Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage

Stories by

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One time she had left him. The immediate reason was fairly trivial. He had joined a couple of the Young Offenders (Yo-yos was what he called them) in gorging up a gingerbread cake she had just made and intended to serve after a meeting that evening. Unobserved—at least by Neal and the Yo-yos—she had left the house and gone to sit in a three-sided shelter on the main street, where the city bus stopped twice a day. She had never been in there before, and she had a couple of hours to wait. She sat and read everything that had been written on or cut into those wooden walls. Various initials loved each other 4 ever. Laurie G. sucked cock. Dunk Cultis was a fag. So was Mr. Garner (Math).

Eat Shit H.W. Gange rules. Skate or Die. God hates filth. Kevin S. is Dead Meat. Amanda W. is beautiful and sweet and I wish they did not put her in jail because I miss her with all my heart. I want to fuck V.P. Ladies have to sit here and read this disgusting dirty things what you write.

Looking at this barrage of human messages—and puzzling in particular over the heartfelt, very neatly written sentence concerning Amanda W., Jinny wondered if people were alone when they wrote such things. And she went on to imagine herself sitting here or in some similar place, waiting for a bus, alone, as she would
surely be if she went ahead with the plan she was set on now. Would she be compelled to make statements on public walls?

She felt herself connected at present with the way people felt when they had to write certain things down—she was connected by her feelings of anger, of petty outrage (perhaps it was petty?), and her excitement at what she was doing to Neal, to pay him back. But the life she was carrying herself into might not give her anybody to be angry at, or anybody who owed her anything, anybody who could possibly be rewarded or punished or truly affected by what she might do. Her feelings might become of no importance to anybody but herself, and yet they would be bulging up inside her, squeezing her heart and breath.

She was not, after all, somebody people flocked to in the world. And yet she was choosy, in her own way.

The bus was still not in sight when she got up and walked home. Neal was not there. He was returning the boys to the school, and by the time he got back somebody had already arrived, early for the meeting. She told him what she’d done when she was well over it and it could be turned into a joke. In fact, it became a joke she told in company—leaving out or just describing in a general way the things she’d read on the walls—many times.

“Would you ever have thought to come after me?” she said to Neal.

“Of course. Given time.”

Then, whether he had adopted this style to make the patients more comfortable. More likely it was a transplant. Or just the way he liked to wear his hair.

You couldn’t ask him. He came from Syria or Jordan or some place where doctors kept their dignity. His courtesies were frigid.

“Now,” he said. “I do not wish to give a wrong impression.”

She went out of the air-conditioned building into the stunning glare of a late afternoon in August in Ontario. Sometimes the sun burned through, sometimes it stayed behind thin clouds—it was just as hot either way. The parked cars, the pavement, the bricks of the other buildings, seemed positively to bombard her, as if they were all separate facts thrown up in ridiculous sequence. She did not take changes of scene very well these days, she wanted everything familiar and stable. It was the same with changes of information.

She saw the van detach itself from its place at the curb and make its way down the street to pick her up. It was a light-blue, shimmery, sickening color. Lighter blue where the rust spots had been painted over. Its stickers said I KNOW I DRIVE A WRECK, BUT YOU SHOULD SEE MY HOUSE, AND HONOUR THY MOTHER—EARTH, and (this was more recent) USE PESTICIDE, KILL WEEDS, PROMOTE CANCER.

Neal came around to help her.

“She’s in the van,” he said. There was an eager note in his voice that registered vaguely as a warning or a plea. A buzz around him, a tension, that told Jinny it wasn’t time to give him her news, if news was what you’d call it. When Neal was around other people, even one person other than Jinny, his behavior changed, becoming more animated, enthusiastic, ingratiating. Jinny was not bothered by that anymore—they had been together for twenty-one years. And she herself changed—as a reaction, she used to think—becoming more reserved and slightly ironic. Some masquerades
Floating Bridge

were necessary, or just too habitual to be dropped. Like Neal’s antique appearance—the bandanna headband, the rough gray ponytail, the little gold earring that caught the light like the gold rims ’round his teeth, and his shaggy outlaw clothes.

While she had been seeing the doctor, he had been picking up the girl who was going to help them with their life now. He knew her from the Correctional Institute for Young Offenders, where he was a teacher and she had worked in the kitchen. The Correctional Institute was just outside the town where they lived, about twenty miles away from here. The girl had quit her kitchen job a few months ago and taken a job looking after a farm household where the mother was sick. Somewhere not far from this larger town. Luckily she was now free.

“What happened to the woman?” Jinny had said. “Did she die?”

Neal said, “She went into the hospital.”

“Same deal.”

They had had to make a lot of practical arrangements in a fairly short time. Clear the front room of their house of all the files, the newspapers and magazines containing relevant articles that had not yet been put on disk—these had filled the shelves lining the room up to the ceiling. The two computers as well, the old typewriters, the printer. All this had to find a place—temporarily, though nobody said so—in somebody else’s house. The front room would become the sickroom.

Jinny had said to Neal that he could keep one computer, at least, in the bedroom. But he had refused. He did not say, but she understood, that he believed there would not be time for it.

