

A new development, and more than he can bear: his ex-wife is suddenly back from Europe, her boyfriend of the last two years nowhere in sight. The tortoiseshell glasses she has never worn before alert him that Christie, confronting him across his own living room, has reinvented herself yet again. That the glasses still excite her as a novelty, a kind of prop, is plain to Dennis only because he knows her so well. She has a new gesture, index finger laid against the bridge of her nose to give the specs a tiny upward shove, brown eyes widening, that manages to get across the impression she is taking life more seriously, yet her account of the last year smells of evasiveness. Déjà vu, because his own sense, with Christie, was often that she was skipping details that might not reflect well on her, editing and enlarging as she went, and that he was essentially helpless to pin her to the truth. Christie is all in baggy black, her legs crossed, one black, doltish boot swinging. She wants their son for the summer.

"George has stayed behind," she says with a faint, enigmatic tone of apology. Not even that is clear. Not "I've left him" or "It was all a mistake," but "George has stayed behind." In Paris, where she lived with him for the last year.

By a coincidence, he and Christie both began second families last year, she with George, Dennis with his young wife Francesca. Christie's baby girl has been left in Santa Fe with a sitter. His twins are asleep upstairs with their mother, all of them exhausted by the cold they have been sharing back and forth. Andy, his and Christie's thirteen-year-old, is away overnight with his best friend; when Dennis heard a car grind to a halt in the rocky drive, he had a scared flash that Andy and Leo had got into trouble and somebody had been sent to tell him so. For next to no reason, Dennis distrusts Leo, a smart, good-looking kid, self-assured around adults in a way Andy never will be, not until he's one himself—maybe not even then. Leo's girlfriend works in a record store where Andy and Leo are always hanging out. Andy can't drive yet, of course, and neither can Leo. It's real proof of Leo's fast-talking charm that he has a sixteen-year-old girlfriend. Leo's mother, who doesn't approve of the girlfriend, drives the boys to the mall, because otherwise, she says, they'd hitchhike. Maybe it's Leo's mother Dennis dislikes. She gives in to the boys too easily. She was Christie's lawyer, trim and venomous, during the divorce.

What kind of trouble does he imagine his son getting into Dennis has no very persistent or obsessive idea, just occasional glints in which Andy pockets a Baggie of white powder or, with faked knowingness, hoovers a furred five-dollar bill over a mirror, talked into these idiot risks by Leo. None of those fears come true; instead an altogether different problem materializes. The car that startled him belongs to Andy's mother.

Christie's never been in this house before, and one of his reactions to letting her in strikes Dennis as inappropriate, even disturbingly so, and he hides it: he'd like to know what she thinks. An architect, he is constantly exposed in his work to the wanton quest for the famous New Mexico light, which is especially sought after by new arrivals from the grayed-over, greenhoused cities of the East Coast. It's as if light is another aspect of the West they can seize and display, the way their walls are now hung with pristine longhorn and bison skulls whose flesh—the new arrivals don't trouble to learn this—has been boiled from the bone in oil drums, not worried away by coyotes. Dead Tech, Dennis's partner calls it. When Dennis first came across this house, it was a warren of low-ceilinged rooms whose windows were unfashionably small and few. Huge cottonwoods grew right up to the walls. Such a shaded, wood-fragrant, down-at-heels little place; he wanted it. In renovat-ing, he changed it only minimally.

"Nice," Christie says of the room, sitting, crossing her black legs, beginning to pick at the cuticle of her thumb, and he asks himself why he wanted more of her. Glancing up, she reads his disappointment, and makes a face. *What do you expect?* the face says. This is where you live your new life. The face implies that she knew such a muted reaction would hurt. More than anything, he wants

her to stop picking away at her cuticle. If she can get at him so fast, so nonchalantly, he'd better watch it.

"Can we turn on another light?" she asks.

When he does, he has to admire the kinked mass of her dark hair, backlit. Even with the stupid glasses, she looks good. She's already lost whatever weight she gained with the baby.

