

A woman was reading, and a man was watching her read, on a train to Wales when the pages of her book turned soft gray and disappeared, the gray brief-lived and the dark after that very dark, though not complete—*not night*, but deep enough that when she glanced up, all the small points of orientation she had unconsciously collected over the last several hours had vanished. *Not there, not there, not there*—the elderly man's hat, the child's handprint floating on a window, the becalmed perspective of receding seat backs, gone. Molly was lost. She was to imagine, later, the expression on her face, inasmuch as it could be perceived in the dark. Very likely he could see better than she could see, in the dark. He leaned forward to touch her knee, and remained leaning forward as they slid through the series of resonant echoes, Molly explaining to herself, *Train. Tunnel. Nothing's wrong*. If he'd touched her hand instead of her knee, the gesture would have been reassuring in the way he meant, or mostly meant; nothing would have changed between them. She wouldn't have found herself holding her book to her chest so that she could lean toward him. His lank black forelock fell to the outer corner of an eyebrow, and because his short beard grew close around his mouth, his mouth seemed to deserve attention—as if it were just luck you'd seen it, that mouth. She understood she'd been aware of his mouth all along. He existed interestingly—partially; in glints, in guessed-at contours—in the dark. *Train*. She'd forgotten she was on a train. They kissed, balancing, having to balance, making minute concessions to this distraction, to their almost awkwardness. She absorbed this reality: their teeth, their tongues, the frankly sour grown-male taste, his breathing, the surprising fingertips with which he steadied her chin as faint concussions or tremors ran upward through them, running through them in sync, no lapse, no gap, an identical, subtly sexual jarring, not *them*, not their doing, something that was happening to them, neither of them responsible, in the dark. Light was sliding back into place down the length of the carriage as they leaned back into their opposite seats. Echoes died behind them not all at once but raggedly, as an orchestra finishes tuning. Drifted leaves made a tortoiseshell ground against which the bare trees flashed sharp-twigged and cold. The speed of the train disturbed nothing, not a leaf out there. The woods didn't look very *well*. They were cold English woods—or was this Wales? She could ask, but he'd switched his attention from her to the window. He was that graceful. She didn't like herself for the voluptuousness of her relief, a big velvet emotion she could wrap up in, and didn't like him because he could so easily leave her alone, because he wasn't immediately intent on the kiss's meaning something. He wasn't intent on her at all but was gazing out the window with a sadness so stark and unqualified that it was, even in an unknown and therefore relatively unreadable face, plainly sadness. Here it was, the hurt like that when either of her parents, distracted from her, grew suddenly sad. For reasons she couldn't fathom, such sadness excluded her. However inadvertently, sadness, or even occasionally a mood as minor as disappointment, as supposedly fleeting as that, had caused her parents to seem elusive. This sadness proved to her what she was always forgetting in their presence, that she neither understood nor knew them completely. An intolerable aspect of childhood was that your parents could so swiftly and irresponsibly provoke in you a feeling of the most intense isolation. She didn't want to contemplate fear of abandonment in regard to someone she didn't know, but she hated it that he was leaving her alone. Molly ridiculed herself indulgently, using Joe's kid's slang, *Earth to Molly*, and began to feel better. Where there had been woods there were now houses, strict, small, brick, abrupt, their late-fall gardens walled in brick. His face stood out with a powerful distinctness in the last of the sun through the window. He let a long arm lie along the back of his seat. She imagined, in the slightly self-conscious line of that arm, the press of her own shape, and wondered if she were wrong. What she hated about starting something was how often you had to wonder if you were wrong. You had to know someone incalculably well before you were sure—wrong, right, *I know where I am with you*.

That wasn't all she hated about starting something. She didn't, in the first place, want something. Possibly she was wrong in the most sweeping sense, wrong to have come to England, though: he could live without her ten days, Joe said. They'd been sleeping together with a licentiousness that felt charmed, trying to conceive a child. In Albuquerque International, in the ladies', she found she'd gotten her period. Molly had been enough of a doubter to pack Kotex. They'd been trying for five—now six—months. The interesting thing was that Joe was outside, waiting to ride up the escalator with her to her gate, and she hadn't told him.

