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*Wade's Wait*

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*Cover Photograph:* "Congress Street, Portland, Maine, 1985," by Abraham Alan Schechter.

# WADE'S WAIT

by Jonathan Aldrich

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## A Note to the Reader

Chuck Wade is a private detective. He appeared some years ago as the shadowy, unnamed speaker of a poem called "Fading Blues," introducing himself this way:

Warm night alone,  
I stare  
again at my dusty  
two-bulb chandelier,

a Holmes without his  
Watson. Just burned in  
on the wind's roulette  
below my screen

a sidekick June bug is  
playing her cards right,  
and her singing leg  
tonight

floats over my thin  
scholarship and library  
to admit herself  
like me, a solitary.

I too am essentially  
mobile and cannot help  
answering almost any  
appeal for help,

and appreciate her  
stopping to send up  
a low-down song from her crucible  
and carry me to sleep...\*

Although I'd meant to leave him in that single poem (which went on for a few pages), I soon found that his character, along with the poetry that defined him, lingered and grew in my mind until I could not let him go. This collection picks Wade up when he is 31, just back from European assignments, and better off than he used to be.

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LUSTINGS

Time: the late forties



## LUSTINGS

It was mid spring. Nothing much had happened in the farm town of Mackson, Wisconsin, all winter. Almost everything went on too long, they agreed, including winter. Beyond a brief flurry of excitement over the burning of the lumberyard in August, winter allowed its quota of petty smalltown gossip and intrigues to keep things tolerable--a few deaths by old age, some unwanted pregnancies, the usual knee-deep snowfalls and drifts and wind; so many long gray days. Then comes a thaw. A warm wind. Suddenly there comes a charitable sky at night as if, blown back, the season remembers you after all, and earth is welcoming. On one spring night, past midnight, a figure of medium height moved along Main Street in a tan overcoat, lapel turned up, face hidden by a visored cap, passing unnoticed, carrying a paper bag. The sky, part overcast, carried small clouds adrift, moon showing sporadically. At one point a little dog scrambled out from his hiding place under a store front and scurried to the feet of the figure, whose steady pace didn't acknowledge him. The dog, deflated, stood looking after, and then, trotting back, nosed under the store. The walker headed down a dirt sideroad. At the end of the road was a wide field. Unused, it had long grass, but still winter's grass. It was like an ocean with dark waves. Directly the person struck across it. At the far edge of it another road came down from woods to end in a clearing before trees, a stand of empty buildings: an old farmhouse, its northern roof caved in, and several scattered sheds, an outhouse, a barn without doors, where the person stopped and stood, appearing to listen--much as the little dog had done--before taking a bottle from the paper bag, and poured--exactly, with a languid design--liquid along the base and window sills and front wall of the farmhouse; and stepped back.

Then a match came arcing through the air. It caught. Like a burst of water the flame sprang to the sideboards and up. Shoots of brightness took the foreground. Suddenly the farmhouse was all heat and crackle, a watery music, like little cups of fire falling into themselves, that have always sought death and must drop into it; and the flames lit up the face, too, of this gazer who had leapt behind a bush and was crouching, her eyes slightly dilated. She had high cheekbones, a small chin, a slanting forehead, intent and somewhat angular features. She was lean, rather than really pretty. She hardly moved. The light from the farmhouse illuminated the road behind it, old posts running uphill. A small attic window filled with yellow, the roof taking. Something else inside cracked heavily, fell; branches overhead were singed, sparked, as she crouched at the bushes, breathing more and more quickly. Her body shivered--then relaxed. She removed her gloves. Pulling the coat around her, she slowly took the same path through the grass, pausing midway to inspect the conflagration, then turned, continued across the field. The animals watched her.

It took Wade a few moments to know where he was again, the snug room, a single window half-open. His dream drifted. It was night outside, with lights spinning along his ceiling, a red, a blue flashing, and a wail of sirens. He leapt to the window in time, of course, to miss everything. The street was empty, though an unnatural glow softened the sky off left, above the uneven rooftops and skyline.

Wade had rolled into Mackson that morning--or rather been towed in, his faithless Condatti offering another lesson against bringing obscure European models back from the Continent. Today it broke down again, eight miles outside Mackson, and the mechanics,

all ceremoniously sympathetic, couldn't hope to diagnose it before Monday. But these mishaps might be telling him something, that maybe he ought to slow down? he was pushing himself and the car too hard?

*Maybe I ought to slow down,*

he wrote in his journal, pulled up at the table's oversized lamp--once awake he needed to tire himself out before falling asleep again, his mind was that active (he liked to think). But he had slowed down.

*I came swinging off  
the 4-lane this morning to see  
some farm areas, only not this much.  
All kinds of potholes--winter  
had been rough on these roads,  
or else the tar was poured cold,  
not hot. But a fine time, being  
a day ahead of myself. Spring  
made everything smell fresh,  
I was spinning along listening  
to Mozart (early, but excellent)  
with my elbow out the window,  
the wind blowing over my elbow,  
tanning it, let's say, when this funny  
noise started up in the motor  
like a pebble jumping around,  
then a blue dashlight went on, one  
of those international signals  
you need your manual for.*

Everything caught up, didn't it? Old thoughts, memories, things you bought that shouldn't be uprooted, like this car, but always, each year, this easy déjà-vu quality of spring. It warmed you, blending into the night, encouraging dreams. What was that dream he'd been having? His first home: afternoon sunlight slanted on a long clear lawn. He was a boy now, barefooted, dashing through the sprinkler. Some women moved on the lawn to an unfamiliar music.

*I felt  
very stupid standing at the side  
of the road with my beauty,*



but finally a pick-up jounced by  
and I hitched in--a retired farmer,  
a wiry and talkative old boy. Been born  
in Mackson, raised in Mackson,  
worked all his life and retired  
in Mackson since he liked the place.  
His pick-up smelled of corn somehow.  
He dropped me at a garage, the best  
in town he said. With three  
mechanics, except weekends naturally,  
given my luck. A rather  
attractive blonde on the books.  
Overall, an easy-going lot,  
nobody there understood my car's  
trouble, or seemed very eager to.  
Tonight--well, I took a few beers  
downstairs and simply watched a  
bargirl squirting Pabst on draft  
into mugs, how first she'd squirt  
a long sideways one, letting the head  
rise, then a quick follow-up just  
to the top with no foam spill.  
Watching her was more instructive  
than drinking them down.

Given his headache, too, he'd scribbled enough for the time,  
and dull stuff at that.  
He returned to bed, read part of a thriller, and lay there.  
It was still night.  
He'd doublechecked the horizon off left, the same as  
before or brighter,  
and obviously a problem for somebody, but Wade was no  
accident or  
catastrophe chaser, he rarely cared about such things  
unless someone died.

...by grass, darkness,  
streetlights, reaching the upper door she'd left  
unlocked. Set back attaching to the house,  
a flight of wooden steps ran up to it,  
a platform at the top, where she waited  
gazing a few moments at the far glow;  
then pushed the door open. A thin hallway  
of creaky boards required quietness.  
From a windowseat near the hall closet  
one could see a treed backyard area

mostly in shadow. She looked down,  
not as if she feared somebody was there,  
but more as if she needed to. She put  
her hat and coat away, catching a few  
hangers before they rattled, as the door  
to the bathroom opened, and her father,  
stooped over slightly, his thin hair ruffled:

"Anna--what's the matter? What's going on?"

Each was clearly startled by the other.  
She stood there in dayclothes, startled, wearing  
a summer cotton dress and blue sweater.  
Hatless, she appeared smaller than before.

"I--well--I was about to take a walk,  
I can't sleep. I thought maybe some air, or..."

"But you're all right? Everything's all right?"

"I'm fine, just wakeful. I think I'll just go  
back to bed and read something for awhile."

And opened the door to her bedroom: here  
everything in it looked suspended  
by a gray light, cool, even the bookcase,  
various books tilted or piled sideways,  
magazines spilling from the bottom shelf.  
Before a full-length mirror, she took off  
her clothes and laid them over the chairback,  
then slid her pillow off the bed and lay  
down naked on the bed, on her stomach,  
resting one hand at the small of her back,  
the other hung from the bedside, her eyes  
open a short time before she closed them.

Wade wandered near the ashes, humming. Some had blown  
down or drifted  
loosely onto the trees, branches with spring leaves.  
Well, the firehouse bunch  
left a soggy mess of things. But had stopped a fire  
that, with a little wind  
or inattention, might have taken the woods and spread  
townward.  
Perhaps the small crowd felt this, and it lent a light  
tension he felt in the air.  
An odd place for a fire--of course, there was always a  
reason for everything.

A few townspeople eyed him, in fact, as the sporty stranger among them; suspicion might even fall his way. "They'll have a hard time proving anything," he reflected, his mind jumping, as usual, some pointless steps ahead.

At an edge of the Sunday gathering stood the old gentleman who'd brought him into town yesterday and given him the bum steer on garages. Too late to duck him. Looking chatty and eager, he was already approaching Wade, who seemed to attract such people, rather than the quieter ones he preferred.

So Wade got the story. This whole area had been abandoned for years, ever since the surviving son moved into town--that short fellow over there beside the investigator picking through debris. Quite a scattering of fires in the last year, this was no accident either. Useless property, really. You'd have needed a new homestead anyhow, and town water. The expense. And what would you do with it, in this spot? Wade shifted feet. He'd noticed a fuzzy blueness, possibly wood violet, the state flower, running below the untouched eastern trees, some fantasy was shaping itself in his head: the birds, the open setting, the dry woods, engaging in their quaint way, he could see a simple half-modern structure aimed to the view, nicely detached from town. Though he wanted to get away. A rasping caught in the man's throat as he talked, the way a silencer sounds like a penny hitting water at a certain angle.

*...and it was hard getting away,*

he wrote, after a change of socks, having no other shoes. A wet glove lay on the table before him. He enjoyed doing this journal for reasons he'd never quite settled, this casual running bridge between himself and the world.

*I walked back, a nice shortcut  
through the field, but unwise maybe,  
with its grass very long and dewy.  
Though I found a half-evident path*

*bending the right way. Actually  
I enjoyed the wet grass against my  
legs, the loose feel of it, the air,  
birds singing, like the old days  
when my father and I went birding  
together in summers. I miss him,  
I miss them both. About halfway  
I found a workglove lying to the left,  
not very deep in the grass, resting.  
It's a fairly new one, or at least  
not dirty, with a faint earth smell,  
but also the smell of gasoline.  
Which I note down reluctantly,  
since this trip, after all, was meant  
to be different, was meant to be  
my vacation.*

Anna came down early that Sunday  
and opened the front door of the drugstore  
and gathered up the bundled newspapers  
and putting them on the table cut strings  
with her knife and set eleven copies  
below the counter for her regular  
customers. Already it was a bright  
morning. She had eaten breakfast quickly  
and dressed before her father and, downstairs,  
uncovered the canary who began  
to primp, jump, sing a little, as ever.  
She sat on a stool behind the counter  
leaning on one elbow, flicking pages  
of Photoplay backward through the gossip  
section. The sunlight fell on her knuckles.

