

## Reading

I WAS SITTING in a train station, in a city, somewhere in a country. It was midday, and across the large, half-empty room a woman sat, reading a book. Her legs were crossed, the book's spine rested on her knee, and she was gazing intently into the pages, as if she'd just opened a Christmas gift, a box holding an intricate quilt, and she was discovering what was there.

But it was August. We were in a southern city I knew, and as I watched her reading I imagined colorful clothing, limp and humid figures, moving like reading threads sewn into the various fabrics of the city's streets, its outskirts beyond the air-conditioned room. I thought she might be reading something about that, her mind in some story in the tropics, while she rested in cool comfort somewhere else. She lifted the book up from her knee then, and I saw her smile.

When I travel alone like this and sit in train stations, I feel that I'm nowhere. I've left my life, the encumbrances of its textures and responsibilities, the matrix of threads that make it real, and I've not yet arrived at some other place, with its own textures, the place I call my final destination, so I can return home from it. I might say I was in that city once, just passing through, but it was only a train station, much like all the others, and though I might make a list of places, brag about a broad experience of travel, it's only a story. To travel is *like* a story, like reading one in a

book: being some place where you aren't and yet being someplace.

Sitting in a train station, I often feel I could get right up and walk out of my life. I could cross the half-empty room, throw away my wallet, the labels in my clothing, even my fingerprints. Just walk into the outskirts of this foreign city, to begin again. That's why I often bring a book along when I travel, and sit in train stations and read like that woman. It's a way to go somewhere and stay put at the same time.

I can't tell the woman's age or guess at her occupation, her "story", at this distance, but I can see her attentiveness in her posture. She's turned many pages while I've been watching, and I remember standing in front of a classroom, reading from a book, when I was a child. I can almost hear the teacher calling out softly from her seat, "posture, posture". Then I'd lost my place, something about Florida, houses and humidity.

I have an aunt who is in her nineties but still travels. When she goes someplace, then comes back, she measures where she's been by shopping centers. Shopping centers are like train stations in cities, but she doesn't see it that way. This *good* place has a fine one, but *that* place has nothing to speak of and is therefore suspect. She travels because most of her friends have moved to Florida; they live in condos down there.

She means condominiums, of course, and she knows she's made that mistake. She's said it often in my talks with her, a twinkle in her eye, and now the mistake has become part of her story. Hearing her is like reading a book, over and over, and in the meantime anticipating reading it, because it is so good. I mean, the image of that. Her friends live very close to shopping centers, and I can

see their postures as they crawl into the pink tubes of their thin rubber homes. She means condominiums, like a book says one thing but means another when you read it.

A young couple with two small children sit close to the woman now, but she doesn't seem to notice them. She's reading, and so are the children – thin, colorful books, with pictures on their covers, as if the covers were the outskirts, and opening the book was to enter into the city itself. The parents have gathered suitcases and overflowing paper bags around them. There's food, toys, pieces of clothing, all forming a low wall, containing them in a kind of house, at their wooden bench. This is a traveling family that has brought its life along, I think, a life that holds even the stories in the children's books, fantastic ones I'm sure: talking animals, purple trees, small homes as pink, pliable and safe as those rubber ones, near shopping centers my aunt visits, in Florida. Even the parents are reading now, leaning back on the bench, as if they sat in a soft couch, that one in their living room at home.

Not once has the woman reading the book looked up from it and seen me watching her. My own book rests on the wooden bench beside me, and I realize I have two choices. I can take up the book and go somewhere in it, or I can get up and do that other thing, forget my train and my life, head for the door, just walk out into the humid and foreign city and become someone else. Those are the choices, and thinking about them, my head down now in concentration, is like reading about them. They both become real.

I look up again and discover I'm in a shopping center. It's something I'd not noticed, that row of colorful stores behind the woman and the family, people my aunt's age moving in and out of them. Some are looking in at the windows; others

head for the door to the limpid city, thinking of home, images of those houses on the outskirts, soft pink, and yet safe in their pliable minds. None of this has been true.

There was no woman reading, no family, no dank and foreign city. That train station was a local stop and I was riding the express, reading a book, never looking up, even as we slid through the city's dark tunnel and the lights in the coach came on, a kindness of the railroad, so that no one would lose their place. Only my aunt was real, and though I have never been to Florida, I can see the homes her friends now live in quite clearly.

