

WINTER TERM

It is nearly eleven when he turns off the gravel road to nose the car into the leaning barn they use as a garage. Killing lights and engine, he hauls out his bag of books and crosses the frozen yard. The tin-roofed farm house, which belongs to her family, needs painting and rewiring, but the rent is so cheap, a gift really, that he can't bring himself to complain.

As he opens the door he thinks he catches the sound of singing. He dumps his bag on the deacon's bench and listens, but hears nothing. After a moment he calls out that he's home. In the kitchen, she says.

He finds her in the pantry on a stepladder. Her back is to him and he leans against the doorway looking at her. She's wearing jeans and one of his old shirts, red flannel, with the tail hanging out. Her coppery hair is caught up in a yellow kerchief. In the first year of their marriage, he would have gone to her to lock his arms around her knees and press his face against her warmth and fullness.

She twists about on the wobbly ladder. The expression on her face teeters between an eagerness for good news and a fear of bad, or maybe he only imagines it.

"Watch yourself," he tells her. "You'll fall."

"Well?"

"I got the check, don't worry. The way they stall, you'd think those extension clowns paid travel out of their own..."

"Nooo, silly." Her generous smile is just a bit too toothy to be pretty. She gestures at the wall with a paint roller. "Look."

"Gold?"

"Van Gogh yellow. Like it?"

"Bright."

"With no windows, you'll want bright walls, won't you?"

He nods. She likes redoing things. First it was their bedroom, then the smaller one as a nursery, although after her miscarriage and his tenure denial they agreed that a baby could wait until they were better settled. Now she's gotten it into her head that all he

needs to get back to his dissertation is a place of his own to work. 'My nursery,' he jokingly calls her new project.

"Don't you like it?" she asks.

"Did I say that? I said it's bright."

"I thought maybe shelves in the corner."

"Let's not get into any big expense here."

"Just boards and brackets," she says. "Or you like bricks?"

"Since, you know, it's only temporary."

He reads a question in her look: How temporary is it when they're midway into their third year there?

He backs from the pantry door. Opening the refrigerator, he says, "Jesus, I'm beat."

"That won't help, you know."

"I'm wound up, all right?" He takes out a bottle of beer and twists off the cap.

"Why it's called a pick-me-up, I'll never understand. I read where it depresses you." Backing down from the ladder, she empties the paint tray, caps the can, wraps the turpentine-soaked rags around the roller and puts it into a plastic bag which she then seals with a green twistie. "When we get your books and typewriter in there, it will look a lot nicer, really."

Her good spirits in dealing with the rubble life dumped at your door amaze him, and he fails to see how anyone can be so cheerful with so little cause.

"The car's stalling out again," he says, then recalls that, driving home, he had thought not to mention it. When it came to car trouble, she was no help.

She follows him into the chilly kitchen. "You had to have it towed?"

"No, no. It's missing is all. Forget it"

"Didn't we just get it tuned or something?"

"Back in September. Sixty miles round trip to the main campus every day, fifty twice a week to the pen, you think that doesn't add up?"

As she washes her hands at the sink her head is framed by hanging plants. The little house is a jungle of spider plants, wandering jew, peace lily, chinese evergreen. She believes they clean the air.

"If it breaks down for good," he says, "then where are we?"

She dries her hands on a sunflowered towel.

"Stuck," he tells her. "That's where."

"I bet you're hungry."

He drops into a chair. "I could eat something."

She begins scrambling eggs at the stove. The only sound in the room is the clicking of the spatula on the pan. She used to sing bits of songs while she cooked, he remembers, and he would kid her about not knowing any one piece all the way through.

The day's mail has been opened and left on the table. Looking at the bills, he calculates how tight their money is this month. He finishes his beer. His body feels like lead. Maybe he spends too much time reading and brooding, and reading other men's broodings. But no, actually he spends too few hours studying and making notes on Conrad's stoic vision, and far too many in Columbus or Marion badgering illiterate freshman or convicted manslaughterers to put predicates in their sentences. That it isn't in her to complain, he thinks, makes him seem bad-natured simply because he has a common sense awareness of their troubles, and the world's.