In England, nothing was very clear to her except that she wasn't really willing to read from her book again. She was going to have to, of course—this was a book tour, intricately worked out. She dreamed of losing the book, dreamed the usual dream of nakedness before an audience, but this was worse, and new, this resistance to being herself—the Molly of her poems; they were that kind of poems—in front of another auditorium of peaked British faces set at strict interest. The alternately shrewish and winsome malice manifested in their book-reviewing, she was sure it was there as they listened. Audacity here worked on a much smaller scale, in increments of irony, refinements of accent. Who was she, maladroit, presumptuous, confessional, to read them such poems? When the director of the hall—was it called a union? An arts center?—where she was supposed to read in Wales met her at dinner last night in London, and told her they were to be on the same train tomorrow, she'd been relieved to find herself taken under someone's wing. In a sense, she handed over the burden of Molly—her awkwardness, her neurotic tallying of her mistakes, the light (becoming manic) of insomnia in her eyes. He did fine. He fed her, got her things onto the train, and instructed her not to mind him but to read if she liked. To read, in front of somebody else? He was sure she must be tired with meeting people, making conversation, and being constantly flattered. His name was David, and when Molly told him he was being wonderful to her, he laughed and said he was wonderful to everyone. Are you? Why are you? He said it was his job.

"Poets," he'd said; he'd grinned—"like a lot of flattery."

"Do I?"

"You're far too intelligent for that."

Inside her bag were copies of her book, a self-protectively sexy dress to wear to the lectern, silver earrings that were a good-luck gift from Joe. Also in the overhead rack, rattling along, lay the cheap folding umbrella bought at the last minute before boarding the train from an Indian in a tatty black jacket. Over his upper lip, defining it, the Indian wore a feminine eyebrow of lustrous black hair. To persuade Molly, he'd sent umbrellas flaring open one after the other with the *whomp whomp whomp* of beaten rugs until zoomed-open umbrellas lolled and rocked by their feet and passersby had to navigate around them. She chose, and when she gave the vendor the wrong sum he cried out, delighted with her for having erred in one of the thousand rapid-fire exchanges he made his living by. He belonged here, she did not. Her error had dug his immigrant's finger and toeholds a little deeper. David was amused, though not in any protective or possessive way—keeping his distance, but amused by her.

"Our stop." He was collecting their bags. Climbing out into the rain, Molly opened her umbrella, dodging sooty litter blown along the platform. She tried to angle the umbrella to shelter them both, but before long, David's hair was dripping. The row of wet pillars they walked alongside had been graffitied in driven scrawls less spangled and artful than she was used to. David stopped. "I want that bird," he said, of a rusty rag somehow flung across the rain-glittering front of the engine. David waved to the engine's lofty window. He was going to jump. An arm waved from the cab: Go. Maybe it was Go. Nobody's head stuck out to confirm this. He would have to be fast. He jumped neatly. He was deep in the alley the tracks ran down, trapped between high, soot-blackened cement walls. He should

not have trusted the wave of an arm with his life. In the wind, Molly's umbrella kept wanting to block her view of him, so she collapsed it and let it flap to the pavement and was at once as wet as David, drenched, sick with crazy tenderness toward his body, for the particular cowlicky wetness of his sleek dark hair. Molly was a stranger witnessing a child running out in front of a car—immediate frantic *I'll do anything love*. He was looking at her from that black depth. He needed her to take the bird so that he could hike himself back onto the platform. It had taken—what?—thirty seconds? She bent, her hair raining in his face, so that David laughed, handing up a light, uninhabited bundle. She folded its wings shut. They folded inward with a starchy, slightly mechanical resistance, unexpected. The long, black-striped fawn-and-copper tail, whatever the bird had gone through, was unbroken. She touched the breast—baby hair—as, using both hands, he swung himself up, said "Thanks," and took the bird from her. "You're not going to eat that." "Why not? It's only had its neck broken. It's been quite cold. Not dead long, either." He carried it through needling rain Molly slitted her eyes against, realizing, when she was an awkward distance away, that she'd forgotten her umbrella. In the deserted parking lot, his was a small car stranded in harsh light. Though both of them were soaking, he dried the pheasant with an old sweater before bundling it in newspaper and tucking it in against their bags, lodged tightly together in the trunk.