Still, the woman looked up finally from her book, closing it, and where the man had sat there was another man, or a woman, or parts of a newspaper hanging from the edge of the wooden bench, discarded, to be picked up by someone else who needed some reading. In her story, the man might have risen and gone out into the humid, foreign city; he might have discovered he'd left home prematurely and walked across the station to the telephone; he might have crossed to where she was, sat down beside her and introduced himself. I don't know.

I was on the train, reading about her, a book about a woman who had never been to Florida but had plenty of imagination, a constantly expanding mind, and who read a lot. Some thought her lonely, bookish, disconnected from real life, but it was clear in the book that it was *they* who were that. They were not readers, and because of that had no powerful focus through which to see her clearly.

But a woman can be a man, men can be children, and the old who read in soft, safe houses in Florida can be all of them. It has something to do with imagination, with food, and with memory.

The train came out of the dark tunnel and into the sun-

light just as I finished the last page. I put the book down on the seat beside me and looked out the window. Trees were passing, then a river. Then we came to the first houses at the outskirts of a new city. They were row houses, condominiums, and because of the sun's slant I could see into their pink windows clearly as the train slowed, approaching the station.

People sat in chairs, on couches, reclined on beds, all reading books. And I saw a woman standing at a window. She was looking out and watching the train I was in pass by. She'd been reading, but now held the book like a fragile and prized possession, open, as one might hold up a quilt for warmth near a draughty window, against her chest.

Still, it was August, I was headed for home, and even as I saw her she became an image in the mind only, though just as vivid that way, after she was out of sight.

I was smiling. The train eased into the station, but it was not yet mine, and I could stay put. So I reached down for the book I'd just finished reading, lifted it up into the light, and began again.

## The Sister and the Cistern

DEVOUT PRINCESS OF the May, you might say, but there were a few problems. She was flirty. And she had a way with pleats and draping. She even washed her starched white wimple, that stiff half-moon wafer covering most of her chest, in some substance that gave it a third dimension. Still white, but if you lowered your gaze from her beautiful face, her crisp white bandeau dressing her forehead like a bandana worn by a sorcerer, you would find you were seeing deep into some unearthly presence of dark clouds and rain. And at night you might even see stars.

Sister Mary Grace, just two years out of the convent in Guadalajara, Mexico, now teaching mathematics to high school seniors at Saint Lois Catholic School. Saint Lois was not really a saint, but the grandmother of one, Timothy, whom she had instructed. Grandmothers are always sainted. This sister was only a few years older than her students.

And she was excited by them, the energy of the young, and yes, their sexuality. She was feeling it, this late adolescent randiness, and she recognized she'd never had an adolescence of her own. When she came to America, she noticed that many nuns were out of habit and were like ordinary women, and this frightened her, so she quickly decided that she would always wear her habit, slightly refined, of course, and she did.

In the convent dormitory, the nuns were goofing around, playing grabass, farting to excessive laughter, generally on

the loose. It had been May Day at the school, little teaching, but a good deal of policing, keeping the kids corralled and out of trouble. An exhausting eight hours, and now habits had been shed, and the six sisters were romping around in their underwear. The seventh sister, Mary Grace, was not among them, but was ensconced in her small room, a cell really, preparing for her appointment. The first and the last time, she thought. Just this once. I've never ...

First her cotton underwear and black stockings, then her long black dress, which she had hemmed so that her shoes, a little higher of heel than the usual, would show. Her woven belt, the rosary, then a good deal of time spent with her coif, her bandeau, and the black veil flowing down her back. Then her wimple, of course, freshly washed and treated, so that this time ghostly figures, very much like tortured saints, danced in the gloom. What clichés, she thought. Just this once. Just this once. She wasn't looking for love.

Mary Grace grew up on a farm far from the city of Merida, on the Yucatan peninsula, and so she was comfortable in the town where she taught, since it was surrounded by farmland, woods and low hills. On her father's farm she'd worked the crops and was home-schooled. The work was hard, but her father was a kind man, and she had plenty of time for her carving, those small sainted figures she had fashioned even as a small child, learning the technique from a Mayan worker her father employed to help with the harvesting.

