

Once More, With Feeling

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"Of course I remember. But I thought we were going to—"

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Jack, who did not like disruptions or deviations, looked down at the paper he had been grading and satisfied himself that the tip of his red pencil still marked his place. He said, "What've they got?"

"Eldean says he's partial to the skirt steak with garlic mashed potatoes."

"Sounds heavy."

"He says they've got all kinds of lunch specials. Gyros. Fish wrapped in rice paper. All kinds of Mediterranean, Indian, and Sino-Japanese things. They've got grilled Pacific salmon." Wanda waited. Then: "It's just lunch, dear."

"Sorry." Jack made a check mark next to a mistake on the paper and set his pencil aside. He said, "I hate leaps into the unknown."

Wanda laughed. "Don't I know. You two come on, I'll meet you there. It was a September day, humid but cool, and Jack paused on the steps of the mathematics department to don his jacket. He automatically looked to make sure his Subaru still occupied its reserved parking space across the street. Then he set off down the long hill. His brother-in-law Eldean met him in front of the English department. They crossed the commons at the bottom of the hill, with Eldean, small and bird-quick, setting a brisk pace. When a student called out, "Great class today!" Eldean accepted the compliment as his due and said to Jack, "Today in Tragedies of Shakespeare, I taught Titus Andronicus as if it were one of those godawful psycho-splatter movies."

"Did it work?"

"Well, it obviously did for at least one person. I may try it in Nineteenth-Century British Auth ors next."

They walked two blocks and entered an oak-shaded street lined with well-kept Victorian houses now occupied by law firms and other businesses. When Jack saw the Mars logo adorning one facade, he said, "This used to be—"

"Yes," said Eldean, "and before that—everything's changing faster than I can keep up with it. The city's growing out of control."

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“Yes,” said Eldean, “and before that—everything’s changing faster than I can keep up with it. The city’s growing out of control.

“When I was a student, the population here was a hundred thousand people or so.” Jack shook his head disbelievingly. “Now they say, in another twenty-five years, it’ll be a round million.”

Wanda was waiting inside Mars, where the walls were painted a vivid pink and embellished with gold stars,

crescent moons, and comets. The decor somehow avoided garishness. Jack and Wanda quickly exchanged kisses. He asked about her day so far, and she said, "The usual." He did not press for details. She was a psychologist at the county jail, specializing in juvenile offenders. While he spent his days with young people who did not know how to work the most obvious problems in geometry, she dealt with young people who did not know how to live their lives. The hostess showed Jack, Wanda, and Eldean to a corner table and handed out menus. "Your waitperson will be right with you."

They scanned the menus. "Everything sounds so good," Wanda said, "I don't

know what to order.”

Eldean put his menu down and slapped his hands against his own narrow torso.

“I haven’t been disappointed with anything I’ve had here.”

Jack glared at him. “Not all of us are blessed with efficient metabolisms. Wanda makes me walk miles every day to keep the weight off.”

The waitress arrived, and Jack, still studying the menu, heard her ask what they would care to drink. Her voice was a warm Southern purr.

“Iced tea, please,” said Wanda.

“Make it two,” said Eldean.

Jack looked up. The waitress was in her early twenties, trimly built, with

honey-colored hair, light skin, and an abundance of freckles. She had alert brown eyes and a good smile. “Same here,” Jack croaked, and she thanked them and glided away.

Jack felt heat creep up his neck and across his cheeks. He was helpless to stop it. He forced himself to look down at the tabletop directly before him.

“Now,” Wanda said, “it’s time to attend t o business—Happy Birthday, Eldean””

and she handed him a birthday card and Jack, after some confusion involving the pockets of his jacket, handed over a flat, rectangular gift wrapped in shiny foil. Eldean laughed and gave his sister a hug. Then he read the message on the

card and unwrapped the gift—a double-disc collection of old jazz standards sung by Anita O'Day. He excitedly turned it in his hands and looked at Jack.

“Tunes from the tone-deaf?”

“Wanda said you like her.”

“I do. I guess I owe one of you an extra hug.”

The waitress returned with their beverages and asked to take their orders. Jack tried to stare at her without seeming to stare at her. There was just a hint of reproach in her expression when he admitted that he still had no idea what to order. He fumbled with the menu, ordered the first thing that caught his eye. The waitress seemed to regard him with amused tolerance for a moment before

she turned and left, Wanda aimed a finger and a mildly reproachful look across the table toward Jack. “Close your mouth, dear.”

“What?”

“You’re gaping.”

“I—what? No. I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. Bulging eyes, slack mouth—in my book, that’s gaping. Or are you just window-shopping?”

“What?”

She inclined her head in the general direction taken by the waitress. “I have to admit, she is pretty.”

“No. Of course I’m not—”

“Oh, leave him alone, sis,” Eldean said, “you know he’s your thrall.” He leaned low over the table with an

exaggerated air of confidentiality. “Before he took you to wife, the only figures Jack looked at for forty years were in math books.”

“Don’t listen to anything he tells you about me,” Jack said. Wanda said to Eldean, “I like a man who can balance a check book.”

Jack had always enjoyed Wanda and Eldean’s banter when it was not directed at him. He said, “If you’re through discussing me—discuss Eldean instead.”

