is it you want, a love letter?”

“I leave that to you. Whatever it is I’ll treasure it. I’ll read it until it crumbles in my hand.”

He laughed all the more. “Then it had better be good, *ja*, teacher? It could be that you will not like my style.”

“I know your style; it’s in your speech. You’d never write a very purple passage. But I know it would be interesting, so--”

“Probably not very...except for the stimulating subject.

“Now we ride northeast. I want to look at your forest adjacent to federal land. When I checked my calendar before we left, I found that I am meeting with two BLM agents in Hayfield this evening, so no guitar playing, I am sorry. Perhaps...but *nei*, tomorrow is busy too.”

“What’s the meeting about?”

“They want to spray that federal forest land and have asked if they can also spray the adjoining Ender Farm *skogsnar*.”

“What?”

Ragnar laughed. “You see, I am teaching you *Norsk*. I meant strip of forest; a *skog* is a forest. I want to know the sprays they will use. I will not allow anything inorganic. They have so far been very satisfied with the regardful methods we use on the marginal ecology of this farm -- even more considerately than they can promote in the public domain -- so I will likely be able to dicker for what we want.”

As he stood with serious countenance, informing her of the farm’s business, the contour of his large backlit frame sparkled jade-gold in the mercurial sun’s teasing reappearance. Her quite spontaneous reaction, literary and impassioned, chose this sudden luminous epiphany to perceive him in a nimbus of *integer vitae* -- an honorable life. Knowledge of Ender Farm and a very perceptive knowledge of others, of himself, his immutable integrity and social

considerations, all sanctioned her notion of an exemplar very near *perfection* -- the word he would never let her use, because it did not apply to life, to any life, for it was a sterile foolishness, an abstract, unreachable nothingness. He would have laughed and scolded her, and declared innumerable shortcomings, but the echo of his voice: *Careful with that word*, did not affect her unswerving desire to use it.

Eventually he tilted his head and gave her a questioning look, because in her silent mental praise she had been staring hard. She smiled and shrugged, not wanting to reveal a reverie of ponderous adulation. But her next sense was one of awe; having realized that each time she looked at him it was as if she were seeing him for the first time; the rush of astonishment when her gaze fell into that blue-gray depth never diminished. In a sense every look was the first look, the first encounter with some baffling new discovery or investigation; here was the cunning paradox of familiarity and none at all, the titillating wonder of the known and the inscrutable, both incredibly seductive.

*Kiss me before I get back on Legs*, she silently implored, but he did not. He helped her mount her horse then mounted his own and moved ahead. Glancing back at her, he touched the brim of his hat, then turned Mariner around and trotted up to her. Holding the reins against the pommel, he clasped her neck with his other hand, leaned toward her and kissed her while staring from beneath half-closed lids into her languorous eyes.

“The sun is good for you and you are good for the sun, but do not lose your hat, it is always about to fall off.”

Blissfully requited, she pulled the woolen cap down over her ears and offered a clownish grin. Legs leapt and pranced high, obliviously echoing her happiness. Violeta let him whirl at the field's edge in a short tight spin, while she scolded with conspiring laughter.

“He'll tire of this soon enough,” she cried, still laughing.

“He knows his rider,” Ragnar said, enjoying her laughter. Then he tapped Mariner's belly with his boot heel and urged him

forward. He patted the scarred and bulging old saddlebag Mariner now carried, and said, “We will eat our sandwiches and drink our water on the way. Northeast now...the big forest you rarely ever see...where we verify our attention to the land in our trust.”

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They were approaching the southwest edge of Ender Farm’s pristine northeastern woodlands, where a resting fallow field, last year plowed only for dormancy, swelled in elevation and came up against the edge of dense virgin forest. The idle field’s abrupt termination, demarcating the separation of human inroads and raw nature, was shaded by gently sloping limbs of reposefully aloof, untouched evergreens: towering dark Douglas firs, delicately lacy hemlocks, elbowed old spruces, and a scarce number of pines, all steadily inveigling the onlookers into their wild domain.

Still some distance away, but starkly discernible upon the woods-abutting margin of their grassy field, lay an incongruous dark mass. They were silent, their eyes focusing on this arresting mound, but their horses had become reticent. As they slowly approached, a circle of vultures flapped away over the dry grass, at the last minute climbing into the sky.

Both horses balked at coming any nearer the odor of death. Now visible was a freshly brought down mature male deer. They gently coaxed their panicky mounts forward. Caked with blood, the big buck’s claw-ripped flanks implied the hunting prowess of a hungry cougar. The center part of the fly-circled fresh carcass had been torn away.

Ragnar’s even voice was different, without emotion but resonant with discretion, his low words mingling with the gentle sighing of the nearby big trees. He watched her closely as he explained that the hunter would likely return for the remainder of its kill.

He could not think she was afraid, she was not afraid. She tried to calm Legs, who had laid his ears flat then planted his hooves and arched his entire body stiffly backwards.

As she looked down at the carcass, her eyes fell upon the head, spattered with blood, a nobly antlered head stretching toward life, intact, hardly touched. There were the startled glassy eyes, the choked pale tongue falling over the lip of a gaping jaw; a frozen expression announcing final horror, and eerily summoning the stifled cry of human shock. Below the throat, the bloodied neck was ripped open deeply, muscle and tendon pulled away. Viola grimaced, issuing a soft gasp of sound. Suddenly the image of Robert lying bloody at her feet fully and brutally overtook her, so completely against her will she was stunned, helpless to stop the terrible clarity of the unbearable image imprinted in her mind. She groaned and dropped the reins, dizzily placing both hands over her face.