"Coffee?" he says, for a chance to leave the room. He pokes through a drawer for filters, then stares around the kitchen, catching his emotional breath, reorienting himself. "Tea," Christie calls. Her tone's not rude, and he's no longer annoyed with her, but it troubles him that, this long divorced, it's taken them all of five minutes to fall back into marital short-hand. O.K. Tea. By the time he carries their two cups back with him, he's both more guarded and surer about where to begin.

"Christie, weeks went by when you didn't call him. Once you let it go a month. February, right?"

She has too much at stake to lose her temper. That would have been her familiar next move, but she holds it fast, though her black thug's boot kicks air. "It costs a fortune."

"Do you think he understood being abandoned for a year? Then you show up here and you'd like to pick up right"—Dennis snaps his fingers—"where you left off."

"Did he tell you he felt abandoned by me? Are those his words?"

"The agreement that you get him summers depended on your trustworthiness."

"You're saying I have to be as predictable as you are, Dennis. You're saying I should never have had George in my life. I don't think that was the agreement."

A sort of ongoing record of their exchange—the conversation as he will replay it for Francesca—runs through his mind. Francesca, as she will sit up in their bed, listening, taking everything in, sometimes shaking her head or marveling aloud, is his sanity. Francesca illustrates children's books. Christie's mercurial excess, which prevents her carrying anything through to the end, and Francesca's serene attention to detail—to root, trunk, twig, and every small, slanting leaf in the forest—could not be further apart.

What fairy tale is it, where someone comes back at last for the beloved child? Because she's never seen well in the dark, he walks Christie out to her car. When a rock trips her, he catches her arm, and in the darkness she twists to face him before shaking off his hand. She would rather have fallen. They could be any bitter couple walking in the woods, tired of each other, tired of the way nothing is ever resolved between them. He had thought he was protected from such vivid involuntary remembrance of her past lives: her zazen phase, with its hours of formidable silence; the year during which she was convinced she was an actress; the macrobiotic diet she starved herself on; the novel she finished half of. Leaving her had been so plainly necessary that he should not find himself surprised to be here, where everything, the house behind them, the wife sleeping soundly in that house, even the trees closing in around them, speaks of the care with which he has constructed an existence of his own. There is an infant's car seat in the back of her Volvo, and she has wedged a bag of groceries into it, upright. So this visit really was on the spur of the moment.

Leaning into her window as she starts the Volvo, wanting to end on a friendlier note, he asks whether she's found a place to live. She did. A week ago. In one of those apartment complexes where there's always something empty; he knows it.

But then she can't resist circling back to their quarrel. "So you're saying no for the summer?"

"Too much has changed for that agreement to hold."

"What's changed is that you're even more judgmental than before."

"You hurt him," he says.

"Dennis, we need to talk about this again." She takes a hand from the wheel, raking her hair from her face, the dark-rimmed glasses picking up spots of light from somewhere. "I'll call," she says,

and he can't tell her not to.

*Tonk, plunk:* something goes in upstream, where half-submerged boulders catch direct moonlight. All around Dennis, cottonwoods yield to the wind with saddling-up creaks. By the moonlight he observes them, the only trees he will ever think of as his own. A head black and broad as a Labrador's, and as purposefully at home, shaves across the glassy, swelling smoothness that is the deepest part of the river. A beaver, a big one, and upwind, or it would have known Dennis was there. *Castrados*, the beavers are called in Spanish, because after a fight the victorious male scythes off the scrotum of the loser, or so it's said. Dennis finds it hard to believe, but since hearing it he likes the beavers less than he did before, when he thought they mutilated only his ancient cottonwoods. Another bit of folklore: the piss of a man connotes a proprietary interest that the beavers tend to respect. Each night Dennis liberates a different tree from possible destruction. Barefoot, brooding, he smells the odor his urine gives to dry, grateful old bark, and taps the last drops onto a golden leaf. The spring wind, balmy and humid, blows across the river, and as it stirs Dennis's hair there is that slight, single instant in which he feels himself blameless.

