

Deluge

Rain.

And the ominous silence of the oversleeping baby.

Prowling, Simone passed the picture window, step in step with the glazed image of herself, faintly luminous against the storm. Beyond, below, the farthest ridges were lost in clouds. Over the nearer slopes the forests writhed with the frenzy of mourners rending clothes, hair. The reflected living room stretched into nauseous skies, where Simone's tall familiar drifted, thinly etched, with emptily stiffening arms and hands.

She instinctively tried to heft the symbolic weight of that lone figure suspended in gray-green turbulence. But the old sybaritic thrill of reading for signs had given way, since the baby's birth, to fear: common, ugly foreboding, nothing akin to the exalting terror of the oracle. Even this outburst of rain and wind, those lashing trees, emblematic to a fault, composed a mindless melodrama whose impact was measurable solely on the mean scale of human trouble, in the aching of a baby's ear.

The storm had gathered not with the usual fanfare of purple swiftly massing on the outer peaks but more insidiously, the crisp autumn sky congealing over two days into a vault of steely cirrus gray. In the pressure shifts the baby's earache had intensified, to judge by its feral squallings; and Simone's frantic, obsequious phone calls had finally elicited the pediatrician's brusque sanction of a larger dose of codeine. Spewing gratitude, pledging to keep up the antibiotic and bring the baby in day-after-tomorrow on Mark's return, Simone tried to yammer away the doctor's scorn for her, a shrill woman terrified of the solo drive down a spiral mountain road with her screaming infant. Impossible to convey the delicacy of a nesting mother aflutter without her mate.

Each thought of whom gave her a spasm of acidic rage. Whenever Mark called, she detected the background cocktail-party noises of his conference and the rested, exuberant tone of his commiseration. His response to the progress reports always seemed to harbor a subtle disappointment in her and the baby, even as he bemoaned his absence from them. Curtly she declined his repeated offers to change his plans; she turned, each time, from the phone to the wailing infant and he to the rising jubilation of his colleagues.

Now, while the baby slept in its narcotic stupor, she repented of her brusqueness. Even before his departure earlier in the week, Mark had offered to ditch his conference. How many other times hadn't he begged her to take a few days off, go somewhere, visit an old college friend? Poor guy still took her for a social being, conceived himself the curator of her spirit, attempting to anticipate its needs. His own needs, as he delineated them, were few and supreme: Simone herself, the baby, and their shared mountain solitude.

Charged with remorse, Simone paced vigorously before the waxing storm. Cloudfronts were tumbling in rapid succession overhead and broken treelimb rising from the forest into the clutches of the wind. She and Mark had done wisely to clear their summit property; debris rarely reached them, even in the occasional hurricane. The back boulders provided sufficient windbreak for their long, lowslung house.

An electronic bleat sounded from the kitchen, where she'd left the TV on. She veered from the living room into the dining "L", glancing out at the stony profile of the rear view, and reached the kitchen in time to catch the remainder of the storm warning: gale-force winds and flash floods throughout the valley region. Some of the stormdrains had already reached capacity in the lowest areas, and the channel aired its early footage of people wading out of cardoors. It looked to Simone like a replay of the flood two years ago when the waters had weakened the moorings of the Ridge Road bridge below the house. She and Mark—childless then—had savored that marooned, addled week, nursing a hilarious jug of rancid wine and eclectic remnants from the pantry: olives, pimentos, stale crackers. In voluptuous indolence, Simone had regained the sultry, confident nakedness of five years before when they'd seized each other for life. That flood had been providential, reminding them that they were still scandalously bawdy. Mark had been lying on the couch in the candlelight, chortling and defiant, the night she sashayed in, a nude wine steward bearing the bulbous jug ostentatiously sheathed in his underwear.

"Good show," he scoffed; "can't miss with an undies joke."

"Somebody's *blushing*," she taunted.

"Does the word 'infantile' ring a bell?"

"Not really." With a twist of the waistband and a tilt of the jug's long neck, she held an unmistakably lewd facsimile. "I'd say we're full grown. At least by some people's standards. But I'd be delighted to explicate--"

"I'll give you explication!" He lunged, crammed his fingers into the mouth of a half-empty jar of marinated red peppers, and held up, vertical, two parallel strips pinched together at their ends. With a free finger, he teased them slightly apart, leering, "Get the picture?"