“My God!”

Ragnar leapt from his horse, then took the reins of both horses in one hand and pulled Viola from the saddle with his other arm.

“*Nei*, this is a dead animal, a carnivore’s prey. You have seen this before on the farm, animals put down, animals dying, animals butchered for human consumption. You are here in this place, Wild Vi, near the wildness of your own farm where this happens.”

He pulled her hands away from her face and turned her stiffened head toward the eviscerated carcass. “Open your eyes. Look now. There is meat for a hungry cougar. *Look at it!* Look until you see nothing else.”

She stared down in horror, stared and stared until the reality of the dead animal became superimposed upon any other thought or vision. At last she saw only the once proud deer as it now lay inanimate, saw it as the normal sacrifice of nature’s rule. Her clenched mouth relaxed and she looked up at Ragnar, who nodded his head and smiled. He took off his glove and clasped her neck, his fingers stroking hypnotically into her hair, then rewarded her with a kiss.

They had ridden for a while to the northwest, on an old cattle trail running through a narrow finger of dense forest that

stretched into cultivated land, a trail that would eventually lead them back to another grain field. Ragnar was looking over this forest, assessing the health of the trees, which so far appeared to have resisted any pestilence of beetles or other devastating ravages.

“There is a pond in here. I think you know it...just off this trail...cool water in the hot summer. It is fed with fresh water from one of the streams that flow down the hills through your land.”

“It must be the swimming hole I and my school chum, Margo Slone, hiked to with Mama and Gran. Mama drove us to the edge of the field, then we all hiked into the woods. We always carried backpacks with picnic food: hot dogs and Mama’s potato salad...and strawberry soda. We wore swimsuits under our blue jeans...our cowgirl t-shirts. Swimming there was heavenly escape from summer’s hot swelter.”

Further along the uneven trail, Ragnar dismounted; he took the reins of both horses and tied them to branches of a sturdy manzanita bush, then kicked aside some fallen limbs and asked her to follow.

“Can you see the path now? Still traversable after this hard winter. Animals have used it to drink at the pond.”

Occasionally clearing dead limbs and debris from their path, they walked further into the dense winter forest, with the sound of rushing water growing louder and louder. At last the trees parted around an oval expanse of sky-mirrored water. The big firs sent long shadows over half of the pond, leaving that cold dark half still bound in ice. A short waterfall noisily tumbled over a stepped rise of fern and moss-encrusted basalt at the other side of the partially snow-rimmed basin. At its opposite curve, where they stood, water trickled away more slowly, reshaping itself into a gently descending stony outlet; along its edges the escaping stream flowed beneath thin plates of ice.

Viola stared at a strip of sandy beach, recomposing long ago summers. She and Margo would swim while Mama built a small fire for roasting hot dogs, then marshmallows -- the usual contest was not to blacken them, but to gently tease their powdery

surfaces to a golden crust with a sweet, melting-hot middle. Always rivalrous, they had to compare their efforts before biting the gooey mounds from the sticks.

She could hear Gran calling to them while placing on the blanket paper plates amply daubed with potato salad. She and Margo, dripping with pond water, hungrily rushed up to spear the hotdogs with Mama's freshly cut hazel sticks. Their shivering and goose-bumped pubescent wet bodies luxuriated in the caressing warm airs as they darted away from the shifting sweet-acrid smoke, roasting the sizzling hotdogs to a half-charred finish. She could almost taste the first bite, and with that same carefree hungry young mouth.

She looked up at the tall, wind-played trees; gathered so long around the pond they must know each other by now, must possess a bonded sentient awareness, enforcing their towering majesty, their collective enduring strength. Entertaining this whimsy, she smiled, wondering if they remembered that young girl joyfully disporting beneath their sheltering limbs; wondering if they knew her now, could sense how her attachment to their familiar presence remained and increased.

"And you swam here too...so long ago?"

"*Ja*...I still do. We will come back this summer with a picnic, swim together...then eat...drink some wine to encourage laziness."

"Interesting, that you and I would swim here together, after all this time and..." She fell silent, standing with intense pleasure beside this tall steadfast Norseman. "The idea of a picnic here with you almost drives away my fear of spring and summer."

His dismissive laughter gave a more immediate reassurance.

"Why are you afraid of spring and summer? Do you think our circumstance lives only in hibernation?"

"We haven't exactly been hibernating."

"*Nei*, only winter dreaming. All of the seasons will have us now...nothing insurmountable, whether they rage or smile."

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They were on their way home, two silhouetted riders moving along an umber field edge over a vast raised expanse of carefully manicured earth, sweeping fields dipping and curving into the broad vault of sky. The loaded atmosphere above had gradually gathered itself into the high-altitude ice crystals of cirrocumulus, a delicate mackerel sky with joining rows of tufted clouds swimming across the heavens. The great flaming ball of western sun was fast rolling into another meridian, at some mysterious point becoming dawn in the east. A brilliant thin spear of open horizon beamed its fleeting rays of crimson-gold light over them as they rode to the southwest. All the colors of their clothes and the hides of the horses disappeared beneath this last red varnish of day, flaming out as their gigantic black shadows ran away far behind them over the hushed fields.