His divorce seems a tight black tunnel he once forced himself and Andy through, fearing each forward move, fearing still more getting stuck to suffocate. A blindly crawling exit from pain, his shy kid shoved along before him. So Andy loves motorcycles, which do not creep, which proclaim in every line speed and certainty. Christie didn't ask, or didn't think she could ask, to see Andy's room. Dennis believes it tells everything about Andy. Photo-realist motorcycles, chrome and highly evolved threat, grace the walls, along with a passport photo of Kafka razor-bladed from a library biography, a sin so small and inexplicable, and finally so appealing, that Dennis uncharacteristically forgot to mention it to Andy. If Andy's motorcycle paintings, done in this hyper-attentive style of glisten and mass, are depressing, surely jug-eared Kafka promises complexity, contradiction, hope? When he was a little boy, Andy painted houses with peaked roofs, surreal cats and dogs and birds, petroglyph parents—Dennis and Christie—with their hands linked over the head of a smaller, round-eyed creature, Andy himself. Orange sun, blue house, green grass, all's well. The garish houses dwindled; cats and dogs were supplanted by snakes and wolves; Dennis and Christie were replaced by superbly muscled superheroes, and Andy was seven. Ten was the year of the divorce. Thirteen is this plague of motorcycles, Leo's flawless smile, and hanging out at the mall. Oddly—at least Dennis wouldn't have predicted it—Andy wrote regularly to his mother in France. Because Andy didn't seem to consider them particularly private, Dennis sometimes read the letters over Andy's shoulder. The light of the computer screen glowed on his son's clear forehead. He wanted her to know that he liked having a little sister. He wanted her to know that he thought about her. He really worked on the letters. None of the obvious things (When was she coming home? Ever?) were in the letters. His son knew by thirteen not to ask Christie certain questions.

At the kitchen table Dennis eats slices of bologna folded into cold tortillas and drinks a beer, then scrapes and washes the day's dishes while the twins' bottles come bobblingly to a boil on the back of the stove. When Gavin wails, Dennis climbs the cantilevered stairs. Tim howls, coming to consciousness alongside his brother. Dennis lights a candle, his habit so that the overhead light won't blind Francesca, blinking awake. Dennis lays Gavin and Tim side by side on the bed, and Francesca sits up. Theirs is a four-handed assembly line, the twins' bottoms bared, wiped, and rediapered, neither boy crying, both staring from their giant calm father to their giant calm mother, who are talking softly together. Francesca takes Gavin. He can't lunge at the breast fast enough, and she laughs down at him.

Though they're almost over the cold, the twins' breathing remains raspy. The wings of Francesca's nose are coarsely red, and her chest has the tonic stink of Vicks VapoRub, which neither boy seems to mind. Dennis cradles Tim, leaning back in an old chair whose upholstery is a kind of friendly maroon moss worn away, on the arms, in matching bald spots his elbows fit in as he angles the bottle up. Tim's warm head rests in a hand large enough to cup it completely. What weight was ever this good? A baseball fresh from the sporting-goods store, or his high-school girlfriend's breasts released from lacy bra cups in a dark Chevrolet. Maybe. Francesca is uneasy, Dennis can tell. She's not sure she understands exactly what is wrong, though he's told her everything that was said.

He says, "She can't have him this summer."

"Andy has a father *and* a mother." That lightly stressed "*and*" is criticism, and subtle as it is, it pricks him to argue, "You wouldn't know that by the last year."

"She was far away."

