

JACK'S TRIBE

She was a pretty girl who dated him through high school and never planned on college because the option was not presented to her and her grades though acceptable were not, in practicality, encouraged. She was family-bound, parents, grandparents, old, if modest roots in the community. She was a cheerleader senior year, the one voted in by the blue collar kids who saw her best representative of their income group—not hillbilly, not factory line, but carpenter, machinist, cop, fireman—not wrong side of the tracks but markedly below the kids who lived on the Beach Drive and drove parents' convertibles in the summer and ignored her group with consummate totality year round.

He played football and ran track but wasn't talented enough to get any scholarship offers except from one downstate school nobody had ever heard of—but then he didn't want to leave town. His life to a large part was laid out for him and far from aversion to this it presented a security and belongingness. To

venture into uncertainty and pursue elusive goal based on moderate talent did not appeal to him. *His* grades were never more than passable and he, as was generally expected, concentrated his efforts in vocational education: wood shop, welding, automotive technology, solid, pragmatic skills to be applied in life's journey—not abstract learning to lead him into a paper world in which he had no appetite for. His mother had been the one person who held out hope for his so-called betterment. This though, she was astute enough to see, would be her own vicarious achievement and she didn't press it.

In the spring of their senior year Jack and Linda started having sex in the basement of her parents' house, a family room with a huge cushioned couch, concrete block walls covered by inexpensive oak paneling, the older family television set on a coffee table, her parents at the Moose Lodge. And, but for one summer dalliance on his part before they were married, neither had ever had another sexual partner. They didn't marry until he was twenty-one and had been working as a mechanic in the city street department for three years and managed to save money enough, while living at home, for the down payment on a house

in the same neighborhood as their parents, second and third generation Polish and German stock.

She worked as a receptionist in a dental office and was breezy and personable and discovered she had an aptitude for office management that the doctor noted and made use of but for which he did not pay her worth. She stayed there until she was 22 and got pregnant and, as planned, she quit work a few months into the pregnancy and spent her days with her mother whom she loved and with her mother-in-law whom she did not love excessively but liked and respected. In kitchens around tables and at counters they talked about mutual acquaintances and church and raising children and shopping and gardening and health care and she felt herself assimilated into a life that extended into a near and predictable future. She did not question. It was not in her repertoire or canon.

She still saw her high school friends but only casually, in the supermarket, at church, at community events. Her two closest friends she spoke to on the phone at least twice a week for an hour at a time and they provided needed counterpoint from Jack and the older women. He would sometimes get

annoyed that he couldn't get through to her when he called. She told him who she was talking to and he would roll his eyes but they wouldn't fight. It was too petty and they were in love.

He would come home in his soiled coveralls and enter through the garage and take them off and toss them into a separate clothesbasket next to the washer. Sometimes she would stand in the doorway and watch him with a coy smile, her belly swelling like a melon, and she would laugh when he went into a provocative striptease and peeled the grease-stained work clothes off. He was thin and muscled then, his wavy hair black, and he was careless and jaunty and handsome with youth. She was sensual and irresistible to him and would readily open herself and this was the most blissful and perfect time of their lives, when they had no knowledge of whom they were.

They went to her church and it wasn't much different from the one he had dutifully, sporadically, attended as a child. In youth, however, he and his father would either be fishing on Sunday mornings or hauling all-terrain vehicles behind the pickup truck to the sand dune trails beneath the high power lines on the

outskirts of town in an undeveloped area where, when in season, they hunted deer with bow and arrow. He was not religious and she believed she was, and this, if not entirely proper, was an accepted way, he felt, as it had been in his upbringing. He had had moral code instilled that provided sufficient guide to keep him out of trouble with the law and his conscience and to maintain an even keel in dealings with his fellow man. Jack's father was fair-minded in any enterprise and didn't preach but practiced honesty—the boy of course saw this and seamlessly incorporated it into his own orthodoxy. Honor wasn't a word spoken, but the quality is not unique to any one class.

It's not necessary to chronicle every year of the marriage. Another child followed, and though the passion cooled, a tranquility and stability replaced it. She was frugal and put savings into an account. He got periodic raises and his first promotion. They purchased a second car for her, a used van he drove to his workplace, the municipal garage, where he subjected it to a battery of free tests before he returned the vehicle to the lot and listed every fault to the salesman and presented a counteroffer that was accepted. In his spare time he

remodeled the basement into a family room and added another bedroom.

Jack took quickly to manhood. He was a serious man. He had little nonsense about him and no appreciation for the conspicuous and prideful swagger of too many of his contemporaries. It did not mean he was without humor, but he had to work at it. His intelligence was average but he was shrewd in identifying and practicing the unspoken and unwritten rules whereby a man gains stature. He observed the veterans and emulated the bulls, not an obsequious and obvious mimicry, but an appropriation of style and attitude. By adapting to the form a substance inevitably followed, an understanding why older men put aside the brash foolishness of youth. Far from discouraging the act, the mature man, despite the maturity being hard won, welcomes the company, and competition turns to other, less aggressive, more power-centered pursuit. Jack perceived that vain posturing and braggadocio was quick bested by clever mind. And this is how he learned to handle men, the facility that assured him notice. To be sure, he could fight with his fists, and

this potency and violence, however dormant, contributed to his rise.

Those his own age allowed the change with minimal comment, without the resistance often associated with a friend's transformation; they had seen it in him and unconsciously waited for the quality to manifest. His friends and associates found him to be sober, nonjudgmental, but commanding and worthy of respect.

His credibility and expertise grew within the company of men and gradually he was made privy to the workings of community and government which are not taught in Civics class and which require an unbreakable code of silence and stoicism: an obedience to the clandestine organism that brings hard knowledge. It was not a world to be readily shared with her—though he loved her deeply and could not imagine life without her. His heart swelled with pride and inexpressible ache over his children. She and the boy, the girl, were his showpieces, his statement to the world about who he was. But his fundamental self had become immersed in a darker, secretive realm, a man's

dominion enriched by knowledge that he was one keeper of the flame.

His father contracted lung cancer and died a slow painful death and Linda complained about *his* smoking habit, especially in the house where it got into the furniture and drapes and bedding. She was successful only in chasing him downstairs with the cigarettes—and vowed to continue the fight. The younger child, the girl, was diagnosed with a learning disability and Jack wondered if he himself had not struggled with one similar.