Neal had spent nearly all his spare time, in the years she had been with him, organizing and carrying out campaigns. Not just political campaigns (those too) but efforts to preserve historic buildings and bridges and cemeteries, to keep trees from being cut down both along the town streets and in isolated patches of old forest, to save rivers from poisonous runoff and choice land from developers and the local population from casinos. Letters and petitions were always being written, government departments lobbied, posters distributed, protests organized. The front room was the scene of rages of indignation (which gave people a lot of satisfaction, Jinny thought) and confused propositions and arguments, and Neal’s nervous buoyancy. And now that it was suddenly emptied, it made her think of when she first walked into the house, straight from her parents’ split-level with the swag curtains, and thought of all those shelves filled with books, wooden shutters on the windows, and those beautiful Middle Eastern rugs she always forgot the name of, on the varnished floor. The Canaletto print she had bought for her room at college on the one bare wall. Lord Mayor’s Day on the Thames. She had actually put that up, though she never noticed it anymore.

They rented a hospital bed—they didn’t really need it yet, but it was better to get one while you could because they were often in short supply. Neal thought of everything. He hung up some heavy curtains that were discards from a friend’s family room. They had a pattern of tankards and horse brasses and Jinny thought them very ugly. But she knew now that there comes a time when ugly and beautiful serve pretty much the same purpose, when anything you look at is just a peg to hang the unruly sensations of your body on, and the bits and pieces of your mind.

She was forty-two, and until recently she had looked younger than her age. Neal was sixteen years older than she was. So she had thought that in the natural course of things she would be in the position he was in now, and she had sometimes worried about how she would manage it. Once when she was holding his hand in bed before they went to sleep, his warm and present hand, she had thought that she would hold, or touch this hand, at least once, when he was dead. And she would not be able to believe in that fact. The fact of his being dead and powerless. No matter how
long this state had been foreseen, she would not be able to credit it. She would not be able to believe that, deep down, he had not some knowledge of this moment. Of her. To think of him not having that brought on a kind of emotional vertigo, the sense of a horrid drop.

And yet—an excitement. The unspeakable excitement you feel when a galloping disaster promises to release you from all responsibility for your own life. Then for shame you must compose yourself and stay very quiet.

"Where are you going?" he had said, when she withdrew her hand.

"No place. Just turning over."

She didn’t know if Neal had any such feeling, now that it had happened to be her. She had asked him if he had got used to the idea yet. He shook his head.

She said, "Me neither."

Then she said, "Just don’t let the Grief Counselors in. They could be hanging around already. Wanting to make a preemptive strike."

"Don’t harrow me," he said, in a voice of rare anger.

"Sorry."

"You don’t always have to take the lighter view."

"I know," she said. But the fact was that with so much going on and present events grabbing so much of her attention, she found it hard to take any view at all.

"This is Helen," Neal said. "This is who is going to look after us from now on. She won’t stand for any nonsense, either."

"Good for her," said Jinny. She put out her hand, once she was sitting down. But the girl might not have seen it, low down between the two front seats.

Or she might not have known what to do. Neal had said that she came from an unbelievable situation, an absolutely barbaric fam-
ily. Things had gone on that you could not imagine going on in this day and age. An isolated farm, a dead mother and a mentally deficient daughter and a tyrannical, deranged incestuous old father, and the two girl children. Helen the older one, who had run away at the age of fourteen after beating up on the old man. She had been sheltered by a neighbor who phoned the police, and the police had come and got the younger sister and made both children wards of the Children’s Aid. The old man and his daughter—that is, their mother and their father—were both placed in a Psychiatric Hospital. Foster parents took Helen and her sister, who were mentally and physically normal. They were sent to school and had a miserable time there, having to be put into the first grade. But they both learned enough to be employable.

When Neal had started the van up the girl decided to speak.

"You picked a hot enough day to be out in," she said. It was the sort of thing she might have heard people say to start a conversation. She spoke in a hard, flat tone of antagonism and distrust, but even that, Jinny knew by now, should not be taken personally. It was just the way some people sounded—particularly country people—in this part of the world.

"If you’re hot you can turn the air conditioner on," Neal said. "We’ve got the old-fashioned kind—just roll down all the windows."

The turn they made at the next corner was one Jinny had not expected.

"We have to go to the hospital," Neal said. "Don’t panic. Helen’s sister works there and she’s got something Helen wants to pick up. Isn’t that right, Helen?"

Helen said, "Yeah. My good shoes."

"Helen’s good shoes," Neal looked up at the mirror. "Miss Helen Rosie’s good shoes."

"My name’s not Helen Rosie," said Helen. It seemed as if she was saying this not for the first time.
"I just call you that because you have such a rosy face," Neal said.

"I have not."

"You do. Doesn’t she, Jinny? Jinny agrees with me, you’ve got a rosy face. Miss Helen Rosie-face."

The girl did have a tender pink skin. Jinny had noticed as well her nearly white lashes and eyebrows, her blond baby-wool hair, and her mouth, which had an oddly naked look, not just the normal look of a mouth without lipstick. A fresh-out-of-the-egg look was what she had, as if there was one layer of skin still missing, and one final growth of coarser grown-up hair. She must be susceptible to rashes and infections, quick to show scrapes and bruises, to get sores around the mouth and sties between her white lashes. Yet she didn’t look frail. Her shoulders were broad, she was lean but large-framed. She didn’t look stupid, either, though she had a head-on expression like a calf’s or a deer’s. Everything must be right at the surface with her, her attention and the whole of her personality coming straight at you, with an innocent and—to Jinny—a disagreeable power.