"That's no excuse," he says, knowing she knows it's not, having advanced it only so that they could both examine its weakness—could study, through the excuse's transparency, Christie's habitual irresponsibility. For a time they sit quietly, each with an urgently sucking baby, until, in Dennis's arm, Tim yawns, a thumb gliding into his mouth, his body's weight going sated and more vague, so that it's only a matter of settling him into the crib. Then Dennis leans to take Gavin. This is tense: Gavin's crying, if it starts, will rouse his brother, but Gavin sleeps. Ah, silence. "We're good," Dennis says, and the answer is an amused "Good? Great." He sits on the bed, not ready yet to climb under the covers, some chord in him still vibrating at a tense, post-Christie pitch. Francesca stretches, then narrows her attention until it includes only him. To do this, she very deliberately excludes sleep. The intense, the velvety deep desirability of unbroken sleep is what Dennis senses most strongly whenever he enters this room. In any competition he wages for her against sleep, sleep's going to win. It has only to lap inward from the dim corners of the room to close over her head, and she has only to let herself slide luxuriously under, while what he wants, in wanting to make love, would ask effort of her, and an energy she doesn't have.

"Showing up here with no warning," Francesca says.

"It was weird."

"No wonder you resent it, but what convinced you she can't have Andy?"

"She's lost the boyfriend."

Francesca says, "What has that got to do with it, really?"

"How many guys does Andy get to see come and go?"

"In three years there's been George. Not exactly promiscuous."

"Now Andy has a sister he knows only from pictures."

"The sister was born in Paris," she says reasonably. "Andy can get to know her here."

He wants Francesca on his side, not mediating between him and Christie. "She kept talking in non sequiturs." He places his hands, palms facing, in the air before her, implying the gaps between what Christie said and what she said next, but Francesca leans forward until his hands slide into a caress of her face, until, with two fingers, he tucks hair behind an ear, and then idly revolves the pearl resting against that ear's lobe, as if he were turning a tiny screw, tightening some connection that had, minutely, loosened.

"What's her baby's name?"

"Emma." He feels strange, saying it.

"I'd hate to see you be so unforgiving toward me," she says.

After a time he tells her thoughtfully, "I couldn't be," but she's asleep, her mouth open, an arm flung out before her, her fingers touching the wall, her entire body relaxed, loose, her fingertips' pressure against the wall too negligible, too accidental, to suggest she is meeting any resistance, even in

a dream.

The next afternoon Andy comes in, home from somewhere, on his way somewhere else, and is struck enough by his father's expression to say, "You look weird." Dennis, lying back on his son's unmade bed under the portrait of a glitteringly malign Harley-Davidson, squeezing a racquetball in his left hand, answers, "Your mom's back."

Two squeezes of the ball before Andy risks "Yeah?" He is careful not to let slip how pleased he is, but in a lilting involuntary movement, younger than he is, he goes up on his toes, his long legs braced, and bounces, one arm holding the other arm at the elbow.

Dennis says, "Uh-huh. Just last week. She came over last night."

"She did? Is that what's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me is no sleep and I didn't shave and that makes me feel old." He dents the blue racquetball with his thumb, and it oozes back into its sphere as he remembers that when his own father used to say he felt old it was a threat that Dennis suffered with an obscure and embarrassed guilt.

He reads in his son the same stiffening, the same resentment, as Andy, at his dresser, fidgets a drawer open and shut, and Dennis says to his back, appealing to the cocky set of the shoulders and the vulnerability of the nape exposed by the cruel Leo-like haircut, "Look, I wanted you to know, but. I was really thinking you could spend the summer here. With us."

"You hate her," Andy says intensely, talking down into the drawer, and Dennis starts to say "No, Andy, that's not it" when Andy strips off his sweatshirt, tearing it over his head, its shapely unknowable stubbornness so much like his mother's, and Dennis sees the violent bruise marbling his son's arm. The bruise resolves into a tattoo of a skeleton on a motorcycle, leaning forward as if into wind, black eye sockets, spiked helmet, the whole evil deal, grinning on the freckled, pale, still baby-fattish curve of adolescent biceps. Dennis slams the racquetball at the wall. It caroms past Andy's shoulder. "Dad!" Andy cries, and Dennis is up, taking two fast steps, grabbing the arm. Andy twists away to stand against the wall, cornered.