Finished and wanting a smoke, with no cigars in his  
suitcase sideflaps,  
Wade wandered up Main Street. Stratus clouds  
lay over the trees; it would be raining before  
nightfall.  
He had returned from Europe too soon. He had left  
behind  
the music of Europe. His best cases, the answers to  
everything. And those winding

roads through mountains, antique hillsides, arches,  
the geometry of  
pools in Oslo reflecting big purple trees, all Europe  
catching up  
after the war, like his thought. Like his thought  
the clouds today  
stretched sideways into emptying wisps of imaginings,  
throwbacks.  
Well, he'd had to come home sometime. Throw of the dice.  
His own country,  
like an inheritance, rangy and loose and open, wanting  
a new language.  
It was just that, once home, he'd committed himself  
too quickly  
to deRochemont, who needed him clear on the coast by  
midweek, which now looked impossible.

Not that this town required you long, as the painted  
sign said,



And a pleasant town, as small towns go, although on  
Sunday everything  
shut except church. This street he walked along  
tossed up its informal  
and settled midcentury ease that, sentimentally,  
he liked,  
a counterpoint, in these transitional days, to his  
near rogue-life.  
Or maybe it was the lazy energetic sunlight of  
spring that made things  
so full of themselves, happy to be there. Wade's  
shoulders relaxed,  
he was carried down a sidestreet without knowing  
why precisely.  
Here he found a mingling of shops and detached houses  
running downhill  
with no fixed design: baked houses in sunlight, some  
weatherbeaten tiles  
needing repair. Small gardens. A clotheshorse of  
very casual  
underwear lifting in the breeze. And, after these things,  
an open drugstore.

And the shop was laid out modestly in two aisles,  
a wall for the pulps and glossies;  
a canary sang as he opened the door, with its overhead  
tinkle, but stopped abruptly.

A girl sat behind a glassed counter containing cigars  
in closed and open boxes, along with tins of  
imported tobacco. Dark hair  
just reached her shoulders, her mouth was unpainted. Small.  
With a jolt, he remembered  
another woman crossing the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, very  
much like this one, if slightly older,  
it was the end of day, dusk, rather breezy also, the warm  
hour when people are leaving work heading home or back  
to lovers. The Arno  
lay yellow-brown in the late sun. At one end of the bridge  
stood an old beggar  
selling pencils and shoelaces. And from the crowd, as if  
torn loose, or fragmentary, came this pretty dark-haired  
woman in a white blouse with ruffles, shouldering her  
trim purse of brown, gold-buttoned Florentine leather.  
She looked oddly rushed or distracted,  
and their eyes had met, embarrassingly, for an instant  
as she hurried past. He had never forgotten her.

Now in Mackson, dawdling, he continued to read the box  
label he'd asked,  
after several others, to examine, "Not to be sold for  
less than..."

The air in the shop seemed stuffy, muffled. Church bells  
began to ring  
uproad, with a flat sound. He'd also be needing some  
toothpaste soon,  
but only the small-sized toothpaste, he hated those  
big money-saving tubes.

--And how did you happen to get such a varied  
selection, Wade asked the girl.

--My father runs the store, she said, briefly  
but not coldly.

He studied the layout further, hoping for complications.  
The girl, hands at her sides,  
had the instinctive, streetwise look he always recognized  
and liked,  
though he lacked it himself, and he sensed, half-pleasantly,  
her body when she moved,  
her animal breasts under the blouse, slight nub of nipples.  
It had been a long time.

So much running around after answers, finding a reason  
for everything (his passion  
yes, his long need and fascination) but a  
romance  
could drop out of things? Go by? No time to stop,  
to settle. He'd have liked  
to touch her then, gently, touch her with a kindly  
protective touch.  
She, in turn, seemed just to be studying his shoes,  
still wet.

--Now this brand, he said, these little Danish ones,  
are they fairly mild, or wouldn't you know?

--I wouldn't know. Do you want to try one?  
She had grown petulant under her thin smile.

Something, a chance, passed easily, slipped away;  
he looked up.

They weren't what he wanted. He bought the box anyhow.  
Also a Sunday paper  
for the long afternoon, although news was the last thing  
he needed.

It was then as he turned in the doorway, cupping his  
match flame  
against a quick breeze, that he caught her eyes, rather  
opaque, fixing him  
over the flame, through the flame, and, startled  
a second time,  
he paused just a moment too long for the casual stance  
he'd meant to affect.

After she heard her father snoring, she  
slipped down the outer staircase into the  
warm night. The clouds had scattered, sending no  
rain after all. She walked along Main Street.  
As her way bent left, downhill, and sidewalks  
and shops dwindled to houses where the lawns  
or low hedges directly met the road,  
she stopped at the second house. It was dark,  
just an unshaded bulb on, casting a  
diagonal to the attached workshop,  
which she entered. In shadow were some rakes,  
a toy wheelbarrow, maybe a half-cord

of maple, randomly piled newspapers.  
She stood awhile there, hesitating and  
breathing quietly, holding the matches.  
Then left. Passing the town hotel she glanced  
up. There were no signs of activity.

Sometimes he wondered--as he did the next evening, Monday,  
away from Mackson--  
why the timing of things mattered so much. He'd been  
surprised  
before noon, idly checking the garage, to find his Condatti  
finished and ready to go.  
He tried to conceal his disappointment. The idea of spare  
days in Mackson  
had been growing on him, and with no excuse now, morally  
he should yield  
to deRochemont and move on. But the car looked dirty,  
less flashy  
than usual. He asked for a wash, while he headed back  
to pack up.

Then a bigger surprise: on reaching his room, he found it  
tidied  
and the bed made, but the glove, which he'd left on the  
table, had vanished.  
Quickly he searched the room. He wanted that glove.  
He'd been thinking--  
vaguely, as a hunch--of ways to test the girl with it.  
In a way, she haunted him.  
It was silly, but he could enter the shop with the glove  
dangling from his pocket...  
or he could wear it on one hand...or place it on the counter  
while buying toothpaste?  
Well, no matter now. With deRochemont waiting, he could  
hardly justify  
sticking around on a groundless hunch, glove or no glove.  
Throw it in. Forget the glove.

Still, he asked about it downstairs.  
As he heard their answers, watching their confusion,  
he began to feel  
sheepish: an old workglove, why would these people have  
taken it? And the girl,  
even supposing her guilty, how would she get the glove,  
or know it was there,



or want it back, even? Why not throw the other one out?  
Well, no,  
he imagined she had it back. One way or another, he'd been  
quietly taken at his own game.

It didn't make sense. Her face haunted him. Several  
times he debated  
dropping into the store again anyhow, but thought  
better of it.

He found a pleasant, small roadside hotel near evening  
on the scruffy  
edge of somewhere three hundred miles, maybe, west of  
Mackson,  
and after a fine steak at the neighboring diner,  
continued,

*It didn't make sense.  
The manager called his daughter  
over who'd done my room, the same  
bargirl I'd been watching on my  
first night, only a kid by day,  
gumchewing, very ingenuous, hard not  
to believe her. She hadn't seen  
any glove. Soon we were all  
rummaging wherever she'd cleaned,  
into laundry piles, the wife too,  
like a down-and-out vaudeville team.  
I felt pretty sorry I'd asked  
by now, since I kept picturing  
the road ahead, happy to get away,  
as I did finally--the best weather  
for traveling, and the Condatti, I'll say,  
behaved beautifully again, as I'd known  
it would, after its usual  
initial warm-up, the radio playing  
and window down, as we threw  
the first miles behind us, a sweet thing  
on the turns doing fifty...*

But he felt off-stride with a rhythm broken, having  
ended up  
somehow in the wrong place, the wrong town, and he put  
the still-open  
journal aside, temporarily, as something that didn't  
bear thinking  
about just then. His youth was gone.

DINNER WAS SERVED

25 years later

Warm nights alone,  
after some years  
off-work I take up  
my pen again

to begin another  
journal. I have thrown  
everything out, forgotten  
everything I've known.

Nearly forgotten my  
grubbing for justice down  
those flickering unjust days  
to a kind of song,

Forgotten what friends I had.  
Now suddenly I'm called back--  
and although I may enjoy  
seeing Gregory next week

somehow I can't terribly  
care about saving him.  
No, the old days  
play out, and while I'm

quieter,  
easier than before,  
I don't hear  
that song anymore.

The rain was letting up,  
my deSoto rattling down the foggy  
tree-lined drive to a turn-around  
loop at Gregory's house,  
a Colonial seafronter, aloof  
by night, vaguely a mustard yellow.  
A single porch light only  
suggested the lawns. Small roses  
on the rosa rugosa filling the loop-center looked  
like bruises. I heard  
sea behind the house.

He must have been watching for my  
headlights through the rain for hours,  
for suddenly he stood on the dim  
porch, lit by the overhead,  
a frail if dapper figure for sixty, bent  
by his old war injury and holding  
an ivory cane I remembered now  
from his father. The old days  
were coming back. We sat  
in the long kitchen nursing our differences: milk  
for his ulcer, a double nightcap for me.

And reviewed, of course, the blackmail  
business. He explained  
how the people themselves, by unhappy  
coincidence, were sleeping upstairs,  
too late to have warned me on the road.  
Then showed me an ocean  
room: sidetable, lamp, old book  
of anecdotes for the wakeful, which I wasn't,  
a soapdish with folded  
towels on a twin bed, a triangular  
half-bath adjoining.

We shook hands in the doorway, smiling  
excessively I felt,  
his tapering hand worn smooth  
as if by greetings. Clearly  
he needed something,  
and that's where I came in.  
As waves pounded the rocks below,  
my head full of the traveling day,  
I lay in bed thinking  
of old jokes, thinking  
my whole life was a cliché.

iii

Maybe the whiskey  
wearing off,  
maybe a noise  
or the moonlight

woke me. A sharp  
moon dropped a ripple  
to the inlet, anyhow,  
and the open sea and islands.

Lightheaded, I shuffled  
over to look,  
then on to the little bathroom  
to piss. When I came out

somebody stood in the doorway.  
I would have preferred  
nobody. But Harriet had  
that way of appearing.

"I thought I heard someone--hello,"  
she said, lightly  
fingering her negligee.  
"Gregory's asleep, like a top."

Too neat, maybe?  
As she leaned forward to kiss  
me hello, an extended  
shatter and clump

sounded downstairs, then  
a door swung in the hallway,  
more doors, and emerging heads  
of other light sleepers.

What we found in the pantry  
was no picnic--the butler  
crumpled, his dropped tumbler  
trailing a crescent of milk.