His fraternizing with cronies and a predilection for drink led to an inordinate amount of alcohol consumption and the sleek athletic body she admired was gone in eight years—the abdomen distended like a spit of land, his skin going to gray and his nose veined in drinker's red. His playfulness with her diminished, and with his growing children it was limited to the occasional camera mugging. The demands and responsibilities of manhood precluded tomfoolery and, while this rule did not in actuality extend into the home, his personality hardened and took its definition from without.

She was still vivacious and her heart drew light from her love of Jack and the children, but with his change came doubt and foreboding. A melancholy sometimes constricted her chest and she lost her breath. Her hope had lost not direction...but momentum, and she hesitated where before she had not in planning halcyon lives: the children nurtured by faith and affection and raised in health—she and Jack aging in comfort and content, taking their places in their family's and the town's appointed history.

It was unavoidable that their minds would travel different paths. A man's work is at least half his life; at most he is consumed by it. Jack's home was his anchor, but he ranged far throughout the sea. He became a foreman. Behind the scenes he was favored and groomed, not a man to take center stage, but the unspoken leader among his own, a quiet power broker—though he would not have known the term, and perhaps not have fully comprehended the concept: that abstract weight of the person. He came to the attention of city politicians who cultivated his friendship at lodges and clubs he was asked to join. He smoked cigars and by the age of thirty he wielded the clout of a man

twice his age and twice his income. He carried himself with self-confidence. But he had studied and been tutored well and understood the perils of swagger and arrogance, a lesson often lost on younger men. Intuitively he knew that power is hinged, dependent upon the grace and agreement of base and following and patronage. He did nothing to jeopardize his position. He kept his counsel and held his tongue and exhibited humility when circumstance demanded it. He played along. His ambition though, if it could be called that, was ambiguous, without specific aim, geared to the intent of the elders in his tribe who he believed had never and would never mislead him.

The leadership came naturally to him. He accepted it without question. It was his place. He knew that. And he knew too that with it came a duty that had been bred into him as surely as his breath. He didn't, however, take advantage of his implicit rank. Rarely would he go to the well, though many owed him for favors, for jobs, for recommendations, for gifts disguised as loans, for his nod, his friendship. He let the reserve grow, still uncertain of end. Even congressional candidates with savvy

campaign managers had heard his name mentioned with those who counted.

Because in youth he had not been denied, or felt that he had, and because of a veiled distaste for the higher income classes and a disinclination for material display, he disdained excessive financial gain. He liked the power game though, being part of it, being one of the inner circle, a man included and respected, a man able to handle himself and the job, a man not likely to betray his class. He bowled and went on fishing trips with the fire chief and a regional union leader. He accepted the philosophy that tribal leaders knew best how to lead and that his own clout would be lent to the proper agenda. He came to understand his influence and the political power attendant with it—and in other, subtler, perhaps more decisive authoritative control. It was never spoken though, never anything but understood.

One of her close friends moved away and they vowed to keep in close touch though they knew they wouldn't. The other friend's marriage went sour and abusive and Linda found herself

constantly buoying this woman until it sapped her own energy. She did not want to abandon the high school bond, the identity and nostalgia that came with it, but when she realized the strained relationship caused her short temper with the children, she tacitly, temperately advised professional help and backed out of the friendship. She took to avoiding the friend. She spoke to Jack about the situation over dinner and he listened. She watched his jaws work methodically up and down while he chewed, the contraction of the throat when he swallowed, and she was acutely aware of the mechanism of flesh. His eyes contained no vestige of the youth she loved and she was frightened because a door had slammed shut in their lives.

"You probably did the right thing," he said.

She stared in the stranger's eyes, peered into this new room, profoundly disturbed by the sight and instinctively she looked to her children, at their food.

"I don't know. She's real vulnerable now." She sought something from him, something spiritual, tangible, a reaffirmation of their

life as a couple, of their love. Her need was to take the commitment to a deeper level, to entomb a pact conceived in vow and tradition, to create a universe of marriage, with she as umbilicus—but this was gone.

For her he felt deep affection and gratitude but he did not have the tools to recognize a woman's unspoken yearnings—or to gratify them. She had had emotional control of their relationship from the beginning, consciously and unconsciously, and since her manipulation was with the heart it was justifiable. She had been able to effect his moods, elicit the affection for a child, the joy for a family outing, the solemnity in church, draw him from one state to another. But he had gotten away from her and had gained energy and direction beyond her influence. She had lost his boyhood and innocence to age. She saw too that he was unaware of any lack, thinking this was his natural condition. Family life had adapted to his meaning and expectation, the canvas upon which life was lived.

She required his totality.

In response she resorted to the woman's strategy older than sexual craft: she darkened and retreated deep into her mind. She didn't talk to her mother of it, but sought clue in retrospect. Was the abstraction for which she longed part of her heritage? Her mother was gentle and possessed a native intelligence applied in the circle of family as cohesive force. The use of language was practical, but buried in it was innuendo, in the eyes, in the tone, in the subliminal phrasing—the spoken word was a gloss over hidden masterworks. This was how counsel was given and received, love conveyed, disfavor and approval shown. She looked upon her mother's familiar face as if it were a crystal ball in which to read her own future. She settled into the cool equanimity in the eyes but divined no answers.

Her father was a retired machinist. He was quiet and introspective and in the silences he and her mother shared the grown daughter gleaned what her marriage lacked. Her father had surrendered to the marital pact and this freed his partner. In turn, the mother clung to him. Linda's husband imprisoned her by his freedom and distance from the hearth, creating and sustaining a delusion of his ideal home life and binding her to it.

She poured her energy into the children, into church and school activities. She polished unused office skills to organize fundraisers; she volunteered to read in her son's third grade class; she was able to get out more now that the youngest attended kindergarten half a day. In unadmitted desperation she cooked elaborate dinners and read women's magazines on how to rekindle romance. She began working out—hoping that he would too—nothing zealous, a morning power-walk four days a week. She used two kettles filled with flower bags as makeshift weights (a magazine tip) to build her arm's strength. She jumped rope and stretched like she had as a cheerleader. A color came to her cheeks, and a worry that had settled in a corner of her psyche, invisible to her, was lightened. A pragmatic bent suggested she get on with her life and accept the changes.