“Let’s,” said Eldean. “I have the soul of a poet, not an adding machine. Yet all I’ve ended up with is ex-wives.”

“Maybe,” Wanda told him, “you shouldn’t have waited until you were married not to have sex.”

He laughed loudly enough to draw glances from the far end of the room. Jack saw, over Eldean's shoulder, the waitress returning with their food. He looked away hurriedly, too hurriedly, he felt, but Wanda appeared not to notice. He kept his eyes on the table as the waitress placed his order before him. He ate mechanically, hardly tasting the food, and had no idea what it was. When the waitress paused at their table again to ask if everything was okay, he made some comment, slightly off the beat of the conversation and instantly forgotten. When Eldean suddenly spoke directly to him, he started.

“What?”

“I said, Mars to Jack, come in, Jack.

Enjoy your flight?”

As they were leaving Mars, Wanda said, “This was good. We’ll have to meet here again sometime,”

“If it’s still here,” Eldean said. “Restaurants come and go in this town faster than anything.”

Wanda offered to drop them off on campus. They got into her Nissan and had traveled a block when she said, “Jack, there’s that noise again.”

“I hear it,” he said distractedly. “Better give Jimmy at Apex another call.”

In front of the English department, Jack and Wanda again wished Eldean a happy birthday, and he thanked them again and went inside. The car ascended

the hill, dodging jaywalking students and still making the noise. The mathematics department occupied a red-brick building located near the crest. Below, in descending order, were the buildings that housed the music, English, and art departments. On the crest above the mathematics department was the science and engineering complex. The order of ascent, the rightness of it, had always appealed strongly to Jack's sense of orderliness; now it soothed and reassured him. Art belonged at the bottom: any nitwit could slop paint on canvas and call it art. English was only relatively more orderly, and music meant nothing to him. But mathematics—in mathematics you were right or you

were wrong. There was no dissembling in mathematics. And in life as on campus, to get to science and engineering, you had to pass mathematics.

“I’ll see you later,” said Wanda as she pulled the Nissan toward the curb in front of the mathematics building.” He started to get out, but her thoughtful expression made him wait. She said, “Tell me now, what’s bothering you?”

“Nothing’s bothering me,”

“I can tell something’s bothering you.” The thoughtful expression yielded to a smile. “It’s oh-kay. I’m a trained expert. And your wife. You can tell me things.”

“You’re going to think I’m being ridiculous.”

“You are the last man in the world who’s capable of being ridiculous. Now what is it?”

“That waitress.” He barely managed to get the word out. Something had come up out of his heart and lodged itself in his throat. He was mortified and blushing as uncontrollably as he had in the restaurant.

“A cutie, for sure,” Wanda said evenly, “but young enough to be your daughter

“That’s just it. She is young enough to be my daughter. She could be—she’s the image of my first girl friend. I mean, my first serious girl friend. My freshman year of college. The waitress looks just like her. It’s uncanny Same hair, eyes,

face, everything. Even the freckles.”

“Why didn’t you ask her about her mom when she came back to the table?”

“I—I haven’t seen her—the girl friend—or heard from or about her in almost thirty years. I haven’t even—” He let that sentence go, he had been at the point of saying that he had scarcely thought about her during all those years. “But I remember exactly how she looked.”

“Well, that girl at Mars was nowhere close to thirty. Eighteen or nineteen is mere like it. She’s someone else’s daughter. I know we promised never to ask questions like this, but since you’ve brought it up—what was her name? The girl friend.”

“Jonesy. Catherine Jones.”

“Jonesy,” Wanda said, “not Cathy. Interesting. So what happened between you and—” she hesitated for a fraction of a second, long enough for Jack to feel, first, the beginnings of embarrassment, then, a flicker of resentment at being made to feel embarrassment “—Jonesy?”

She was watching him closely. Jack nodded past her, past the faculty parking lot. Trees grew thickly on the far side, where the hill sloped away, and visible above their tops were the upper levels of a parking garage. He said, “The math and music buildings weren’t there back then, and that hillside was all wooded. It was a real thicket, and it grew all the way down on the other side to a

blacktopped parking lot. The garage wasn't there, either."

Wanda considered the hillside. Then she said, uncertainly, as though she knew she was expected to respond but did not know exactly what that response ought to be, "Well, that's progress," and looked as though she knew that she had somewhat missed the mark .

Jack said, "In the evenings, before we had to be back in our dorms, Jonesy and I used to, you know, do it on that hillside."

"What? You are kidding."

"No. Down the opposite slope, among the trees. We discovered a tree house someone'd built. We never found out who or why. Maybe bird watchers,

maybe someone from the engineering department. It was a good solid tree house. When I came back here to teach and saw the trees'd been cut down on the other side and the hillside bulldozed —” Jack thumped his breast with the side of his fist, “And now, all day every day—” he jerked his head toward the mathematics building “—I can look at what's left from my window.” He studied her expressions. “I can't believe I just told you that. You look absolutely amazed.”

“Actually, I am amazed. The thought of you, of all people, getting it on in the great outdoors—”

“Well, it was the Sixties. Later, we got a place together, in an old house

that'd been cut up into apartments. It's gone, too. Torn down to make room for condos. Progress, eh?"

Wanda looked at her watch. "Jack, this is fascinating, but I've got to get back to the jail."