After a considerable silence, Viola said, "I came to terms with animal scenes of death a long time ago -- familiar things dying on the farm. I can't explain how the other cruel vision suddenly appeared...except that some brutal images get burned into the brain...triggered by..."

"Association," Ragnar finished. "Once, long ago on a British Merchant vessel, a grisly thing happened to me. We had steamed down through the South China Sea from Manila and offloaded our cargo in Jakarta, reloaded, and were headed back up through the Karimala Strait when a tsunami struck the swampy, less populated east coast of Sumatra. It passed right under our vessel, hardly noticeable except for some sudden extra wash. Our captain received an urgent request to put in at Pangkal Pinang on the island of Bangku off the southeast coast of Sumatra. They wanted us to help rescue, or mostly collect the bodies of, some of the Malay and Indonesian Chinese living there. You might know Bangku as the reputed location of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*. It mainly processes fish and produces pepper and tin, low hilly unprotected land. By the time we finished digging corpses from sand or stirred-around backwash debris -- faces and bodies young and old, in every state of



physical misery at the moment of death -- I had a head full of images I can now too easily recall. Every once in a while even a beautiful sandy beach will trigger them. I know it would have been far worse if I had been looking at someone I knew and loved, but my heart bled for those poor souls. I understand what happens to you, Wild Vi. I can surmise that over the years it will become more like that tsunami passing under our vessel. Right now the only cure I know is the one I have shown you.

“As to periodic melancholy, as I have said, work is best for that. I am not much in favor of using drugs, unless absolutely necessary.”

“No, I agree. You’ve also seen so much; you always have something useful to tell me...or at least commiserative experience to offer. Do I appear to be improving?” she asked with a hopeful voice.

“*Ja*, my girl, very much so. You have seen quite a lot. Best to keep the actions of your life as simple as possible...and use the interior complexity as a challenge for reason’s rewards. I tell you this, but I do not expect it to happen quite that way: you are, and always have been, exceptionally passionate and high-strung; this, alongside profound reasonableness, can be a volatile and corrosive combination.”

“But when I reason I attempt to do it thoroughly.”

“*Ja*, then you use your curious mind very well.”

“I’ve never been fooled into asking a lot of tiresome non sequitur questions...or those that aren’t questions at all...and have nothing to do with purpose.”

“Good...that is wisdom. The purpose of your existence is the one you make...of course you know this. Carrying on your chosen aim, always with a reverence for life, is good preventative medicine. If you are following that prescription you will heal well enough.”

“*Labor omnia vincit* -- work conquers all things...as you might put it, Doctor Almestad. Generally...how are my emotions?”

“More love than anger.”

She wanted to attribute that favorable augmentation mainly to Ragnar, but held her effusiveness in check. It was all far too obvious anyway. He already knew how she depended on him for stability and happiness, which he generously supplied. If she pressed him one more time as to how he could care so much, he would most assuredly scold her with more accusations of useless self-ridicule. He had recently told her: "An obvious flaw in this *perfection* you misapply is that I have been selfish enough to remove you, in some degree, from others and the world -- you are still so young...to me very young." She had answered: "You didn't remove me...and I chose to come home. I love where I am, love being with you...in our quietness or heavy talk...I never feel the least removed from anything in the Ender-Almestad world...others might say I'm not so very young, but it's nice to hear anyway." Pleasurably adrift in the intermittent silences of their homeward ride, she continued to revel in the phenomenon of his devotion, but never so without constant wonder, deep gratitude, a thrilled anticipation.

In this northern latitude and season, the earth's twenty-three and a half degree tilt was now allowing the sun's rays a little less slant, the days were slowly lengthening, and at six o'clock there was still enough light to navigate home along the snow-patched field roads set among the dimming fields. Some of the mackerel sky had swum away, thus opening up the western horizon where bright Venus now ruled: Hesperus for the Greeks, Vesper for the Romans -- Viola preferred to think of the luminous planet as Lady Venus, with all the beauty of her ancient mythological attributes. Misty vapors rose from the earth, as a dewy ground fog sent its tenuous white fingers reaching out across Ender Farm. Along with the pungent odor of slowly dehydrating turned-over earth, there was a hint of the crisp chlorophyllous freshness that often preceded and could always be detected accompanying spring growth, a very slight perfume of seasonal change sweetening the air. Viola did feel some ambivalence concerning the approaching emergence from their cozy hibernal cocoon -- crystallizing winter still held the first expression of her present happiness. Then her vernal whimsy was

borne away on a sustained chilling breeze, and she immediately felt a sense of liberation. The falling temperature now hastened their return, and the two riders let their homeward-bound horses canter eagerly through the resplendent peacock blue of winter's twilight.

"You have to get ready to drive to your meeting, let me take care of the horses and put away the tack," Violeta offered as they rode up to the paddock.

"*Nei*, I will do that, I have time." He dismounted and began at once to remove the saddles.

She followed him into and back out of the tack room, as he tended the horses. "Then shall I go and fix you something to eat?"

"I will eat in Hayfield with the two agents. Go have a warm bath; it will cure your bowed legs," he teased. "And fix yourself something decent to eat. When Peter brings the milk into your pantry, let him finish the work for you, finish all of it: straining, pasteurizing, separating; he knows how. But first come here and kiss me goodbye. I am afraid I will not see much of you tomorrow either...more business in town, a meeting with farmers...and some other business."