His body lay in a mess.  
A dutiful gentleman  
in a state of half undress.  
He had tried to grip the drain  
board, tipping tea cups and saucers  
and assorted silverware going down,  
his flimsy silk pajamas  
ripped half open.  
He kept, nevertheless,  
an air of just carrying on  
as old butlers will, his face  
perfectly dull as if he'd been  
dead for years, the innocuous  
snake slipping its skin.

My visit seemed to be  
getting off on the wrong foot,  
wrong but predictable,  
whenever I go out, some sort  
of trouble follows me.  
You gentle folks  
at home romanticize a gumshoe's  
walk of life  
who think it's kiss and kill.  
No, no--more like a drawer of socks,  
forever unscrambling your darks  
and lights without a wife,  
then all this  
walking on goddam tiptoes.

Of course at breakfast  
it fell on me to check  
these relatives out who'd just  
arrived a day before me,  
who made an extended family  
of five (beyond our host  
and circulating hostess).  
Naturally I did my best  
to like them, one  
does what one can  
even at such a lazy hour  
as they sat working to look  
alert and blameless,  
a string of pearls for sure.

Just to my right  
Jud was the first pearl, hardly  
real or cultured, as unlike  
his older brother Gregory  
as you could have it.  
But he found himself okay--  
muscular, dark, and woolgathering  
with a sort of tacked-on gloom  
as if he'd typically play  
the life of the party or nothing.  
In this case nothing. No use  
to make conversation, no use to stick  
a fingerbowl in front of him  
as Harriet had done, by habit.

Beside him, Jackie his wife  
was a warm little fanfare blonde,  
hospitality was her long suit,  
suggesting in her indiscriminate  
wish to please everyone  
and the surrealistic get-up of her face  
something beyond hospitality:  
like a deep hole, oblivion.  
Once, in my faraway, cut-off  
youth, I could have fancied this,  
but no longer--such dizzy  
blue-chip eyes, like roulette  
balls bouncing from slot  
to slot, a world beyond.



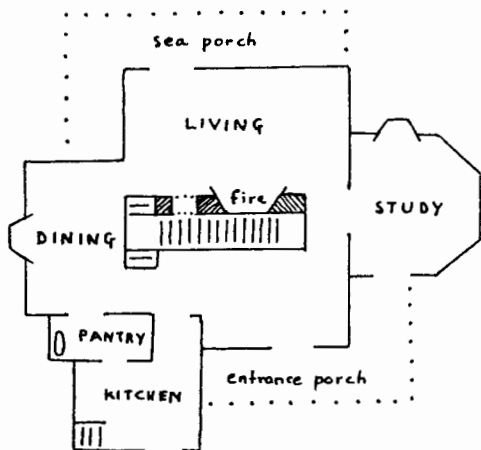
Jumping from Jackie and Jud  
on the family stem--  
Gregory's daughter Pat was almost too  
topheavy, if that can be,  
her sweater made it hard  
to keep your eyes entirely off them.  
She spoke in whispers without any  
point or style,  
she loved her scrambled eggs,  
she found the coffee good,  
her rejoinders, since she tended to  
repeat whatever was said and smile,  
at least added nothing new  
(while I speculated on her legs).

In his cashmere v-neck  
and tennis racquet tie, her Harry was  
like your willowy English dandy  
of another decade, sporty  
and trophy-oriented, always "on top  
of things," though he coughed a lot  
in the air still cool and foggy,  
a morning for catarrhs.  
It was quite a mystery  
how Pat and Harry could ever live  
together, with her endless smiles, his not  
very dry or engaging wit  
darting at intervals to make  
even his silences competitive.

Last there was Cassia, their own  
little daughter retarded  
beyond recall,  
fidgety, in a blue dress,  
beautifully dark and unfocussing,  
who sat on a booster cushion.  
I liked her best. And maybe  
Harriet and Gregory  
(as our new domestics managing  
breakfast) would agree,  
for they gave her special oatmeal  
and, more than to all of us  
other pearls around the table,  
were gently solicitous.

So there it was, a morass  
of relatives, Gregory's  
sulky brother Jud and wife  
Jackie; his daughter Pat  
with husband Harry  
and little daughter Cassia  
all gathered round like a mildly  
strangling necklace,  
though hardly, from where I sat,  
showing sparkle or spunk enough  
for anything awful or great--  
they looked simply inconsiderate,  
this being the cook's week off  
and untimely to visit.

I hadn't slept since Gregory first shuffled us back to bed refusing to phone the police or doctor (let's think about it, he said) and I lay dutifully in bed thinking about it until the light came through. And crept down. I couldn't claim to be the tough guy of my youth, but I felt an old thrill returning, the sheer necessity to see if the layout could betray anything.



Nobody up. And quite an odd family to take catastrophe so lightly. But a pleasantly airy, circular home with nice touches-- a games-closet cut through the stairwall with doors of leaded glass to let you look through into a livingroom. Almost nothing contemporary. A lot of fireplaces. The diningroom suite showed a copper samovar and Canton china, walnut sideboard with rosy cut-glass decanter and snifters on it, all from the days of limitless faith and light when Gregory's father built-- I felt his kind, downreaching hand in this. Oddly, it made me hungry.

But considering events I didn't care to rifle the refrigerator for snacks when I looked in. The new milk carton that Gregory had opened and returned to the top shelf was gone. It lay in the trash, empty. I smelled the lip: the unmistakable smell of James's tumbler, when Harry had stooped to finger-sample the spill and I'd restrained him. Rather sobering. I went outside and wandered a while, I just thought I ought to. Everything dripped. Light fog was drifting in, the soaked lawns showed nothing, no prints in the flowerbeds or by windows or on porches (except my own) to suggest visitors. A lobsterboat chugged invisibly in fog. Already I felt a loosening to the scenery overnight, the late spring moving to summer, season of my own wife, dead these seven years. I went back. Later Harriet repeated that earlier lying drowsy in bed and half-asleep before the big noise, she'd possibly heard somebody out on the upper landing and creak of the upper stair, but maybe not, maybe it was a dream.

Cassia picked a rock flower.  
Morning fog was finally  
burned off, we had the islands  
out there in sun, shore breeze  
and the tide coming in.

Yellow flower for cargo,  
Cassia squatted down by a  
tidepool sailing the little  
catamaran Jud made her,  
his only kindness I knew of.

From one end of the pool  
to the other she sent it  
over and over. Wind  
skittered it past its crevice  
harbor, always inches off.

Removing the flower, she broke  
the mast and tore the paper  
sail in two  
and snapped the driftwood base  
and tossed the pieces out.

And her mother: "It's all right,"  
she whispered, "it's all right,"  
and together hand-in-hand  
they headed back along  
the rocks the big house clung to.

In the study, Gregory muttered, "Well, even letting a doctor see him, who might require an autopsy, and then reporters--" he glanced sideways, tamping tobacco with a silver tamper. James's blanketed body lay out on a tufted gold settee, a Victorian leftover at the roadside window, shade down. "I'd been maintaining a lower profile lately, Chuck. That's why I called you in, really."

I waited. "You were expecting this?"

"Sweet Jesus no, I mean the old trouble between Jud and me. Always this stupid trouble between my brother and me. The way he's never accepted--" Gregory waved his match hand, letting the flame go out-- "all this. I mean, how I was Father's favorite. Or maybe just the older, who knows how Father really felt? Anyway, Jud got his bundle, simply not this summer house. And didn't keep what he did get, either. Damn this pipe... And now last month the boy announces he's dug up something on me, he and Harry too, they both have."

"What have they dug up on you, Gregory?"

"I'd rather not go into that today, as I said before," his words slurring a bit. He'd opened up a specialty from his old reserve, quite fruity. Serving wine just now seemed very inappropriate, but anyhow. "The thing I want is a counterjab from you, bargaining, counterblackmail, whatever it takes. I'd meant, you know, to keep this weekend free for our initial chat. I didn't mean to make you meet them all so soon."

"My pleasure," I said.  
"This troupe was totally unexpected?"

"An hour's warning--can you believe it, all of them on the road already, and the cook gone, too? The cook, you see, she names her week, and Harriet and I make do for that period. Obviously we're not set up to entertain. At least these crazy relatives! Jud--he's been irrational since birth, always feisty and jealous simply at being the younger brother, always the rakehell dragging in one floozy after another. Jackie's his seventh try, you know--I hate to imagine the alimony. As for Harry, he chiseled his way into the family and took my Pat away for the money, as I often told her, and finally she's admitting. God, if I could just report this thing I'd do it, but we'd need an angle, a story we could all stick to. You'd never get it with this crowd. Jud calls me an accessory. Jackie's upstairs vomiting, apparently something she brought with her. Harry's running around, complaining. Except for my poor Pat, I'd call them all a bunch of damned freeloaders. I know this doesn't sound like me."

It did, though. His gentility ran thin, I remembered, years ago when our two fathers knew each other. (James I'd considered exemplary.)

"I called you in," he said, "because you're good. Professional, a friend."

"I'm rusty."

"Never mind, we've got a problem," he said, eyeing the sofa, his voice dropping, and poured himself a freshener--you couldn't miss the hand trembling--"a real problem." He looked at me. "And who do you suppose was the intended victim?"

"I--wouldn't call that one."

The long  
afternoon, as the sun sank over  
to the far side of the house  
had begun to cool and dark slightly  
his small study, darkening  
some off-the-ceiling greenery,  
Harriet's touch. It was not  
unpleasant. In the wiggly panes  
I could see far whitecaps running  
to funny blips and leaps--and I also  
found the distortions not unpleasant,  
the way in some boring situations  
a sudden corpse invigorates one,  
like a stain--like the way great Leonardo,  
when he had nothing doing, used to  
study the dampness stains on walls  
for inspiration.

"I'm scared," he said.  
"My goddam life is slipping away.  
It must be obvious I'm scared.  
Talk, Chuck! You don't say anything."

"Well...if Jud or Harry wanted money,  
why would they kill you, Gregory,  
with your Harriet inheriting?  
How would that help? Still, I agree,  
poisoning milk would hardly seem  
a likely way to kill a butler."

"No. But, dammit, it's possible  
if we're just talking method. James--  
I'm making a connection now--  
had developed some insomnia  
since Father died, he often came  
down late to get warm milk and crackers.  
And everyone knew it! The poor man,  
he just got quirlier and more lackluster  
over the years--I guess he loved  
my father like a one-man dog.  
We'd let him wander anywhere  
around the house, tidying things.  
We liked to give him the free run."

"Got on with the cook?"



"Oh, sure.  
Professional, no more, no less.  
She's young and saucy, out of his league.  
Not much of a cook, either."

No tipoffs coming through. Or mixed  
signals. Our conversation moving  
toward silence, as things tend to.

"A generally fine fellow, then?"