And she was very good at it, producing a series of saints that dressed the shelves and mantle in their farmhouse. These would be given as gifts to those her father did business with. They were always delighted with the craftsmanship. And she had continued with this endeavor when older, carving the figures of people she knew, nuns at the convent where she had taken her vows, prizes given to

those American students who excelled on various tests and oral presentations, here, in her new life.

Now she slipped the small carved figure into the pocket of her dress. She was ready. It was seven o'clock, and not quite dark, and she left the convent dorm to the frolicking nuns and set out for her rendezvous.

Father John the Baptist Esposito, known throughout the parish as Johnny E, had become a raconteur, though he had started out as a saintly presence, taking on the task of teaching disabled children when all others shunned them. He'd been sweet and dignified, and everyone, including the young parish mothers, loved him.

He was forty-two years old now. He told entertaining stories and jokes, drank a good deal, gambled at the Seminole casino a few towns away, and had an eye for the ladies, at times, it was rumored, taking their love for him quite literally and acting upon it. Somewhere, deep in his head or his loins or his conscience, he may have regretted what he had become, shameful, hardly a real priest at all, but he was unaware of this and felt it was right to enjoy the life he had chosen for himself. He seldom prayed any more, and when he said Mass the words came only from memory, not devotion. He had no place in his heart for Jesus.

And so it was that he found pleasure in the face and figure of Sister Mary Grace, the nun he saw often in his perambulations at the high school. He taught Bible studies there, a required course that the students had little taste for and neither did he. He knew his Bible, but he was no longer interested in it, and his teaching was little more than rote.

They spoke a few times, the good sister querying him



about Biblical matters and he taking in her beauty. And after a while their talk moved on to secular subjects, movies she had never seen, the pleasure of alcoholic beverages, current fashions in women's clothing. There was a beautiful place in the hills outside of town, he told her, smiling a little lasciviously. She might enjoy it. They could meet there. He would bring something to eat and some wine.

And so it was that Sister Mary Grace headed into the hills on a well-worn path as daylight faded and the stars came out. There was no breeze, and a bright sliver of moon hung in the clear sky.

And Johnny E was waiting there, sitting on the smooth concrete edge of the large cistern that provided rainwater for irrigation of the fields below. The cistern was full, the deep dark water rising almost to the lip of the low rectangular wall that contained it.

She sat down beside him, her black dress rising a little to reveal her slim, perfectly formed calves. He touched her fingers as he handed her a glass of wine, which she sipped with little pleasure, though she enjoyed the few cold shrimps he presented on a glass plate over a thin bed of Boston lettuce. There were nuts too, just a few, and pita bread. They ate and talked, and he looked into her dark, inviting eyes, and just as he was preparing to move closer, to possibly kiss her to get things started, she reached into her dress pocket and presented him with the small carved figure she had fashioned.

It was him, the man he once was, as seen through her innocent eyes, this beautiful nun. And it accused him. The figure's head was lowered in profound prayer, and a rosary fell from its delicately carved fingers. My fingers, he thought, my losses.

He knew he couldn't go back, couldn't be the real priest he had once been. Though he still wore the clothing of his order, it was only a disguise. He was a charlatan.

But what to do? She was here now, smiling at him. Beckoning him? No, he thought, for in her eyes he saw her purity of spirit, her saintliness. She had been tempted, perhaps by the devil, but she had found energy and peace in her virginity. Now it was locked up tight, beyond any soiling or violation. Yet he knew he wanted her, and this want was yet another reminder of what he had become. She was the object of his evil desires, and he knew he must rid himself of her.

He pulled her toward him, kissed her stony lips, then pushed her back over and into the cistern.

There had been no lakes or ponds or other watering holes on the Yucatan farm where she had been raised, and she had never learned to swim, but for a while she managed to stay afloat, to look up at him in this baptism, her eyes aglow in her faith and the saintly figures on her wimple accusing him. Then she slipped below the surface, followed by her veil. It floated on the water for a long moment, then went under with her.

He sat there for a while, considering what he'd done. Then he stood up, danced in place for a moment, settling his genitals, and headed down the path with the remaining foodstuffs. The miniature rendering floated on the surface above the dear sister.

She had been his nemesis, his shocking reminder of what had been and was now gone. She had been no saint. He was sure of that. But she had been a very good girl.