The shadows of evening curled around them, and low in the sky a misty bit of milk-white moon silvered its frame of clouds. She felt so contentedly drawn to Ragnar, so thankful for the day, she was disinclined to end it by kissing him goodbye. The kiss, so powerful, would leave her in loneliness, a little forlorn to think of enduring his absence, however brief the time. Feeling that tonight she could hardly withstand such an arousing parting and no warm aftermath of loving, she stood on her toes to reach his bent head then touched her mouth briefly to his cold cheek, quickly turning away to go.

"*Nei, koma da*, that was not a kiss." His arm had reached out and snatched her back. He lifted her up hard against his coat and kissed her until her hat fell off, then let her down, sliding his fingers into her hair, and finally snatching up her hat and placing it back on her head, pulling it down and kissing her again. She stared at him, at the moon in his sulfurous eyes, and wondered whether to laugh

or cry, eyes brimming with both extremes.

“Better not to let your wary demon belabor happiness,” he advised, with his incredible prescience. “It is only a short time apart...I never think of you as absent from me. Get yourself into the warm.”

He put his large hand on her shoulder and turned her toward the house, with a gently guiding jostle of encouragement.

“Have never enjoyed my round of surveyance so much. Now you will have to come with me each time,” he called after her.

“Indispensable...I hope,” she called back with soft laughter.

As she walked toward her house, forgetting that her feet were coming in contact with earth, Viola was now pondering the amorous ways of Ragnar. His considerate and *appropriate* manner might fool others into believing him quite conventional, but he was nothing of the sort. For instance, any vocalized declaration of love, of itself rarely heard, awaited no similar response when issued as quick reassurance -- an overused cure-all given her only when she appeared to doubt something, or was clearly in need of hearing precisely that. Thus, the amorous phrase more often served as expedient compensation, a declaration he appeared to consider too rote and facile for the conveyance of profound love. His relative attitude was always most effectively indicated by a more enduring intimation, or by actions far superior to words, either mindful or instinctive actions, large or small but with unmistakable reference, flowing into her whole being, intoxicating, unforgettable.

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Viola was scrambling eggs with slices of chorizo. When she turned off the fan she could hear the pasteurizer in the pantry. The pantry could be entered either from the back porch or the kitchen. Once, its many shelves of now empty jars were colorfully lined with her mother's and grandmother's tall glass jars of sweetly preserved bright fruits: lush golden peach halves, pears, plums, and gorgeous dark wine cherries.

With his usual thoroughness, Ragnar must have called Peter,

for he had gone ahead with tending the milk, and it was almost ready to be separated and then placed in containers and stored in the pantry's large refrigerator. She opened the door and found Peter sitting on the white four-legged stool kept nearby. He was reading a paperback: *Moby Dick*.

"Hello Peter. I hope you get the rich subtleties in English."

"Hello Viola. Probably not all...read it before...easier this time."

"When you finish with the milk, would you like to share supper with me? I could add to what I've been cooking...just scrambled eggs and sausage."

Peter stood up and laid his closed book on the stool. His candid and fair blue-gray eyes gleamed with hunger. "I am in my work clothes."

"For heaven's sake, I don't care. We'll eat in the kitchen."

She went to take more eggs and pork sausage from the refrigerator and make a pot of coffee. Glancing into the pantry as the separator spun the cream and milk into separate crocks, she saw Peter reading again. He had deftly stored the milk and cream, and finished by washing and shelving the separator parts. This work took her straight back to her childhood, a daily chore she could now nearly execute with closed eyes.

She handed Peter a more substantial towel than the worn one hanging in the pantry. He rolled his sleeves and washed his hands and face in the spacious old pantry sink, then slipped out of his boots and came into her kitchen in his thick gray socks. His heavy black pea jacket was left hanging on a wall hook in the pantry. Unrolling the sleeves of his blue wool shirt, he sat down at the set table, then turned around to watch Viola cutting thick sausage slices straight into a pan atop the stove.

"May I help?"

"No thank you...not unless you cook as well as Ragnar," she teased. "Do you cook healthy food for yourself over in your cozy cabin?"

"I can feed myself well enough...nothing like my uncle."

From time to time, as Viola stirred a freshly made batch of scrambled eggs, having put hers into a warm oven, she glanced at Peter and was reminded that classicized physical form had begun with a live young model. Peter's fair-skinned cheeks shone with ruddy health, the flesh a wind-burned rosy cream rising into a very straight, round-tipped nose, gently flaring just enough at its base; a robust face accustomed to the out-of-doors, yet altogether smooth and pure of any blemish but a few faint freckles sprinkled over a youthful brow. He had tried, only half successfully, to swiftly finger-comb his unruly curls of blond hair, mussed from his thick woolen cap, and still intransigently tumbling into delicately flexing blond eyebrows.

"Help yourself to the coffee -- it's almost finished. I made it for you. I usually drink tea."

"Ah, thank you very much."

He stood up and poured himself a mug of coffee. Like Ragnar, he towered above her, filling her kitchen with his husky presence. He remained standing, swallowing his black coffee and watching her with a shy smile, occasionally glancing around the room. His eyes came to rest on a bucolic, slightly faded colored photograph in a golden-oak frame, hanging near the dining room door. He leaned forward, a thumb tucked into the back pocket of his jeans, studying the large photograph.

"This is the farm in summer."

"A long-ago hot summer," she said a little wistfully.