Now here was a bad moment, Molly folding herself into the MG on the left, the wrong, side of him, attracted to him; his car was so disheveled and cozy, so rapidly making itself warm, that it was as if he'd turned a key and let her into his house. Manuscripts, soiled clothes, pamphlets, and old mail had slid together in haphazard heaps. There were even pebbles, as from a beach, so dull you wonder why they mattered. No woman's things. Molly was careful—not a glove, not a feminine slant to the handwriting on any of the letters. His dark-lashed eye was socketed in shadow, his cheekbone had a fine grain like an eggshell's, in contrast to the imposing orderly sleekness of his beard. Rain glittered in the headlights. He read Cymric to her from street signs and shop windows, plying Molly—she thought—with a sense that all this strangeness could please and amuse, that she must not sit there with her arms around herself feeling tired and misplaced.

When she understood he was hunting through the dark streets of his city for someplace to eat, she asked, "Is it all right if we—if you take me to the hotel?"

"To your hotel? You're not ravenous, then?"

"Nervousness. I can't eat before readings. I never can." This last, though it was a lie, was to make it clear that nervousness wasn't caused by him.

"You must eat" was all he said. He'd tilted her chin while they kissed, too, to suit himself: she didn't protest.

The place he took her to was Indian and garish, and settled across the wood-grain Formica table from each other they were a couple. He dried his beard with his sleeve, grinning at her like a fox from a hole as he did so. He could have been her lover. His conviction that she was interested in his least gesture (as she was) said so, pleasantly. Even as Molly tried to shake off her awareness of how they appeared, it was confirmed in the once-over of their waitress, a fifteen-year-old whose hair had been cramped back from her temples by plastic butterflies. The sturdy way she set her legs apart, in her short skirt, was flirtation, but it seemed ingeniously to include Molly as well as David. The waitress knew who David was, and liked his coming in from the rain with someone, dripping wet. She told Molly in detail what each dish was and how hot it would be, simply to spend time leaning over Molly's shoulder toward the menu.

"Quite a performance," Molly said when the girl was gone. *Better than me*, she thought. *Surer of herself*. Molly was jealous.

"Sheila," he said, naming the girl. He kept tapping his spoon against his lower lip, ready to

laugh. "Nothing much in Sheila's future, I'm afraid."

"You don't know," Molly said, thinking of the girl's energy.

"I know," he said, thinking what she was pitted against. They'd silenced each other with this disagreement. "Tell me about your poems. What comes first." "First?" "Image? Emotion?" The spoon ticked iambs against Formica. "A train you catch?"

"Landscape."

He laughed. "Not an answer I've had before."

"New Mexico." She hurried; she wanted no lapse in his love of what she was saying; she wanted to be good. "We have a house set over an arroyo, and on the arroyo's other side are hills, and, after that, mesas." She sculpted the house—two-storied, tin-roofed—in miniature, aware suddenly how dear it was to her: a sharp emotion, and oddly timed. Joe lived in that tiny house of air. Guilt. "Tell me why you're here. In Wales. "

"I saw Wales when I was a child. I knew then: I was coming back. I can't leave now. I've even tried, once or twice."

Food came. Molly devoured fragrant curried chicken, fawn sauce ladled over white rice, baby-food in texture but spiked with heat. "You never eat before a reading?" he teased. "Do you never drink before a reading either?"

"I can't."