The Creator by no means designed life to be idyllic. It was a proving ground and she was being tested. He would help her if she helped herself. This was her belief. She suppressed painful doubts. Emotions were acceptable to feel and express in oneself and to be accepted and encouraged in a man but not to a

debilitating extent, nor to embarrassment. And dangerous emotions as anger and hate and unrestrained passion were to be curbed, not vilified, rechanneled into the meticulous obligations of quotidian life. Beating rugs. Scrubbing walls. Pleating sheets. Attacking mold. Caring for children. She would endure. She would hold to her silence and adapt to his world. But desperation haunted her.

He stayed away for longer periods and could not be counted on to be there for dinner, or on Saturday. He would though take her to lodge and work functions and exhibit pride in her appearance and sociability. She saw how men looked to his lead (and he how men to her), young cops, firemen, straw bosses, minor politicians. She too felt pride and understood his estrangement from her—and she acquiesced, substituting his place in this world for her idea of fulfillment. In truth, she saw no alternative.

When her youngest started first grade she seriously considered finding employment. She and Jack had talked about it on and off in casual reference over the last six months—she tentative, and he noncommittal with reservations. His treasure was the boy,

who he had begun to include in his life to further extent: fishing, car rides, sporting events—and he wanted a mother there for him. He trusted her completely with his son's education, and his daughter's, and to him this meant being there 24 hours a day. A job would divert her attention. She never argued volubly and on the few occasions during the marriage when he had raised his voice in anger her response of shock and aversion quickly shamed him into apology. Nevertheless, she initially deferred to his explicit wishes and instead threw herself into the volunteerism where she could control her hours—but also begin a campaign to soften his intractability.

She mentioned a job the school had offered her as an assistant librarian, which was part-time and would have worked conveniently with her schedule. The pay was moderate but it would have been experience. She delivered the information in a level voice, without nuance, without the slightest accusation: she would defer to his wish; it was simply conversational—and he took it as that, but a seed had been planted. He had to consider her outside the role of homemaker, in a new context, an individual detached from his province.

It did not sit well. He had first to think about his social position and how this would reflect on it. Increasing numbers of women entered the workplace and in many cases the cost of living made it essential to maintain a decent quality of life. He had friends whose wives worked and he had held himself slightly above them for this. He did not consciously fear her autonomy, but in light of his growing influence he questioned the wisdom of this ripple on unwavering surface. He looked to a future that promised only his continued rise.

The boy was strong, every inch a nine-year-old, outgoing, scrappy, adventurous, curious, stubborn, resilient, athletic, that roguish laughter in the eye, and the father protected him like a lion—yet not noticeably. He offhandedly inquired about teachers, playmates, habits. He attended little league games, sitting unobtrusively in the stands, silent and watchful, and while other parents jeered and shouted, berated umpires, and followed the path of the ball, he studied the coach, his boy's response to him, his interaction with teammates, his approach to the game. No doubt about it, the boy was gifted athletically. Jack

was not effusive in praise but he would clamp a hand on his son's back after a game and take him out for ice cream.

Linda wrapped the boy in a spiritual cocoon and scrupulously monitored his schooling, his moods and likes and dislikes—like the father though, she was unobtrusive, letting him believe his freedom was without encumbrance or influence.

He didn't see it clearly, or at all, but she did. The two began using this child as channel to their lost affection. He would beam over a well-executed play, a solid hit, and she would grab her husband's eye with a question to capture the love and pride once reserved for her. Was this where his love had been from the beginning? Did he love her as the farmer loves the ground for the crop?

The girl was shy, animated like a pixie, ethereal, overly self-conscious about her difference from the boy, closely attached to her mother but not clinging, borrowing some of the explorer's spirit from the brother, but redirecting this to private worlds of the imagination. She neither revered nor feared the father—he

never raised his voice or showed anger toward her—but she held him in reserved awe for his physicality and indomitable presence. He called her his "Muppet" and she closely studied her namesakes on television, drawing parallel.

The mother though got close to her world, bending to her knees, settling on the floor at the child's level, staring with mysterious understanding into her eyes and smiling compassionately. She loved her mother without reservation, but contained in this was a troubling confusion, an inability to deal with the sovereignty of emotion. The girl, more than the others, recognized the change in her mother, the worried looks where hitherto had been security and settledness. The boy saw the mother, the father saw the wife—but the girl saw her own future and so she alone with discerning eye saw storm clouds on horizon, not clearly, but with the child's fearful inarticulated worry.

It might have gone on indefinitely, she carrying out the duties of the day, her own, those of her children, of close extended family, taking up the commerce of self and community. But through word of mouth and her volunteer work and a key

acquaintanceship she was offered a job at the library that paid relatively well. The requirements outmatched her qualifications, presenting challenge and opportunity, and she insisted he confront this rejuvenated being. He was wise in seeing she was firm in her decision, and his resistance, if not already worn down, would be done so soon. He conceded, taking on a contrived benevolence she saw through.

She accepted the job and with the excitement and newness and growth came an awareness of her physical self. She had never considered herself pretty because it had never been necessary in her life. She had had Jack for as long as males had been deemed objects of affection and sexual attraction. But now, with two children, after twelve years of marriage, and the entry into a new life—and, unadmitted to herself, with the growing distance between her and Jack—she wanted to be attractive to men. It violated no precepts. She was religious not in dogmatic acceptance, but in belief and faith and basic goodness and a conviction of purpose and practiced morality. She involved herself in the social and unifying aspect of the church and revealed her deepest convictions to no one—which were, in

truth, somewhat liberal—and she did not censure her vanity, or ascribe it to sin.

Privately, alone in the bathroom, with a soft bulb, she examined the lines on her oval face. The skin was clear, of fair complexion, but the tracks, which now took on the significance of archeologist's finds, were worrisome. There was gray too. At thirty-three the hoary rust found her out and she expected the betrayal to weigh her down with gloom. But age, like youth to her, was a matter of recognition and adaptation. She bought fashionable albeit unprovocative clothing and glowed with unexpected pleasure when her daughter noticed a new outfit and complimented her during her first day's preparation for work.

“Grandma's going to watch you for a couple hours this afternoon, Sweetie.”

“I know. You told me.”