"My God, it's ugly." Dennis hears the hoarseness of his own voice, the sound of a father's barely controlled anger. "I didn't want to believe it was real. Was this Leo's idea?"

"No. Mine. Dad, it didn't hurt. The needles were really clean. I watched the guy sterilize them. That's the first thing you see when you walk into his place, this big sterilizer. Dad, it's my body. You would have said no. You know you would have said no."

*It's my body.* Dennis can't believe that. He can't conceive of having no say in what happens to this body, in no longer being needed to protect it. Andy is five, shuddering in his arms; he has fallen into a doorjamb, slitting open his lower lip, and for some reason Dennis is catching the blood in his hand. Andy is two, shrieking down at his own bare leg as the needle eases in. The nurse has told Dennis, who wanted to hold Andy in his lap, facing his chest, that it's better if Andy sees that it's the nurse who's hurting him. That way Andy won't come to distrust his own father.

"What does it mean?" Dennis asks.

"It doesn't mean anything. It's just cool."

"You're thirteen years old," Dennis says, "and you'll be living with this the rest of your life."

"I want to live with it." Andy pulls on a clean sweatshirt from his drawer, and the tattoo disappears under a sleeve. What Andy's defensive about, it hits Dennis, is that he does not regret the grinning little leather-jacketed Death on its motorcycle. Part of him would like to drum up regret if that's the clue to his father's forgiveness, but the truth is he's now too old to summon emotion on demand, and too honest to fake it, without being insulated enough to fight his father without a fair amount of pain. Dennis catches himself making an abrupt accommodating shift, with this insight, in the

direction of understanding his son as someone strictly separate from him. Perhaps the tattoo has accomplished what it was meant to. Perhaps it was meant to be something that couldn't be undone and something he couldn't possibly like about his child. That's it. His adoration has been unconditional. He's made Andy have to wrestle it off. Something has changed between them, and here Andy is, watching him covertly for signs that this is over. Over, so that he can go.

"You were so perfect when you were born," Dennis says, and is blindsided by the idea that the only other person who will truly mourn that perfection as he does is Christie. "You're grounded," Dennis says. "You're not leaving this house."

When the phone rings that night, Francesca answers and mouths, "It's her." Dennis shakes his head. Holding Gavin against her shoulder, Francesca mouths, "Come on." He holds his left hand flat in the air, his right vertically below it, a T. Time out. Francesca, exasperated, has just enough grace to smile at him. She says, "Christie, he must have gone out. I didn't hear him leave. Andy?" Dennis is shaking his head furiously. "Andy's out with Leo. Sorry. I'll tell them both you called."

Two nights later, and this time Francesca's side of the conversation is "He never called you? I gave him your message. I am sorry. His partner's away, so, you know. I'm sure he'll get back to you as soon as he can." Francesca listens a moment before adding, "I agree with you this can't go on much longer." When she hangs up, Francesca says, "Did you hear that last part?"

"I need time," he says.

She shakes her head at his hard anger, at how far he's willing to take this. "She's not helpless," Francesca says. "She can always call her lawyer. I think you're in the wrong."

Without her on it, his side begins to strike him as stale, small-minded, and increasingly indefensible, and a day later it comes to him that it's time he talked to Christie. Francesca seems relieved, looking up from a drawing of a wolf, forepaws resting together on a green satin coverlet, one incisor exposed, caught outside the lip in accidental malice, the whiskers long, flexed back against the muzzle in a grimace of grandmotherly welcome.

"Nice," Dennis says, and amends this to "Great. That wolf has eaten people."

"Did you know your eyes are red?"

"It's insomnia, not your cold. Don't worry."

"How can anyone not sleep?" she says. "I love sleep." They're both startled by a sneeze, followed by syrupy coughs, from the bedroom overhead where the twins nap, and Francesca says, "If they get sick again, I'm going to kill myself."