Tympani, a drizzling beat, and an eerie disembodied wailing: Sheila reappeared, dimpling, for their approval. She'd put romantic music on. As if they were her parents, she wanted them to love each other. David's knee rested against Molly's. He ordered a bottle of wine. David listened to the music. "Somebody's getting their throat cut for love," David said.

At the hotel, really a shabby bed-and-breakfast, the landlady, pinching her upper lip in displeasure at having to hoist herself from her chair, let Molly into her room and left her with the key. The landlady was a long time retreating down the hall. The dolor of her tread, with its brooding pauses, was not eavesdropping but arthritis. Molly was sorry for having needed her to climb the stairs, but of course the old woman complained her stiff-legged way up them all the time, showing lodgers to their rooms. Why, oh why, would anyone spend the night here? A prickly gray carpet ran tightly from wall to wall. It was the color of static, and seemed as hateful. Molly was drunk. Each month, as long as she believed she might be pregnant, she couldn't drink. Drinking was an aspect of her—again—defeat. A bed sealed in white chenille, sporting a frail iron headboard, had been jammed against wallpaper adrift with plushy roses. Bees scaled to those blooms would have been the size of ping-pong balls. The only window overlooked the dark street, empty except for David's little car. Molly smiled down on it.

In a chipped sink, before a postcard of mirror, she washed in water so icy it rang in the bones of her hands. Though David was waiting downstairs with the grim old woman, and there wasn't much time, Molly fell back on the bed. The ceiling tipped one way, then the other way, righting itself beautifully. She had never even considered the chance that she might be unfaithful to Joe. Only the opposite. In this bed? It was like her *grandmother's*. Molly bit her hand to keep from laughing. Her grandmother's bed had been like this, exactly like it, down to the chenille spread, the tiny white cottontails Molly used to love picking at as she daydreamed her way through a fever. Molly's grandmother had lived with them. Molly had been put to bed in her grandmother's room with measles. This was done to keep Molly away from the little brother and sister she was sure to give measles to. Molly remembered the exhilarating warnings that she could go blind if she looked out the window, and the smell of her own body, sick, and the compulsiveness with which she'd picked and picked at the

chenille. She was forbidden to read, and monotony was absolute, the shades drawn to the sills, old shades, that heavy old yellow parchment kind you never see anymore.

Getting up, she kissed the iron bedstead's post, kissed the knob on top, kissed her own goose-pimpling arms as she undressed; then into a dress that was suddenly not just an expensive but a *beautiful* dress. How could you know, buying a dress, whether it was beautiful or not? This was a mystery to which Molly had never been initiated, though women all around her understood it, assumed it was simple—your body, its virtues and drawbacks, the right dress. This was luck. Mascara for her lashes. Back in the chilly little bathroom again. Chap Stick, not sexy, necessary. She was taking too long. Terra-cotta powder, Aziza, to bring out her eyes' green. The mirror she stared into had a crack up its middle, so that one of her eyes was higher than the other. Molly was suddenly stone-cold sober and full of fear.

"Book, book," she called to her bags, sorting through. Instead of the book, she picked out the sheaf of new poems. To ensure that this was a decision, she latched her bag and got out of the room. At the head of the stairs Molly stopped, apprehensive about the steepness, the heels she wasn't good in, and from his horrible chair David mimed opening a book. She held up the folder; his eyebrows lifted. Her descent was self-conscious but fine. He was willing her to be fine.

"New poems," he said in his car. "I'm flattered."

"You are."

"We are." He said carefully, "You can't know: I haven't said: I love your work."

She told him, "Lately I've hated it."

"Hated it." A question.

"It seems so limited by *aboutness*."

"Don't dislike it, it's a waste," he said, and seemed serious.

She told herself he was being good at his job, but still, she was pleased by him—his hand on the steering wheel, glanced over by light, the valleys between his knuckles, the specific veins.