She picked her mother up in the minivan and brought her to the house well before the children's bus arrived—and filled her in on the routine.

“I hope it's not any bother for you, Mom.”

“What do I have to do in the afternoon anyway, besides traipse after your father in his rounds or watch my Soaps? Half the time I think he wishes he were alone.”

“Don’t let her trick you into letting her watch the *Mythic Quest*. Too much sexual innuendo and violence.”

“So much of it is nowadays?”

“Don’t get me started on that. I have to go. Eat whatever you like. I left some stew in the fridge.”

She went to her bedroom for a jacket and looked at herself in the dresser mirror. She pulled in a tight breath and lifted her shoulders and breasts and a warm anticipation and excitement stirred—that delicious element of unknown.

“By Mom.’

“Don’t worry about us.”

She didn’t. She drove the van to the city library and began her first day and fit immediately into the milieu. Her job was checkout person but in the weeks that followed her skills were recognized. She got a small promotion and added responsibility. The job and change were vitalizing. She came alive. She was

reinvented apart from everyone who had been close to and had defined and scrutinized and limited her—though she did not think of it in this way because her denial in the previous life had always been adept, trained scrupulously into her by her own mother who had never worked a day outside of the home for pay.

Although she was useful and efficient it was quick apparent that lack of advanced education limited her in some respects and she wished she had progressed further in school. Her mind didn't give it voice, but she intuited a self beyond herself, one who watched and guided her with the solicitude of a friend. She got intimation of another world, not a monied world, but one of the intellect, of ideas and the privilege of a higher culture invisible to her within the shared, common one.

Jack and the boy noticed the change not in her but in themselves. It was as if someone had shed light on a dim-lit task. While Linda was conscious always to maintain a pleasant atmosphere at home, the relationship's strain and uncertainty and life change had cast a pall over the household—not to an

appreciable degree or to an extent that it would significantly affect either the children or the husband's existence but, displaced, it gathered in the drapes, in the cushions, in the excess not flushed or swept from the house. The job and the new role lifted her spirits and expanded her identity and she entered a second bloom and the family benefited. He found himself more often skipping functions and coming home. The boy's affection grew and he sought her out in her chores. They basked in the mother's glow.

The girl, however, was not fooled. Artificial euphoria did not last. Something sinister in her world lurked; wary and vigilant, she watched. A change would come beyond the present one. This was only a precursor. Change did not come alone

Linda did not think she could ever leave the marriage, regardless of how empty it might become. Tradition and her faith forbade it, despite the near 50 percent divorce rate and the explosion of single parents, mostly mothers, many of which she knew. She was convinced it would never happen to her—but now with the job, modest as the pay was, she could taste the possibility.

She matured.

Jack *was* matured—he had aged and hardened, had jettisoned emotions like excess baggage, feelings that a man first of all will not admit to, and that secondly will detract from agreement between him and the fraternity. Of course a man cared for his family. This was the foundation of the system. But guardians were a special predatory breed. The wives contained and tamed the savagery—but it existed, beneath the constrained emotions, in the dispassion and cold-blooded eye displayed to those outside the tribe. And tribe it was that gathered in the lodge hall, in the workplace, at church, at play. Thrown together in new land they still recognized one another. Warriors no longer raided in blood but the archetype was there.

He never would have left either—in fact, it never once entered his mind—for many of the same reasons as she, social and family disapprobation, a basic, if not satisfaction, then habitude. It was a reassuring course, not rut to him. Deviation would be

tantamount to dissent—and malcontentedness was anathema to his character.

What then caused the divorce?

She could live without sex but not without warmth and affection and companionship and one day she woke up to this fact and the realization was strong enough for her resist counter-argument. The joy had gone but, perhaps most telling, the communion, her *raison d'être*. Her daughter felt the resolve that same morning and knew the storm had broken but her fragility preserved her. She was pliable as a seagull tossed by the wind. She adjusted because she had not been formed.

The boy was different. He idolized his father. He was his hero, his mentor, his friend and his model. So when his parents split, amicably enough because it was impossible for her to act otherwise, or to allow it, the boy heir was decimated, broken into a thousand pieces because his world was shattered. Like father, like son, a foundation crumbled. But, except for the bewilderment he could not hide, he never showed his pain. Jack

was a man's man, he was a boy's boy. Tough and malleable, he bounced back from every outward hurt. He talked no one about it, he bit down the hurt until it submitted to his will—but he bled in secret. In the desolate and unholy hours of night, the terror of death has lost its grip. The divorce supplanted it.

One evening when the children were in bed she walked in the living room and turned off the television and took a seat across from him and he was baffled: the move was unprecedented. She held her hands together in her lap as if in prayer and looked him in the face.

“I am filing for divorce.”

He thought she was kidding, or had gone mad. He laughed and reached for the remote.

“Cut it out, Linda.”

“Jack, I'm serious.”

He stared at her, a blank look, one he used with the reprimands he rarely had to employ. A wrecking ball slammed into his stomach could have caused no more punch. Never on the football field, never in 15 years of playing hardball with bosses

and politicos, never had he been hit so hard. Usually he could see it coming and brace himself—here he had been blindsided.

Despite his influence and the men who sought him out and probed for vice with women tacitly made available, the easy, untraceable cash, the all-paid weekends to vacation spots, he stayed uncorrupted. His father was cause and the boy too.

Integrity was too valuable an element to wholly abandon. The soul was not for sale. One can smell its loss even in corrupt times when the stench of greed penetrates the social core and men fall into line and drop from grace.

This was why he was dumbfounded. What had he done wrong? He had done everything right; he had abided by her moral and social standard. His status in their community was steadfast. This, he believed, is what a woman needed.

What had happened was as insidious as the smirk of a corrupt bureaucracy. Political philosophies and balances shifted. What wasn't once acceptable became so, not overtly—but it was understood and practiced clandestinely. It seemed with

impunity. He could not help but be affected by it. Peer infected peer. Principles once held to were secretly scorned. Hypocrisy was a byword and bought admission. His honesty blinded him to its scope and preserved his integrity. But it was with guilt that he accepted the alternative: to simply look away. He remained quiet as was bred into him. He laid low. He went along, except to a greater degree than before, and he kept his power though his soul was tainted and Linda could not fail to see.