"The wheat was ready to harvest."

"Yes, late summer. Please sit down now, I think we're ready."

Peter was obviously famished, but attempted to eat politely, carefully laying down his fork to chew his food.

When they were finished and sipping coffee and tea, Viola said, "Norway is booming now, isn't it, because of the oil?"

"Life is much better there for many. *Ja*, the quiet old fishing port of Stavanger is now petroleum city...upgraded and oily, one could say."

She drew her cool hands over the arms of her pale blue turtleneck, then leaned her tipped head on one hand, facing Peter with a smile.

“I very much like your writing, refreshing, different...just what I’m trying to foster in the class: imagination. You’re quite well-read for one so young; it clearly shows in your work.”

“Thank you, you are an inspiring teacher. We are literate enough in Norway. I understand that Americans do not like to read...or make no time for it...or do not care...do not consider it important. But reading is really important...for...a...for vision and broad thinking. To have peace and democracy there must be a lot of literate people...and of course the more well-read the better.”

“Yes,” she said, so grateful that Peter was sitting at her lonely table, so happy that this agreeable, like-minded, intelligent young man was alive in the world, in *her* world. Peter was delightfully reasonable yet sensitive, so naturally life-affirming he inspired her with hope for the troubled planet’s difficult, unpredictable future.

The day had been edifying, memorable, unbelievably good -- except for that one startling moment, which Ragnar had helped her through. Why a lingering fear that some countering event would yet intervene? How hopelessly superstitious she had become, afraid of happiness and so uncertain of what lay ahead, hardly familiar any longer with the busily engaged self of only a few years ago. Perhaps it had been a gradual process, a slow wearing down. Then came her sudden happiness with Robert and his as sudden death. Everything had come apart; right now she was trying to separate these pulsing, clashing emotions, the nearly simultaneous feeling of happiness and apprehension. Reason’s counterbalance, her lodestar, must somehow shine forth. Tonight Peter was her positive influence. Ragnar’s canny reading returned to her and she thought: *Yes, inside me is a wary demon who never lets me rest -- anything that can happen will happen. I do remember having anxiety as a child, but nothing like this pervasive fear of loss. The suddenly shocking image today was very hard to bear...must somehow get that recurring vision to fade. Happiness still seems only temporarily stolen from disaster...have to face that, must face it in*

*order to make it stop...perhaps the blunt way Ragnar made me do it today.*

Pushing this intervening disturbance from her thoughts, she asked, “Does Ragnar help out much on the farm when he visits your family?”

“He likes to get a hand in...but everyone wants to please him and sit at his feet...he gets too many questions. He is like a...like a big celebrity to our family. When he goes into our busy kitchen, everyone becomes a student. The family stands watching while he cooks...they can hardly believe it...but he is also very good at putting us to work...just as he is so good here on Ender Farm...putting me to work.”

“The women must love it that he’s such a great cook.”

“*Ja, ja...*my mother is still trying to get him to marry one of her willing candidates. Every time he comes she introduces him to another friend who... Ah!” Peter exclaimed, his pale skin blushing thoroughly crimson. He was silent, unable to find a way out of his unfortunate blunder. But Viola laughed, then he laughed too and offered her a sheepish, self-mocking grin.

Peter finally went home to his satisfying little cabin, stepping off the back porch with his collar raised and his black woolen cap pulled firmly down. “The cold is used to me,” he presented with cheerful jest. He turned around in the yard and called, “Thank you again for the nice supper and for this good pie.” He was carrying a grocery sack with one of her frozen apple pies inside; his paperback was tucked under his arm and he was whistling. Viola stood smiling and waving as he drove off in his old truck. She would have loved to talk half the night, but knew he had to get up early.

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“I was a little nervous about coming to dinner here tonight -- I mean, without the *chef de cuisine* presiding -- but your spaghetti’s near fatally delicious. I like it with this spicy beef crumbled up throughout, rather than meatballs. And you’ve got these other things in it: olives, mushrooms, celery, onions, tomato chunks, parsley; not to ignore the rosemary-rich tomato sauce. You even



encouraged us to add as much Parmesan as we like. I prefer mine without.”

Roland placed the fork he had raised high -- speared with various items and wound thick with spaghetti -- into his mouth. “Ecstasy.”

“Well, you’ve certainly redeemed yourself of your earlier reservations,” Viola said.

Hugh merely listened, eating slowly and swallowing his Chianti.

Viola had decided she was not in the right frame of mind for a solitary evening and had hastily invited Hugh and Roland over for a simple meal, one she prided herself on doing well, a hearty pasta dish she had made for years; never quite the same but always pleasing.

When they were settled in the living room before a crackling pinewood fire, sipping a little port in lieu of dessert, conversation turned to Viola’s class.

“Tell us how it’s going since our banishment,” Roland said.

“You weren’t banished...only de trop,” she teased, but meant it.

“Last week a student asked me a question that precipitated an entire lecture.”

“Really? Give us a précis,” Hugh requested.

“It was the young farmer, Jason. He reads quite a lot, but indiscriminately. He asked how one went about evaluating one good writer as above or below another good writer.”

Hugh and Roland offered sympathetic smiles.

“Can you even conceive of the volumes devoted to this highly subjective question? He then went on to ask if there could really be degrees of good writing. In previous academic settings, I would have treated the question as a rhetorical preface to a lengthy linguistics debate.”

“That must have kept you fully occupied,” Hugh said.