They were going up the long hill to the hospital—the same place where Jinny had had her operation and undergone the first bout of chemotherapy. Across the road from the hospital buildings there was a cemetery. This was a main road and whenever they used to pass this way—in the old days when they came to this town just for shopping or the rare diversion of a movie—Jinny would say something like “What a discouraging view” or “This is carrying convenience too far.”

Now she kept quiet. The cemetery didn’t bother her. She realized it didn’t matter.

Neal must realize that too. He said into the mirror, “How many dead people do you think there are in that cemetery?”

Helen didn’t say anything for a moment. Then—rather sullenly—“I don’t know.”

“They’re all dead in there.”

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“He got me on that too,” said Jinny. “That’s a Grade Four—level joke.”

Helen didn’t answer. She might never have made it to Grade Four.

They drove up to the main doors of the hospital, then on Helen’s directions swung around to the back. People in hospital dressing gowns, some trailing their IV’s, had come outside to smoke.

“You see that bench,” said Jinny. “Oh, never mind, we’re past it now. It has a sign—THANK YOU FOR NOT SMOKING. But it’s out there for people to sit down on when they wander out of the hospital. And why do they come out? To smoke. Then are they not supposed to sit down? I don’t understand it.”

“Helen’s sister works in the laundry,” Neal said. “What’s her name, Helen? What’s your sister’s name?”


They were in a parking lot at the back of a wing of the hospital. There were no doors on the ground floor except a loading door, shut tight. On the other three floors there were doors opening onto a fire escape.

Helen was getting out.

“You know how to find your way in?” Neal said.

“Easy.”

The fire escape stopped four or five feet above the ground but she was able to grab hold of the railing and swing herself up, maybe wedging a foot against a loose brick, in a matter of seconds. Jinny could not tell how she did it. Neal was laughing.

“Go get ’em, girl,” he said.

“Isn’t there any other way?” said Jinny.

Helen had run up to the third floor and disappeared.

“If there is she ain’t a-gonna use it,” Neal said.

“Full of gumption,” said Jinny with an effort.

“Otherwise she’d never have broken out,” he said. “She needed all the gumption she could get.”
Jinny was wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat. She took it off and began to fan herself.

Neal said, “Sorry. There doesn’t seem to be any shade to park in. She’ll be out of there fast.”

“Do I look too startling?” Jinny said. He was used to her asking that.

“You’re fine. There’s nobody around here anyway.”

“The man I saw today wasn’t the same one I’d seen before. I think this one was more important. The funny thing was he had a scalp that looked about like mine. Maybe he does it to put the patients at ease.”

She meant to go on and tell him what the doctor had said, but he said, “That sister of hers isn’t as bright as she is. Helen sort of looks after her and bosses her around. This business with the shoes—that’s typical. Isn’t she capable of buying her own shoes? She hasn’t even got her own place—she still lives with the people who fostered them, out in the country somewhere.”

Jinny did not continue. The fanning took up most of her energy. He watched the building.

“I hope to Christ they didn’t haul her up for getting in the wrong way,” he said. “Breaking the rules. She is just not a gal for whom the rules were made.”

After several minutes he let out a whistle.

“Here she comes now. Here-she-comes. Headin’ down the homestretch. Will-she-will-she-will-she have enough sense to stop before she jumps? Look before she leaps? Will-she-will-she—nope. Nope. Unh- unh.”

Helen had no shoes in her hands. She jumped into the van and banged the door shut and said, “Stupid idiots. First I get up there and this asshole gets in my way. Where’s your tag? You gotta have a tag. You can’t come in here without a tag. I seen you come in off the fire escape, you can’t do that. Okay, okay, I gotta see my sister. You can’t see her now she’s not on her break. I know that, that’s why I come in off the fire escape I just need to pick something up. I don’t want to talk to her I’m not goin’ to take up her time I just gotta pick something up. Well you can’t. Well I can. Well you can’t. And then I start to holler Lois, Lois. All their machines goin’ it’s two hundred degrees in there sweat runnin’ all down their faces stuff goin’ by and Lois, Lois. I don’t know where she is can she hear me or not. But she comes tearing out and as soon as she sees me—Oh, shit. Oh shit, she says, I went and forgot. She forgot to bring my shoes. I phoned her up last night and reminded her but there she is, oh, shit, she forgot. I could’ve beat her up. Now you get out, he says. Go downstairs and out. Not by the fire escape because it’s illegal. Piss on him.”

Neal was laughing and laughing and shaking his head.

“So that’s what she did? Left your shoes behind?”

“Out at June’s and Matt’s.”

“What a tragedy.”

Jinny said, “Could we just start driving now and get some air? I don’t think fanning is doing a lot of good.”

“Fine,” said Neal. He backed and turned around, and once more they were passing the familiar front of the hospital, with the same or different smokers parading by in their dreary hospital clothes with their IV’s. “Helen will just have to tell us where to go.”

He called into the back seat, “Helen?”

“What?”

“Which way do we turn now to get to those people’s place?”

“What people’s?”