In desperation and disbelief he asked, “It’s because of that job, isn’t it?”

She had rehearsed it and vowed to avoid falling into the trap of clichés. I need to find out who I am. We have grown apart. He would have ready answer to anything not spoken in incisive honesty and truth. The truth was when the joy and communion left, the marriage became rote. This could not be. The children would accept and repeat the condition in their own lives and loves. She had agonized long hours over her decision and acquaintances asked her at work if she was all right.

“I’ve just got some things going on at home right now.”

“You want to talk about it.”

“Not right now. Maybe later.”

She couldn't hide the anguish but neither would she talk about it, even to her mother who intuitively saw the struggle but withheld comment.

“The job is going okay?”

“Yeah mom,” she looked up and they shared what they always had, sympathy and rapport. “It couldn't be better.”

That same evening the mother told Linda's father. “Linda and Jack are going through some rough times.”

He looked up over newspaper, reading glasses falling to his nose. “Financial?”

“No. I think it's something else.”

“Serious?”

“I'm afraid so.”

“Ah, Jesus. What about the kids?”

“Sometimes it's better.”

“Sometimes it's not. Maybe they'll work things out. Jack's not a bad sort. He'd do anything for her and the kids.”

“That's not always enough.”

“It used to be.”

“Times have changed Franklin.”

“Yeah yeah. Don’t remind me. Maybe they’ll work things out.”

“I don’t think so.”

He brooded all day at work in his office, he growled at mechanics, at a city councilman who called, finally at the superintendent, who wouldn’t take it and who shut the door behind him and sat down without invitation.

“What’s going on?”

The pain in his foreman’s eyes jarred the super: Jack was a man who had been a rock as long as he had known him.

“Linda’s filing for divorce.”

“Ah hell, Jack. I’m sorry.”

They sat there a minute.

“You got a lawyer yet?”

“I don’t even believe it yet, Ron. This caught me completely by surprise.”

The department head reached his position through the old boy network and had known Jack’s father, and Jack from his high school days. The divorce could be ruinous. Jack was their boy. Linda was a sweetheart. The news troubled him and he figured how it would play out in community arena. One thing was for sure: it wouldn’t be the same for Jack as it was.

“When you’re ready, let me know. I can recommend someone... a local guy. He’ll do all right by ya.”

“Yeah, okay.”

The super got up. “Hang in there.”

“Yeah.”

They decided she would keep the house and he would move in with his mother for the short term. They worked out all the conditions before calling an attorney. There was no acrimony on her part and he was too devastated to take advantage of his position and income—not that he would. His world had been turned upside down and once he accepted the uncompromising

pain he ascribed no blame but looked for reasons. He sat in his childhood bedroom on the edge of the bed and laid his head in his hands and emptied his mind. A grown man returned home. No memories assailed him but his father haunted his dreams. The taciturn figure tied a fishing lure, bent over with eyes down as he would do, the fingers slow and meticulous with the certainty and care of a craftsman.

“Now you try it.”

Jack took the line but he couldn't see clearly and his fingers wouldn't work. He woke in the morning morose and dutiful. His mother, silent, abstracted, her eyesight failing and her will distressed, made breakfast for him and asked for no explanation—and for this he was grateful. He dragged to work and looked forward to the weekend when he could see his children and his wife. At the city garage, his crew talked about him for a couple weeks over coffee, noting his moods and recovery.

“I'll bet they get back together in a month or two.”

“I don’t know. She’s a cute little thing. A woman like that is going to attract men.”

“You wouldn’t catch me anywhere near her. Jack will kill anyone who goes poking around.”

Jack hadn’t got that far in his thinking. The possibility of Linda seeing another man had not entered the realm of reality. It was too unthinkable. She was *his*. And things might still be worked out. As for him killing anyone, it wasn’t all hyperbole. Jack, despite his reputation for reasonableness, had violence in him. All fighters do. It was the warrior in him and the understanding that he would fight if circumstances called for it that attracted men and power to him. His father had been a decorated WWII veteran. Jack was the type who would be first in line at enlistment in time of trouble, a man to back a friend in a barroom brawl, a man to fight for his country.

But so far, Linda’s seeing someone new was not a factor in either his or her life. She found the adjustment easier than expected. It wasn’t like he was gone or dead. He could still be counted on for repairs around the home, in emergencies, and for

practical advice beyond her expertise. He took the boy to his baseball and soccer games and she went too—and sometimes they went together and sat side by side as they always had. The girl also came but didn't play on the swings as usual—she shoved next to her father until her leg nudged his. While his departure was not as an emotional jolt to her as it was to the boy, she missed the feeling of safety and security, the presence of protector.

After the games she would ask Linda, “When is daddy coming home?”

“Sweetheart, we've been over this.”

“You have.”

After a few months the instinctive shield she had raised against men lifted. In the marriage her and Jack's sex life had diminished to a bi-monthly routine, typically occurring after one or another social events with a crowd of people and music and laughter along with a few drinks, he five or so beers, and she a whiskey-seven with lots of ice. She missed the physical warmth and comfort of a male body: the small satisfactions and pleasures taken from a fresh shaven, glistening face, the steamy

flesh smell after he showered—and she admitted to herself another man would be nice to have. She imagined him and couldn't help herself but the first thing she dreamed was that he was thin. She felt a twinge of guilt because of Jack's weight, that her fantasy had somehow betrayed him—but the sensual reverie stimulated her and she sometimes caught herself at her desk daydreaming, hugging herself.

Months passed and the broken family fell into a routine. Logistics had been worked out, finances were secure; the emotional trauma was lessened when they realized they would survive and that not all happinesses were lost. One wrinkle was the girl had nightmares about winged beasts. She would wake up screaming and Linda would rush into the room and take her in her arms and rock her back to sleep. The grandmother lived two blocks down the street so the boy took to stopping by unannounced when his father was home and they played cards and chess and video games. Jack added the electronic entertainments to keep the children interested when his own attention abated. He might be content with their presence but they required more. Linda didn't mind the spontaneity, though

she had read that divorced children required a regimented visitation. She didn't press it and her inclination when he derided the studies was to agree with him.

“Ah, that's bullshit. I don't see any harm in the boy coming over when he wants... or the girl for that matter,” he added because he wished to be equitable.

“It's too far for her to walk on her own.”