She wanted him to keep driving, for them not to get there, but this wish ended in another parking lot, her face stung across by rain, unfresh, industrial-city rain, the folder under her coat. They were both conscious of David's not putting an arm around her as he ushered her up stone steps where people were standing around forlornly. These creatures dressed in black, almost to a man—because they were all men (boys)—had the air of having waited for some time, crying, "David! At last!" If David didn't feel guilty, she wasn't going to. He unlocked great double doors and led her down a hallway whose floor of varnished wood was rapidly tracked over by the trailing pack. David parted another, even grander pair of doors to peer into a dim auditorium, and she was struck with the worst fear yet: tiers and tiers of seats in bottle-green plush, their scrolled wooden arms braced by brass. Many of the seat backs had shadows worn in the plush where heads had lolled in boredom. Air released at last from a sarcophagus would be this intimidatingly dead. She couldn't do it. Molly chewed her lower lip for an animating taste of her own blood.

"You look a wee little bit worried."

Molly said, "I am a wee little bit."

"I can take care of you."

"You're paid to."

"I would anyway."

Taking her arm, he steered her fast down the hall, dodging two or three sodden idlers in black, who looked interested at being dodged. A closet of an office: from its disarray, she guessed it was his.

On the wall, Auden presided, his forehead and fallen cheeks as rucked and rilled, as tragically complex, as cortex. Marianne Moore had taken refuge, her fastidiousness intact, disliking it and almost everyone, under an eave of black hat. Dylan Thomas, disenchanting, slipstreamed cigarette smoke. Books had fallen everywhere. Books covered even the solid black typewriter with its long-stemmed keys alertly uplifted. "No computer," Molly said. "No," he said. Molly let her fingertips fit into cold silver cups. She typed, setting books hopping and then thumping to the floor. DAVID was five pops and then a silence in which he came near to rub at her cheek. "Rain has melted something here," he said. "Under this eye. Come on, I'm not very good at this. You must help."

She scrambled through her purse. Handkerchief. She touched until he nodded. "You might brush your hair," he said critically. She sat down in his chair and did as she was told, surprised to find her hairbrush in the rubble of her purse, her hair snapping, Joe's earring slanting across her jaw as she tipped her head. Joe. She thought how she had conjured him at supper—shaping their house with her hands. "Let's try this," David said, sliding open a drawer. They drank a slow burn from a flat golden bottle. She wanted to open his other drawers to see what she could find. She wanted to read all the letters spilled over the desk to find out whether anyone loved him or he loved anyone or whether these were only the usual mutually flattering exchanges about who would come to read in that deathly auditorium. And what pittance they were to be paid and what train they should climb on to get here. He could not be on everyone's train, could he?

"I didn't ask why you were in London."

"We must go, Molly. Time. It really is."

"Why were you? Tell."

"A friend of mine is in hospital."

"Is he all right now?"

"She," he answered softly.

"So you have a friend," she said. Of course. How could someone like him not have a friend?

"She's all right?"

"She's dying." He shook his head. "It's not getting any more real—dying, not possible, not her, no, but she is. *She* believes it."

"I'm so sorry. "

"I know."

"Are you all right?"

"No, not all right, not for some time now, not all right, but fine." He stroked her hair away from her forehead: he made her a little girl and told the little girl, "Come on now. Read me some poems."

Molly was at the lectern, braced against it, newly introduced by David, newly abandoned by David, aware, before she began speaking, that her voice would be hoarse, suffering the dream moment—no book!—before she remembered she'd brought the sheaf of poems instead. Nine, no, a dozen, no, fourteen foreign faces in the tiered darkness, and *Molly* in a love poem, Molly and Joe lying together, she resting with her chin on his chest, he caressing her naked back. What was wanted was a baby—the child they could evoke for each other, imagine, but maybe not cause to *be*. It struck Molly that she was confiding these confusions not to the—twenty-two? She'd miscounted, or latecomers had snuck in—heads out there, but privately to David. She turned the page, the microphone magnifying this to a giddy crack. The widely spaced, laggard clapping caught her off guard, already into the next poem, another love poem. Too late she understood she had picked up the folder on the spur of the moment so that she could expose the most intimate aspects of her existence to twenty-two contemptuous faces. Here was