## Burial of the Red Squirrel

HE HAD BEEN having what he perceived as problems with the red squirrels, who were known to eat into houses, there to create havoc in a man's walls and belongings. They seemed intelligent, but then all animals seem intelligent to those who come into close proximity to them and watch them, even bees, though they are not, properly speaking, animals. The goldfinch pecks delicately at the thistle feeder, an eye out for the stray cat that might leap up to catch and devour it; the lowly vole, only a baby, he saw nibbling at the cheese carefully in the set trap; obviously, the coyote. There were a few too many coyotes around these days, seldom seen, though he had seen one in the early morning, at first light, staring back at him knowingly in the side yard.

He was a scientist of some sort, a retired academic, very specialized, and only a few others understood his work, and these he saw as competitors and avoided them. Thus, he was alone when it came to talk about what for him were serious things. Recently his wife had passed away, or died as he chose to think of it, and he had mourned her, though he didn't think he missed her. She had become little more than an irritant to him late in their marriage. She was buried just a short distance away, near this summer home she had loved but had spent little time in until she fell ill, being on the road a good deal. He seldom visited her grave with flowers, as was the custom. "It was as if she just closed

up shop," he'd often said, aware that he couldn't really know that, having retreated into his study for work as she wasted away, tended by the various nurses he had provided for her. Actually, her death had occurred two years ago, in the city, and had come to mean little to the man these days. It might just as well have been ten years or more.

His study door faced a small wooded glade, pine trees the lower branches of which were denuded of needles because the thick canopy above prevented enough light for sustenance. The study itself was its own building, a few yards from the main house and facing away from it, away from his wife when she was among the living, when many phoned but few came to visit, though some did from time to time. His daughter did, but no one visited his study, until the squirrels came.

The squirrels looked good. They were small and compact, a dusky red; their fluffy tails stood tall and vibrated when they paused on a limb for reconnoitering or the dismantling of some nut or cone gripped between forefeet or in tough little jaws. They were, he supposed, cute in their boldness, pausing to look hard at him as he strolled out for work in the mornings, but he thought they had evil intentions. And they made a racket, often interrupting his concentration, which had often been interrupted enough recently by any number of random thoughts and sounds, he supposed because of the complex difficulty of his current project. He'd hear the squirrels scampering across the study roof, and he had seen them leap athletically from the peak to the small balcony outside the second-floor bedroom of the main house, the bedroom in which he had found his wife dead, almost two years ago now, though it seemed much longer and in another kind of life entirely.

There was no evidence of their presence inside the

house, at least he didn't think there was. But animals *had* gotten in, mouse droppings at the backs of drawers and in cabinets, and a few desiccated bodies in traps in the pantry when the house was opened for the season, before the cleaners came through. And he had found a ragged edge of clapboard near the rear door, a chunk gnawed away, teeth-marks, he thought. The house was tight, but it was no fortress, and there were recesses below porches and decks at the stone foundation where he had not checked and felt he had no convenient way to do so. He had been handy when his wife was alive, but he had given up on most outdoor work now, leaving it to others. Some were efficient, but none as meticulous and careful as he had been.

The house was called a farm, Gay Farm, his wife had named it well before the term was suggestive, but there was no farming. It was one of a number of places set on land that had once been a farm, long ago, before it was divided up into five-acre parcels, he thought in the 1940s, though it could have been earlier. They'd bought it in the '50s, then had watched as other "estates" had grown up around them, houses with garages made to look like barns, manicured lawns. No academics, but professional men and their families from the city, there only for weekends, which suited him just fine. They'd spent their long summers there for over forty years, and now it was half the year, and in the last two that had grown to be an even longer time. He hardly remembered their winter apartment when he was away from it.

He'd tried the few things others had suggested, a Havahart trap, cayenne pepper, the hottest grade, even a brutal rat trap. He'd placed the Havahart in sight of his study, and a squirrel had indeed entered it, only to carefully lift the nuts from where he'd stuck them down on the trip-

switch with peanut butter. When its mouth was full, it gave him what seemed a cynical grin, then made its exit with the spoils. They had ignored the rat trap completely, and though he'd sneezed and his eyes had watered when he'd mixed the cayenne with bird seed and poured a mound on the flat bed of the feeder, only the birds had gone away, while the squirrels ate copiously to no effect.