Gregory gestured--his pipe and wine  
had blurred him sentimentally.  
"Yes, yes, the sort of help you can't  
get nowadays, he sensed whatever  
you needed, he knew everything.  
Even the timing here is such  
a shame, since he was planning to  
retire this fall, go back to Scotland.  
Or maybe not a shame--for us.  
If people ask, we'll say he's back  
to Scotland, it's our simplest out!"

My host's demeanor underwent  
a false brightening. I tried again:  
"But shouldn't we report this now?"

His answer--quick and edgy, "Too late,  
I tell you, it's too late."

x

Going downstairs for supper I met  
him halfway on the rise,  
Jud glaring at me, a gruff hand  
on the bannister,  
nobody spoke. A pause.

"Whoever you are, pal, whatever  
you're doing here,  
this is family stuff--if you  
could move, please?"

Okay, I moved.  
As the feller says, never  
complain, never explain,  
never apologize.

Night, at last I am  
off smoking. Room lights off.  
The bickering crowd all off  
to bed. My cigar tastes  
poor, it is too old.  
Or am I too old?

The old smoke, feathers in the room's  
moonlight, against a flowered  
wallpaper, seems to be  
a real object moving. It's not.

Oh, well, What am I  
thinking? I need to think  
of her again, near summer now,  
how finally I am her  
age, nearly, when she died.

How all I do,  
how even the journal I write,  
these wandering stories and songs, I do  
for her, to reach her,  
she moves me forward, this narrow line we  
play here, the--

my window open for smoke  
or I wouldn't have heard  
the shuffle.

Below, at the porch,  
came two figures, three really,  
or, better, a single shape tangled and  
shifting crablike into the driveway,  
Gregory and his brother Jud  
and a blanketed bundle wrapped in a sort  
of netting bag, like a snood,  
with Gregory handling the bent  
end, himself limping,  
they edged to the open trunk  
of the Mercedes.  
Then Gregory shut the lid, a click,  
their getaway decently quiet,  
with hardly a pebble crunch,  
leaving all that suddenly absurd  
emptiness, or so it appeared  
absurd now, the empty  
road and stone gateway,

the rosa rugosa bush, clumps, trees,  
rock masses in moonlight. I felt  
a hand on my shoulder. I swung.  
"He woke me leaving," she said,  
"he didn't realize. You know what this means."  
"No, Harriet." She stood in her same  
neglige, the light shadowing  
her small breasts, an aristocrat's.  
"Help me"--a new voice from her.  
"You'll smell of cigar  
if you stay," I said--pointlessly;  
"also, you're married."  
She waited. "It's a sham.  
He hasn't touched me in years,  
he doesn't love me, nobody  
in this house loves anybody,"  
and before we could hear  
the car downshifting an hour later  
it was over, she drifted out  
taking her long legs with her.

Breakfast, nobody spoke  
anymore--a click  
of silverware, cups, and plates  
that once were the good gentleman's  
who built this house,  
and, munching quietly,  
sat all the old boy's progeny  
about to strike,  
each one eyeing the others. Once,  
I suppose, in Italy  
the Borgia branch was even worse,  
but any family hits  
its peak  
and then declines.

It finally came  
to me later that morning  
as I sat in the bathtub  
humming an old tune,  
a frayed hooked rug  
under the tubfeet,  
wallclock ticking,  
sun through the window,  
hearing the wash  
of sea on the craggy  
rocks far and away,  
and feeling this case  
was hardly a feather  
in my cap--as I pulled  
the fluted tin soapdish  
along the tubrail  
and soaped a little:  
*Warm milk and crackers*  
Gregory had said,  
*warm milk and crackers.*  
Then--why wasn't the  
milk warm that fell?  
Not even slightly?  
And why was I waiting  
in this tub?

And that was the way I came to  
the last room, after so long. Maybe I knew  
what to expect, a simplicity and spare  
esthetic.

One rocker, book bent open.  
Window overlooking some older fir  
trees, sideview to the sea, and through  
his open dormer floated a sense of the sea air.  
Bedcovers were thrown back  
as he had left them, wide.  
So then he went downstairs and died?  
Well, yes. But an oversight to have left  
the alarm clock set for 2:00.  
I thought a while. I thought, and with  
my handkerchief I set it on ahead.

Then to the top drawer--underwear,  
cuff-links, handkerchiefs, silk socks,  
some paper boxes and mementos,  
and finally, along with these, a vial  
of powder scrapings,  
he hadn't used it all,

only enough to slip  
away, leaving us all to  
ourselves at last, leaving me here to hide  
his secret now? as from below  
came up the freshening endless cries of anger,  
arguing. I pocketed  
the poison. Let the chips fall  
where they would. I was satisfied.

POOL SHOT

"Pool is like the violin--you've got to  
play an hour every day."

Sonny Greer, drummer  
for Duke Ellington

5 years later



POOL SHOT

1

Wade was out of work, but that was no different. He had a kind of dog-eared look settling about him. Nobody noticed-- that is, noticed the difference. Much of his time he spent sitting at the outdoor café the Carrenton Hotel had fashioned itself when the city redid its walks and planted trees in pebbled circles with little wire fences around their bases, rather continental. He sat under an umbrella. It was a warm summer then, sunnier than usual, and fine for sitting outside before dark away from traffic and pedestrians if you liked that: waiters circulated unobtrusively, napkins over their wrists, a pleasant flavor and flair spread over that area of town bordering the old slums and their gradual renovations, and Wade with deliberate counter-seediness, sipping pernod or white wine, was looking continental, I thought, as if he found it his way of being inwardly fashionable. Something, anyhow, satisfied him. Although his clothes looked like the end of a career, still his demeanor, studied, curious, even over-casual, said don't be fooled. He couldn't quite be measured. Maybe he really was on the downward spiral his dress implied, and possible tipsiness. He wasn't always there, but I never saw him leaving either. I can't say if he left a tip.

Sometimes I'd take a walk I wouldn't otherwise have, strolling at random. Other afternoons, taking an indirect way to the car, I'd pass the Carrenton to check him out and usually find him sitting there, alone. My irritation grew. I liked to assume he didn't see me--at least our glances never met, since I would single him out from a distance, and if he shifted or showed signs of looking up, I'd look away. It was all pretty clean.

Then, if I drove home thinking about it, his effrontery, his placid assurance of dropping into

such ease, I'd flop into my own armchair without wanting to move sometimes for hours. The empty house was like a cold hand now. I didn't need to light up the whole thing. Usually I'd retire to the den and run the table. Something to do...Three lights over the green felt, in green shades, were just my way of staying consciously old-style. Slowly I was becoming rather accomplished, clearing my mind. Once in mid-July Wade wasn't there for three afternoons running, but then appeared again same as ever. The routine bothered me--the break, I mean. Later I played past midnight, keeping the game slower and more methodical, I remember, angling each ball carefully or feathering it, because the other way, that night, they didn't drop easily. My topspin was off.

Actually my wife was too smalltown to take the house, her ingenuity being the facts she'd gathered up against me. In the first months I counted myself lucky, no terrible loser. Then the house began to get lonelier, pictures, furniture, all the paraphernalia one is left over with. Worse--at the office, opening a drawer, I found the anniversary bracelet I'd bought a year ago, and when I lit my pipe and spread the bracelet out to admire the workmanship (meaning to wrap the thing myself I hadn't let the shopgirl wrap it), I saw its beauty again--a dozen oval stones banded by silver, each with sidebands flaring out like tiny sheephorns, the tip ends curled into circles for delicate linking chains of silver, all with a slightly muted buff setting the oxblood coral off. The pain ran through me. Like sheephorns, were they? No, not really, but a faint association touched me then, as on the day I'd bought it, something to do with the farms of our childhoods, orchards, cattle, sheep, buzzing of crickets, like the first moment I knew I loved her, I was lying in bed and it was raining, a cool light rain, maybe spring, maybe fall, whatever the season I was about twelve, and the patter started just before bedtime, overhead, windless, not against my window, and I could hear it on the trees outside, on the leaves, so it wasn't winter I know.

The feeling came from nowhere, the open sound of rain lifting us, stretching us all out. The rain was cheerful and sad and mysterious. Then suddenly it struck me rain was falling on her roof, too, exactly a mile away, and I laughed aloud. Those were the days I often laughed aloud just before sleep. I never really knew what brought it on. My laugh simply hung there in the dark. It might come anytime, unexpectedly-- I might be only mulling the day over, or watching winter stars, watching, guessing the pretty constellations over our town, the way things had to be, a tacit but inevitable circle. I suppose my sense of inevitability came early, from prayers and dotty relatives. Before gradeschool I'd got astrology and the zodiac signs from Aunt Louise, my late grandfather's twin, a spinster given to plaids and "cosmic dance," who drank and smoked on the city edge of town and spoke with an engaging huskiness of conjunctions and ascendancies and drew charts of the whole family, flaunting her fragrant make-up, and her orangy hair that she called "natural, the effect of time." I was, of course, delighted when her house burned down one night and she moved in with us-- January, a chimney fire they said. So Aunt Louise settled into our spare room making such gloomy forecasts that finally my mother asked her to go easier-- although her readings usually came true. Somebody on our road, she signed, was doomed at some point. Naturally I kept wondering. I didn't relish leaving questions open. I thought of a downcast home along our road. Often that winter, on snowy Saturdays, to see my mother's pallid smiling friend who no longer had a husband (I forget why), we'd trudge to this house of sooty icicles, hot inside like an incinerator. Upstairs her little daughter rested, not as old as I was, sick, bedridden, who couldn't play outside or go to kindergarten. I was told she'd eaten paint from rungs of her iron bedstead and twisted a bald point at the back of her head. Once, while our mothers talked away, I stole upstairs along the carpeted hall until, at the far door's slit, I saw her. She was staring ahead. A small, feathery blackbird beat in front of her eyes.

I didn't wave. A month later she was dead.  
All day a powder snow broke through the cold.

Only a bracelet, yes, although for days in the bank office, at intervals left alone, I examined the piece, moving it round and round the desktop, clasping, unclasping its doubled-over, little slide-in snap, until one snowy morning, tired of all my pointless obsession with the thing, calling it a casualty like the rest of my life, I quietly dropped it into a trashbin as I left the bank for lunch--checking to see if Wade was anywhere. He didn't mind the cold. I'd spotted him all winter on various street corners, even with snow falling. He seemed oblivious. Sometimes he wore a hat. Or I'd catch him loitering near a downtown restaurant or shop--when I'd look out to see him nonchalantly turn and stroll away. After the divorce I had expected him to disappear, his dirty work all done. Or so I could assume his dirty work. How else would Linda have cited actual times, places, women, have learned enough to hint at bank transactions she might like to expose if I contested custody? Yet when she left me and Wade didn't go, but appeared sitting around unnaturally often, I took occasion to rethink it. This was early July, slowing my car past the Carrenton during the rush hour, without change of expression, I looked over. There he was--drinking, of course. He seemed to raise a glass to me as I passed him. That's how bothered I was, by then, to think so, since really his little gesture was ambiguous. Home, I cooked a TV dinner and turned the den lights up. I chalked my cue and tried to shake it off. But I couldn't. Had Linda ever hired him to begin with? Could he be under hire still, if not by Linda, then by someone else? This may, in fact, have been the first evening I really felt an inclination not to do anything, forget the deals, forget the womanizing (if you called it that), and simply sequester myself in this low-timbered room we'd annexed to the old Colonial structure. Just to relax. What was so dumb in that?