“Actually, I rather enjoyed my rudimentary answers...and thought them...hmm, I suppose you could say I thought them

adequate.”

“Enlighten us,” Roland pressed.

“Well, first I answered that one qualified *good* writer could certainly be preferred over another, but not necessarily presumed to be better. After all, when we’ve determined that certain writers use the language intelligently and very cogently, thereby perhaps deeming them *good* writers, we then endeavor to appreciate them for their singularity, which has much to do with selection of subject, incisive portrayal, and style of delivery -- proceeding, of course from the writer’s capacity and unique experiences; singularity, by definition, stands alone, and, in that sense, cannot be compared to something else. Preference is, of course, quite subjective...but too swift dismissal may reside in the reader’s inability to comprehend the depth of the writer, due to insufficient reading or a lack of knowledge. Certain preliminary readers may find James Joyce incomprehensible or crazy or both, while Joseph Campbell, with extensive knowledge, expository brilliance, found Joyce’s allusive writing the omniscient tale of a titillating genius.

“As to degrees of good writing, in a so-called *good* writer I have generally found degree of excellence related to evenness: the ability to sustain the writing near the work’s highest level, along with strong adherence to intent; all good writers miss the mark at one time or another. The argot of post-modernists may dispute all of this, but I stand firm.

“But enough of this, one of you talk now and let me listen.”

“May I first tell you that the little you’ve said on the subject has been well said?”

“Thank you, Roland. It was just a summary of what I--”

“Lucky students. I’m glad you’re having an interesting time with your class, Lea. If you’re changing the subject now, I’ll just mention that I’m leaving for China day after tomorrow?”

Viola was startled. She left her wing chair, which faced Roland and Hugh, both casually settled on the davenport, and stood with her back to them, gazing into the flames. How could she respond to Hugh without ruining the evening? It would hardly

be pleasant for anyone if she argued before Roland. She leaned over the fire screen, inattentively hurling a log on top of another smaller one awkwardly burning. Brushing her hands together, and through with restraint, she turned around.

“Hugh...you could have told me sooner.”

“What for? I could also have just called from the airport.”

Roland looked at his watch with some exaggeration, then said, “I’ve got to get along now...back to my work station.”

“Don’t go, Roland. I only decided to tell Lea because you’re here. If you leave me alone with her there’ll be hell to pay.”

“I don’t understand the implications of this...this...whatever it is. It’s all very mysterious and unsettling. Why should Viola care if you’ve decided to take yourself to China?”

The newly inserted log suddenly rolled off its precarious perch and crashed into the screen, sending a shower of tiny sparks flying through the mesh. Hugh jumped up, grabbed the tongs, and pulled aside the fire screen, then reseated the log. Viola took the rush broom and swept the smoking black bits of debris back into the coals, then Hugh replaced the screen. They stood looking at each other for a few seconds, then turned swiftly toward sounds across the room. Roland was putting on his coat. “Please don’t leave,” they both called out.

“Obviously I’m out of the loop here. I’ve no right to ask questions, so why should I stay?”

“Ask whatever you want,” Hugh invited.

“How long are you going to be gone?” Roland asked. He remained standing with his coat on, shuffling from one foot to the other.

“Oh, Roland, come and sit down,” Viola implored.

“I’ll probably be gone around a month...or more.”

“You’ll miss the spring!” Viola cried.

Roland crossed the room and removed his coat, throwing it over an arm of the davenport, then sat down near the arm. He hunched forward, resting his elbows on his thighs and staring thoughtfully into the fire; his knees were slightly apart, his hands

clasped between them.

“Over in the poet’s cloudland, I miss quite a lot, so I don’t really know what’s going on here. Is this like a *ménage à trois*?”

Hugh laughed bitterly. “Christ, Roland, nothing is as vilely black and white as that, is it? You, a poet, ought to be familiar with all the cunning little twists and turns of life. I suppose you could say Lea doesn’t want her great, great-grandfather’s stone house to remain empty. She’s never even conceded that it’s *my* house...but anyway she wants everything on the farm to run along smoothly and inalterably...something like a petulant child who doesn’t want daddy to leave the room while she’s sleeping...never mind daddy’s vapid suspension.”

“Hugh, that is so disingenuous, so condescending, and...and so completely false. I only thought...are you well enough to go back?”

“Now that *is* false. Goddammit, you want me over there moldering in my *oubliette*, the original *Ender House*...to complement your happy existence on Ender Farm.”

“But you like the stone house, don’t you? How can you call it a dungeon? You work so well there, write so beautifully there. Yes, I want you there in your house, but in a nice way, nice for you. You know I’ll miss you terribly. Aside from Roland, I haven’t that many friends with whom I enjoy talking and visiting in a really intelligent manner...and you know you have friends here. If it’s selfishness I haven’t meant it that way. I’m also worried about your--”

“You can talk to Ragnar...you haven’t forgotten *Ragnar*?”

“Of course not...of course I talk to him, but--”

“China’s in a temporary economic slump...thanks to our own crash, so things probably aren’t very stable there right now,” Roland said, apparently not realizing that he was only adding to Viola’s unrest. “That’s another reason why I’m going, Lea. You seem to forget that I was previously a roving journalist...never a distracted tourist.”

“I know it, Hugh, I know how good you are,” she placated.