So he bought a gun. It was not a real gun, weapons of that kind were not allowed, but a Crosman Air Rifle, a Model 2200A Magnum, not a toy the literature said in its for-use warnings. A can of Beeman Ram Jet silhouette pellets came with it, "shoot safely, be careful" printed in small lettering on the metal cover, .22 caliber. The rear sight had "windage and elevation adjustment screws" and the front one was described as something special, a glowing green tube, minuscule, sighting through which accuracy would be enhanced. Though a teacher of physics, he had never in his life shot a gun, and so he studied the literature carefully, taking account of every warning and schematic. Then he put the weapon aside, unloaded and with the safety on, leaning against the wall near his study door. The days or weeks went by, and he continued with his studies and scribblings, and before he knew it, it was late June and warmer and the few red squirrels in residence had grown into a larger number. He thought there were smaller ones now, possibly young offspring, though they were as loud and raucous as were the adults. And they stared at him and clacked in the same way as he entered his study each morning, and one morning, his work not going well at all, he decided it was time to try to shoot them.

They were out there, scampering along horizontal limbs, pausing at times to work at nuts and cones, their tails vibrating, mouths open when they clicked out those

irritating calls from deep in their narrow throats, and he went to the door and closed it against the screen, then lifted the weapon and loaded a Beeman Ram Jet pellet into the port and shot the bolt. He lowered the forearm and began to pump. Ten pumps maximum the literature said, so he counted six, a muzzle velocity of between four and five hundred feet per second. He had tried to calculate the effectiveness of those numbers, had the figures but no idea of their meaning when it came to accuracy and flesh penetration. And how will I ever hit them, he had thought, they're so small.

He opened the door quietly, then pushed open the screen and stepped out slowly onto the path fronting his study. A squirrel was looking at him, sitting on a limb, suddenly tense, about thirty feet away. It barked out its ratcheting call, a warning to others, or an accusation, he thought, at his presence there. He lifted the rifle, pushed off the safety and sighted through the glowing green tube and fired, surprised that there was little sound and no kick, only a pop when he pulled the trigger.

I've missed, he thought. The squirrel scampered along the limb. But it paused for a moment, then fell like a stone, landing in last year's leaves and matted brush, half hidden by weeds under shadows the limbs cast down. He could see the downy white fur on its chest and belly, like a cat's, he thought. They'd had a few cats over the years. And he could see the rapid pumping, as if a small desperate engine were inside of it. And there was, its heart or lungs. Then the pumping stopped and it lay still. He watched it for a few moments more, then clicked the safety on again and turned and went back into his study, stood the rifle in its place, and closed the door.

He had thought to move it, take it further out into his

property and cast it away, once its body had cooled and stiffened into rigor mortis, not wanting to touch it when it was still warm. Do squirrels go into rigor? He didn't know. But every morning when he came out to his study for work it was still there, possibly a little shrunken. He would sniff for the smell, but there was none, and he left it there. Then on the fourth day, or was it the fifth, it was gone. He looked hard at the spot where it had rested, thinking it might have altered in color in death and be difficult to see. And he looked too at other spots near that one, in case he had mistaken the location. He stepped closer, moving beyond the path and into the wood, but he found nothing. It was gone. Probably some foraging animal, larger than it was, a raccoon or a skunk, even a stealthy coyote, had taken it away for food. Then, after a few days, as one might only finally become aware of the silence of a periodic bell, he noticed an absence of sound and realized that all the squirrels were gone. He stepped out to the study path, stood still and listened. In the past, when they had left the wood temporarily, for an hour or two, he'd been able to hear their chattering at a distance, but there was nothing now. He could hear the soothing warbles of birds, even a faint groan of traffic from the distant highway, but no squirrels. Were they somehow aware of him and the weapon he had used to kill one of their kind? It seemed a very intelligent thing for them to have done, going away like this, since the weapon, only an air rifle, and the killing itself had been almost silent, and he had seen no others watching the event. He went back into his study and tried to work again, but it wasn't a very good day for that, so he retreated into the house to catch the first evening news program, but that wasn't there either. It was only two in the afternoon. Perhaps the clock in his study had gone haywire.