I should have said the table was antique, bought from a big estate up north, the nap heavy and the cushions dead until I did them over, a richly dark mahogany frame with mother-of-pearl diamonds, and the balls ivory. Lit by those hanging overheads, table and room looked nicely atmospheric and told an eclectic story--mine: a buck's head pinned to a sidewall (dull-eyed), a Winchester over the window from my young days; snapshots of boating with Linda and Bobby (as baby) under the string of scoring beads; some chairs and a maple table from my parents' farmhouse, a contemporary swivel. And the glass doors opened to my patio back area lower than the front. I liked it.

No one, because my yard sloped into several acres of swampy undeveloped woodland, saw me when I played.

Finally, after months, my game was going more acceptably. Earlier I had played a careless eight-ball, or broken the rack and pocketed at random, until this got so casual I devised trickier set-ups, or I played nine-ball to win--let's say--in not over two innings, or tried to run the table in straight pool. Serious stuff, you'd call it. And I studied my manual, all the various terms and photos and diagrams. Being self-taught, it took a while to learn to freeze the head and shoulders when I struck the cue-ball, left knee bent and most of my weight forward. And yet this evening everything got going. My warm-up shots felt relatively smooth and silky, I remembered to give each ball its finishing caress. The clicks were good, I liked the sound of them in the empty room, in the open emptiness I'd felt lately. Tonight, for once, I hit the cue-ball crisply, finding my strategy right off. I took an obvious move to give the nine a ride and spread the cluster, while the eleven rebounded softly into position zone. That was simple enough to sink. From here I sped the eleven down the rail to get shape on the four, an easy rail-first carom taking the twelve out, then a double kiss sent several others rolling delightfully to a workable three-ball combination,

the kind that makes it all worthwhile, my pace unworried, easy, accelerating, the play almost involuntary--not even keeping a ball up for another round, but only me there riding the wave until the last ball dropped, without fudging, done, not over-fancy, nothing for show, the perfect run.

How to continue? Is there a better way than another?--as if you could ever know. As if it mattered. That evening I poured myself a scotch and water and sat back in the swivel, flushed and empty-headed, and while the elation settled, began to see how long I'd taken learning the game well, how many practices, until this sudden run tonight, deserving (I thought) another scotch and water. I sat again, enjoying the slight disorientation of the drink, and began to remember the way my own father would fall into his big bones slowly each morning, he wore sleep angels at the table. "Anything good," he'd say, "happens more slowly on earth than anyone wants it to," himself born under the easy watery moon of Cancer, as I, in fact, was meant to be but came through late by three weeks and a day. And he would tell us how everything burns, slowly, of course, exactly as it has to, it all burns, little stones at the wayside, trees, grass, animals, even trivial events flare into others coming our way, with everything another kind of food.

Wheelruts, spokes of ice, puddles tightening, snow  
the night set down again lay county-wide,  
our early-morning truck coughed breath into the unbroken mystery of frozen air and countless journey stops. Don't taste! Cold iron fence will tear your tongue off. Big garbage cans set out for us, with food burning inside them, empty bottles, paper, the mitten-soaking syrup juice that made stains on the snow beside porches of the intown winter rich without hard farms to carry, hogs to feed, their balconies facing Warren Avenue, with names and numbers I had memorized, and wondering, too, on their astrologies (old lady Brandt who couldn't keep her tops on) we came, we came. The dreamers had agreed never to hear our feet breaking the crust--

although at times there simply seemed too much  
garbage, I imagined the overspill  
up with the planets, orbiting like planets,  
calling, calling to be taken in.  
How could it all get through that hole in the sky?  
Crazy my innocence, my riding there  
so much less helpful than I thought I was,  
those Monday mornings, while I felt the lucky  
touching signs we carried, my sign the Lion  
that I wasn't yet, his sign the Crab,  
the one I coveted, together climbing  
sideways into God.

And there was also  
in early days before the farm was sold  
the unamusing little Farley Wilson, whose house  
sat on a city sidestreet, who at school  
seemed to be living under a spell, speaking  
the right word only or not speaking,  
twirling a forelock, telling me once, "I know  
you're poor, you smell of apple tree wood."  
I never liked him much, nobody could,  
although his haughtiness vaguely intrigued me.  
He claimed to own a cabinet of coins  
at home, come down by family means,  
with extra velvet bags all stashed away,  
until, one summer afternoon, it happened  
I stood beside his windowcase, his legs  
straddled against me lightly, and how cool  
a coin lay in my hand, his oldest  
and most valuable, he said, this funny  
lopsided thing, a wide-eyed little bird,  
it was an owl: I felt the tuck and pull  
of history, shadow and sunlight moving  
on my hand at once, hints of old empires  
that old Miss Weatherby told us about,  
India, China, Greece, great merchant fleets  
riding the wind-swept open sea since man  
deserted Paradise and trade began. That night,  
after my hours of intown visiting,  
I woke up late somehow and, seeing the moon  
faint on the windowshade, got out of bed  
and put my shade up very quietly  
to see, perhaps, if the farm was really there.  
And I saw trees, fields, haystacks. In the wan  
moonlight, my father's garbage truck,  
its bulbous wheel in back, looked like the obscene  
squat of a pregnant cow under the elm tree.  
A few fireflies floated right and left.  
And along the shadowy, gravel path--oddly,  
the animals long put up and the milking done--  
hands in his pockets, came my father

walking slowly. He smiled; his hand shot out in a wave. It was an awful scare for me. Suddenly back in bed with the bedcovers huddled up to my chin again--I laughed.

2

So I began a new routine of clearing my mind entirely. I would not think of the past again, I would not think of Wade, I would not think of Wade sitting at the Carrenton ordering drinks, while he read his newspaper or looked around slightly or shifted positions, as if he had all the useless time in the world. I would not think of not thinking of him. The summer stayed warm--warmer. Languid afternoons held on, one after another, I began easing an hour off my workday to get home early while the light was good for exercise and clearing out the junk wood, limbs, overgrowth, dead brush accumulated over so many summers of negligence. My new routine: shower and swim. Enjoyable to paddle backward slowly in the deep end, to look up at a blue sky darkening, tree tops and clouds, early evening clouds, shapes steady or shifting as the wind moved them, and let the whole year drop away, away. The pool was there already when we'd bought the house--a sunken, heated pool with a wide runway of checkered tiles--we only added the den to orient and open to it. Swimming now I let the den's stereo play out to cover the far-off traffic noise. "That was the day also when he interpreted her declining his little gift of oakleaves on the walk as coolness." Where did that come from, those words? What could I be thinking? It was late July. Nearly time again for Bobby's regular end-of-the-month visit.

I cleaned his room and set old toys out, placing them round to affect naturalness, as if they expected him, and also did my weekly kitchen clean-up. He came by bus on Saturday. A tightrope



of little jokes, comments, wanderings  
from room to room, getting the banter back,  
his suitcase full of neatly folded outfits  
I hadn't seen last month, pamphlets and magazines  
like a traveling library tucked away.  
We swam together in the pool, his body  
small but supple for eight. At night he wanted  
a story from his bookcase, calling me back  
after I'd thought he was asleep, but it seemed  
a vestigial, half-hearted wish. His eyes  
no longer met mine when I checked, but finally,  
turning his head, he gazed at the far window  
as I read aloud the old words, trying  
to give them tone, interest...

...Into the empty orchard dark  
Pete sailed, and so by moonlight  
He picked new peaches from the trees  
If they were ripe or not.

When he had filled his basket floor  
He yanked a rope and soared  
Aloft again, to float at length  
Safely behind a cloud.

By dawn he caught a favoring wind  
That gusted at his elbow,  
While faithfully some dark birds flew  
Above him or below.

Wheatfields below him, too, and farms  
And cities and seacoast  
Rolled far away in muffled light  
To say goodbye at least.

Now as the early morning sun  
Rose over a green sea  
He set his cruise-valve open, dozed,  
And drifted easterly.

So passed his idle hours away,  
So passed his great balloon  
High over seaclouds gathering  
Toward afternoon.

He woke and wondered: Can I be  
With luck the only one  
Who never tried to sail his boat  
Beyond the sun in vain?

He tossed pyrometer, compass out,  
The dangling oars and anchor,  
Even the champagne for his greeting  
Party, every bottle.

Rustling sounds came from the sheet and blanket  
as Bobby stirred, only to settle himself  
better in the direction he already faced.

At this, the lightened-up balloon  
Began to rise and rise,  
To find the far belt of Orion  
And the gentle Pleiades,

Where, farther in the dome-like quiet,  
Stars of the Sisters play  
Mindlessly into the Bull  
Beyond the Milky Way

And, half asleep, the sidelong Crab,  
Its center soft and fuzzy,  
Floats with a flotsam radiance  
As on the earliest day.

And so began his single journey  
Angled to the Earth  
And the unbounded Heavens,  
Enjoying views of both.

I stopped. There were some pages left to go,  
but I shut the book, since Bobby slept now,  
giving in to his tiredness. So be it.  
His sleeping profile looked a bit like Linda's.

The jump, the massé, my manual argues,  
should be unnecessary, connoting rather  
a flashiness or confession of poor planning,  
just as the serious-minded novice learns  
not to swagger, but cultivates a simple air  
of command, knowing more than he uses,  
a laid-back repertoire, just as the crack

gambler never talks much, only seems to, so I played steadier once Bobby left, compensatorily you may say, a midnight and beyond midnight ritual, skid shot, throw shot, deadball rolled to an angle, off-hand running and reverse English, follow and draw, the occasional thin cut to the pocket, safeties, that became quietly blooming seaflowers, like a life hidden underwater. For nearly a week a mild heatwave wouldn't dissipate. The nights came moonless, hot, the air not circulating, I left the glass doors open, the screen being hit by fluttery bugs trying to get in, the den lights throwing a soft rectangle on the lawn.

The fact Wade never appeared outside the bank now meant nothing. There was no need of it, my earlier indiscretions over, no case to investigate--in fact, a tidy smokescreen of figures covered the old figures. I was all right. Though something ruffled me, something...Why, despite my expectations, did Bobby's visits disappoint me so, only intensify the gap between us, tenuous as his visits were, with Linda able to drop them if they "proved unhealthy." My moodiness returned. Only the games alone at night, after a day's doldrums, put me on the occasional upswing, though paradoxically they made the next day worse, burning me out. So now instead of my anticipated week away traveling upstate, what with its being maybe too aimless a notion anyhow, I returned the airline tickets and quietly holed up in the house to reconnoitre. Pleasant enough--just minor negatives. I found it difficult to sleep at night, my mind running to possible burglaries throughout suburbia in vacation time, ominous indications of the crime rate rising, unruly teenagers on dope, such craziness, and all the world's problems, I should have wired the house up with alarms, but hadn't.