Simone, rising to the bait of memory, scanned her kitchen for erotic analogues. The baby's bananas?—no: a sacrilege. She was a mother now, a rock of prudence. Since the pregnancy she'd kept at least a month's supply of canned goods on hand. But, she reflected with a pang, the antibiotic would run out in several days—assuming it was even working. She should have driven down earlier and had the baby rechecked before the storm. No room for improvisation at this stage of life. The phone rang, and she muted the TV before answering.

A recorded telemarketing pitch from a long-distance service.

Hanging up, she immediately refilled the room with TV noise, slathered peanut butter over some crackers, and drifted to the table, thoughtfully staring at the live helicopter coverage of evacuations along the perimeter of the flood basin.

In the lowest places the inhabitants had already made a timely exit from streets that were now swiftly-flowing rivers a foot or two deep. An aerial camera zoomed in on water rising over the bumper of an abandoned florist's van, which suddenly tilted onto its side, slid to the center of the street, and collided with an upright Mercedes coupe whose hood ornament still stood valiantly above the water's surface. The anchorwoman's voice intoned a piety about the waters' knowing no class distinctions as the camera panned back for another long-shot.

Scanning, the lens halted on another stranded vehicle, a flatbed truck with something moving on the back. A close-up revealed the figure and then the grainy face of a dark-haired young man standing in the cargo bed, waving and calling to the viewer. Simone thought she read desperation in his blurry, gaping mouth and ceased munching. The lens pulled back, as if to confirm the young man's plight: he stood alone in the middle of a river rising steadily along the storefront façades. The water was now flowing across the truckbed, over his feet, and he lurched to grab a bracket above the rear window of the truck's cab. Gripping it with one hand, he waved the other violently, fingers splayed and rigid, yelling his silent entreaties to the camera. Simone froze, the cracker paste obscene in her mouth.

"Do we have—? Can we get in close—?" a crewman could be heard babbling as the picture tilted momentarily.

"It looks like some sort of rescue may be underway..." the anchorwoman offered weakly as the picture righted. The water had reached the young man's knees. A brutal close-up showed his lips: "Help! Help..."

The picture broadened; water had reached his waist. One hand still clutching the bracket, he strained with the other to reach the radio antenna on the top of the cab. As the water rose, he flung himself onto the cab and crouched there, a Laocoön, arms extended and wrestling. The river surged to the cab-top; suddenly the tortured figure lifted, straightened on the flow, and hung horizontal, still clinging to something below the surface of the rampant water. Then, with a bolt, it was gone, churning away on the current as the focus lengthened and lost it in a swirl of water and debris.

"A tragedy, a tragedy," the anchorwoman stammered. "For viewers who've just tuned in," she added tremulously, "we have just witnessed the first— the first presumed fatality of the flood. We apologize for...if our coverage has been...graphic; this is live coverage. We will return in a moment—"

Simone slapped the TV off, staggered to the sink and washed her mouth out. She smashed a fist against a cabinet.

"Maaark, Maaark," she found herself chanting.

She would call him. She would level with him: get home. Blow off the monkey-suits and get home. Now.

"We're sorry, all circuits are busy. Please try your call again later."

What was he doing there, anyway? Isolationist though he claimed to be, *he* was the one who got out, who left now and then, sallied forth onto that flat, stretching grid of lights to stand under lucite hotel chandeliers with a tonic in hand and a

quip always at the ready. Before the baby, she'd seen him in action and noted how exquisitely unobjectionable a social creature he was. His twinkling charm would have belied his claim of mingling poorly in society but for the fact that his comrades did, indeed, not call betweentimes. She knew that Mark would be first among them to leap to the assistance of another—and probably they sensed it, for they trusted him with confidences on the sly and sought his advice in matters of self-advancement. But they had their ski weekends and christenings without him.

And she grieved to think how little he was loved.

And seethed with hatred and envy of these others who understood the uses of their fellow man. She reeled, always, between the desire to extricate Mark and the impulse to insert him forcibly into their circle, burned to confront the gregarious ones with their subtle exclusionary tactics and claim for her small, outcast family its rightful place.