It was mid-July. Summer was in full bloom, and he thought he was probably finished with a piece of research and had written it up, so he decided to take a good long morning walk around his property, to see how things were going out there, something he remembered he had not done for a long time. Years ago, he had cut various paths through the acreage, a thing his wife had wished for, but that he had put off, not intentionally, until she was too infirm to make use of them. Now they were grown over, almost invisible, and even when he walked to where he remembered them being, he found nothing. But what he did find, near sunset, near the base of a locust tree among other trees, in a shallow valley, as if built there by fairies, was a grave. And he thought immediately, standing over it, that it must be the squirrel's grave.

It lay in shadow at his feet, but it seemed clear, even seen through shadow, that it had been tended. Acorns and green pinecones edged the small oval, and dull purple buds had been sprinkled across the mound. He thought they were pale asters, forgetting that they bloomed only in the fall. My wife's grave should look so good, he thought, there in the old cemetery nearby, that he had not visited for a long time, though he was unable to feel guilt about this neglect. Jenevive had been her name, an architect until she fell ill. Could it have been a neighbor who found the desiccated corpse and buried it here? But people, unlike animals, did not trespass in this enclave of small gentleman farms that were farms no longer. Maybe it had been a child, the burial of a cat or small dog. He remembered the way his daughter had buried a kitten when she was that age, how awkwardly sincere she had been. He had fashioned a small white cross to stand at the grave head. But here the burial and tending had been meticulous. There

was no cross, but then squirrels are not Christians, he thought. He wanted to dig the grave up, to be sure, but the sun was failing and it was time to get back.

The next day after a troubling morning of fruitless work, he went back again, but had trouble finding the spot, and it was mid-afternoon before he located the stand of locust. The grave was the same, though the pale purple buds had opened into flowers then quickly wilted. He lingered there for an hour, looking down at the small graceful mound, and before he left found a large dead branch and worked it into the ground beyond the miniature forest's brink as a guidepost. It isn't even a grave, he thought, as he ambled back through the acreage toward his study, so deep in musing that he lost his way and only came to himself again when he was standing at the blank rear wall of a neighbor's garage, one of those designed to look like a small barn.

Sitting in his study two days later, after two hours of work and few notes, he thought of his long life and of the squirrel's shorter one that by another species' measure might well have been as long as his. Gathering cones and nuts and information, building small houses in the trees as he had built theories and composed papers. His wife too had built houses, among other things. How similar our lives might have been, he thought, even had I not killed him; or maybe it was a her I shot down, he suddenly realized. And the next afternoon he took a folding director's chair, a gathering of flowers and a tall drink of bourbon in his hand, and headed out again, finding that his feet had made a path over time and that, though its way was circuitous, it led him back to the grave without detour.

After brushing away the fallen twigs and leaves, he cut the green stems with his pocketknife then arranged the flower blossoms, of various colors, around the small

mounded oval. Then he went into the trees and gathered white and gray stones and used them to form an enigmatic figure, possibly a physics formula, on the mound itself, and after he had pulled a few weeds that seemed too close and was satisfied with his work, he sat down in the chair just a few feet away and sipped at his drink and gave thought to the squirrel's gone life again, and to his own. The thoughts were random, many forgotten soon after their mental articulation, though a few drifted away then returned again. What is it I want here? Is life so precious? If I don't remember this squirrel, who will? That pumping of its chest or lungs, then stillness. Am I a participant or only a witness? Did the squirrels really do this?

And over and over again he went back, taking seeds, a trowel, his lunch, a notebook, at one point a sleeping bag, his liquor, even the Crosman air rifle, only to laugh when he discovered it leaning against a tree. It's of no use here at all, he thought. He brought a few miniature pots containing single flowers he'd planted in them back at the house, and a garden rake to clear the area more thoroughly. He left the director's chair among the trees, rather than lugging it back and forth. And he dressed the grave with meticulous care each time, having cleared a space around it so that weeds would not penetrate its inviolate space. It became sacred to him, though he didn't think he was religious in any way. And it became quite beautiful too, like an elegant formula beckoning him to that study desk where he was spending little time these days. He slept on the ground overnight, then sipped from the thermos of warm coffee he had prepared before coming. At dawn, the grave with its stone and flower dressing glimmered in the early light, and he imagined himself kneeling in the dew, praying softly for the one he had so recently killed.

The days went by, and one day his daughter called and left a message, and the following evening, listening to the message again and hearing her voice, he realized how much he missed her, so he called back and spoke to her.