“Where your sister lives. Where your shoes are. Tell us how to get to their place.”

“We’re not goin’ to their place so I’m not telling you.”

Neal turned back the way they had come.

“I’m just driving this way till you can get your directions straight. Would it work better if I went out to the highway? Or in to the middle of town? Where should I start from?”

“Not starting anywhere. Not going.”
van. A surprisingly strong throw. It hit Jinny’s door just below her arm and she gave a light scream. Helen thrust her head out the back window.

“You want your arm in a sling?”

The child began to howl. He hadn’t bargained on Helen, and he might not have bargained on the Popsicle’s being gone for good.

Back in the van, Helen spoke to Neal.

“You’re just wasting your gas.”

“North of town?” Neal said. “South of town? North south east west, Helen tell us which is best.”

“I already told you. You done all for me you are goin’ to do today.”

“And I told you. We’re going to get those shoes for you before we head home.”

No matter how strictly he spoke, Neal was smiling. On his face there was an expression of conscious, but helpless, silliness. Signs of an invasion of bliss. Neal’s whole being was invaded, he was brimming with silly bliss.

“You’re just stubborn,” Helen said.

“You’ll see how stubborn.”

“I am too. I’m just as stubborn as what you are.”

It seemed to Jinny that she could feel the blaze of Helen’s cheek, which was so close to hers. And she could certainly hear the girl’s breathing, hoarse and thick with excitement and showing some trace of asthma. Helen’s presence was like that of a domestic cat that should never be brought along in any vehicle, being too high-strung to have sense, too apt to spring between the seats.

The sun had burned through the clouds again. It was still high and brassi in the sky.

Neal swung the car onto a street lined with heavy old trees, and somewhat more respectable houses.

“Better here?” he said to Jinny. “More shade for you?” He spoke in a lowered, confidential tone, as if what was going on with the girl could be set aside for a moment, it was all nonsense.
“Taking the scenic route,” he said, pitching his voice again towards the back seat. “Taking the scenic route today, courtesy of Miss Helen Rosie-face.”

“Maybe we ought to just go on,” Jinny said. “Maybe we ought to just go on home.”

Helen broke in, almost shouting. “I don’t want to stop nobody from getting home.”

“Then you can just give me some directions,” Neal said. He was trying hard to get his voice under control, to get some ordinary sobriety into it. And to banish the smile, which kept slipping back in place no matter how often he swallowed it. “Just let’s go to the place and do our errand and head home.”

Half a slow block more, and Helen groaned.

“If I got to I guess I got to,” she said.

It was not very far that they had to go. They passed a subdivision, and Neal, speaking again to Jinny, said, “No creek that I can see. No estates, either.”

Jinny said, “What?”

“Silver Creek Estates. On the sign.”

He must have read a sign that she had not seen.

“Turn,” said Helen.

“Left or right?”

“At the wrecker’s.”

They went past a wrecking yard, with the car bodies only partly hidden by a sagging tin fence. Then up a hill and past the gates to a gravel pit that was a great cavity in the center of the hill.

“That’s them. That’s their mailbox up ahead,” Helen called out with some importance, and when they got close enough she read out the name.

“Matt and June Bergson. That’s them.”

A couple of dogs came barking down the short drive. One was large and black and one small and tan-colored, puppylike. They bumbled around at the wheels and Neal sounded the horn. Then another dog—this one more sly and purposeful, with a slick coat and bluish spots—slid out of the long grass.

Helen called to them to shut up, to lay down, to piss off.

“You don’t need to bother about any of them but Pinto,” she said. “Them other two just cowards.”

They stopped in a wide, ill-defined space where some gravel had been laid down. On one side was a barn or implement shed, tin-covered, and over to one side of it, on the edge of a cornfield, an abandoned farmhouse from which most of the bricks had been removed, showing dark wooden walls. The house inhabited nowadays was a trailer, nicely fixed up with a deck and an awning, and a flower garden behind what looked like a toy fence. The trailer and its garden looked proper and tidy, while the rest of the property was littered with things that might have a purpose or might just be left around to rust or rot.

Helen had jumped out and was cousing the dogs. But they kept on running past her, and jumping and barking at the car, until a man came out of the shed and called to them. The threats and names he called were not intelligible to Jinny, but the dogs quieted down.

Jinny put on her hat. All this time she had been holding it in her hand.

“They just got to show off,” said Helen.

Neal had got out too and was negotiating with the dogs in a resolute way. The man from the shed came towards them. He wore a purple T-shirt that was wet with sweat, clinging to his chest and stomach. He was fat enough to have breasts and you could see his navel pushing out like a pregnant woman’s. It rode on his belly like a giant pincushion.

Neal went to meet him with his hand out. The man slapped his own hand on his work pants, laughed and shook Neal’s. Jinny
could not hear what they said. A woman came out of the trailer and opened the toy gate and latched it behind her.

“Lois went and forgot she was supposed to bring my shoes,” Helen called to her. “I phoned her up and everything, but she went and forgot anyway, so Mr. Lockyer brought me out to get them.”

The woman was fat too, though not as fat as her husband. She wore a pink muumuu with Aztec suns on it and her hair was streaked with gold. She moved across the gravel with a composed and hospitable air. Neal turned and introduced himself, then brought her to the van and introduced Jinny.