"Sure. Thanks."

"For what?"

"Listening to me babble like an idiot."

He kissed her, got out of the car, and watched as she drove away, Jack's afternoon classes went unsatisfyingly. He finally conceded to himself that he was off his stride and dismissed his last class as early as he felt he decently could. He cloistered himself in his office and tried to do other work until it was time to change clothes and go meet

Wanda.

She had changed at work, too, and was waiting for him at the entrance to the hike-and-bike trail. "I called Apex," she said after a kiss, "and they said to bring the Nissan in first thing tomorrow. They said they'd try, repeat, try and have it fixed by five tomorrow. So you have to follow me to Apex and take me to work in the morning and pick me up and take me to Apex in the evening." She widened her eyes, widened her smile. "And how was your day, dear?"

Traffic on the trail was as heavy in its own way as that on the street. Jack let Wanda set the pace and managed to stay abreast of her, though she ran more often than she walked and he hated running.

They did not talk. He was grateful for that, his attention fixed on something within himself, and when at one point he abruptly became aware of his surroundings it struck him that he must have completed the first two miles on autopilot. At the halfway mark, he followed her to one side of the trail and watched as she knelt to adjust her shoe. His eye followed the line of her body from her hand up her arm, over her shoulder and along her flank, around the curve of her hip, down along her smooth strong leg, back to her hand. It was as though he were seeing her for the first time. She is so, he thought—and then he could not think of a single word or any group of words that might do her justice,

but, looking down at her, he did experience a rush of feeling for her so intense that his throat slightly constricted and his eyes stung.

At home, when he emerged from the shower, he found her brushing out her hair at her vanity table. Jack stepped close behind her and gently began to massage her shoulders, near the base of her neck. She said, “Ah,” and let her head loll forward. “Can’t tell you,” she said after half a minute, “how good that feels.”

“Lie down on the bed. I’ll give you the full treatment,”

“Don’t have to ask me twice.” She slipped out of her robe and lay prone on the bed. He sat on the edge and went to

work on her.

After a while, she told him, “You missed your calling. You could do this for a living.”

“The secret of giving a good back rub is just to listen. Whatever you do that elicits grunts of pleasure, do more of it.”

“Whatever. Mm.” After several more minutes, he stopped massaging her but lightly stroked her lower back with one hand, and she said “Mm” again, and then,

“Thanks.” He ran his hand over her buttock. “Buns of steel,” she murmured into the crook of her arm. “Just another way of saying I’m a hard-ass.”

Wanda rolled suddenly under his hand, onto her back, and drew a corner

of the robe over her pubic area. He found her modesty endearing. She lay looking up at him with one arm across her breasts and the other arm cradling her head. His hand rested on her smooth firm stomach. She moved a hand down, placed it upon his, squeezed gently. He saw after a moment that she was trying to keep a straight face. She grinned suddenly and said, "Making love in a tree house!" and laughed. She rolled her head from side to side and said, "I'm sorry" and laughed again. He wanted to laugh with her; he managed a grin. He bent forward and kissed her shoulder. "Didn't think I had it in me?"

Wanda put her hand upon his forearm; her expression was mock-solemn again.

“I’ve always thought you’re a good egg, but I’ve never quite figured you out.”

“You promised to love, honor, and not try to analyze me.”

“Well, sometimes I regret that third part.”

He kissed her again, softly, on the cheek, leaned closer, slid his arms around and under her, held her. Her arms pulled him tight against her. “Ah, Jack,” she murmured. They lay quietly holding each other for at least two full minutes. Then he pulled back slightly and said, “Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Me, too. Want to go out? My treat.”

“Back to Mars? Not twice in one day.

I'm just too tired.”

She kissed him. “Check out cute young waitresses on your own time.” Jack felt guilty and relieved at the same time. “Maybe we can do something this weekend,”

she went on, “if there ever is a weekend,” and groaned elaborately. “Meanwhile, I’m still starving.”

“Why don’t you lie here and relax while I fix dinner? If you can relax, knowing I’m fixing dinner.”

“That was a joke!”

“Not much of one.”

“True.” She put her arm around his neck, drew him to her again, pressed her cheek to his, nuzzled his ear. “But enough of one.”

“I’ll call you when dinner’s ready. Dinner or a reasonable facsimile thereof.”

“Don’t try to be funny twice in one night.”

He kissed her and went and made a respectable dinner. The effort relaxed him. Afterward, they briefly watched television, then made respectable love. The following afternoon, after dismissing his last class, he called Wanda at her office. She sounded tired and unhappy as she told him that the Nissan would be spending the night at the repair shop. He suggested the hike-and-bike trail. She said,

“I don’t think I’m up for it today. Just pick me up and take me home, okay?”

“Sure. I’ll see you soon.”

He left the mathematics building swinging the tote bag containing his sweatshirt, shorts, and walking shoes. He stepped off the curb to cross to the faculty parking lot and immediately jumped back at the sound of a car horn. A black Volkswagen Beetle muttered by. Affixed to its rear bumper were two stickers. One was a circle containing a peace symbol. The other read, VIETNAM: LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT

He stared after the Volkswagen, thought of an imprecation but did not unleash it, then got into his Subaru and went down the hill, straight into rush-hour traffic. It took him an eternity to drive the ten blocks to the county

courthouse. Wanda stood waiting on the steps; she looked as she had sounded over the telephone. She accepted his kiss, however, and gave him a wan smile. The corners of her mouth turned up slightly, but the muscles in her forehead remained contracted. “Bad day,”

he said; he was not asking a question

“Tell you later. Maybe.” She exhaled harshly, then tried another smile, but still the effect was not reassuring. “You?”