Joe again, and here was Molly lying naked along him, above him, her legs V'd to match his longer legs, remembering making snow angels when she was small. The poem ended with that month's disappointment. It was graphic enough. "Menstrual," in her new hoarse voice, rang around the dreary dimness, rousing a spindly young man who sat up and began coughing on a note of amazement. His coughing punched through a bronchial aria, faltered, accelerated to a frightening intensity. "Menstrual" had startled and was possibly going to kill him. His hacking extinguished itself in a snarl of nose-blowing. Molly dealt him, and this prolonged interruption, her all-purpose ironic *This could only happen to me* smile, which had saved a lot of bad moments, bad public moments, because the truth was nobody would blame the young man for really ruinous awkwardness, but only Molly. She could seem rueful, but not chastened; genuine embarrassment on her part would appall the room. She would have liked to be able to count on the next poem, but these were new poems and she had no idea what it was. She was a fool.

*The dark wants something: to get darker.*

Dark, then a more serious darkness, slid down the pages of Molly's book, and she was lost. She'd forgotten she was on a train—it seemed, now, a wonderful thing not to have known, but she needed to stop thinking about this afternoon in order to get through now, this poem, an early Joe poem, sex exclusive of the will to conceive, un-baby-haunted. *Molly* had been so bold as to fall in love at first sight. She envied *Molly*, and regretted everything that had gone wrong in real life since *Molly* fell in love, five years' flawed, because real, love. Her next book would be more complicated.

She said "Thank you" and was through.

"Wow," David said. He was holding her coat, and she backed toward him, sliding her arms down sleeves. He had been keeping track of what she needed—a kiss; the privacy in which to rue a kiss; reassurance; now her coat. Her coat was simple. "What do you mean, 'Wow'?" she asked over her shoulder, and was told, "You were great." She let herself be led out into the night, miserable at having to mistrust him for the first time. On the stone stairs, she found her book thrust at her, and signed it. Her book was unfamiliar, far from home. It had stopped raining. A dozen watchers, pale faces, dark scarves, apprehensive patience, were waiting, and David said, "Would you like to visit the pub?" She said, "Yeah, sure," and they laughed and echoed her, "Yeah, sure." Even walking back to his car she could hear it, once or twice more, "Yeah, sure," floating after her, and David unlocked his little car and they rattled down streets between reefs of absolutely uniform row houses, each with its bare stoop. One, two, three steps up to a narrow door was repeated infinitely throughout Cardiff. She had believed London bleak, but this city was far more impressive in the authority with which it ruled out any possible deviation from depression. In London there had been little relieving touches, a door sporting a lion's-head knocker, an old woman tenderly chiding her leashed Yorkies as they powered her along, the silent people waterfaling down the Underground's escalators. Here David was the only beautiful thing. The bar was a low-ceilinged room packed with grim men in caps who shifted only slightly to let Molly and David through. Men addressed one another over Molly's shoulders, and when a pipe was rapped smartly against the wall behind her, she jumped. David had deserted her; two young women took his arms and dragged. He made a wait there face at Molly, so she waited twenty dizzy smoky minutes, Welsh voices roaring around her. *I'll go to sleep, she thought, right here on my feet, and none of them will notice, and because we're all packed in so close together I won't fall over.* She felt entirely safe among the men. Maybe this was the right relation to men, to be crushed in among them, involuntarily comforted by their bigness and smokiness and tweediness, their almost roughness, but utterly ignored, not there to them, as if you sat on your father's lap and he forgot you. She yawned deliciously, with liberating rudeness, then looked around to see who'd noticed. Of course the poor hacker, in need of