“Why don’t you come out. It’s getting on to August and the flowers are in bloom.”

“It’s September,” she said. “Where have you been?”

He thought for a moment. “In my study, of course, working.”

She drove out from the city the next day, arriving in time for lunch, which she had organized and packed up before leaving. A seafood salad and fresh lettuce and avocado, and a baguette. He seemed quite hungry, eating every morsel quickly. Then she made coffee and they sat at the kitchen table, sipping from their stoneware mugs.

“Why don’t you come back home?” she said at last. “It’s getting late. Soon it’s going to get cold, and besides that you’re all alone out here.”

“Home,” he said.

“And the children miss you. So do I.”

“Come with me,” he said, knowing vaguely that the argument he had in mind was no good argument at all, then rose from his seat and headed for the coat rack near the kitchen door. “I want to show you something.”

They passed his study and headed down under the bare pine limbs. There was a slight chill in the air, but the wind shifted and the breeze was warm. She walked at his elbow, glancing up at him from time to time, her light coat open, and when they came in sight of the locust stand, he quickened his pace and she had to quicken hers to keep up. Where is he taking me? she thought.

“Over here,” he said, when they had entered in among the trees.

“What is it?” she said. He was looking down near the base of a locust tree, but there was nothing there, only fallen leaves and twigs and a few white and gray stones scattered on the ground. He looked around for his chair, but that too was gone. Who? he thought. They must have taken it away. Surely it’s the right tree. He bent over slightly, looking for any evidence that he might find, but there seemed to be none, nothing but leaves and stones and a few flower petals blown here on the wind. He knew enough to be slightly embarrassed.

“It’s a beautiful spot, isn’t it? I wanted you to see it.”

They lingered for a while, for as long as seemed appropriate, just standing there and looking around and listening to the warm breeze shushing in the branches and leaves above. Then she took his arm and tugged lightly at his sleeve and they set off back to the house.

The next morning, after a fitful night, she suggested that they go to the cemetery to see her mother’s grave, and after breakfast she got his old car out of the garage.

They drove there in silence, parked in the small lot, and then set out walking among the gravestones. It was an old cemetery, their plot off in a far corner, one of the last to be sold. Much like the last reservation available at some venerable hotel, he had often mused. They stepped among trees, then came to the brief clearing and paused.

“Why, it looks just beautiful,” his daughter said.

Weeds had been pulled out at the rectangular perimeter, and in their place sat low pots spilling with petunias, vinca, and portulaca. At the head of the grave itself, which had been raked of leaves and twigs, mounds of colorful stones, nature’s pinecones and picture-book acorns were placed carefully below the broad granite marker. And to the side of her mother’s grave, at the foot of which they

now stood, the second reserved spot had been weeded and raked too, prepared with a similar care.

“Jenevive,” her father said softly.

“Yes?” said his daughter, standing close at his side.

He thought for a moment before speaking.

“Your mother, of course,” he whispered. “Beatrice, my wife.”

“She’s gone,” his daughter said.

But he was not listening. He was looking around, searching for something. A chair, he thought. Then he saw it. It had blown away and now rested on its side against the rough stone wall at the cemetery’s perimeter, just a few yards from where they stood, from which vantage he was now vacantly gazing. This place is prepared for another, he mused, after a time. And that time came in only a few weeks that could just as well have been years. Then he too was gone, without noting his own gradual passage.

They held a graveside service, his daughter, her husband, and their four children. At the side of the stone and her mother’s name, fresh lettering had been cut, his name, and below it the words Scientist and Teacher, Loving Husband and Father. Under her name was only the one word, Architect, which was quite enough, for she had been a woman of some renown.

When Jenevive and her family returned to the house and stood forlornly in the kitchen where he had made his morning coffee, they heard a cacophonous chatter in the distance beyond her father’s study but didn’t know what it was. “Just mockingbirds,” her husband said, but it was not that. It was the red squirrels, who had returned again now that he was gone.

They were scampering along the bare limbs and branches, chattering, ripping at cones and nuts, making

those sharp warbling sounds deep in their narrow throats. And they were calling out to each other in their foreign language. It was as if at times they were laughing at his name, among the last to know of it. But that, of course, is ridiculous. They were only squirrels, after all.