—Because it was intolerable that the baby should inherit such opprobrium. Wistfully she'd imagined herself and Mark schooling the child at home, and her imaginings had taken on a simple, eloquent precision. She pictured the three of them standing out front in the sloping field of heather, halfway between the house and the road, as the schoolbus rounded the distant curve, glugged with brutish faces. As she pictured her family turning away together and beginning to reclimb the slope, she seemed to see the three figures as from the busriders' point of view, with a long and yearning perspective on their unity. She imagined, too, a nighttime scene, vaguely firelit, with Mark reading aloud in the armchair and herself on the couch nuzzling the shapeless, listening figure of the child.

Yet whenever the baby cried, Simone knew that her dreams deceived her. The wailing infant seemed to indict her custodianship with a passion that foretold estrangement. Ministering doggedly to its cries, Simone had discovered her own primal repulsion from the baby; she'd confessed it to Mark, who pronounced it healthy, and together they'd brooded on how to exploit it appropriately, gradually, as the child matured. If during the nursing she reverted to fantasies of mutual dependence, she was forced to surrender them again when colic or, lately, pulses of earache caused the infant to spit the nipple back, bucking and rearing, flushed with rage.

A dismal rumble tolled for seconds on end. The rain's hard, slanting grid erupted with chaotic eddies that broke like ocean spray against the kitchen window, and Simone cried out involuntarily at the first thwack.

Had she awakened the baby? She rushed out through the dining L to the living room and listened at the opening of the hall. Silence. She would try Mark again. She scurried back to the kitchen.

"We're sorry, all circuits are busy. Please try your call again later."

She slunk to the kitchen table, where her father's postcards stood, carefully ordered, in the napkin-holder. Slumping in her chair, she faced the leaden rear landscape, the dense hatching of the rain, and shuffled the small stack of Mediterranean coastal scenes. Reluctantly she flipped a card over and reread:

The sight of these alien lands moves me strangely; their beauty surpasses my expectations...I'm driven to admit that my life's achievement is, perhaps, this voyage.

Listen to him, she gritted. This was her father, her lifelong mentor in a brand of noble skepticism, a world-weariness against whose backdrop the astounding preciousness of self, parent, spouse, and child had stood out in brilliant relief. Yes, she could see: he'd been the intellectual prototype for Mark—always monolithic, even if eclipsed by other figures since her adolescence. And was he satisfied, then, with his geriatric voyeurism? Had the ruins and the little villages sufficed to quench his thirst for ambiguity? Undoubtedly all the other foredeck loungechairs were erupting with like-minded, if less eloquent, missives: "The cruise of a lifetime!"

She had expected something more of him, some struggle with the seduction, even as she'd sent him off with admonitions to enjoy himself. Now she pictured him feeding with all the other sightseers at a common sensory trough; and these feeders seemed at once to be frail, pathetic shells of human need and lardy, overflowing vats of surfeit.

She wanted to believe she wronged him. Perhaps his eloquence fell short of capturing a troubled confrontation with the prescribed icons of antiquity. Or perhaps, like her, he had begun to lose the old, pompous sense of personal destiny and had struck a compromise. But why bow with such humility at the feet of the ancient world?

I see Peloponnesian warriors in the faces of the tradesmen.

This was not the iconoclastic voice that had raised her saying, "Seek the questions, not the answers," the sportive voice that had teased Simone's mother for objecting to a young couple's living isolated on a mountaintop. The world had seemingly caught up with him; bereaved, he was seeking certainties in historic places.

...Our hosts share their culture without prostituting it and teach us how to be their guests without demeaning them. I grow aware—

Forgive the abruptness; I'll close now and send this out. They tell us the rains in Europe are delaying the airmail, and I don't want you to worry. Love to all three of you,

Dad

Even the solicitude of his closing lines struck Simone as uncharacteristic. He was a man of many parts, as the old expression had it, but never before a sentimentalist.

The phone jangled, sudden and inevitable. Simone snatched it up and heard, to her overwhelming relief and pleasure, Mark.

"Darling, I'm sorry—I should have come home sooner. The lines are jammed; they're giving us each three minutes. Just tell me: are you all right?"