"Coming home tonight, I couldn't help thinking." He twists the bottle in his hands, then taps its neck on the chrome edge of the table. "I don't know, it sounds crazy."

"What's that?"

"I could do something terrible," he says.

"What?"

"That's what I kept thinking, that I could do something terrible."

"Oh you could not."

"Yes. Anyone could."

"I don't believe that."

"You don't think you could?"

"Why even think something like that?"

"All right, not you. But me. You don't think so, really?"

"No."

"But I could," he says.

"What an old grouch," she says, but smiles to show that she's teasing. "Here you are, here's your eggs."

"If I was locked up like that, I don't know what I'd do."

"Well, that's different. If you were in prison."

"You don't know what you could do, not until maybe it's too late. The prisoners, they're losers, sure, but not bad guys, not all of them."

She puts wheat bread and margarine on the table. "You want toast?"

He shakes his head, and starts in on the eggs. "Some of them act like high school kids. Last week when I said they had to finish Heart of Darkness? You should have heard them. 'Aw, Teach, do we have to?' Then there's the others, the bad asses. They don't say a

word, just lean back with their arms crossed on their chests and look right through you. What they're doing in class, I've no idea. They look like wrestlers, pro linemen. All they do in there, except eat and do God knows what to each other, is lift weights. They wear workshirts, like denim but thinner, this washed out blue with the seams all split at the shoulders. You should see them, you wouldn't believe it. They're like monsters."

She lays a slice of buttered bread on his plate, then steps behind him. He expects her to rub his neck, but she doesn't touch him. "You're not really scared, are you?" she asks, and he realizes that she doesn't want to see his face when he answers.

He makes a sniffing sound just short of asigh. He knows it's not the truth that she wants to hear, not if it's hard to live with. "I don't really think about it. It's a job." What she wants is for them both to be happy. It's a heavy load for him to carry, but he tries, though he can't hope to compete with her Mom and Dad, beet-farmers, square-dancers, churchgoers, married for forty-two of the happiest years of their life. And he can't help but think that she's less happy now than when she was a part-time secretary at the college, taking on extra typing jobs at night, like his dissertation when it still looked as if he might finish it in time to land a permanent appointment there.

"It's just, you're so worn out when you get home."

"Three straight hours. Plus the drive. And they're no help. I'm the one does all the talking."

"It must be scary," she says, "I can imagine."

"No, you can't."

She sits across from him at the table and he pictures wire mesh keeping them from touching all but their fingertips.

"You know what I mean."

"No," he says.

He goes to the refrigerator and opens the door to stand looking into its bright cold interior as though he's forgotten what he's after. The ceiling lights dim as the motor kicks in. He takes out the second beer he knows he can have without getting anything serious started between them and, feeling her eyes on him, sits down. He forks up another mouthful of eggs before opening the beer. "Tonight," he says, "I'm right at the place, you know, where Kurtz says, 'The horror, the horror.'"

"I've never read it." She points to his eggs.

"And you don't want to." He takes a bite of bread, then shoves the eggs around the plate with the fork. "'The horror, the horror.' I'm just going to explain it to them, when Czuba starts in. He's

about the brightest guy in class, meaning he asks some questions that make sense. Now he's got his head in his hands and is rocking back and forth and I think he's having a seizure or maybe somebody slipped a knife into him."

"They can't have knives, can they?"

"Who knows what goes on in there? Nobody tells me anything. I'm just the man with the books, an outsider."

"But they search them."

"They're supposed to, sure. All I know is, Czuba could be dying, and the rest of them sit there looking at me like 'So what now, Teach?' He's rocking back and forth, groaning 'Oh Jesus, Oh fuck, Oh Jesus, Oh fuck.' So I go to his seat, squat down beside him, and ask what's the problem. How about him taking a deep breath here, trying to tell me what's wrong. What else am I going to do, send him to the principal? But he can't stop, or won't, and I can feel the others getting restless. I tell them please tear a page out of their notebooks and, this counts as a quiz now, write a paragraph on 'What does Marlowe learn from Kurtz?' Then I kind of pat Czuba's elbow and he gets up. He's a big guy, one of the weightlifters. I get him out into the hall. He just stands there sobbing. I can't see any blood on him, and I don't know if I should put my arm around him or what. Maybe it's against their code. So I just stand there."