Six months after the breakup a single man in the AVI department took interest in her. They had been introduced and spoke briefly at a couple of inner-library functions. He was nice, kind of quiet, soft-spoken, medium height with brown hair and sharp nose and glasses. They talked about movies they each had liked and she made him laugh. After a month of casual conversation they would occasionally sit down for coffee together in the break room and linger after others had left. It wasn't romantic and it wasn't thrilling, but she got back into the swing of things and it was pleasant to talk to a man, the question of intimacy hanging between them like an unopened page of a book.

Word was fast in getting back to Jack. An office secretary told her boyfriend who happened to work for the city and knew Jack, not personally, but by local prominence and through several proxies. It wasn't exactly a delicate situation. Men of a kind look out for one another and this includes the protection and acquisition and, in fact, possession and custody of women. It lends importance to what can otherwise be a mundane and pointless existence. The delicacy entered when considering how Jack would be told, and by whom, or if he had to be. They looked out for their own and anticipating Jack's response was their obligated pleasure.

Frank, the AVI suitor, had had no more than three coffee sessions with Linda when he noticed men of a certain ilk paying him immoderate notice. Men in pickup trucks and work clothes parked beside his car when he was leaving the library and looked at him with violent eyes. At first he considered the incidents unconnected: the garbage men who threw his can down behind his small house, dented, the men who pulled beside him at stoplights and stared hard at him, delivering warning. He

ran inventory of his life to explain the occurrences. It wasn't until the same secretary who informed her boyfriend of the trysts spoke to him that he figured it out.

“Linda’s really nice, isn’t she?”

“Yes. She is.”

“I hear those two kids of hers are real dolls.”

“She’s mentioned them.” The woman was obviously going somewhere with this and though he wasn’t sure he wanted to know where, he played her game—though uncomfortable with a secretary’s presumptions.

“I guess her ex is some kind of wheel in the city street department and local politics,” the secretary said sweetly and batted her eyelids because her alliances were with her boyfriend and the crowd they hung with, and these included Jack's tribe.

That was all it took. Frank backed off. He was not an absolute coward but he didn’t want to get involved with a jealous husband, especially an influential one. In the last year alone in their modest-sized city two ex-wives had been shot and one boyfriend killed. Linda was a gentle and intelligent person but,

after all, she hadn't the education he was accustomed to and her roots were different than his. And every so often she would make an unintended grammatical mistake...secret death in a library crowd proud of its literate demeanor. So he backed out of what hadn't really begun. She was puzzled but not hurt. The reason for the latter is that she couldn't picture him and her kids together in the same room. So she shrugged it off and in a week was able to smile and pass him by without feeling a need to stop.

There were no other men for several months until she ran into a high school friend in church, David Ross, whom she hadn't seen in years. They had attended different services, it seemed, and he recently switched. They chatted briefly on the church steps and the boy and girl stood a short distance off, uncomfortable and impatient. She loved how they looked: he with his hair dampened and slicked back, she with hers let down, a blue ribbon in it. The boy hung onto an iron banister and sniffed the air for the kind of day it would be, alone with his father on the lake in a bass boat, casting the lines, that release and spin of well-oiled reel, the soft swish of water slapping the hull, rocking on gentle swells—then the excitement of the strike, the libido he

did not have word for, the panting, gasping, furious and uncomprehending fish he had taken hostage tossed insouciantly in a bucket. The girl stuck a toe out and swiveled it back and forth like a broken compass, eyes demurely down for this day of prayer—thoughts though were not of God but of the shiny blackness of her shoes, polished to a mirror sheen that reflected the shadow of her yellow hair.

He had been divorced for a year, he said. And she, with an unexpected relief, divulged her own separation. Their eyes locked a moment and she felt a chord had been struck in her womb. He wasn't an athlete or scholar in high school, as she recalled—but one of those without pretension who goes mostly unnoticed but is always welcome and included. Nor was he handsome in youth, though his features were well proportioned. But healthy living, lack of stress lines from financial worry—his family owned a furniture store—and a late blooming nicely aged him. She liked his ordinariness, his relaxed élan. The low-key self esteem and conviction he had possessed in school, the result of loving and stable parents, had grown into manhood, quiet and responsible manhood.

They didn't see each other the next week, though she got to church early and surreptitiously glanced throughout the congregation looking for him. She lingered after service on the steps, talking to an elderly neighbor. On the way home she went over their first encounter, searching for clue of what she might have said wrong. She chastised her thoughts and rationalized his absence, attributing it to some insignificant matter unrelated to her. All that previous week she took enjoyment in anticipation of their next meeting. She debated how much to tell him about herself, whether she should draw upon high school memories. He hadn't said if he had children or not—his liking children was crucial to any liaison—but she got that impression. She imagined how a relationship might progress, the movies, the conversation, the walks on the beach, the first time they held hands, the exquisite touch of a first kiss. She tried to quell the projections and fantasies but they crept upon her at work and at home like twilight upon a gray day.

It had been nearly a year since the divorce, long enough in her estimation to grieve and impose the proper length of

disassociation. She would get on with her life, and although the children were of paramount concern, a priority far outstripping her own, she had needs and it was not impossible to believe hers as well as theirs could be met. To mark the year, and to scratch the itch David had aroused, and to assert an independence she had never really known or experienced, except in the last year in tentative and exploratory degrees, she traded in her car, a used model, one Jack had picked out, for a new red Mustang. She couldn't resist when she sat in the leather seats and started it up and took a long test drive, alone—the salesman knew Jack and didn't figure his ex-wife would take off with the vehicle.

When she drove it into grandma and grandpa's driveway the kids squealed with delight and immediately jumped in and they drove in the countryside.

“Cool, Mom,” the boy said, buckled beside his sister in the backseat. He couldn't wait for his friends at school to see it.

The girl's delight was less effusive. For her the polished red was of greater significance than the status image. The newness

delighted her, the joy of a gigantic toy, the crackling excitement they shared. She understood the purchase was a watershed in her mother's life, but what exactly the moment represented was unclear to her. She did not make the connection between car and freedom from a past.

When Jack heard from his mother that evening—word was always fast getting back to him—he shook his head and ran a hand through his still thick black hair and mumbled, “Well, I’ll be goddamned.”