Saturday, anyhow, I ventured out by foot. A handsome two-mile trek down to the city, unusual for me to be hiking out so far unnecessarily--

having developed, too, a summer cold, the kind that saves itself for your vacation, but the day was a sunny, refreshing one, with a light morning breeze, and furthermore it felt better not to have the car seen but, rather, just to wander by and appear to be sitting down as the whim struck me. I arrived and took an outdoor table vacated by a mother and squabbling children--fine, at least, to escape that sort of thing myself--the waiter swept fries and shredded napkins into a dustpan, smoothed the oilcloth, and I gave my order of a sandwich and looked round the busy place--casually. My heart leapt. Wade wasn't there. After all that! A healthy crowd, though. Twenty odd tables filled to near capacity. Then I saw him at a small one under the awning, set back rather passively, by the hotel window where the gold characters CARRENTON and the day's menu floated. Reading some magazine, he sat half-turned away from me, and looking studious. He wore an irritating small beret (as if the shade under the awning made it cooler there), a gray shirt, open-collared, legs crossed and partly hidden by the oilcloth. Past other tables and the uneven breaks between waiters and moving customers, I saw a glass of red wine set in front of him with empty saucers to one side, the place's way of calculating the bill here, maybe; but what an hour to begin drinking! He looked sallow, wrinkled, sunken below the cheekbones, not sad, not happy--not anything, really. Somehow I wanted to beat the shit out of him. His eyes stayed lowered to whatever magazine intrigued him so. He appeared to have lost weight. Suddenly I realized he was sitting a certain way--aimed in my usual direction from the bank, perhaps to allow quick glances, his old system of trying to see me while pretending not to see me, knowing I'd seen him, pretending not to know. If so, he was handling it stylishly. Quite in keeping with the service here, your basic reason for the noontime turnover, everything chic and stylish down to the sandwiches. When my chicken club arrived I ate it slowly, delaying, also, over the sprouts and side cucumber wedges, to see what might occur. But now, on a mid-day outing, I was spotted

by two old ladies I'd helped once with investments.

"Good afternoon there!" came the inevitable waves and some laughter from them. "You're looking well." "You look well, too," I said back to them. "Are you?" "Yes, we are, thank you!"

Irrationally  
their presence put me at a disadvantage;  
and uneasy in my plan to stretch the last  
inconspicuous bites out, and not wanting coffee,  
I paid the waiter and left. For me, of course,  
there was time to dawdle--the whole week, if need be.  
So I took a movie in, and wandered back  
afterward. I didn't really care  
if he was there or not. But he wasn't.  
Premature for the supper crowd, no more  
than a handful of couples at scattered tables.  
I had a rye and water, waiting. Darkness  
began to hover. I ate a small meal.  
Perhaps I should have walked to his hotel  
right then. Perhaps I should have finally sought  
him out, once and for all, talked, satisfied  
my wondering. (Last spring, of course,  
after I'd traced him to an old brownstone,  
half-modernized hotel, and slipped the doorman  
twenty, I had learned something: name of Wade,  
hanging around here several years and running  
a slow detective agency upstairs  
to judge by the few visitors. "People  
don't need your private eye these days," he'd added.  
Well, no...I checked the mailbox: H. Charles Wade,  
confirmed him later in the yellow pages  
open to 7-day, 24-hour business.  
He must have been delighted to catch Linda's.)

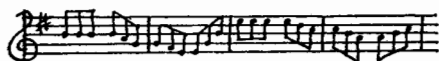
I had a few more whiskeys. Still no show.  
I felt tired. Took a taxi home. Dark, a bit  
misty, though I spotted immediately  
the raccoon damage, finding I'd left the garage  
doors up and den lights going by mistake.  
Raccoons, woodchucks--often I'd pick them off  
leaving the woods, damned scavengers. Tonight, though,  
pleasantly tipsy, I left the mess for later,  
hardly hoped to play a passable game  
but did, the cue-ball zippy and obedient.  
Even before vacation I'd begun  
going to bed later and later, learning  
to anticipate the dawn light. Only once  
did I get thrown off--suddenly near dawn  
a quiet rain, obscuring the usual  
shifts of sky, and always suddenly

rain again would make me think of Linda, feelings of loss I didn't worry over most of the time--and now vacation had me lurching for breakfast at the Carrenton, coffee and eggs by noon, parking sensibly short of the café, as to maintain my casual approach by foot. But Wade had taken off. That was Sunday, I remember. I strolled until the first movies opened, also checking at intervals all Monday, and took my evening meal there, but no Wade. Why not? Funny what dark considerations can bubble up at times like these. Could he be spying on me by some counter-strategy, manipulating my behavior, laughing--intolerable, making a fool of me! Or could he be a so-called "open shadow" meant to be spotted?...

My sudden fury passed. I felt better. And Tuesday he returned, as ever, the heatwave broken finally, sky overcast. A late evening clientele, more dressy than noon's, gathered inside, though Wade and I and maybe a dozen others took the open air. Why not enjoy the pleasant summer air? Clear weather, and some little banners out. He must have noticed me arrive. His shoulders appeared hunched, something newly, oddly frail about him. Or mere self-consciousness? Sporting his tweed beret again, he sat relaxing into wine and cheese, no entree. This was becoming a repetitious story, mundane, with finely tuned variations. Still, I have to admit my mild respect--how he projected a certain artistry beyond me, even in these to-and-fro wanderings from the café. Again tonight not even a brief glance over: his clear avoidance of me had grown vaguely humorous. Actually, with the break from my work schedule, I'd felt a partial fondness springing up for him: maybe I'd rather overstressed his deviousness, his purposes, he might indeed be lonely, wanting sympathy, having no friends or family or cronies, nothing to keep him going really. But money? You couldn't call the café inexpensive. What about his floundering business? Did he have outside funds, benefactor, private income--who knew what to say about this?

Nothing arrived to mark the end of summer,

wanderers passed the café, often with dogs,  
and faint warm breezes came down those nights  
to ruffle the small leaves of trees growing  
out of the pebbled circles, with their Romanesque  
repeating wire loops, prettier than tin  
sleeves or stick supports. Waiting for him  
I spent a long time studying those trees,  
watching and studying the leaves that curled  
partly and turned by the breeze, shimmered,  
I took an interest in details that could  
both cover and manifest a mystery,  
as if the very leaves themselves hoped to be caught  
up swirling around some single, inexpressible  
silent word. This may sound foolish, unclear,  
it does to me, actually. Street music  
returned, a nightly itinerant group  
(one of the mayor's rejuvenation plans)  
played fiddle, accordian, and tambourine,  
I heard their pretty music drifting round  
a corner, a tune I'd heard before somewhere,  
something like



and I found tears welling in my eyes,  
not painfully. I felt nearly at peace.  
It was like memory, a return of beauty  
floating not just ahead of me, but behind me,  
a confirmation of all I had come from.

You know how one indulges, whimsically,  
a silly fling one later can't slip out of,  
well, here I was, guessing that although  
I couldn't control his chance arrivals, surely  
with patience I could make him leave before me,  
I arrived on Wednesday, quite a humid night,  
determined to outsit and follow him  
and play the shadower he preferred to be.  
Not much of a wind was moving, like the day  
before, to rustle the awning or cool anyone,  
but it didn't bother you if you stayed still.  
Wade was already comfortable. He wore  
a buttoned madras jacket in cream colors  
and looked as if he could be heading somewhere.  
Wade, almost elegant! Well, yes. I chose  
a table closer than he might have liked,  
and rattled the big menu gently. Ordered a few  
aperitifs. Then snails. Then tournedos,  
a tossed salad. Cheese plate. Yes, I could  
dawdle here as elegantly as he could.

Chablis: I nursed a half-bottle through the seven-to-eight hour. A little sweat settled on the oilcloth, on my forehead. My wine went tepid. And predictably Wade kept sipping, ordering separate glassfuls as if he knew the preferred system, reading his fool magazine again, or a new one. Customers thinned out. Or intermingled with the happier after-theatre set for drinks only, and these eased away. It got late, more obvious we were the two steadies, more obvious this waiting-the-other-out routine could fritter on forever, given our stubborn set of mind. Then as he shifted fractionally in the café light and shadow letting his jacket, already a loose-fitter, fall open slightly, there was a gun. A second before his elbow settled again, I caught the gun-bulge and a black protruding handle. "You, sir, would you--"

"No," I said. "No. Nothing. The check, please." For my idea came--quickly. This was the smartest thing I ever did, I kept telling myself, having paid and walked away--now heading straight to his hotel, down through the old quarters; the smartest thing.

4

Nobody stopped me at the elevator. I rode it to the seventh. Quickly I found 701, his door, at the overlit end of a corridor, folded newspaper waiting. He'd got his name displayed, also a doormat, but I didn't hang around. Downstairs and going outside again, I counted up: his shade half-drawn, no light. All this was gaining a jaunty excitement to it. Across and facing opposite, stood two turn-of-the-century flophouses, the dingier one closer, but never mind, I crossed and entered the lobby where a whiskery nightclerk sat half-dozing, an old head on his hand, dozens of keys like little tongues in the mail cubbies behind him. Not a very popular hotel--or everybody was out, let's say. He muttered



something to my "Single, facing the street?"  
How uncommunicative these people are,  
so taxed by non-responsibility.  
And the elevator, too, in these places  
is never on the ground floor waiting, but makes  
jackhammer clanks as it grinds slowly down.  
I took a slow trip up (reading FLORIDA  
ONLY A JUMP AWAY, along with various  
graffiti, See Marie in 33,  
and Have a good time in 69 below it,  
as if some local mucker thought it rhymed).  
Another consideration: why is the room  
they give you always so far from the elevator,  
a couple of turns at least? Already I saw  
my room before I got there: a low bureau  
and chair, dustballs, rigidly sagging mattress,  
not that I bothered to turn the standing lamp on,  
but sat, with neon flickering in, and looked  
out on Wade's hotel and small businesses,  
drugstore, pinball, adult novelties, some broken  
signs, discounts. I sat there several hours,  
sorry for Wade, sorry he had to live  
in such circumstances, sorry he didn't arrive  
more quickly, and once I dropped off even,  
and woke, the street empty. It was darker,  
everybody gone home. Then I saw him  
rounding the corner by the pizzeria,  
shuffling somewhat. He must have had a skinful  
in him by now, although he looked unduly  
chipper for the hour, as he ambled closer,  
gazing downward, oblivious, straight  
into his hotel.