“Glad to meet you,” the woman said. “You’re the lady that isn’t very well?”

“I’m okay,” said Jinny.

“Well, now you’re here you better come inside. Come in out of this heat.”

“Oh, we just dropped by,” said Neal.

The man had come closer. “We got the air-conditioning in there,” he said. He was inspecting the van and his expression was genial but disparaging.

“We just came to pick up the shoes,” Jinny said.

“You got to do more than that now you’re here,” said the woman—June—laughing as if the idea of their not coming in was a scandalous joke. “You come in and rest yourself.”

“We wouldn’t like to disturb your supper,” Neal said.

“We had it already,” said Matt. “We eat early.”

“But all kinds of chili left,” said June. “You have to come in and help clean up that chili.”

Jinny said, “Oh, thank you. But I don’t think I could eat anything. I don’t feel like eating anything when it’s this hot.”

“Then you better drink something instead,” June said. “We got ginger ale, Coke. We got peach schnapps.”

“Beer,” Matt said to Neal. “You like a Blue?”

Jinny waved Neal to come close to her window.

“I can’t do it,” she said. “Just tell them I can’t.”

“You know you’ll hurt their feelings,” he whispered. “They’re trying to be nice.”

“But I can’t. Maybe you could go.”

He bent closer. “You know what it looks like if you don’t. It looks like you think you’re too good for them.”

“You go.”

“You’d be okay once you got inside. The air-conditioning really would do you good.”

Jinny shook her head.

Neal straightened up.

“Jinny thinks she better just stay and rest here where it’s in the shade.”

June said, “But she’s welcome to rest in the house—”

“I wouldn’t mind a Blue, actually,” Neal said. He turned back to Jinny with a hard smile. He seemed to her desolate and angry.

“You sure you’ll be okay?” he said for them to hear. “Sure? You don’t mind if I go in for a little while?”

“I’ll be fine,” said Jinny.

He put one hand on Helen’s shoulder and one on June’s shoulder, walking them companionably towards the trailer. Matt smiled at Jinny curiously, and followed.

This time when he called the dogs to come after him Jinny could make out their names.

Goober. Sally. Pinto.

The van was parked under a row of willow trees. These trees were big and old, but their leaves were thin and gave a wavering shade. But to be alone was a great relief.

Earlier today, driving along the highway from the town where they lived, they had stopped at a roadside stand and bought some
early apples. Jinny got one out of the bag at her feet and took a small bite—more or less to see if she could taste and swallow and hold it in her stomach. She needed something to counteract the thought of chili, and Matt’s prodigious navel.

It was all right. The apple was firm and tart, but not too tart, and if she took small bites and chewed seriously she could manage it.

She’d seen Neal like this—or something like this—a few times before. It would be over some boy at the school. A mention of the name in an offhand, even belittling way. A mushy look, an apologetic yet somehow defiant bit of giggling.

But that was never anybody she had to have around the house, and it could never come to anything. The boy’s time would be up, he’d go away.

So would this time be up. It shouldn’t matter.

She had to wonder if it would have mattered less yesterday than it did today.

She got out of the van, leaving the door open so that she could hang on to the inside handle. Anything on the outside was too hot to hang on to for any length of time. She had to see if she was steady. Then she walked a little in the shade. Some of the willow leaves were already going yellow. Some were lying on the ground. She looked out from the shade at all the things there were around the yard.

A dented delivery truck with both headlights gone and the name on the side painted out. A baby’s stroller that the dogs had chewed the seat out of, a load of firewood dumped but not stacked, a pile of huge tires, a great number of plastic jugs and some oil cans and pieces of old lumber and a couple of orange plastic tarps crumpled up by the wall of the shed. In the shed itself there was a heavy GM truck and a small beat-up Mazda truck and a garden tractor, as well as implements whole or broken and loose wheels, handles, rods that would be useful or not useful depending on the uses you could imagine. What a lot of things people could find themselves in charge of. As she had been in charge of all those photographs, official letters, minutes of meetings, newspaper clippings, a thousand categories that she had devised and was putting on disk when she had to go into chemo and everything got taken away. It might end up being thrown out. As all this might, if Matt died.

The cornfield was the place she wanted to get to. The corn was higher than her head now, maybe higher than Neal’s head—she wanted to get into the shade of it. She made her way across the yard with this one thought in mind. The dogs thank God must have been taken inside.

There was no fence. The cornfield just petered out into the yard. She walked straight ahead into it, onto the narrow path between two rows. The leaves flapped into her face and against her arms like streamers of oilcloth. She had to remove her hat so they would not knock it off. Each stalk had its cob, like a baby in a shroud. There was a strong, almost sickening smell of vegetable growth, of green starch and hot sap.

What she’d thought she’d do, once she got in here, was lie down. Lie down in the shade of these large coarse leaves and not come out till she heard Neal calling her. Perhaps not even then. But the rows were too close together to permit that, and she was too busy thinking about something to take the trouble. She was too angry.

It was not about anything that had happened recently. She was remembering how a group of people had been sitting around one evening on the floor of her living room—or meeting room—playing one of those serious psychological games. One of those games that were supposed to make a person more honest and resilient. You had to say just what came into your mind as you
looked at each of the others. And a white-haired woman named Addie Norton, a friend of Neal’s, had said, “I hate to tell you this, Jinny, but whenever I look at you all I can think of is—Nice Nellie.”