He leaves his office early to go to Christie's apartment. It's in a stucco complex of separate four-story buildings spaced around culs-de-sac and traffic islands spiked with dying yucca. He should have called her first, but somehow, for all his keyed-up restlessness, he never got around to it. "You look terrible," people kept telling him all day, and he got tired of his own small joke, "I feel much worse than I look." Well, she surprised him, showing up without warning. Surely she can't be too put off if he does the same. When his knocks go unanswered, he scratches in the dirt under a flourishing white geranium. Christie's houseplants always thrived. She always left a key under one of her plants by the front door, though he'd asked her not to a thousand times. He lets himself in, telling himself he's going to call out to see if she's there after all, but once inside he makes no sound. Stealth, it strikes him, is no small thing, but very physical. He's breathing faster than he likes, as if he'd run two miles on the river road, his heart banging. Her baby's toys lie all around. The bright clutter, for some reason, panics him. In his own house, he would begin picking things up; he'd know how to go about setting things straight. Here, he can't. He's stymied by the very fact that he's an intruder. An intruder is an unreasonable thing to be. *You are in the wrong*, maybe more deeply than ever before. Leo's mother could make a capital case out of this. As if with foresight, he dressed for the part. His Levi's are torn, and his shabby sneakers, gray with age, let him move neatly, brimming with guilt and yet slightly high on it, through

the mess, which seems to him evidence of happiness, her happiness, which he long ago divorced himself from, which he has no right to know anything of. All this, everything he sees, is contraband. A jack-in-the-box has been left as it was, sprung open, the vacantly grinning head hanging upside down from the long caterpillarlike sleeve of the body, and here is a naked doll seated in a chair, and on the couch *Vanity Fair* open to a picture of Kevin Costner, leaning back, his shirt loose, glass in hand. Dennis feels scathingly appraised by Kevin Costner.

On the far side of a narrow counter is the kitchen, whose paint-splattered furniture she must have got at the Salvation Army. Four straight-backed chairs are dashed with brilliant blue, while the small table is a scarred palette of yellow, turquoise, hot pink, and silver. It looks as if an Abstract Expressionist went insane here. There are crumbs of burned toast in the high chair's tray. The floor is fifties linoleum, tan tiles with faint white cirrus clouds drifting across them, and on one tile, Christie—or someone—has painted a tiny air-plane. She has been using *The Frugal Gourmet*, which is propped open by her mother's (he remembers) tin recipe box. In the refrigerator, nothing much—milk, bread, juice, the usual, and a half-empty bottle of Beaujolais with the cork floating in the wine. She never handled corkscrews well. Peanut butter. Garlic, fat cloves in mauve-white paper. He takes the garlic out—garlic doesn't belong in the refrigerator—but, holding the crisp little weight, he doesn't know what to do with it. If he leaves it out, she's going to know somebody was here. He has to put it back. He does.

Emma's room, sunny and disheveled, the crib against a wall on which hangs a small Amish quilt, its corners frayed, a powdery-pleasant baby smell and folded clothes in wire drawers under a changing table. A basket of teething rings. A kazoo. A child's rocker. Balled up in the crib, a pair of baby tights and a striped sock. A second small bedroom, darker, shades down, must be meant for Andy. There's something wonderful in being in this room, and he's still high on his amazed apprehension of his own wrongdoing, floating on it, willing to stay with it a little longer now that he's come this far. His hearing is sharp, but there's nothing, no sound, and his sense of what he's seeing seems magnificently, magically clear. He wouldn't have known any of this. She would never have told him. Even if she'd wanted to tell him, he wouldn't have listened. Here are things she thinks Andy will like: a cowboy bedspread, a glaring African mask, an aquarium filled with water, oxygen percolating through it, no fish yet but some kind of seaweed hypnotically weaving, and, clinging to the glass, snails small as capers. A desk fashioned from a sheet of Melamite laid over sawhorses. A bright-blue dresser. The drawers, when he opens them, are empty, except that the last drawer contains a Hershey's Kiss.