“The usual,” he said.

He drove, and she sat with her head tilted back and her eyes closed. Finally, she said, “I lost my temper today and yelled at somebody from the sheriff’s office.”

“Bad day. “

“The worst. The kind of day that makes me think seriously I’m not cut out for the work. The kind that’s hard on my professional objectivity. That makes me think I’m not dealing with disturbed people, but plain old stupid ones, stupid and evil ones, and some who’re just purely evil. I may have met one of the purely evil ones today. Ah, Jack.” She looked sadder than he had ever seen her. “I’m preparing a psychological profile of a sixteen-year-old monster at the jail. He stabbed another kid last week, then hid out until his own grandmother turned him in. He already had a history of—but, anyway --today, while he was being processed, some idiot put another boy, a

fourteen-year-old, into the cell with him and left them unattended. The sixteen-year-old talked the fourteen-year-old into hanging himself. Later, when I asked the sixteen-year-old about it—why he'd done it—he said because he'd always known he could do it, and he'd waited long enough. The devil in him was ready to show itself.”

Her eyes glistened, she smeared at them with her hands, clutched her head between her forearms, and exhaled a heartbroken and heartbreaking sound. The thought darted through Jack's mind that this could not be his own reassuringly calm and collected wife sitting next to him, looking tireder than tired, looking exhausted, used-up,

fighting back tears, speaking nonsense. Her talk of monsters and devils disturbed him—he thought that he could not have been much more disturbed if she had spouted obscenities—and yet, as he had on the trail the day before, he experienced a rush of feeling for her that was almost painful in its intensity.

“I’m sorry.” He did not know what else to say. He let go of the gearshift knob and touched her arm. He did not know what else to do.

“No, I’m sorry,” she said in an occluded voice, “I promised I’d never take my work home with me. And listen to me. I’m talking about devils and monsters.”

“It’s okay. If you want to talk about it,

who else are you going to talk about it with?”

After a few seconds, she said, “Would that sentence stand Eldean’s scrutiny?”

and essayed a fresh smile, more or less successfully, and he touched her arm again. Then she said, “Do you mind if we stop somewhere for a drink?”

“Anywhere special?”

“Somewhere with wine and ferns and no local news on the tee-vee.”

Soon, Wanda sat lost in her own thoughts and nursing a glass of white wine. Jack sipped from his own glass and waited patiently. He started when he noticed the black Volkswagen parked across the street; even as he jarred the

table and wine slopped from his glass, he saw a young woman with honey-blond hair walk around the car from the curbside and unlock the door on the driver side.

“Jack,” Wanda said, like a harried mother, as she grabbed a napkin,

“See that girl across the street?”

Wanda, occupied with sopping up wine, scarcely bothered to look. “Not without my glasses.”

“Put them on! Quickly! I want you to see her. The one in the—the Sixties clothes—getting into the VW—”

As Wanda dug through her purse for her glasses, she said, “Jack, Sixties fashions have been back for some time now. Retro-retro-retro, and I may even

be leaving out a retro. Don't you pay attention to what your students are wearing?"

"Look at her."

As she fumbled her glasses into position, the Volkswagen pulled into traffic and was gone.

"It was—" He could not bring himself to finish the sentence. Instead, he said,

"Just as I was leaving the math department to come get you—I almost stepped out in front of that same car."

Wanda wagged a finger at him. "Always look both ways before you cross the street."

"It was her."

"Who?"

"The waitress from Mars," he said.

Jonesy, he thought.

Wanda leaned back in her chair. She said, “Tell me what finally happened between you and your college girl friend.”

Jack meant to say, We broke up, or simply, I don't know. Instead, he said, “I treated her very badly.”

“Ah. Remorse. You are just full of surprises.” She took a careful sip of wine.

“Remorse can be a bad thing or a good thing. Hell is truth seen too late. Then, again, remorse comes out of remembrance and may lead to redemption”

“I hardly remembered her at all until I saw that waitress. Could I almost've

“forgotten someone if she really ever meant anything to me?”

“It depends on what you mean by meant anything. How badly, exactly, did you treat her?”

“I don’t—can we change the subject?”

“You brought it up. So, tell me—”

“I don’t feel like being analyzed right now.”

“I m not trying to analyze you, I just want to find out—”

“Wanda, I’m not one of your juvenile offenders!”

Wanda set her wine glass down with a sharp click. “No, you’re not. Let’s get the hell out of here,”

They went home and ate dinner in excruciating silence and did not speak to

each other for the rest of the evening. Jack could not occupy himself with homework papers or television, and the house itself seemed to contract around him. Then, at bedtime, as he sat in his pajamas on the edge of the bed, he looked around at Wanda, who lay on her side with her back to him. He stretched out beside her. He said, "I'm sorry," and touched her shoulder "I'm so sorry. I never want us to be mad at each other. I'm sorry."