Jinny didn’t remember making any response at the time. Maybe you weren’t supposed to. What she said, now, in her head, was “Why do you say you hate to say that? Haven’t you noticed that whenever people say they hate to say something, they actually love to say it? Don’t you think since we’re being so honest we could at least start with that?”

It was not the first time she had made this mental reply. And mentally pointed out to Neal what a farce that game was. For when it came Addie’s turn, did anyone dare say anything unpleasant to her? Oh, no. “Feisty,” they said or “Honest as a dash of cold water.” They were scared of her, that was all.

She said, “Dash of cold water,” out loud, now, in a stinging voice.

Other people had said kinder things to her. “Flower child” or “Madonna of the springs.” She happened to know that whoever said that meant “Manon of the Springs,” but she offered no correction. She was outraged at having to sit there and listen to people’s opinions of her. Everyone was wrong. She was not timid or acquiescent or natural or pure.

When you died, of course, these wrong opinions were all there was left.

While this was going through her mind she had done the easiest thing you could do in a cornfield—got lost. She had stepped over one row and then another and probably got turned around. She tried going back the way she had come, but it obviously wasn’t the right way. There were clouds over the sun again so she couldn’t tell where west was. And she had not known which direction she was going when she entered the field, so that would not have helped anyway. She stood still and heard nothing but the corn whispering away, and some distant traffic.

Her heart was pounding just like any heart that had years and years of life ahead of it.

Then a door opened, she heard the dogs barking and Matt yelling and the door slammed shut. She pushed her way through stalks and leaves in the direction of that noise.

And it turned out that she had not gone far at all. She had been stumbling around in one small corner of the field all the time.

Matt waved at her and warned off the dogs.

“Don’t be scared of them, don’t be scurred,” he called. He was going towards the car just as she was, though from another direction. As they got closer to each other he spoke in a lower, perhaps more intimate voice.

“You shoulda come and knocked on the door.”

He thought that she had gone into the corn to have a pee.

“I just told your husband I’d come out and make sure you’re okay.”

Jinny said, “I’m fine. Thank you.” She got into the van but left the door open. He might be insulted if she closed it. Also, she felt too weak.

“He was sure hungry for that chili.”

Who was he talking about?

Neal.

She was trembling and sweating and there was a hum in her head, as on a wire strung between her ears.

“I could bring you some out if you’d like it.”

She shook her head, smiling. He lifted up the bottle of beer in his hand—he seemed to be saluting her.

“Drink?”

She shook her head again, still smiling.

“Not even drink of water? We got good water here.”

“No thanks.”

If she turned her head and looked at his purple navel, she would gag.

“You know, there was this fellow,” he said, in a changed voice.
Floating Bridge

A leisurely, chuckling voice. “There was a fellow going out the door and he’s got a jar of horseradish in one hand. So his dad says to him, Where you goin’ with that horseradish?

“Well I’m goin’ to get a horse, he says.

“You’re not goin’ to catch a horse with no horseradish.

“Comes back next morning, nicest horse you ever want to see. Lookit my horse here. Puts it in the barn.”

I do not wish to give the wrong impression. We must not get carried away with optimism. But it looks as if we have some unexpected results here.

“Next day the dad sees him goin’ out again. Roll of duct tape under his arm. Where you goin’ now?

“Well I heard my mom say she’d like a nice duck for dinner.

“You damn fool, you didn’t think you’re goin’ to catch a duck with duct tape?

“Wait and see.

“Comes back next morning, nice fat duck under his arm.”

It looks as if there has been a very significant shrinkage. What we hoped for of course but frankly we did not expect it. And I do not mean that the battle is over, just that this is a favorable sign.

“Dad don’t know what to say. Just don’t know what to say about it.

“Next night, very next night, sees his son goin’ out the door with big bunch of branches in his hand.”

Quite a favorable sign. We do not know that there may not be more trouble in the future but we can say we are cautiously optimistic.

“What’s them branches you got in your hand?

“Them’s pussy willows.

“Okay, Dad says. You just hang on a minute.

“You just hang on a minute, I’m gettin’ my hat. I’m gettin’ my hat and I’m comin’ with you!”

“It’s too much,” Jinny said out loud.

Talking in her head to the doctor.

“What?” said Matt. An aggrieved and babyish look had come over his face while he was still chuckling. “What’s the matter now?”

Jinny was shaking her head, squeezing her hand over her mouth.

“It was just a joke,” he said. “I never meant to offend you.”

Jinny said, “No, no. I— No.”

“Never mind, I’m goin’ in. I’m not goin’ to take up no more of your time.” And he turned his back on her, not even bothering to call to the dogs.

She had not said anything like that to the doctor. Why should she? Nothing was his fault. But it was true. It was too much. What he had said made everything harder. It made her have to go back and start this year all over again. It removed a certain low-grade freedom. A dull, protecting membrane that she had not even known was there had been pulled away and left her raw.

Matt’s thinking she had gone into the cornfield to pee had made her realize that she actually wanted to. She got out of the van, stood cautiously, and spread her legs and lifted her wide cotton skirt. She had taken to wearing big skirts and no panties this summer because her bladder was no longer under perfect control.