He wasn't sure if it were any of his business, or whether he should make it his business. He thought how he might comment and what direction his words and tone would take. He was baffled. It was a bold and meaningful gesture on her part, and he was taken unawares. The woman had fast become a mystery to him and he did not know where to lay accountability, if accountability there were. No one offered explanation to him, no one would presume to because of his grade and the private nature of the situation. His efforts to understand her met with pain and confusion. Pain over the loss of home-life and not

coming home at the end of the day to his children's greeting, as was expected and natural in his world—and confusion because as she drew farther away from him emotionally he did not know where the lines lay between them: when he could and could not call her, drop in, fix a broken gutter without her nod, mow the lawn he had cared for for years. Could he use the crapper if he was around the house fixing things?

It was a slow disentanglement she orchestrated, one so gradual as to be invisible to him, one outside his awareness. He supposed she would have to set the parameters. He had not yet accepted the finality of the divorce and rooted in his mind was the hope and certainty that they would reconcile and with this belief he allowed himself liberties: stopping by and searching for a tool in the garage, letting himself in with a key, cribbing a sandwich. Most of his tools he had left behind believing the separation were temporary.

Jack drove by the house that evening and saw the car in the driveway, strikingly incongruous to his more conservative tastes—but he did not stop as he had half intended. Instead he

drove to a tavern and went in for a beer. A man out of sorts, confronted with an unwelcome inevitability

“Jack,” two or three men called out to him.

He acknowledged the men and sat at the end of the bar and ordered a beer and watched a basketball game between two teams he didn't know or care to find out the names of—he scarcely saw the game. It was diversion for the eyes. The other men sensed his disquiet and left him alone to his thoughts.

David was at services the next Sunday and they gravitated to one another afterward. She noticed he was dressed more carefully than he had been before, that he had gotten a haircut, that none of the loose ends single men are prone to were apparent in him. Amenities were brief because it was already clear each had made a decision. Essential formalities had to be followed to appease community eyes and social stricture, but these two knew where they were headed. It was almost too perfect, too fortuitous

“Look,” he said, trying not to be serious, unable to fully conceal his nervousness, “I hope I’m not out of line here...but would you like to get together for coffee sometime this week?”

She lifted her head and told him he wasn’t at all out of line and that “I would like that very much.” She let excitement in her heart.

“Okay, fine.” He involuntarily bowed his head, a quick motion like a horse’s, and looked past her, as if to the coming week. “How does Wednesday sound?”

“Wednesday is great.” She smiled gently, pleased at his shyness.

They exchanged numbers.

The boy watched the exchange on the church steps; he noticed his mother’s ankles strain upward, the long cord above her heel draw taut, but he didn’t say anything to his father that afternoon when they met to play catch. He wouldn’t have known what to say, or how to vocalize innocent thought. He was not a suspicious child. He accepted the world on its surface without needing to question.

“So sport, what’s new?” his father asked, a baseball mitt slung through the neck of a bat, the two walking across an elementary school playground.

Mom has a boyfriend?

“Nothing.”

“Nothing ever is.”

“Not usually.”

“Let’s shag some flies.”

Word of the date was of course quick in reaching Jack and he sat at his desk on Monday morning and contemplated it...seriously for the first time, the possibility of Linda remarrying, of another man sleeping with the girl he had first pinned in junior high school, making love to the mother of his children in the house he had bought and remodeled. His thoughts were tortured and he tried not to imagine it but the images were persistent: another man sitting down at a dinner table with his ten-year-old son and correcting his manners, smiling at his six-year-old daughter in the intimacy of *his* living room. It was too much.

The maintenance shop of course knew about the coffee date. Gossip is lifeblood and endemic within the organization.

“I thought she was seeing that fellow in the library,” one man said, though he knew this wasn’t any longer true.

“No. That didn’t last. He got cold feet or something.”

This was their cleverness, their smugness in belonging. They had scowled at the library pansy. They and the rest of the tribe attuned themselves to Jack’s wishes and well-being because vicariously they lived through him. As Jack went so did they. That’s the nature of leadership, to embody the nation. Everyone knew his love for Linda—for years it had been a beacon for them. His success and marriage represented their own dreams, so it did not require imagination to extrapolate Jack’s sentiments in regard to new suitor.

The date with David went better than expected. He picked her up at the library and drove to a small restaurant with secluded booths and they talked uninhibitedly about their lives and children and divorces and neither suspected they were being watched though they should have known. He told her about his

business only after she asked and only enough to indicate it was profitable. The year old Oldsmobile already made that apparent. The courtship went according to script, one to satisfy even the most punctilious of community censors. His family had century old roots in the city and was not plagued by ghosts or scandal. They had always been prosperous middle-class merchants and businessmen, choosing to maintain low profiles, eschewing ostentation and maintaining residence in an old neighborhood that had harbored bankers and barbers, physicians and pharmacists alike; a neighborhood that had never barred Jews or blacks dating from the days the town was chartered.

The family was dignified and adhered to the social mold—but they were not necessarily Republican and had bred the intermittent rebel and artist who are nurtured in liberality and free-mindedness. While this dynamic might seem unlikely for a woman the first time spreading her wings, David's temperament and humor and mental acuity boded not another imprisonment but connectedness and warmth and security, and even adventure—and, though not expressly admitted, a rung up the social ladder. In addition there was something she could not

quite identify, a characteristic Jack lacked. Refinement wasn't it exactly, neither was it style—perhaps it was a quietude, a resting-place and peace of mind of which Jack's politically powered world of men was unaware. Most importantly though with these two, it was a love match. Each had the uncommon gift to love and to allow themselves to be loved. He dropped her off and she was left wanting more. No further dates were made but they parted with an understanding in place.

Joe Ramone sat down next to Jack before the pledge of allegiance at a city council meeting—the head foreman's presence was frequently required—and bent his ear about a variety of meaningless issues to which Jack occasionally grunted so as not to appear overtly rude, though that was his preference. Ramone was a gossipy little asshole who lived on disability and early railroad retirement and had pestered and insinuated his way onto a couple of local boards. Word had it he was a Mafia bagman, delivering cash to whoever was interested in playing ball, but Jack didn't give any credence to this kind of talk. Ramone was useful within the organization insofar as he collected dirt and disseminated it without bias—so long as he could profit. Infighting, backbiting and perpetual intrigue

propelled the machine and kept it lubricated for those who drove the engine and preserved the citadel. This assured that no one, without proper backing, could claw too far up the wall without being dragged back down. Ramone provided the grappling hook. The bagman got to the point during a council recess.