“So, okay, I guess I’ve figured out that this is not a *ménage à trois*. It’s something more venerable, and much more fascinating, perhaps even poetic. But I’ll have to tell you both that whatever it is it’s making me uncomfortably morose. I don’t think either of you needs me here any longer. I feel certain that you are going to China, Hugh, but I also feel certain that you will be returning in time to restore Viola’s peace of mind. Thank you, Viola, please call on me whenever you feel like talking about anything else. Your spaghetti might well have been better than Ragnar’s. And so I bid you both good night.”

Viola ceased arguing over Roland’s staying or going. As soon as she had returned his departing amenities and seen him off, she sat on the davenport, futilely wiping away tears with the back of her hand.

Hugh, who was standing moodily by the fire with his hands in his pockets, turned around and said, “Not that again, don’t pull that on me. I’m finally becoming immune to your tears.”

“Sorry,” she said, rubbing her eyes. “I never used to cry this easily. I’m not doing it as a contriving exhibition...but because of *you*, because you won’t let us be friends. You’re so hard-hearted.”

“It’s either that or the other.”

Hugh harshly kicked some unseen bit of debris toward the fire screen and limped back to the davenport.

“And look at you, you don’t even walk very well yet.”

“I’ll never walk any differently.”

“You wouldn’t even have said goodbye.”

“I’m only going away for a month or two.”

“You said a month.”

“Not exactly I didn’t. And why the hell do I have to explain any of this to you?”

“All right *go* then. *Go!* Stay away as long as you like. Don’t write, don’t call...discount everything...all the good things that have passed between us. Just go! Right now. *Go!*”

Hugh left the room, pausing in the foyer to put on his jacket, then went out into the darkness. Viola ran to the door, switched

on the porch light and opened the door to watch him mount his motorcycle. He started the engine and kicked the stand. She ran down the steps in her moccasins, freezing in her thin silk shirt and slacks, and promptly slipped on a flagstone covered with shiny wet ice.

“Hey, don’t fall down on my account!” Hugh shouted. He killed the engine and strode over to pick her up, then held her as he had never held her -- his hands crossed over her back and gripping her small quivering body -- held her in silence, held her and held her against his leather jacket, which smelled of gasoline, motor oil, and wood smoke. She closed her eyes and listened to his loud rapid heartbeat.

“I would have said goodbye...in any case. Maybe we’ll have a nice summer. So goodbye for a while, mother of my son.”

She felt his mouth lightly touch the crown of her head, then he let go of her and went to restart the engine.

He roared off hatless into the freezing cold night, probably enjoying it, Viola thought, for just now she herself was delivered by ice, thankful that it could so swiftly crystallize extreme emotion. She looked first toward the field road where Hugh was thundering off into some other life, then up at the realigning moon gliding high above him across the lapis heavens, sending its creamy-blue image of laughter down, coy beams of jest for the human comedy.

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At last Ragnar brought out one of his splendid guitars, not only for the benefit of Viola but for his own pleasure in playing. He sang to her one of the old songs his grand-neice had recorded, while Viola sat on his davenport mesmerized, more by the cleanly plucked strings and newly heard sounds of his voice than by the actual words he sang, which she could not anyway interpret -- a superficial knowledge of what she was to hear had only vaguely prepared her for this refined offering. Initially, there had been no hesitation or reworking of anything, his engrossed, easy familiarity fluidly assuming the necessary effort. His voice, a mellow register

of bucolic earth tones, from time to time borne aloft by the gently alternating strings of his guitar, conveyed a melodic language of its own; yet so married to the hidden lyrics that out of a circumscribed old land-and-sea heritage arose suggestions of a rich fjordic milieu, of generations of aspiring short lives interlaced with the hardships of a long and stoic history. As she listened, her eyes widened then slowly closed in concentration, as she was dreamily carried along by the stirring sounds, yet in another sense made acutely alert. Near the end of his fine singing she opened her eyes and blinked away ensuing moisture.

He finished and gently flattened his hand against the strings, leaning even further forward at the edge of his big leather chair.

“You will not cry? That was one of the happier songs.”

“So beautiful, so beautiful.”

“*Ja*, these shining eyes of blue-violet. Now sing me your milking song a cappella, so my fingers will know what to do.”

She frowned into the steady alder flames in silent rehearsal, moved to have her song and voice at least as expeditiously prepared as Ragnar had been, whether or not she could achieve the same impeccably thrilling results. Looking to the left of the fireplace, beyond the window seat, where nest-dreaming chickadees were fluttering amorously from limb to limb in the pines, she began to sing; a soft middle range climbing into high, clear, heart-stirring notes.

Cold Winter, you warm me far more than June heat.

Cold Winter, my Winter, you rouse weary feet.

You make me cry,

You make me laugh.

How swiftly you impart cabin fever to this wildness in  
my Heart.

Cold Wisdom, you burn me as fire out of hand.

Cold Wisdom, you teach me by love's reprimand.

Master of snow,

How well you know  
Few young loves survive, but fire in the winter  
Keeps spring hearts alive.

Ragnar took up his guitar and started to finger a chord, but then laid it down on his footrest and came to Viola, who sat rigidly, with her hands clenched, trembling with emotion. He lifted one of her fists and smoothed out the fingers, massaging her palm with his thumb.

“You are so tense you could not sing another note. Relax now. Your fine voice...melodic mind. How can you fear spring so? Spring will be entirely at your mercy. The day I returned and found you at your work, I listened carefully to your milking song, your surprising lyrics! I was astonished to hear you singing a trope unmistakable. Even Fern was astonished.”