A dark stream trickled away from her through the gravel. The sun was down now, evening was coming on. A clear sky overhead, the clouds had vanished.

One of the dogs barked halfheartedly, to say that somebody was coming, but it was somebody they knew. They had not come over to bother her when she got out—they were used to her now. They went running out to meet whoever it was without any alarm or excitement.

It was a boy, or young man, riding a bicycle. He swerved towards the van and Jinny went round to meet him, a hand on the cooled-down but still-warm metal to support herself. When he spoke to her she did not want it to be across her puddle. And
maybe to distract him from even looking on the ground for such a
thing, she spoke first.
She said, “Hello—are you delivering something?”
He laughed, springing off the bike and dropping it to the
ground, all in one motion.
“T’ll get home,” he said. “I’m just getting home from work.”
She thought that she should explain who she was, tell him how
she came to be there and for how long. But all this was too difficult.
Hanging on to the van like this, she must look like somebody who
had just come out of a wreck.
“Yes, I live here,” he said. “But I work in a restaurant in town.
I work at Sammy’s.”
A waiter. The bright white shirt and black pants were waiter’s
clothes. And he had a waiter’s air of patience and alertness.
“I’m Jim, Lockyer,” she said. “Helen. Helen is—”
“Okay, I know,” he said. “You’re who Helen’s going to work
for. Where’s Helen?”
“In the house.”
“Didn’t anybody ask you in, then?”
He was about Helen’s age, she thought. Seventeen or eighteen.
Slim and graceful and cocky, with an ingenuous enthusiasm that
would probably not get him as far as he hoped. She had seen a few
like that who ended up as Young Offenders.
He seemed to understand things, though. He seemed to under-
stand that she was exhausted and in some kind of muddle.
“June in there too?” he said. “June’s my mom.”
His hair was colored like June’s, gold streaks over dark. He
wore it rather long, and parted in the middle, flopping off to either
side.
“Matt too?” he said.
“And my husband. Yes.”
“That’s a shame.”
“Oh, no,” she said. “They asked me. I said I’d rather wait out
here.”
Neal used sometimes to bring home a couple of his Yo-yos, to
be supervised doing lawn work or painting or basic carpentry. He
thought it was good for them, to be accepted into somebody’s
home. Jim had flirted with them occasionally, in a way that she
could never be blamed for. Just a gentle tone, a way of making
them aware of her soft skirts and her scent of apple soap. That
wasn’t why Neal had stopped bringing them. He had been told it
was out of order.
“So how long have you been waiting?”
“I don’t know,” Jim said. “I don’t wear a watch.”
“Is that right?” he said. “I don’t either. I don’t hardly ever meet
another person that doesn’t wear a watch. Did you never wear
one?”
She said, “No. Never.”
“Me neither. Never ever. I just never wanted to. I don’t know
why. Never ever wanted to. Like, I always just seemed to know
what time it was anyway. Within a couple minutes. Five min-
utes the most. And I know where all the clocks are, too. I’m rid-
ing in to work, and I think I’ll check, you know, just be sure what
time it is really. And I know the first place I can see the courthouse
clock in between the buildings. Always not more than three/four
minutes out. Sometimes one of the diners asks me, do you know
the time, and I just tell them. They don’t even notice I’m not
wearing a watch. I go and check as soon as I can, clock in the
kitchen. But I never once had to go in there and tell them any dif-
f erent.”
“I’ve been able to do that too, once in a while,” Jim said. “I
guess you do develop a sense, if you never wear a watch.”
“Yes, you really do.”
“So what time do you think it is now?”
He laughed. He looked at the sky.
“Getting close to eight. Six/seven minutes to eight? I got an
advantage, though. I know when I got off of work and then I went
to get some cigarettes at the 7-Eleven and then I talked to some
And if I was to turn the lights on,” he said, “then the sky would go dark and everything would go dark and you wouldn’t be able to see where you were. We just give it a little while more, then when it gets we can see the stars, that’s when we turn the lights on.”

The sky was like very faintly colored red or yellow or green or blue glass, depending on which part of it you looked at.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay. I won’t. June’s probably telling their fortunes in there anyway. She can read hands.”

“Can she?”

“Sure. She goes in the restaurant a couple of times a week. Tea too. Tea leaves.”

He picked up his bike and wheeled it out of the way of the van. Then he looked in through the driver’s window.

“Left the keys in,” he said. “You want me to drive you home or what? I can put my bike in the back. Your husband can get Matt to drive him and Helen when they get ready. Or if it don’t look like Matt can, June can. June’s my mom but Matt’s not my dad. You don’t drive, do you?”

“No,” said Jinny. She had not driven for months.

“No. I didn’t think so. Okay then? You want me to? Okay?”

“This is just a road I know. It’ll get you there as soon as the highway.”

They had not driven past the subdivision. In fact they had headed the other way, taking a road that seemed to circle the gravel pit. At least they were going west now, towards the brightest part of the sky. Ricky—that was what he’d told her his name was—had not yet turned the car lights on.

“No danger meeting anybody,” he said. “I don’t think I ever met a single car on this road, ever. See—not so many people even know this road is here.”
Floating Bridge

miles, and it goes straight from one end to the other. There isn’t even any roads that cuts across it. This is the only road I know of through the Borneo Swamp.”