"We're fine; the baby's quieter this afternoon. What's going on?"

"There's serious flooding across town, but we're higher here, so they don't expect too much trouble. Anyway, I'm on the eighth floor, and this building's like a battleship, so I'm sitting tight. But if there's any way at all, I'll try to get home tomorrow."

"Are the trains running?" she asked incredulously.

"Not now, or I'd be on my way. But maybe tomorrow I can get out of here somehow—"

"No!" Simone exclaimed. "Stay put till it's really safe. I saw something awful on TV—please, it's dangerous; promise me you'll stay there till the water's gone."

"I promise, love. I'll call you again tonight, if I can—otherwise, tomorrow. I'm sorry, I'm just so sorry. How's the baby, really?"

"Fine—really. Much better. Don't worry about us. We have everything—you know. Oh, and remember: check about the Ridge Road bridge before you try to come up. But please stay put till they say it's all clear."

"I will." He sounded slightly amused now, and she fought her anger. "I'll make this up to you, love," he said.

"You bet you will," she heard herself growl suggestively.

"Sweetheart..." he murmured, sounding stifled but eager to acknowledge her overture.

"Look, just *be safe*," she ordered, trying to ignore the dramatic throb of her own altruism. "If you can't get through to me, don't worry. Things are in control. And if I don't hear from you, I'll know you're trying and I won't worry either."

"Right. But I'll try all this evening and tomorrow."

"Let it ring a long time. I might be nursing when you call."

"I know. I love you." He was obviously rushing now, under duress.

"I love you, Mark. Please be careful."

"I will. Goodbye, love."

Simone hung up and convulsed with loneliness. Hands clenched to her belly, she paced the kitchen, averting her eyes from the boulders hunkered in the unrelenting rain. The evening light, such as it was, was fading. Maybe she should wake the baby. But after this long a nap, she could hardly salvage a night's sleep anyway. She wondered if the TV would have anything but flood updates for her in the wee hours.

Simone opted to let the baby sleep another hour and minister instead to her unease. She formulaically brewed a cup of hot chocolate and set herself to browse

the livingroom shelves, without especial appetite. One particular book began insinuating a claim, to which she grudgingly yielded: when, if not now, would she ever take the time to sample it? With an unpleasant sense of compulsion, she stretched out on the livingroom sofa along the front window with *The Finest Stories of the Last Century*.

The tome was a memento of her mother, a bulky, black, clothbound affair familiar from a distance throughout her childhood. She'd regarded it with awe since the night her mother had crept into bed with her, whispering tremulously, "Don't wake up, I'm just here for a cuddle. I got scared by a story." Simone, then nine or ten, had known or assumed that the culpable story lurked within the covers of the black book; she had understood, too, though she couldn't recall how, that the story had in some way concerned a child and that this was why her mother had sought her comforting. With her mother's death last year, Simone had had an urge to own the book. Once possessed, though, it had lost its evocatory power; her mother's essence had dropped from it like old library dust. Perhaps if she'd left it vaguely gleaming in that almost unreachable spot high on her parents' shelf...

Now, having pried it from a surrogate place and propped it on her thighs, she scanned the table of contents filled with redoubtable bygone names. The rain sheeting off the overhang outside the picture window made a dense translucent curtain, and the savory feeling of rainy-day seclusion came to her as a further legacy of childhood. From the standing lamp a warm light glowed onto the ivory pages that had stunned her mother.

For Simone there was a discouraging, archaic ring to many of the story titles—"The Man Who Would Be King," "The Dying of Francis Donne," and so forth. But at the bottom of the third page of contents her eyes caught and fixed on a congenially blunt title: "Deluge." Turning to page 461, she read:

With the first drops, the valley dwellers cinched their tentflaps, while on the cliffs Zuzra and Ben-Itray did the same. The sheep roaming the lowlands bleated at the thunder, while, above, goats scrambled hastily over the rocky crags. When the downpour came, rivulets ran through the stubbled fields and channeled the cracks along the hoofpaths; falls formed on the stony, unabsorbent slopes.

That night the child slept warm between his parents; when they rose at the sodden break of day, they left him slumbrous on the woven mat and crept out along the dripping edges of ravines to milk the she-goats.