Here was levity, his provisional antidote for her fear of an emotion given free rein to overwhelm. Her coddled mind then rewarded his effort by a slackening release of tension, slipping backwards to its dreamy child-mind -- April, soft giggles tumbling from a hidden lookout among her mother’s fragrant lilacs. The blond young hired man stood on the walk, knocking the mud from his boots with a shovel. He looked around him then straight at the lilac bushes, smiling at the sound, the teasing shrillness of childish giggles; they echoed through the decades, until at last their fated provocation was reclaimed.

Viola moved to rise, at once captured -- why now so firmly locked in his grip? Because he meant to tell her something else: “Last night, while you were saying goodbye to Hugh--”

“How did you know that?”

“Let me finish. Last night, when I made myself scarce so you could say goodbye to Hugh, I had dinner with Britta. She--”

“You had dinner with--”

“Wait now, let me finish. The next time you see Britta she will be friendlier...I hope. I had to tell her a few things about you to make this happen, but Britta has her compassionate side. When



I finished with her, still gardening in our friendship, she saw you with more understanding.”

“How you love tidiness. You’re an amazing man.”

“You are an amazing woman. Your stunning song, with its strange melody, is about *me*, my girl. How did I come to deserve such a gift as that...such a gift as you?”

Her cheek now lay contentedly against his warm chest, her mouth muttering into soft gray flannel a string of indistinguishable words of pleasure. Throwing back her head, she laughed at her sudden quixotic image of herself. Then she resettled her cheek against his shoulder, her eyes languidly dreaming, slowly closing. She sighed.

He would surely hear the sigh just as she felt it, like the deep involuntary sigh of a child becalmed after a ravaging cry.

“What, *min kjære*?”

“Mm, mm, nothing...except...I’ve been a topsy-turvy moon wobbling out of orbit, wandering far out into chaotic space, much in need of my planet...at last looping back...to be caught by your gravity.”

“*Ja*, I understand that -- if you had not wandered in your chaotic space you would not be mine to catch. And I understand this -- let us lie in a more comfortable place.”

He stood up, swinging her into his arms.

“When do I get my Norwegian letter?”

“Ah, I thought that might be only whimsy.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Well then...you will have it in the near future.”

“So far away?”

“*Ja*, something to anticipate: the progress of this incredible journey. By then you might know how to read it. Such a letter could become a useful habit...to remind you of something.”

“There’s no argument with wisdom.”

“Much less with you.”

“I’ve wanted to posit a feasible supposition: that Mama did forgive her prodigal child, that she gave you to me...gave you your

cabin not only out of devotion and gratitude but to keep you here until I came.”

Ragnar stood still a moment longer, holding her somewhat impatiently but smiling as he looked down into her content eyes. “Probably not, but there is no harm in believing it...except that your mother did not have to forgive you anything. She loved you, Wild Vi. You might have had more to forgive in me.”

“What?”

“Many were the times I rehearsed control of my anger for the day of your return; never did I imagine I would be angry at myself for not controlling another emotion -- a Shakespearean mischief at play.”

“Ah, yes, the Bard...but *you* can make me sing.”

“As for your song, I will chord it tomorrow -- and later, I am certain, hear more such. I believe you were a *vidunderbarn*, wonder child, wunderkind...in those wild days you investigated everything. Have you any idea how very capable you are, *min kjære*?...as brilliant as a sunset...naturally clever as the wild foxes playing in your great woods.”

“Please go on...oh woe is me, I love it...something terrible is going to happen.”

“You will finally discover that by terrible you really mean good...and that your imaginative fears have perhaps evolved into literature.”

“The nature of this beast,” she said with playful wonder; musing that they had returned to the exclusive realm of Asgard, the fortress of the northern gods, the center of the world, said to be reached only by an elusive rainbow-bridge. Her capricious vision remained vivid, a delightful place where ancient myth lay waiting to reshape itself. Chameleonic old myths could be quite beautiful, but also dangerous anachronisms when misapplied. Now, while the crisp winter night dreamed of spring, she thought of how she would eventually try to chronicle this availing winter’s transforming alchemy, for she understood very well how sharp-edged reality was rounded into myth, how it worked and how it became necessary.

“Tonight I will cook for you, my girl, anything it is possible to make. Think about what you would like to eat.”

“I *will* think of it...oh, yes, later happily consider one of your amazing menus. But...haven't we just crossed the rainbow-bridge, where Odin is in charge of my appetite?”

“*Nei*, my girl, I am the one in charge of that.”

Having restored the tangible, which he much preferred, and which she undeniably craved, he winked at her and received her mischievous smile. She had no desire for further jest, and none of their ensuing pleasures would be laid to myth. Archaic myth could not reify itself, but had once been a very necessary mental escort through mass confusion, a primal quest for understanding and guidance, remnants of its fantastic symbology now splendidly messaged art forms, still vibrantly cathartic.

“Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.” She laughed, then offered a very slight frown, recovering almost at once by the level words of a wise voice.

“Wild Vi, whenever you are troubled by the future, always unknowable, remember what you *do* know: how I said I expected to find you when I returned from fishing.”

“I remember exactly; it echoes in my head -- just as you intended -- so wonderfully here and now: *back on earth with you. Plenty of love, nature, farm cheese, fish, the written word...all that matters.*”