"What was wrong with him?"

"I'm telling you, all right? He keeps going 'Oh fuck, Oh Jesus,' then looks right at me, his eyes are running with tears, and he says, 'That's just how I felt when I blew away my fucking wife.'"

"What?"

"That's exactly what he said."

"But why?"

"Like Kurtz. The horror."

"He said that to you? No!"

"Yes. I had no idea what he was in for. All the office sends me is the enrollment sheet. Now he wants to tell me the whole story. We're standing by the water fountain, he's got my arm and it's like the ancient mariner, there's no way I'm getting free. The others are hunched over their desks trying to write a paragraph, most of them can't put a sentence together yet, and all I can think of is, how in the hell did I end up here? So Czuba tells me that he and his wife split up because he brought his work home with him, he couldn't help it, even when he didn't talk about it, it was there, his attitude, his temper. They were always fighting over it. Then she started seeing this psychologist."

"Because of him probably."

"I guess so. Anyhow, he said that's what did it."

"But she was only trying to keep them together, wasn't she?"

"What? No. Seeing him meaning sleeping with him."

"Not her psychologist."

"A psychologist. They met someplace, at a bar or in church, who knows. He's a man, all right?"

"She wasn't trying to get help?"

"She was fucking him was what she was doing."

"Don't."

"I'm just telling you what Czuba said. 'She's fucking this guy,' he says. 'So, okay, we're split up, what right have I got complaining? Then this Sunday I run into her in the parking lot, at the shopping center.'"

"This was here?"

"Akron. He went to church that morning like always, he's Catholic, and that afternoon, he says, he's supposed to direct traffic at a shopping center, for extra money. I look at him, I don't get it, so that's when he tells me. He's a cop, was. A cop! You see what I mean? He spent nine years on the force and got two commendations. So he sees her getting out of their station wagon, and goes over. He says something, she says something, the next thing you know his service pistol is in his hand and she's down on the blacktop."

"She died?"

"He shot her, sure."

"No!"

"Then, he says, he sat down right beside her, in the parking lot, in his uniform, and waited for the other cops to come run him in."

"Oh my god, the poor woman."

"It drove him crazy, her running around."

"But still."

"Now he's doing twenty to life."

"He'll get out, won't he?"

"Maybe. He's done eight. But they crack up, they kill each other."

"Think of his wife."

"All right, I realize."

"At least he got a chance. What chance does she have anymore?"

"Any longer. You had to see him, the way he was crying."

"But... oh they didn't have children, did they?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't you ask?"

"I just listened. He didn't say. I didn't ask him anything."

"But if they had children, he'd tell you, don't you think, what happened to them and all?"

"I guess so, sure."

"Then I bet they didn't have any."

"All I know is what he told me."

"You think he was telling the truth?"

"Why wouldn't he?"

"Don't they lie?"

"Doesn't everybody? Jesus! Not about something like this."

"Maybe he likes getting attention, wants you to feel sorry for him."

"You don't believe it?"

"I believe he told you, but I just can't..."

"What? Because he's a cop he can't go crazy? Oh sure, like the psychologist, right? He's a doctor, he wouldn't fool around with the wife of a police officer. Sometimes, you know, I really can't believe you."

The overhead fluorescent tubes put purplish shadows under her eyes. "Your eggs are cold," she says.

He puts down the fork. "I'm finished."

"No, you're not. Look."

"I don't want any more."

She gets up, takes his plate to the sink, and runs water.

He says, "Now you're upset, right?"

"No, but I...no."

"If I can't talk to you about these things, then who?"

"It's all right, I said."

"Look, it's not you I'm mad at, I'm not mad, period. It's just the whole thing, I'm worked-up is all."

"I know it must be scary for you there."