Simone, willing herself to indulge the experience, reached for her mug and snuffled noisily at the cocoa.

From their height Zuzra and Ben-Itray saw that the valley dwellers had folded their tents and were herding their sheep into the lowest tier of hills.

Far out on the grey horizon stood the curious object, shaped like a squat urn.

Two birds of peculiar plumage sheared out of the clouds above Ben-Itray's head and dived into the valley, gliding out to its furthest edge. From the west another pair descended, equally swift but differently made. In the distant fields the gorse seemed to be churning, as if with ground-animal migration. The goats' haunches quivered restlessly during the milking.

With the buckets filled, Zuzra and Ben-Itray rose under their yokes and bent to the task of the strenuous return. Rain fell steadily into the milk and overflowed, white, onto their clenching feet.

Simone replaced the mug on the coffee table and slid lower on the couch, her head now supported by the arm-pillow at one end and her feet elevated on the opposite one. The book sat solidly vertical on her belly.

The parents saw that the child had risen in their absence, for the tent flap now hung open to the rain. Within, they met the goat-like warmth and odor of his recent sleep, and they smiled, shy in his after-presence. Zuzra relit the potstove with the last of the dry chips and stirred in millet as the milk began to boil. On the woven mat the ragged goatskin doll that the child cherished lay face-down, its pate rubbed raw where there had once been a crop of woolly fleece. Zuzra rolled the mat up tight around the doll and stowed it to one side, while Ben-Itray finished pouring his buckets into the cheese-frame and raked in the rennet, listening with her for the child's return. As she lifted the porridge from the heat, Zuzra called toward the tent flap, "Hamani, Hamani!"

Simone jerked with the blow of recognition. Hamani! This was the one: the story that had propelled her mother, shaking, into her arms. Through that troubled memory of the cradling and the rocking had run a moaning refrain, the chanting of a name somehow not entirely her own: "Simoney...Simoney," it had seemed to sob. She heard its echo fully now and understood that she was reading a tale whose loathsome terror she already knew. Wedging a finger between the pages, she flipped the cover down and thumbed it cautiously. The black storybook indeed: her mother's treasure and scourge... Fearful, she ventured on.

Supple in his movements, Ben-Itray draped the cover-cloth across the cheese-frame and crouched by the flap, head and shoulders out, repeating Zuzra's call. Zuzra hung motionless a moment, then set the porridge-pot aside and followed Ben-Itray back out into the hammering rain. Streams now flowed on every hand, and the paths they had taken along the ravines were watercourses. The valley floor beyond, from which the lowlanders had disappeared, held broad, meandering pools. A pair of long-necked

fowl plummeted from the east toward the urn-shaped mass on the horizon, and Ben-Itray and Zuzra distinguished to their surprise a breeding pair from their own flock picking its hazardous way across the plain.

"Hamani!" they called together, voices lost in the bustle of water.

Avoiding the flowing paths, they grappled the face of the bouldered hill, moved up and across, one's heel to the other's kneeling back, one's hand hoisting the other's weight. Even in crevices the strongest shrubs, moistened to the roots, dislodged under their grasping fingers, and they slid back twice. At last they achieved a ledge and surveyed the earth—and the plain was now a lake on which an urn-shaped bauble floated.

"Hamani!" Ben-Itray and Zuzra roared.

The sky unleashed a torrent, bowing them to the ground. Each, tucked into himself, shrieked, deaf to the other and to the thunderous filling of the gorges below.

Zuzra and Ben-Itray, huddling under the onslaught, pressed the absence of Hamani to their hearts and felt it crumble, as if they embraced a marrowless sacrificial lambshank. They knew, as they breathed the hoarded air between their chests and loins, how little space was left for him in their survival. Zuzra's fingers dug where her cheek had nestled against Hamani's silken hair, and Ben-Itray's thumbnail gouged his lip where it had brushed the boy's sleeping brow. They knelt no farther apart than they had been with him between them in the night. And there they remained, unobservant of the filling of the chasms.

Simone leaped from the couch and began to pace again, arms folded to her chest and a strangled rumble in her throat. It was now dark outside, and she saw her reflection vividly: stalking, bestial. Through that image gleamed the striated sheet of water falling from the soffit a foot or two beyond the window.