He could feel her hesitate. Then she reached back with her hand and patted his arm. "I'm sorry, too. Sorrier. I'm the psychologist.

"Bad day."

"Yes. Bad day.

“Wanda.”

The moment seemed to stretch to infinity. Jack did not want to talk any more, did not want to speak the things he thought, and Wanda, evidently sensing this, said, “We don’t have to talk about anything,” but it was as though a hole had suddenly been punched in him and words came pouring out.

“She said she wanted to be with me always. I wanted to be with her, too—but it wasn’t safe So our pattern for the year we were together was start up, stop, start over. I kept cutting her off. Whenever I’d cut her off, she’d call me up in tears, send me anguished notes by mail. What’s wrong, what have I done, what can I do?”

Wanda turned toward him, propped her head up on one hand, and let the other rest on his sternum. “It was always you who cut her off? And she was always the one who wanted to get back together with you?”

“Yes. She—it was almost masochistic.”

“In those days, girls were raised to be masochists.”

“Maybe it was something worse. Maybe, the more vulnerable she became, the crueller I became.”

“Why, Jack?”

He started to say, I have no idea, for he had suddenly recognized the greater extent of the minefield that lay ahead. He had not let himself tread upon that

ground for many years, he did not want to do so now. He also knew that he had no choice but to go on. He said, “I knew if I let myself feel something for Jonesy, I’d have to feel other things as well.”

“All of this happened around the time your mother died, didn’t it?”

Jack took a long slow breath. “She’d died in the spring—while I was still a senior in high school. When she was diagnosed with cancer—I didn’t really realize until near the end how serious her illness was. She and my father didn’t prepare me for what was going to happen. I think it was because they never stopped believing that their prayers would save her, even after the doctors couldn’t. When my mother went into the

hospital for the last time, I wasn't all that worried. She'd been in the hospital before—I thought she'd be coming home again. She always had before. When she died, it shattered my father. Just shattered him. That shook me as badly as her death. Worse, really. What her death made me feel was shame and horror because I—I didn't feel anything else. Just cold and empty.”

“You were in shock,” Wanda said gently.

“I didn't know that. Nobody told me I was in shock. And I saw my father, who'd always been the strong, silent type, reduced to—till then, I'd always believed that adults were in control of their lives and their feelings. That they

took things in stride. I saw how my father fell apart, and I thought, Well, maybe being all cold and numb inside isn't such a bad thing after all. Maybe I'm better off never feeling anything. So I stayed in shock. That fall, when I left for college, I didn't just leave for college, I—left. Left.”

“And met Jonesy.”

“We started dating soon after I started college. She was a year older than me, a sophomore. It was casual at first, but we finally did the deed. Deflowered each other. After that, it was like she was determined to make things work on almost any terms. I think she tried so hard because she just couldn't believe she'd made a horrible mistake.”

“Losing one’s virginity means more to girls than it does to boys. In those days, a girl was still strongly encouraged to save herself for one special person,”

“Then Jonesy’s one special person was supposed to be me. And I wouldn’t cooperate. I’d cut her off, I’d relent, we’d get back together for a while. I guess even that finally paled, because, finally, I betrayed her. With other girls. She moved out, and I never saw her again. That was near the end of my freshman year. She wasn’t at school that fall.”

“What about those other girls?”

“I betrayed them, too. I got better at betrayal as I went along. Finally, all that

crying and—it started to sicken me. I stopped bothering. I found more worthwhile interests. And then I finally met you. And—and it was like—like when Beauty transforms the Beast and redeems him.”

Wanda lay her head on his breast. She said, with such tenderness that his eyes watered, “Why, Jack!”

Jack stroked her hair. “I’ve spent too much time around your brother.”

“He does go on.”

He looked at the clock on the nightstand. “It’s late. We really should go to sleep.”

They kissed lingeringly, turned out the light, and settled beside each other, holding hands. In the darkness, Wanda

cleared her throat softly and said, “If you could see Jonesy now—what would you do?”

“I don’t know. Yes, I do.”

“What?”

“Ask her forgiveness. Tell her—tell her how sorry I am. Tell her how much I wanted to—return her—feelings. Back then, I mean.”

Wanda squeezed his hand. “Jack,” she said, “would it kill you to ever say the word love?”

A long time after he knew she was asleep, the black Volkswagen passed fleetingly through his mind, trailing a montage of images, incredibly condensed and yet incredible in their vividness, of another time and almost

another place. He suddenly became aware of his own moist heavy breathing, and of his own skin, bare and hot, and of the touch of even hotter, burning-hot, fingertips. He raised his head slightly and looked, and now he saw and felt the girl, the waitress, kissing his belly just below the navel, tracing designs with her tongue and moving her head in a lazy back-and-forth motion so that her cheek repeatedly brushed against the swollen head of his penis. But how—

She turned her face toward him and whispered, Ssh, and turned her face away and made him groan, half in ecstasy, half in complaint, it feels so good, don't make me wait. But—

—how—

He could not remember how she had managed to come to him, how things had got this far. On finding oneself in bed with a woman, he thought, one ought to remember how one got there. After all, it was supposed to be such a momentous thing. Who had kissed whom, this time or the first time or any time? And how had the kissing gone beyond lip contact to tongues, and what then? And from that to fumbling with buttons and zippers, running the whole obstacle course of feminine underthings—?