"Did I say I was scared? When did I say that? Tell me." He twists about in his chair. Her back is to him and she's drying his dish with the yellow towel. He tells her, "I'm locked in too, you know."

"Do you have to be?"

"That's the way it is."

"But what would you do if there was trouble?"

"I told them, the first class, I said, I don't expect any disciplinary problems here, understand."

"Good."

"They laughed."

She turns to face him. "How do you mean?"

"How what? If you have to explain a joke, you know, then..." He lets out a short, barking laugh, surprising himself. "Once I came

home from school with this history assignment, and I asked my dad, 'were you alive during the great depression?' He's in his chair, like always, half-crooked, and he looks up and says, 'the economic one?' It was a joke, the only one I remember him telling. I didn't get it for years." He shakes his head. "Look, with the class, I was making a joke, that's all. And they laughed, all right? At me maybe, but I think with me. I might as well joke about it. They could break me in two, there's nothing I could do."

"You said there were guards."

"I'm on the second floor." He turns to empty his words onto the table. "The classroom's open up there, and so's the toilet, but the corridor itself is locked. The guard shack or whatever, the room with all the electronic gear, is down on the first floor. It's locked up tight. The guards stay in there, mostly. They stick together too. You don't see any of them going into a room alone." Like me, he thinks, but leaves it unsaid. It could be courage on his part, or only a failure of imagination.

"Well," she says, "at least you won't have to do it much longer."

"Teaching? About thirty more years is all."

"No, I meant at the prison."

"Four and a half weeks."

"That's what I mean."

"That's not long?"

"Is it?"

He shrugs. "Winter term always seems longer."

When he was single he had thought his sadness was due to loneliness and that his bearing it in silence was stoic and admirable. Now, living with her daily good spirits, yet remaining sad, he can't help but resent her for revealing to him his deficiency.

"Why don't you go to bed?" she says.

"No. You go on."

"I thought you were tired."

"Wound up, I said. Wound up is not tired."

"I didn't tell you to do it, you know. "

"Do what?"

"Teach there. It was your idea."

"My idea?"

"Well, it wasn't mine, I know that."

"Paying off bills was my idea, right. Being caged up with killer apes was not my idea, believe me."

"They told you, didn't they, what it would be like."

"Forget it."

"No, I sympathize."

"You do?"

"But remember, you said that's why the other teacher didn't do it, why you got the chance."

"Fine," he says. "Whatever." He scrapes the label from the empty bottle with a thumbnail. "All I was trying to say, when this whole business got started, was that you never know what you might do, maybe you could do something terrible."

"I know, but you're, it's late, and I think really it's the policeman you're talking about."

"No, I could do something terrible."

"If you were in prison, yes, but then you already would have."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"But I'm saying, don't you see?"

"Logic," he says, "takes you only so far."

After a moment she kisses the back of his head. "I'm going up."

"Goodnight."

He sits in the bright, chilly kitchen hearing her weight creak the floorboards over his head. He wants to call her back to say something to make them both feel better, but knows that even his apology would be tainted by resentment. What's done is done. And he can think of nothing to stop him from doing it, despite himself, day in and day out.

When she was helping out in the department, he'd hear the sudden bubbling up of her laugh, spring-like and musical, and would find some excuse to drop into the main office. She'd be done laughing when he got there, but would give him a smile. He married her, he thinks, because he wanted to be in the room where the laughter was.

After she's stopped moving above him, he turns off the lights and sits looking out the window at the snow-dusted fields under the full moon. In the center of his view there is a flaw in the pane that distorts his vision. He shifts his head, and recognizes the crystal prism she's recently hung there. Days, to her delight, it refracts the sun about the room like a school of rainbow minnows. He cups it briefly in his hand, a cold lump of cut glass. Stepping to the refrigerator, he opens the door, then closes it without taking anything out.

When he goes up he places his stockinged feet near the banister where the stairs don't squeak.

She sleeps with a pillow over her head. The hall light throws his shadow across her legs, so dark that it looks heavy, and it surprises him that she doesn't wake up to see what's in the room with her.