The story was intolerable, in her present circumstances. Maybe in a couple of days, snug in bed beside Mark, she could bring herself to finish it—make him read it, so that he would appreciate her present ordeal.

Somehow empowered by this train of thought, Simone sat back down on the couch and reapplied herself to the book.

With the subsiding of the rain, Zuzra and Ben-Itray grovelled still, numb and deafened from their thrashing. They turned their necks stiffly and gazed on each other's face, seeking the plundered source of one who was no more. Painfully they reared up and, by force of habit, turned their gazes to the cliffs and the plain, even knowing that the thing they sought was gone. And their breathing faltered and went still.

For they knelt on a spit of rock in a broad and endless sea banked by the purple bellies of receding clouds.

They gaped at the massive confirmation of their loss.

The abhorrent waste: their grim destination.

Yet in the middle distance loomed a squat urn, high as a hill, twirling slowly as it eased across the surface of that sea. They stared, trying to damp an unseemly hunger for its promise.

As the thing neared somewhat, they perceived a gap high up where the lid-shaped portion of it hung suspended over the bowl-like part on upright posts that formed a circular colonnade. On one of the vessel's calm, deliberate revolutions a dun-robed, bearded figure appeared tall in the aperture between two posts, his head wistfully or apathetically raised to the horizon. The lofty figure visibly flinched on catching sight of Zuzra and Ben-Itray, and his face remained bent on them as the vessel spun him exceedingly slowly out of sight. Its high, tapered bulk continued to approach, still turning, and the man eventually appeared as before but now maintained his position with respect to them by moving counter to the spin, pacing almost imperceptibly along an unseen gangway inside the colonnade. Zuzra and Ben-Itray breathed deeply as the distance closed, preparing for beseechment.

The man had halted and was now flanked by two smaller dun-robed figures that stared intently, as he stared, at Ben-Itray and Zuzra. The taller of these two was dark, scantily bearded, solemn-eyed. The smaller, whose head rose only to the man's belly, looked down on them with tangible woe.

Ben-Itray choked, scrambled to his feet; Zuzra leaned forward from her knees, arms raised and grasping at the air as if milking something high, invisible.

"Hamani..!" they croaked, palms up in supplication and rejoicing.

The child's face lengthened and narrowed with its woeful longing.

The bearded man put his hand to the child's back and thrust the small figure forward onto the vessel's rim. The child grimaced with terror, arms stuck rigid out over the sea, as if to fend off those below.

"Is this yours?" called the man in a voice of pride and power.

"Hamani!" cried Zuzra and Ben-Itray wildly.

"I take nothing from my neighbor," boomed the man. "This wandering he-goat, is it yours?"

"No!" Ben-Itray cried.

"No!" screamed Zuzra. "It is yours—your second son!"

The child jerked backward, staggered against a post, and clung there, staring bleakly down at the pair cowering on the spit of rock.

"Thus saith the Lord," intoned the man with a rumble of fullest plenitude as he lifted his face to gaze again on the horizon.

Ben-Itray and Zuzra kept their starving eyes upon the vessel as it smoothly revolved and floated tenderly away.

With a grunt, Simone shut the book and wrenched herself erect. Her milk overflowed as she lurched down the hall, through the doorway, and over to the

crib. There in the dim shafts of the Pooh-Bear nightlight lay the baby, a cliché of infant slumber. She groaned, whispered empirically, "Hamani."

With reverent hands she changed the diaper, then swept the babbling child into the rocking chair and offered up, as it seemed, the fullness of her aching heart. Simone took deep and subtle comfort in the suckling. The musical, rhythmic thirst engulfed not only her proffered milk but the sinister sounds of the water on roof and windows. The baby asserted the defiant power of its insatiability. Rocking, she became a vessel bearing the baby on the water...rocking, she drifted...and found herself slack-armed with the sleeping baby sliding over her lap.

Disgraced, she clutched the child back to her chest, stood, and ran her lips over the soft contours of its face. Then she lifted it gently back into the crib and hung over the rail, wearily doting in the near-darkness, compensating for her negligence.