He suddenly wondered, Why am I naked, where are my pajamas?

He awoke with a start and a cry. Wanda slept beside him, breathing quietly. At some point after falling

asleep he had released her hand. He turned away from her, onto his side, stared at the dimly moonlit rectangles of the bedroom windows. He lay clutching the edge of the mattress until he saw gray light through the windows. He was groggy throughout the morning, and his nine-and ten-o'clock classes and his undergraduate-advisor session were unmitigated disasters. Helpless to stop himself. Jack left his office early and returned alone to Mars. He asked for, and was shown to, the table he and Wanda and Eldean had shared. His waitress had pale skin, reddish blonde hair, and heavy eye makeup. He asked what had become of the waitress who had served him before. "Could you

please tell me her name? I may have known her mother, years ago.”

The waitress regarded him frankly, appraisingly. “This is my table,” she said,

“and I’m the only blonde.”

“Are you sure?”

She made an effort to humor him, there was only the merest edge of impatience in her voice. “Look around.”

This is crazy. Jack told himself. He tried to maintain his composure, to will himself not to blush. He had a horror of scenes.

“Now,” she said after waiting several seconds more, “may I get you something to drink?”

He left without ordering, strode back

to campus with arms swinging and fists clenched, feeling foolish and humiliated and vowing to himself never to return to Mars. On the steps of the mathematics building, he hesitated, turned, looked across the parking lot. A student said hello as he went by, and Jack muttered a reply but did not see who it was. He stood with his hands thrust into his trousers pockets and his head pulled down between his shoulders, as though against a cold wind, and he watched the trees. At last, he crossed the street and walked past his Subaru sitting in its reserved parking space and entered the trees. The woods closed around him, swallowed him. He knew that he should at least have been able to glimpse the

rear wall of the parking garage through the trees ahead, but he could not, and when he looked back he could not see the parking lot or the mathematics building. The woods seemed to stretch away forever in every direction. Day had somehow become night, yet he saw perfectly well, as though the air itself were suffused with light. He saw the tree house and said or thought No! and looked up through a gap in the leaf canopy and imagined for an instant that he saw not the familiar and dependable moon and stars but a jagged rent in the sky, beyond which was true engulfing darkness. He felt the ground tilt and crack beneath his feet, and he lurched toward the tree house with outstretched

arras. The tree house was substantial. The tree house was real. It consisted of a wooden platform with low sides and a partial roof. A ladder afforded access. He put his foot on the first rung. After a moment, he heard a sound from within the tree house, perhaps a voice, perhaps calling to him.

He fled blindly. The ground turned treacherous underfoot, He slipped, fell, rolled against the base of a medium-sized tree. He lay there breathing heavily with earth-smells in his nostrils and the taste of dirt and blood on his tongue. He wondered if he would ever get back to where he belonged, but the matter no longer seemed particularly urgent. This is good, where I am. From somewhere

close by came the sound of approaching footsteps. Get up, he told himself. Get up. Run.

He got his feet beneath him and used the tree to pull himself erect. He glimpsed movement among the trees close by and ran clumsily in the opposite direction. Something whipped his cheek. His toe connected solidly with an exposed root, and he went sprawling, cried out, clawed at the ground. When he pushed himself up on his forearms, he found himself at the edge of the trees, looking across the faculty parking lot at the mathematics building. The sun was farther down the sky than seemed right. Jack got up, pulled a twig from his hair, tried to brush the dirt and bits of plant

detritus from his clothes. He discovered a welt on his left cheek. He limped halfway across the parking lot and then looked back over his shoulder. The parking garage loomed above the trees,

He turned away from the mathematics building and made his way down to the English department. The door to Eldean's office was ajar. Jack knocked on the door frame and leaned into the room. Eldean looked up from behind his untidy desk. His mouth fell open, and his eyebrows rose.

“Jack! My God! What happened? Did you get mugged?”

Eldean had started to rise from his seat, but Jack motioned him back down onto it.

“I fell down.”

“Fe—? After you blew off two classes in a row, your office practically put out an A P B on you. They called Wanda, she called me. Where’ve you been all afternoon?”

Jack looked first at the electric clock on Eldean’s wall, then at his wristwatch. There was discrepancy of almost three hours. Jack closed the door and sagged into a chair across from Eldean. “I’m not sure where I’ve been,” he said. “In the woods.” Eldean picked up the telephone and dialed. “Who’re you calling?”

“Who else?” Eldean spoke into the mouthpiece. “Sis, Jack’s here i n my office.” He held the telephone out to Jack.

“I don’t know what to say her.”

“Try hello.”

Jack accepted the telephone. “Wanda

”

....

“Jack! Are you all right? Where’ve you been?”

“I’m fine. I’m okay.”

“What’s going on?”

He did not answer immediately. Then:

“I think I’m being haunted.”

“Haunted.” Her voice was inflectionless. Two seconds ticked by.

“By whom or what?”

“Jonesy.”

“Ah, God! Jonesy! Listen to me. Jack, you stay right there with Eldean. I’ll be there as soon as I can get a cab.”

Jack handed the telephone back to

Eldean, who said, “Don’t you want to call your office?”

“No. I’m going to stay right here with you till Wanda gets here.”