As he sits heavily on the bed, his exhilaration dies. It doesn't so much desert him in a rush as evaporate, and a befuddling gray fatigue fogs over the vacuum it leaves in him. This stupid midafternoon sleepiness feels entirely ordinary. He lies back on the bed and puts an arm over his face, breathing in the smell of himself—slightly sweaty, salty guilt. Still no sound. It feels good. He even feels he's in the right place.

He dreams a dream he thinks of later as intended for Andy. Andy should have dreamed it; by accidentally falling asleep in this bed, Dennis got it. In it, Christie is younger, Andy barely old enough to work a scissors, the two of them sitting on the floor with their dark heads together, cutting animals from construction paper, the air between them charged with great, disinterested tenderness, and they're not talking. The animals they cut out come alive. A monkey jumps to his knee, and Andy giggles. Christie sets a blue giraffe down on the floor and it canters stiffly away. Waking, Dennis's first thought is that he's dreamed a dream he wasn't in. He can't remember ever having had such a dream before. In some subtle shift in the room's shadows he reads a new degree of lateness, of sheer wrongness in being here, and his body responds with a rising thrill of adrenaline, but he still doesn't move. He wonders if what he really wants is to get caught. In another minute he's able to tell himself *That would really be the height of stupidity*, and he sits up. His body hates his refusal to get moving. He shakes his head to clear the last of the sleep from it, but the mysterious peacefulness of the dream still has a hold on him.

What he's seen won't let go so easily.

Back through the apartment, each object in its place, everything exactly as he found it, it begins to appear to him that he's getting away with this. He lets himself out and finds that it's later than he thought, probably six-thirty or so. When he checks the parking lot two stories down, she's not there: her dark-rimmed glasses aren't aimed upward in accusation, and though he fumbles, locking the door, her Volvo does not materialize. He twitches geranium leaves out of the way, sliding the key back where she likes it.

This is not happiness, just a gaudy physiological response to not getting caught—light head, hands shaking, legs he has to will steady to get himself down the stairs, world that looks entirely strange.

"I thought I couldn't leave the house until I was thirty-two," Andy says, his feet on the dash, looking around the maze of stucco buildings he's never seen before.

"You can't," Dennis says. "The one place you can come is here. I want you to call me for your ride home. No taking off. No improvising."

But I can stay the weekend."

"You can stay the weekend if you want."

"Why?"

"I was wrong before," Dennis says. "I was just wrong."

"But how did you see you were wrong?"

"You don't get to know all the details."

"Does Mom?"

"I haven't talked to her."

"You mean she doesn't know I'm coming?"

"She's home. There's her car, right?"

"I don't like surprising her," Andy says.

"O.K. You really don't like it, we turn around, we drive home, we get on the phone, we arrange this for some other time. Is that how you want to do this?"

He hesitates, and then says, "I guess so." Dennis starts the car; maybe this was a bad idea, but he'd liked the feel of it. He'd wanted to change things all at once. He'd wanted the suddenness of his reversal on his side in convincing Christie that things were going to be different from now on, and he hadn't guessed that it might be Andy who didn't like the idea, who seemed unprepared for it.

"Stop," Andy says, removing his feet from the dash, sitting up. "I'm going, O.K.?"

"Whatever you want to do."

"I'll call you."

"Call."

He's gone. He's on the stairs, bag on his shoulder, lighter footed than his father can remember ever being, taking the two flights of stairs as if they are nothing. Then Christie is at the door in black jeans, a man's T-shirt huge on her, her son taller than she is. That she's amazed is clear in every line of her body. She and Andy don't step nearer or embrace. They just stand talking, and then Dennis sees Christie move to her porch rail, looking down at him bewildered, and he waves at her, a wave that means *I can't explain it*.