“I guess Linda’s buying some new furniture,” he baited.

It wouldn’t take much to crush Joe Ramone, a firm claw clamped on the carotid for a minute or two was all—but the libelous-mouthed prick served his dark purpose well. Men longed for the blackest news of enemy and ally alike. Jack would never repeat what he had heard about a man, and he wouldn’t necessarily believe what he was told—but he would take it all in and file it away for reference. Jack had never been a target for Ramone’s invective. Heretofore, nothing would stick. The divorce though, had provided hold.

Goddamn it Linda, he screamed inside.

Jack looked around. No one was near. It was expected he meander out to the lobby and mix with councilmen and other politicians before and after the meeting and during the recess—not to issue opinion, but to be seen, to press the flesh and answer any questions officials might have about the street department. Some of the players glanced through the glass partition at him next to Ramone. He had a minute or two.

“What the fuck are you getting at?” he said in a low snarl to Ramone because he couldn’t help himself. He wanted to hear what the guy had to say about his wife.

“Hey Jack. Take it easy. I’m not getting at anything. I saw Linda riding around (actually he hadn’t; he was informed) in Dave Ross’s Oldsmobile the other day. You know him, don’t you? He owns that furniture store downtown. Family’s been here for ages.”

Jack stared hard at Joe Ramone, quelling his urge to kill, and he snarled in a whisper, “You ever say my wife’s name aloud again I’ll probably kill you.” He got up and went to make conversation.

Ramone smiled and joined the crowd himself. The response had been more than hoped for—at last he had an angle on a man who had eluded him.

David called Thursday night as he had promised and asked her out for that Saturday. “I’m not rushing you, am I?”

“No. Not at all. I had a great time yesterday.”

“Yeah. So did I.”

A short silence. “Does Jane have your daughter this weekend?”

“Yes. Will there be any problem with yours?”

“No. Jack will take them.” She felt him stiffen but attributed it to the situation they were in, a natural response. There would of course be sensitive areas as they worked their way through community propriety.

Jack swung by for the kids at seven, but before he arrived the girl approached her mother timidly, her eyes darting and inscrutable. She had picked up the delicious anticipation and could likewise revel in it—but too she was troubled by dark

premonition and fear and although not conscious of her mission, she had to warn her parent.

“Mother?”

“Yes Sweetie.”

“Where are you going tonight?”

Linda bent over and took her daughter’s frail hand and smiled reassuringly. “I’m going out with a friend.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll pick you guys up in the morning for church.”

“Is it that man you talked to?”

“David? Yes. It’s David.”

“He has a blue halo. Is he an angel?”

This startled Linda despite its innocence. “No, sweetie. You’re an angel.”

Sexual energy intensified and thwarted the entire evening. Their conversation, open and relaxed over coffee on Wednesday, was shy and inhibited on Saturday at a restaurant where neither had much appetite. They couldn’t hold one another’s eye long, instead focusing inordinate attention on utensils and the food.

And at the movie they were discreet and took extra caution not to touch—not because of any particular protocol, but because the energy was too intense. David had an erection through most of the movie. The evening was short and he did not kiss her goodnight and she didn't encourage him. They were too wired, too aware of impending sexual intimacy, and merely shook hands—but this gentle, lingering handshake fueled their fantasies.

Why didn't I invite him in, she scolded herself afterward, walking absently from room to room, turning on a light here and there, and examining the house as if David were looking at it. He must be used to finer possessions, she thought—and she decided she would replace the couch in the TV room. But the more she looked, the more she saw Jack and she understood that if she were ever going to make the break complete, they would have to move. It was a heavy and depressing realization. So much of her life was still tied to her ex-husband that the thought of extricating him from her personal life seemed overwhelming, almost impossible—her rootedness resisted so dramatic a change. She fell on the couch and idly picked up the remote and

pulled a quilt over herself and watched a movie until 1 a.m.— and stroked herself softly, as she imagined David would do, until she climaxed in a warm rush. She was scarcely awake enough to flip the television off and she went to sleep where she lay.

Sunday was typical but endless and he was in her thoughts the whole day.

“Did you hear me, mom?”

“What? Yes.” They were at the beach and the girl constructed sandcastles just above the lap of the waves and the boy booted a soccer ball. “You want to play football this fall. You should talk to your father about that. He played.”

“I know.”

David called early that evening and they spoke briefly and made plans for the next weekend. He had invited her and the children out on the family cabin cruiser. He said he would bring his seven-year-old child, Chloe, along.

Afterward, she was out of sorts and did not feel like cooking and when they all got hungry she ordered pizza. Jack called and asked if the kids were interested in taking in a semi-pro baseball game in a nearby city the next evening. He knew only the boy would agree but she didn't begrudge this: a father and his boy going to baseball games. He didn't intentionally slight the girl and Linda did not see that he favored the boy in any overt way despite their being males and a father's predisposition for bearing male heirs.

Baseball did not interest the girl child. It was the minutia of existence that occupied her hours: deciphering the perplexing idiosyncrasies of the adult world; her freedom spent in the magnitude of her imagination. She might make a good scientist with her attention to detail and focus and vision: the patterns of dust motes, the bend of grass in a breeze, the infinitude of sand.

Her father was a shadow, a formidable hulking emotional shadow who cast his penumbra over their lives, even in absence. And too, she felt his unacknowledged authority over her mother and how the mother was too deeply enmeshed in this vortex to be aware of the extent of the control. This was the cause of a

foreboding, the presence of the second man within the shadow of the father.

At work on Wednesday, Linda would take fifteen minutes for coffee in the employee lounge and chat with co-workers, or if no one was in there, she would read the local paper, usually dissected in sections on the long oak break table. Because no one was aware of whom she was dating, no one said anything to her that morning and she learned of David's death by automobile accident by reading about it on the front page. A picture accompanied the story. David Ross, a local business owner, aged 35, died when his car left the highway and struck a tree. He was wearing a safety belt and the airbag deployed but the force of the impact snapped his neck. The accident was still under investigation.