forgiveness, was there to notice. Of course he came toward her hastily, carrying sturdy glasses golden with whiskey. She drank, listening closely, hardly able to follow his apology for his accent. She wished it were possible to say *I forgive you I forgive you I forgive you* and have him vanish back to the underworld, but it wasn't. He was compelled to explain. The explanation compounded as no one else came for her. He had suffered from this cold for two months now. What did one do for colds in America? She told him she lived in the northern New Mexico desert, which was where D. H. Lawrence had been exiled for tuberculosis, hoping he would not take this for an invitation to visit. He lived with his mother, he told her, a formidable woman really, though confined to a bath chair—bath chair?—and her twenty cats. Molly was sure she had heard wrong but he insisted no, indeed, twenty cats; some nights they all started howling at once. She knew she was going to carry his hopeless bachelorhood, his narrow bed blanketed with the laziest and most intimidating of the cats, home with her, and that she had lost David to the local girls who loved him well before she, Molly, got here.

But no, here he was, David's hand on her shoulder to subtract her from her admirer, David telling the hacker, "I've got a great treat for your cats."

"My mum's cats. What is it, then?"

"I'll come by tomorrow." David betrayed the hacker, then, whispering in Molly's ear, "A great bore, eh?," finding her another whiskey, introducing her around to people he assured her she had to know.

It was forever before they were through with this. Back in his car, he set the wipers flogging at the rain. It was only by serious effort that she kept herself from leaning into him, resting her head on his shoulder. This seemed, vaguely, a bad idea, though the reason why proved elusive.

"I'm afraid I won't see you at all tomorrow," he said. "I'm away early. To London."

To his friend. Molly said, "I'll miss you."

He let it pass and she said, just as lightly, "Miss the chance to talk to you," because this was both true and a way of saving face. Couples choose so fast—*immediately*—which is the elusive one, and she'd understood since the train that in whatever haphazard, neither entirely *meant* nor *felt* fashion they were a couple, that the elusive partner was not her, married, American, going home tomorrow, but him. His life was more absorbing to him than hers was to her—a shameful truth she could qualify by adding, *for now*. She didn't want her life back yet, but wanted him, wanted this briefest of brief lives with him.

He was talking. "Impossible to believe in, at first. The usual response, right, but you find yourself evading reality, and you wonder, *What am I capable of? How far would I run?*, meanwhile doing what's necessary. Hating yourself, willing yourself through some phase of her dying, because there's only so much to her dying—it's finite, the process, yet you resent what you have to do, you're not grateful for these last things. Now it needs only a very small tilt and I'll be alone. I will do all my thinking alone; she won't exist. Am I explaining at all well?"

She didn't want to know what his friend was dying of, though this wasn't like Molly, this willingness to leave it at that, to let him tell her what he wished to tell her, to leave it to him. "I wonder what—I can't think how to ask this, but what it does to love, a love that already existed."

"You try to tell each other everything, before."

She couldn't answer.

"Now I wonder where she's going with what she knows. What will happen to what she knows." He said, "Will it feel as though it's all gone into the dark, or will I believe she still knows what she knows," not a question. He said, "She is who I told everything to," and waited.

She couldn't help.

He thought safer ground lay in getting back to her. "Is there someone you tell everything?"



"My husband. Joe."

"You're lucky, then."

"He has a kid by his first marriage. I tell Alden a lot—he's five, and I'm interested how to, uh, tell him the truth. Beginner's truth, you know? Truth for five-year-olds." She was scrambling, too.

"Are you cold?"

"No. This is nice."

At the door of her hotel she waited for David to lock his car and follow her in. Her landlady had abandoned the downstairs but left the silenced television on. Fans of wan light opened and closed between the grim chair legs and along the gracelessly arched back of the divan, or love seat, or whatever it was. Molly wanted very badly to sit there with David, but she let this wish flick open and closed without his observing it—without, she hoped, his observing it. At the foot of the stairs she listened; patiently, he explained she would be picked up and driven to the train at eight by a friend of his, someone she'd met at the pub, someone she'd already forgotten, she confessed. No matter. She would be seen off. This was her last little piece of being taken care of; she hesitated to feel herself her own responsibility again. "You were very good to me," she said. "My job," he said. "Good night, then." "Good night." Nothing at all was left to keep them standing there. In her heels she risked a step. She was so tired. She turned around. She was above him, bending, her hair falling into his face. He was kissing her, locking his hands together in the small of her back so suddenly that her back cracked.