“Oh. Well.” Eldean looked concerned. “Can I get you anything?”

“Professional help.” Jack grinned as Eldean blinked at him over the tops of wire-rimmed glasses. “That’s a joke. Or maybe it isn’t. Either I need professional help, or I’m—look, you know me well enough. You know I’m not the type to dwell on the past and not the type to have panic attacks. But it’s like I’ve been brushing up against moments from my own past. From my first love affair.”

“People forget years,” Eldean murmured, “and remember moments, I

forget who said that. Somebody—”

“I wandered into the trees at the top of the hill. Suddenly, it was night, and everything was the way it used to be, thirty years ago—the same but different. The sky became different, everything was different. I think I heard Jonesy—my old girl friend, the one who looked like the waitress at Mars. The tree house was there, just like it used to be, and she was waiting for me there.”

“The waitress?”

“No! Jonesy! But I got scared. I ran and fell and found myself—back here. Back now.” Jack considered the expression on his brother-in-law’s face. Neither of them spoke for several seconds. Finally, Jack said, “So you tell

me, do I need professional help?”

“Well, if you do, surely, Wanda can help you get it.”

“I don’t want professional help! I want a reasonable, rational, real explanation for this!”

“Does, um, that mean you want this thing to be real?”

“I don’t want it to be a hallucination. I don’t want it to be me. I know it isn’t.”

The concern in Eldean’s expression had transformed itself gradually into some keener type of interest, now he brushed his palms together and sat forward in his chair. “But if this thing is real. Jack—by which I mean, if it isn’t a hallucination—

then what’ve you got?”

“I don’t know. What have I got?”

“Ghosts?”

“Eldean, I don’t believe in ghosts.”

Eldean looked exasperated in his own right. “So then what’ve you got? Time travel? If we must rule out the unreasonable and irrational possibility that you’re imagining weird stuff, it follows that it’s got to be one of those other things. Now which one sounds most reasonable and rational to you?” and he counted them off on his fingers “Ghosts, time travel, or you need professional help?” Jack said nothing, only glowered at him. Eldean held up his hands with his right index finger hooked on his left middle finger. “Right—number three!”

“No! I’m going to solve this. If Jonesy’s back—”

“How hard can it be find out if she’s back? One call, and Wanda can have one of her buddies in the sheriff’s office run a driver’s-license check for you. Or you can start conducting an investigation yourself, right here, right now.” Eldean pulled out his city telephone directory.

“What’s her name?”

“Catherine Jones.”

“Jones.” Eldean thumbed through the directory, then handed the opened book to Jack. There were three and a half pages of Joneses, but only six C Joneses and no Catherines or Cathys.

“What should I do?” Jack asked bitterly. “Call? Ask each one of them.

Are you the girl I used to meet in a tree house, thirty years ago? What're the odds she's married and changed her name and moved away?"

"You're the mathematician."

Jack threw the book to the floor and sat with his head in his hands. Ghosts, he thought glumly. Time travel. Madness.

Wanda entered without knocking. She uttered a little cry of alarm when she saw Jack, bent over him, took his face in her hands. "What happened to you?" She scarcely blinked while he repeated the story he had told Eldean. She lowered herself onto her calves in front of him and put her face close to his. He said, "I'm not drunk."

She said, "Let's get you home."

“I’m not nuts, either,”

“I know you’re not nuts. No one says you’re nuts.”

“You never say anybody’s nuts. They’re always disturbed. I’m not disturbed, Wanda. My mind is working perfectly. It’s trying to figure this thing out. I want a rational explanation!”

“Okay. Okay.” Wanda rose and leaned against the edge of Eldean’s desk. She held up a hand, palm out, fingers spread, and moved it back and forth as though she were testing the resiliency of some invisible membrane. She said, “Try tearing this whole thing apart, Jack, starting from the top. The girl at Mars reminded you of your old flame. But she wasn’t your old flame.”

“And she wasn’t at Mars today. I checked,”

“Oh, you did, did you?”

“If I took you there now, you’d see she’s not the same girl. And that in itself means something. You saw her, too—you both did. I didn’t imagine her.”

“We saw a girl. Maybe she just looked different when you went back. Maybe, in the interim, she had a complete makeover.”

“No. I can’t have been mistaken.”

“No, not you,” Eldean muttered from behind his desk.

Jack said, “What about the old VW?”

Wanda started to answer, hesitated, looked at a loss. Eldean came to her rescue.

“You saw an old black VW,” he said to Jack. “How could you tell it was old? The whole time they built those things, they never looked any different from one year to the next. I don’t remember when they stopped building them, but I’m sure those things are classics new. Maybe they’re making a comeback. Maybe they’ve started building them again, too. I don’t know about cars. Maybe all you saw was a new one.”

“With the same bumper stickers my girl friend put on her car thirty years ago?”

Wanda, what about the hillside and the tree house?”

Wanda lowered her head and shook it wearily. “I don’t know, I don’t know I

don't know,”

“Eldean says ghosts, or time travel.”
He looked sharply at his brother-in-law.

“What do we know about ghosts, Eldean?”

“Ghosts are the spirits of the dead. Sometimes, they appear to the living for the purpose of delivering warnings or other messages, or they come bent on making trouble for their killers.”

“Eldean,” Wanda said, “you're not helping matters.”