“Borneo Swamp?” Jinny repeated.

“That’s what it’s supposed to be called.”

“There is an island called Borneo,” she said. “It’s halfway round the world.”

“I don’t know about that. All I ever heard of was just the Borneo Swamp.”

There was a strip of dark grass now, growing down the middle of the road.

“Time for the lights,” he said. He switched them on and they were in a tunnel in the sudden night.

“Once I did that,” he said. “I turned the lights on like that and there was this porcupine. It was just sitting there in the middle of the road. It was sitting straight up kind of on its hind legs and looking right at me. Like some little old man. It was scared to death and it couldn’t move. I could see its little old teeth chattering.”

She thought, This is where he brings his girls.

“So what do I do? I tried beeping the horn and it still didn’t do nothing. I didn’t feel like getting out and chasing it. He was scared, but he still was a porcupine and he could let fly. So I just parked there. I had time. When I turned the lights on again he was gone.”

Now the branches really did reach close and brush against the door, but if there were flowers she could not see them.

“I am going to show you something,” he said. “I’m going to show you something like I bet you never seen before.”

If this was happening back in her old, normal life, it was possible that she might now begin to be frightened. If she was back in her old, normal life she would not be here at all.

“You’re going to show me a porcupine,” she said.

“Nope. Not that. Something there’s not even as many of as there is porcupines. Least as far as I know there’s not.”

Maybe half a mile farther on he turned off the lights.

“See the stars?” he said. “I told you. Stars.”

He stopped the van. Everywhere there was at first a deep silence. Then this silence was filled in, at the edges, by some kind of humming that could have been faraway traffic, and little noises that passed before you properly heard them, that could have been made by night-feeding animals or birds or bats.

“Come in here in the springtime,” he said, “you wouldn’t hear nothing but the frogs. You’d think you were going deaf with the frogs.”

He opened the door on his side.

“Now. Get out and walk a ways with me.”

She did as she was told. She walked in one of the wheel tracks, he in the other. The sky seemed to be lighter ahead and there was a different sound—something like mild and rhythmical conversation.

The road turned to wood and the trees on either side were gone.

“Walk out on it,” he said. “Go on.”

He came close and touched her waist as if he was guiding her. Then he took his hand away, left her to walk on these planks which were like the deck of a boat. Like the deck of a boat they rose and fell. But it wasn’t a movement of waves, it was their footsteps, his and hers, that caused this very slight rising and falling of the boards beneath them.

“Now do you know where you are?” he said.

“On a dock?” she said.

“On a bridge. This is a floating bridge.”

Now she could make it out—the plank roadway just a few inches above the still water. He drew her over to the side and they looked down. There were stars riding on the water.

“The water’s very dark,” she said. “I mean—it’s dark not just because it’s night?”

“It’s dark all the time,” he said proudly. “That’s because it’s a swamp. It’s got the same stuff in it tea has got and it looks like black tea.”
She could see the shoreline, and the reed beds. Water in the reeds, lapping water, was what was making that sound.

"Tannin," he said, sounding the word proudly as if he’d hauled it up out of the dark.

The slight movement of the bridge made her imagine that all the trees and the reed beds were set on saucers of earth and the road was a floating ribbon of earth and underneath it all was water. And the water seemed so still, but it could not really be still because if you tried to keep your eye on one reflected star, you saw how it winked and changed shape and slid from sight. Then it was back again—but maybe not the same one.

It was not until this moment that she realized she didn’t have her hat. She not only didn’t have it on, she hadn’t had it with her in the car. She had not been wearing it when she got out of the car to pee and when she began to talk to Ricky. She had not been wearing it when she sat in the car with her head back against the seat and her eyes closed, when Matt was telling his joke. She must have dropped it in the cornfield, and in her panic left it there.

When she had been scared of seeing the mound of Matt’s navel with the purple shirt plastered over it, he had not minded looking at her bleak knob.

"It’s too bad the moon isn’t up yet," Ricky said. "It’s really nice here when the moon is up."

"It’s nice now, too."

He slipped his arms around her as if there was no question at all about what he was doing and he could take all the time he wanted to do it. He kissed her mouth. It seemed to her that this was the first time ever that she had participated in a kiss that was an event in itself. The whole story, all by itself. A tender prologue, an efficient pressure, a wholehearted probing and receiving, a lingering thanks, and a drawing away satisfied.

"Oh," he said. "Oh."

He turned her around, and they walked back the way they had come.

"So was that the first you ever been on a floating bridge?"
She said yes it was.
"And now that’s what you’re going to get to drive over."
He took her hand and swung it as if he would like to toss it.
"And that’s the first time ever I kissed a married woman."
"You’ll probably kiss a lot more of them," she said. "Before you’re done."

He sighed. "Yeah," he said. Amazed and sobered by the thought of what lay ahead of him. "Yeah, I probably will."

Jinny had a sudden thought of Neal, back on dry land. Neal giddy and doubtful, opening his hand to the gaze of the woman with the bright-streaked hair, the fortune teller. Rocking on the edge of his future. No matter.

What she felt was a lighthearted sort of compassion, almost like laughter. A swish of tender hilarity, getting the better of all her sores and hollows, for the time given.