There was the concluding, minky, oblique brush of beard as he set his cheek to hers and rested with her like that. They were old friends who could do no wrong with each other, who were full of trust, who had made up every argument, who couldn't part. His breath stirred her hair. She felt it even inside her ear. He let her go. She was watched up the hatefully steep stairs, and when she shut her door behind her, she leaned against it, very still. She hadn't heard him walk away from the foot of the stairs, and it was possible to hear everything in that sleeping house. How quiet they would have had to be, making love. For some reason that struck her as a particularly painful thing to have given up, the silence they would have had to observe, making love. She would have been good at it, careful. She lay on her bed, thinking she wasn't going to sleep at all, letting first the left shoe fall away and then the right, sure she could tell when the house was emptier by him. She moved her head sideways so that she was no longer staring ceilingward but at the old window brimming with cold night. There was still time to run to the window, open it, lean out, call down into the dark street. After a long wait she heard his car start, backfiring. Her last chance evaporated down the street into Welsh silence. When she was sure he was gone she went barefoot across the prickling carpet to the window and shoved it shuddering upward. He would have heard her clearly. She leaned out, but there were no taillights burning at the street's far end, no last-minute change of heart. Two kisses: their entire story, and who was she to pity herself, to think *Molly Molly Molly you fool*, to miss him like this, bitterly?

All the steep little row houses were dark. She dropped her dress to the floor, and back on her bed she considered the ceiling with its square milk-glass fixture, within which could be detected the faint fallen pallor of a moth, several moths overlapping, pale against pale against the glass. The night assured her it was a sleepless night, just now making itself known. When she stirred on the bed, it was only to draw her legs up so that she could wedge her chin against a knee, fetally, holding her own ankles, making herself small. Does Joe know himself, at this moment, loved? Was this love, saying no to something that was, in its way, love? Molly talked to herself. She told herself she wasn't going to figure it out tonight. She told herself to sleep.

She didn't sleep, or not much. At breakfast, she was aware she appeared disheveled. Luckily, there was coffee, not only tea, at the table set about with indifferent boarders—indifferent, at least, to Molly—and she was on her third cup when the hacking admirer of the night before arrived to drive her

to the station. He drank a rapid cup of tea, explaining: David's friend could not, at the last moment, get away, and had rung him up, and he was only too pleased to help out in a pinch.

He talked for both of them on the drive to the train station, and he pressed questions with a solicitous tilt of his head, not really taking his gaze from the road, so that she felt comforted by his interest, no longer repelled by his neediness. When she shook his hand, finally, his grip was knuckly, passionately courteous, memorable. "Do have a nice journey," and she was on the train, and she was on an airplane, sleeping, waking uneasily, sleeping again. Customs. Another flight, though shorter, to Albuquerque. The people on this flight began to look like her people—whether she liked them or not, hers, the harried mother dealing herself tarot cards while her two kids plucked futilely at her gauze sleeve and the baby patted the window between it and the dark; the huge, huge-bellied Santo Domingo man whose sleep, like a bear's, rendered the passengers on either side of him fearfully immobile; the young, very young, Spanish kid who flirted with the girl beside him by rolling up a shirtsleeve to show Christ on the cross. Molly slept. Waking, she oriented herself by the narrow shafts of light on innocent heads. For a time she had forgotten her real life; it was like forgetting she was on a train. Whatever she deserved, she was going to be fine. She was fine, she was on the ground, Joe towing a raft, an extravagance, of Mylar balloons toward her.

*I want this*, she thought, of him running, dodging in and out to get to her, *this life*. His urgency turned heads, caused little *Oh*s, earned the world's indulgence, unreliable but given to them, not them in particular but them as lovers, kissing, Joe breaking off the kiss to say, "Hey, I know you," and, again, "I know you," while what she could hear over and under what he kept saying was unreal—was applause.