With a gambler's instinct  
I counted to a leisurely one hundred,  
hitting the mark exactly--his light went on!  
At this he appeared brisk and business-like  
(all but his head, cut by the windowshade)  
and plainly, in full view, shifted the gun  
to his top bureau drawer, a careless gesture,  
I thought, since anyone like me could see it.  
And he moved out of sight. Another dull  
period. Finally he returned in pajamas  
and, leaning forward, pulled his shade entirely.  
A faint light on the windowshade went out. I lay  
exhausted, trying to sleep now, for I'd want  
to catch his morning exit (and could hardly  
expect the desk downstairs to ring me up),  
I tried to relax, and later heard the faraway  
traffic fade, and heard someone rummage  
into the room a few doors down, retching.

A classy hangout. I ought to come more often.

I woke up, sunlight striking the bed.

His window

shade was up, no motion evident.

Groggy and not especially happy at having missed a beat, I made for the Carrenton. When Wade failed to materialize after coffee and eggs, I walked around a bit, and caught the last decent film opening at noon, having seen everything now except the skins, and strolled again, periodically spotchecking the café and Wade's window.

Before night, though, finally irked at this fancy runaround he was giving me at all times of day, I bought binoculars, a Little Ben alarm clock, a hip flask of Early Times, and headed back, late, idly through the less savory sections. The little whores were out, street-loitering runaways in tanktops, a few inside at counters, talking or looking out, tougher and younger than ever. I nearly began to wonder what a quick pick-up might be like for somebody like me who's never really fantasized about them--what casual, what dirty hands they must have, and how would they talk to you, what sort of wetnesses, smells? --Crazy, crazy, I was losing touch.

I took another stint watching his window. (Having overlooked toothbrush and razor, I had a slightly disheveled and bristly feeling.) Nobody much wandered the streets. Why did my heart jump at the sight of anyone turning the corner--even a dog once? Whiskey and water, no ice: a prolonged vigil whose first part ended with the flask half empty. Abruptly his light went on. Binoculars! I hadn't noticed anything at all. A thrill ran up my spine to see him finally at midnight stand beside his desk (his shirt showing thin arms, not muscular, maybe once had been strong, only a slackness now) and sit down, open a drawer, bring out a notebook and begin writing. Slowly. Sometimes he'd flick a few pages back, or gaze up pausing, thumb against chin, or flick his underlip or rub the inside neck of his t-shirt. After awhile he tore a page out, crumpled it, tossing it sideways. Then more pages. Others.

He proceeded to work himself into a fever, almost feverish, feverish for him. A hubbub of crumpled papers. What was he doing? What (for that matter, really) was I doing myself here, crouching, sweaty, my heart pounding, elbows on windowsill, glued to these poor ridiculous tools of espionage-- me, my life falling to shambles, yes to shambles around me, to nothing, how absurd, how stupid this whole search was, even if Wade indeed had ever been Linda's informer, or knew my weaknesses by heart, or hated me, how absurd, I saw, to have thought any secret gathering of details could clarify it. Look at these hands. Look. Trembling! My arms trembling. What was the matter? Was it too late to forget all this? to leave? Too late to understand? Why didn't he look up? I had been watching in darkness a long time. Now putting aside binoculars (which hardly helped anyway) I turned the floor lamp on, but Wade, as chance would have it, shut his notebook, turned his light off and left the desk area, only a faint interior glow staying inside awhile, until that, too, went out.

It was the next evening--yes, late Friday, it had to be, considering, counting back-- we sat six tables apart.

(Not bothering to shadow him earlier, I'd driven home for a quick shower and shave, was starting a game, having, apparently in my late-night stupor, left the table uncovered and balls scattered, when the phone rang, Connolly at the office, seen me strolling around. Where were the papers? He sounded openly abrupt. Our client was "justifiably pissed," negotiations must follow in person, vacation or not. I lined up airplane tickets for Saturday, located the papers in my briefcase, reviewed them over supper at home before a drive downtown.)

We sat, to repeat myself, six tables apart. Wade's fare tonight was brandy in a snifter. For me "vin ordinaire" was good enough. After awhile, of course, he took another glass, as I myself did; after a decent time we had another round. Whenever he gestured for the waiter, I did too, although my weaker drinks gave me the advantage.

Soon we were into half a dozen slow ones. Customers came and went. It didn't matter. Beyond midnight there was just our young waiter leaning lackadaisically in the doorway riding it out with two last customers. Morning haze had softened the café lights. An unblinkable glow to objects, everything. Noise of the city faded, mostly. I heard a far-off whirr of crickets--or was it my dizziness and fatigue?--as Wade, no other gesture open to him finally, turned to me and seemed to smile.

I left immediately.

All the same, early next morning before my business trip, I dropped a letter off at his hotel, Fairfax 701, inviting him home on Sunday (I'd be returning around suppertime, so come at seven or eight). I kept the tone discreetly casual, not overfriendly, to avoid awkwardness if I had missed the mark completely--ending it:

Could we enjoy chatting together?  
Take the footpath around the house  
to the back. Let's have a drink or two.

Then what a peacefulness came over me. A day later, home from Cincinnati, I unpacked, relaxed, dawdled over some nine-ball in the den, an unhurried game.

It had rained lightly. A brief rain, leaving the backyard trees and lawn fresh-smelling, the tiles shiny. I felt a warmth, a sense of connections I hadn't felt since early childhood. Funny. As I'd expected, footsteps sounded behind the house, a rustling, just past seven, as he walked slowly up the steps to my terrace wearing his summer jacket, with an umbrella, his face typically calm and toneless. He slipped on the tiles slightly--recovered himself, and blinked without much change of expression. As I watched him approaching along the poolside a fierce new liquid started, sprouted from my gums, or under my tongue, a greenish acrid taste. His steps were tentative. I pushed a chair to the back doorway to pull my shotgun down. I aimed and fired the first barrel and struck him, high. If he wore his gun on him he didn't reach, but under the jolt swung out, pivoting halfway around, his hand

to one shoulder, his back to me. The second shot must have split his spine, for he doubled back into the water, sharply crashing, toppling head down, ripples, then smoky red, a slow blending I knew even then was inexplicable.

Somewhere, nowhere, a far scream began that might have been either of ours, but wasn't, the sound continuing through roots and swamp even as I dragged him into the woods and got my shovel--maybe his gun fell out along the way, I never found it--continuing until I drained the pool of him, and filled it up again, and slept, and drove to work.

THE SHADE TREES

Narrator: Wade's brother-in-law

## THE SHADE TREES

My various friends call me humorous, sentimental, and a few other things. I say I'm realistic down to the toes. Business had taken me to the States that September, not friendship, but I saw no reason not to see Wade, my initial stopover being his city, and Margaret also, traveling with me to visit relatives and the old turf, favored it. Many years earlier Wade, after his wife's--my sister's--death, had been so generous in sending us some of her oils and watercolors I'd kept a perennial spot for him. Who couldn't enjoy his wry, rather witty asides on most subjects, his twists of mind? For awhile we corresponded. It dropped to a random holiday card. My recent letters detailing our arrival went unanswered. This piqued the practical side of me.

My phone call (on arrival) to Wade's hotel determined he'd disappeared, his rent unpaid and mail accumulating. Already, as the naively turned-up relative on my end of the line, I could feel myself being tagged for money, though I agreed to stop over, if briefly, the next morning, with time enough before delivering my talk on medicine and computers. How dusty it was! But a serviceable apartment, with a brightly updated kitchenette-sitting nook in the condensed style of those days, the walls displaying some paintings. While the hotel manager (taking my presence for dispensation?) jimmied the lock to Wade's file cabinet, I examined the rather more obvious letters in a wooden box on his dresser, tied by a frayed ribbon, among clips and elastics. Edges had faded. It was small blue paper. In an odd, familiar dazzle I recognized my sister's handwriting floating up at me, letters kept without envelopes, apparently

in order, though undated, without return address--ah yes, my sister's usual nonchalance. I read the top few.

Dear Mr. Wade,

I would like to stress my thanks again with this last payment. Although it may be years before my life regains equilibrium, your help made such a difference. Kindly accept this small bonus as token--and with it, thanks.

Sincerely,  
C. deRochemont

Dear Mr. Wade,

You were most kind to return the check, although I am choosing to send it back again. Yes, I realize you are "all right." But remember, too, my late husband left me comfortably well off. It really gives me pleasure to extend the favor. Accept it please.

My appreciation,  
C. deRochemont

Dear Mr. Wade,

Your last letter finds me, after these many weeks, in England visiting my brother and his family. Forwarding was slow. I apologize for any delay in answering you. However, this reappearance of my check somewhat distresses me. Because most of the money was yours by salary, and only part of it a bonus, I hope we can settle up with this adjusted figure, and when I return to the States, you might allow me to do something for you.

With (final) thanks,  
Catherine deRochemont

When she returned to the States? We'd thought my sister would never leave! She joined us there in Hampstead after the illness and death of her first husband, a brilliant



irritable architect I never liked as much as--later--I liked Wade. But suddenly she was alone, and since Margaret especially felt sympathy, inviting her over seemed the obvious gesture. It was a bad time for Carrie, who recuperated slowly, almost too slowly I tended to feel; she painted, worked in a store downtown, and helped us, taking care of the children when Margaret's career and pregnancy grew difficult, and began, it seemed, a correspondence which now, I admit, like a voyeur I scanned with vague curiosity.

Dear Mr. Wade,

What a surprise, how entertaining to hear from you. Just a few letters are coming to me from the States, not many. Finally my present life is taking on more reality than the past.

This family is a pleasure! I act as a kind of "au pair" girl (twenty years overage, no doubt) to the children, Fred and Vanessa, who are nine and seven. Fred performs clever chemistry experiments from a kit with his father, the two of them showing an amusing rivalry over chemicals, something I can see taking other forms later, while Vanessa studies dance, and is thinking also of the violin. She has a graceful agility with music (as I did once, somewhat), a sweet imitative flair. She could be an actress.

In many ways, it's good seeing another country. Have you enjoyed traveling abroad yourself? Sometimes I feel very superfluous, though, especially in my lonelier moments, despite the help Gerald says I am. He's kind, my brother, and you are also kind to remember an old client so.

Best wishes,  
Catherine deRochemont

Dear Mr. Wade,

What a fine letter!

I hardly expected, when I idly asked about traveling, so detailed a picture of your Italian childhood. Your memory is quite remarkable. How good that your father taught history those many years in Florence. Few children have the experience of two cultures.

I know how William, with his architect's eye, would have enjoyed the Hampstead landscape. Our town itself is built like a fishing village without the sea, houses set on the brow of a hill, and steps running down through little gaps and alleyways to Heath Street, where High Street goes on downhill, four miles, in changing names to London.