“Well,” Jack said, “after all this time, she could be dead, but even if she is—

why would her ghost be appearing to me now?” Before either of them could reply, he remembered, with an unpleasant shiver, Wanda's words the

day before ... he'd always known he could do it, and he'd waited long enough. The devil in him was ready to show itself. He rallied by reminding himself, I do not believe in ghosts. Even if I did, I couldn't believe they wait tables or drive Volkswagens. Or engage in foreplay.

He said, "Even if I believed in ghosts, what could this ghost be trying to tell me?"

"Maybe," Wanda said, "it's not trying to tell you anything. Maybe you're trying to tell yourself something."

"Like, maybe I'm trying to tell myself I need professional help? Funny how it keeps coming back to that." He slumped on his chair. "I don't even want to think

about time travel.”

“Jack, let me take you home.”

“I should call the department.”

“We’ll do it when we get you home.

Where’s the car?”

“Parked in front of the math building.”

“I’ll go get it. You stay here, and, Eldean, don’t you encourage him.”

She left. Jack and Eldean regarded each other across the desktop. At length, Eldean said, “Are you sure you don’t actually want this thing to be a mystery?

Because if you do, watch out. Mysteries force a man to think and so injure his health. Poe said that, and look how his life turned out.”

“I intend to solve this mystery.”

“You solve puzzles. Puzzles are

sterile, they're safe. A mystery's something you have to fathom—stick your hand in up to the elbow. Sometimes you have to dive in headfirst. You can drown in a mystery.”

Jack stood up. “I don't give a damn about Poe.”

They spoke no more. Wanda returned for Jack, and when they walked outside together he saw the Subaru illegally parked in front of the English building.

“Let me drive,” he said, producing his own keys.

“Better let me.”

“I haven't been declared incompetent yet.”

“Will you stop?” She threw up her hands in resignation as he slid into the

driver seat. Through a series of abrupt, angry motions, she got in on the other side, closed the door, and buckled her safety belt.

As Jack pulled the car away from the curb, he spotted the black Volkswagen at the bottom of the hill. He started to speed up, then had to step on the brake as two students jaywalked in front of the Subaru. Wanda yelped a warning. Jack snapped,

“I see them.” As the Subaru entered traffic and turned after the Volkswagen, a minivan abruptly moved in from the left-hand lane to fill the gap between the two vehicles. Jack found himself boxed in by another vehicle in the left-hand lane, he could see around the minivan

but could not get around it. The Volkswagen, the minivan, and the Subaru turned at the intersection as though threaded together on a string. Wanda said, “Jack, where we going?”

“See it? The black VW?”

“Ja—”

“Do you see it?”

“Yes!”

Jack gripped the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckle bones looked and felt as though they were about pop through the skin. “She’s in that car! She wants me to follow her!”

“Who?”

“Jonesy! She’s come back”

“Jack, this is crazy!”

He laughed wildly when the minivan

turned right, then cursed when he saw that the Volkswagen had managed somehow to put another vehicle between itself and the Subaru. The Volkswagen turned onto a narrow street leading into a neighborhood full of big old houses and huge old trees. At the far end of the block, the Volkswagen turned onto a gravel driveway. Jack turned after it and found it sitting parked and empty in the shade of a tall tree that grew next to a peeling Victorian house. There were no other cars and no one in sight. He pulled the Subaru in so close behind the Volkswagen that he could no longer see its brand-new-looking ancient bumper stickers. He turned off the motor and sat back in his seat, it almost hurt when he

unwrapped his fingers from the steering wheel. Wanda looked around perplexedly. He heard her ask, "Where are we?" but he did not answer her. He gazed up at the house. It been built sometime before the First World War and cut up into apartments sometime after the Second. A venerable oak shaded it. The apartments were cheap and reasonably easy to keep clean and had private entrances. A brass letter C adorned the door on this side of the house, and paisley-print bed linen had been pressed into service as curtains for the two windows. What luxury, Jack thought, after that tree house He listened to the sound of the cooling engine and of his own excited breathing

and marveled that he was not astonished to find the house intact, though he knew that it had not survived a building boom during the 1980s.

“Jack,” Wanda said.

“What do you see?”

“Jack --”

“Tell me what you see!”

“That car. An old house.” She clutched his arm as he opened his door.

“What are you going to do?”

“Find out.

“Find out what?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I hate enigmas. And if this is what I think it is —

— whatever it is I think it is—after all this time, I have to seek forgiveness.”

“What if her reason for coming back isn't to forgive you?”

He hesitated, with the door half-opened and his left foot on the ground, and after a long moment had passed, he thought, I also hate leaps into the unknown. He got out of the car and walked up to the door of apartment C. He inclined his head toward it, listened, felt a chill between his shoulder blades when he heard movement within. He looked back at the Subaru. It was still parked behind the Volkswagen, but it suddenly seemed a lot farther away than it ought to have been. The street was a million miles away. The sky was all roiling incandescence, illuminating Wanda's face as she peered through the

Subaru's windshield. Jack saw, across that great distance, that she appeared distressed, appeared to be calling to him, but she was too far away for him to see or hear her very clearly. He made a fist and knocked on the door and thought he heard another, different sound, a voice, perhaps, saying, perhaps, I'm coming.