These many Hampstead names are delightful. I've taken to strolling on mornings along Well Walk, or down Flask Walk, Froggnal Lane, Church Row, to Holly Hill, visiting the in-town booksellers, chatting with people at the very top of Heath Street by Whitestone Pond. Despite our changing world there is still a peculiar ease to these well-kept Georgian houses of our section, the graveyard just inside Church Row, and the confident Sunday bells. Uproad, our Heath is a wonderful, wandering, untamed area good for walks and painting.

And I've been painting and reading a lot lately--rummaging through the fine old leather volumes Gerald inherited from our father, a library he's quite proud of, although he doesn't read much lately. Jane Austen's novels are what I'm doing now.

I enjoyed your letter--very good everything goes as usual.

Cordially, and good wishes,  
Catherine

Peculiar to hear these vague, these slightly off-putting echoes, my family analyzed, my home and library thumb-nailed, thirty years later, this September morning (and all those memories of the old house in Hampstead, before we'd found it

more sensible to live in London).  
What was she doing into my Jane Austen?  
Curious, too, how well she'd foreseen  
traits and tendencies that took years  
to surface clearly so I could see them.  
It wasn't difficult to begin  
riffing through for news of myself.  
Frankly, at this, I felt the old sibling  
jealousy rising up again, still  
Carrie the older sister, talented,  
somehow protected by her dark beauty,  
she could do anything, ways naturally  
opening up for all her adventures  
and eccentricities--I remembered, in childhood,  
an umbrella dance she took through the house  
from chairbacks to floor, sofa and stairs,  
ourselves detained and waiting to give her  
smiles and applause, and how I thought--  
she will always float through life like this,  
beautiful, easy. And I will be myself.  
And I wondered, will I ever be drained  
of bitterness?

But continuing here,  
while the impatient manager rattled away,  
I read more quickly, catching extracts  
on larger paper now.

Dear Chuck,

No, I don't mind your writing. In fact, I welcome  
this correspondence, if you won't expect miracles of me.  
And certainly please do send me that autobiography  
you're doing.

Thanks for your concern over my moods, which are better,  
now that I'm painting each day. I work afternoons, as well,  
in a small second-hand bookstore down in Hampstead, run by  
a very good-natured bachelor, in his mid-forties I'd say.  
I find it a diversion being around customers and the neatly  
arranged shelves and tables of old books. He isn't the  
way he sounds, he's quietly lecherous actually, in a  
gentlemanly, suppressed English way. He toured me around  
Keats's house, and a few nights ago we strolled again in the  
lovely, sedate Keats Grove, and I thought of that young  
man snuffed out so early, and his bravery. None of your  
tree-haunting nightingales this year, though. I can't remember  
what nightingales sound like, but there weren't any.

I keep thinking how the dead and dying must envy us--  
us, the living--how William certainly did, dying. Something  
was lost in the end, in his anger and pain. But I keep  
telling myself that the end itself doesn't matter, what  
matters is how we live every day. Too easily we forget what

we hold in our hands, forget how the saddest thing is simply to be gone.

What cases, by the way, are you tackling these days? Anything startling? You never mention them, although I realize they may, of course, require secrecy.

Best wishes,  
Catherine

...Bradley (my bookstore pal) has become more intimate lately. Rather a relief, since a real affection for me seemed to be lurking in the shadows. I've met his father now, his mother died ten years ago.

At our Hampstead cinema, which specializes in revivals, we saw Cocteau's "Orpheus," a rather strung-out and compulsive sort of movie, finally too effete, too period-piece for me, obsessed with style. Bradley thought so too. There was a display of some local artists in the lobby, and it struck me I could also show there, if I stay in England a while, or move here permanently.

...Bradley and I took a picnic lunch last Sunday to the Heath, ten minutes' walk up from Redington Road. It's truly a delightful place, with the hawthorne and late fall flowers nestled in, the paths, sudden views of Kent and Surrey to the south. What stays with me, though, is the sounds of those trees, like a kind of spirit blowing, as Bradley said, waiting there even in the quietest weather. Have you ever wanted to create something so beautiful that people would say it was there already, you simply found it for us?...

\*

No, I won't keep dwelling on Bradley et al. Thanks for your latest autobiographical section. It's getting quite long! The passages on the robberies and the archeological digs are especially effective. My only criticism is that there's so little of yourself in it. And the tone--isn't it, at its weakest, a little too wise-cracking? Sometimes it's hard to believe or understand the actual things you're reporting, or at least to realize your connection with them. After all, aren't you the real subject? Couldn't you explain your emotions about these people and places, letting us know what you're feeling at the time?

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...of this third-floor studio my brother fixed up for me, its windows overlooking our courtyard of grass and bushes, some scattered flagstone, a fine pair of cedars at the west edge. Today there's an inch of snow on them!

Gone soon, no doubt. There seem to be fewer swallows and swifts doing their arcs in the sky. I'm painting more freely and quickly from this window, a series now, I'm trying to capture, at these different times, our downhill silhouette of rooftops, so haunting in the afternoon light, especially when the angles begin to shift--catching the gray shingles, chimney-pots, leaving the courtyard down below. Sometimes I think I'm trying to find the perfect moment here that sums everything up, brings it together, some perfect moment you'll always remember and build on later. If such a thing exists? This courtyard, when you're down there, it feels so spacious and elegant, but later it's a boxed-in little area, looking so arbitrary from up here, like a toy. And at dusk, these sharpening edges of roofs, always diminishing, and the fading sunlight...

\*

...But I like your distinction--wherever you get it--between the hedgehog and the fox. Possibly I am more like the hedgehog, wanting a single answer, and you are the fox, wanting many. I hope I don't look very much like a hedgehog, though. Whereas you do, I think, look rather like a fox at times...

\*

...these amusing little dichotomies you keep tossing out to me. I don't know what to make of them. But your cheerfulness cheers me, anyway. I see you wandering the streets, watching the whole spectacle, watching yourself in it, and the puzzles around you, and yourself always humorous and secretive, a bit cynical, perhaps needing a little warmth you don't like to admit. Not that I understand you--I realize by now I'll never quite understand you. But how can you really maintain that reality is just on the surface? You say you're not looking for "clues" to anything hidden behind actions, only trying to see exactly what those actions are. Well, I can't agree with you that life is all surface, with nothing--to use your vocabulary--but these so-called questions of "fact" and questions of "relationship." Where did you pick up this funny idea, Chuck? As you know, I believe in delving to the deeper mystery. After all, you haven't explained why these "facts," as you put it, exist to begin with. Something that goes beyond these dichotomies. On these deeper questions, doesn't your philosophy lead you, finally, to a position of silence?... But I suppose you won't answer that, to be amusing.

(They went on, these letters, possibly a dozen more of them, discussing theatre, museum exhibitions, books and philosophy, her sidetrips to Canterbury and the Cotswolds, becoming warmer and signed variously "my best," "as ever," "with affection," although the tenor and thrust of the discussion began to rankle me slightly. Why was I left out? It was my house, you'd expect to be mentioned more than tangentially, I thought--and skimmed for my name.)

...Truly, my apologies for letting your letters pile up. I haven't forgotten, I was tired--no, tired isn't the answer. When nothing arrived from you these two weeks--and I certainly don't blame you for it--I began to worry, and I'm still worrying. Are you ill, or injured, are you insulted? I realize now that I've been avoiding my end of the correspondence out of fear, a simple fear of becoming too close to you, to anyone, so soon after William's death. I may be wrong to say this. But your friendship matters greatly to me, you must know that.

Anyway, spring is here. Today I'm testing a new hammock Gerald has hung for me in the courtyard--he is constantly kind and thoughtful. Though actually I prefer the yard chairs. This is a warm April, very little rain. The activity all over town is picking up. Gerald's away again--another medical convention. He's doing so well, someday he may be famous. The bushes and gardens along Redington Road are flowering finally, making a pleasant walk downtown each morning. I have quit the bookstore...

\*

...Thank you for your letter.

Last night a strange thing happened--I walked in my sleep. I had got downstairs without falling or upsetting anything, half-dreaming that I was backstage at some outdoor amphitheatre, when finally I wrenched myself awake by rattling the latch of the French doors going into the courtyard. (They wouldn't open.) I stood there dazed, with a little light coming through the windows and lace curtains into the livingroom. The long Georgian livingroom. I saw the familiar things, settee and chairs and piano, but I still believed, for a few moments, I was somewhere else. I crept upstairs like a thief!

All day today I haven't been able to shake the experience. To escape the mood, I walked up to the Heath and tried some sketching (poorly). But I felt happier than usual. There was a warmth in the air all around me, everything

seemed to be floating away--the drawing, my body, my whole visit to Hampstead. It was like a signal of some kind that I ought to be leaving England, leaving Gerald and this family who have been so perfect to me. I will always love them for that. But I need to be putting it behind me, leaving it behind...

Well, yes, she had left us behind, back there, somewhere...a warmth, sunlight, a more innocent time maybe? But the manager was shuffling Wade's papers now, easily covering the whole kitchen table with them, and I, with that uneventful packet of Carrie's letters in my hand, I saw that I'd actually been expecting some revelation (now that I'd found none) and how, for all my curiosity, I was left with that pointless embarrassment you sometimes feel when you enter a room talking, only to find the room empty; and while I stood there, foolish, not yet realizing I would keep these letters as a small legacy of emotion, as something, anyhow, left over, all I could hear was the obviously charitable voice of my sister, a sister I'd never especially loved, speaking at the outset of thirty years, before her successful marriage to Wade, her death, and now (as I hadn't guessed that morning) Wade's final disappearance. Two more on the original notepaper:

...of all  
our questionings. And now  
I see why you returned my check  
five months ago. You meant to continue  
the conversation, didn't you?  
You knew from the beginning.

But, Chuck, I ask you  
to reconsider. Or else, perhaps,  
to ask me again, much later, knowing  
this: I never can have children.  
A miscarriage settled that years ago.  
There was no reason to speak  
of it earlier. But you deserve  
a family, should have one.

And how, really, could we ever be suited? From what little we know of each other we're opposites, with different pasts and presents, attitudes, needs, philosophies, we'd be forever arguing, and I am older than you--in fact, whatever would an odd child of ours have been like? It's interesting to speculate.

I admit to longings over these months I haven't described, perhaps out of loneliness, but if you asked me over again, I'm not sure how I'd answer even then.

\*

Yes, I will come home...

I almost think this will be my last letter to you. I feel happy. Can one be entirely happy and still be writing letters about it? Is that why some great people in history have written nothing?

There's a light breeze now, the sun is making funny patterns on Gerald's terrace, or rather the leaves are, or both.

Somebody nextdoor has just gone inside to make tea. I hear a whistle. People are strolling downhill, I hear laughter beyond the wall and these trees. Someday I will look back and say, that day was magic for me. But very ordinary. I mustn't forget this. You must try not to forget this. Under the shade trees I have made my mind.