The baby's ear must be clearing up, she realized; and with this profoundly reassuring thought dispelling the last uneasy echoes of the story, she returned to the livingroom couch, took up the book, and opened to "The Courting of T'Nowhead's Bell." She made it to the third page before snuggling deeper into the sofa and closing her eyes to await Mark's call...

Simone twisted, instinctively trying to regain the shadow of the back cushions before awakening fully to the sunlight in her face. Wincing, she recognized joyfully the harsh radiance of the eastern sun and the strident morning cacophony of birds. The brilliance and racket felt comically unnatural to her rain-dulled senses.

Seven o'clock by her watch: Mark hadn't been able to call last night, unless she'd slept through it. Presumably he'd get a call out to her today and head home—although maybe she should hold out another day and let him finish up there. No reason not to, after all. She sat up, hunched and squinting, and the sunshine thawed her stiffened back.

Still dazzled, she limped from the living room through the dining alcove and into the kitchen, where she paused, awed by the legion of birds pecking the back stretch between the boulders and the house. Several sparrows, under the provocation of a crow, rose and winged off swiftly, only to bank on the upper air and return to another portion of the field. Simone wondered what delectable seeds had blown onto her soil during the hurricane.

She lifted the kettle and switched on a burner—but the stovelight remained dark. Her teeth set: another power-outage. There was no way around it; Mark would have to come home and get her out of here. She was not going to sit tight with a baby and no power. Not only was she going to summon Mark home but she was going to admit the absurdity of this mountain life. Theirs were always the last utility lines to be serviced. Well and good for young romantics to move to the

ends of the earth. But as for her, heat, light, and bridges had grown indispensable. She seized the phone.

Dead.

Simone gave a yip of terror, nipped off by pragmatism. The rain had stopped, the baby was better; there was no reason not to pack their bags and simply drive down the mountain. If the bridge looked bad, of course she'd turn back and wait for Mark to raise hell when he figured it out—maybe they'd end up on a Med-Evac copter. Anyway, it was time to close this chapter of their lives, start anew as flatlanders. Mark could finish the full-scale move later on, harness his penitent energies. Simone had a flash of anticipation. She flung open a cabinet and grabbed a couple of bottles for the diaper bag before heading out front to pack.

On reaching the living room she halted, let go of the bottles, took up the bent stance of a sideline coach with hands on hips and elbows flared, opened her entire throat, and howled.

The piercing sunlight through the picture window blazed from the surface of a sea that lapped the heather slope beyond the house. Forests, ridges, canyons all were gone; the burnished expanse ended in a wide circular horizon that met the cloudless brilliance of an autumn sky. Birds strutted frenziedly over the width of the heather; rose, wheeled, returned again.

Simone heard the deep, uncanny howls as if they emanated from the fearful vision—as if the ocean roared its own monstrosity and the agony of what it had devoured. The guttural cries broke from that thick, bestial, shimmering thing that breasted the heather, growling the absence of the earth and the grim presence of an unfathomable interloper.

Gone... Gone...

The chest-splitting cries of recognition and revulsion were such as only one being could ever have absorbed and stilled: the one most implicated always, most culpable, the casual source of life and orphanhood and pain, for whom she'd howled before, whose nonchalant withdrawal had foreshadowed all the others' stunning evanescence.

Simone finally recognized other, echoing cries.

She staggered down the hall to the screaming baby's room, where stark light blazed viciously around the borders of the closed blinds and glinted off the appliquéd figures dancing over the walls. The child lay writhing in a striped radiance, squalling its paltry terror. It screeched for comforting.

Palsied, she undid its sodden garment and removed the diaper; the infant stilled—and Simone felt an instinctive twinge of reassurance, which at the same instant she recognized as horribly incongruous. Gut quivering, she plucked the baby up, lurched to the rocking chair, ripped her shirt open, and thrust her nipple at its mouth.

Heaving over the infant, she wrestled, in waves of rib-clenching nausea, with what lay out there beyond the living room: the palpable absence of the entire world to which this baby had been born. Retching, she mechanically groaned a

damnation of her life, meaninglessly spared, listened to the echo of her words and ratified them, ratified a repudiation of being, of ever having been. Yet she couldn't succeed in coveting the inundation of the others—*Mark*—who had struggled and succumbed violently in the night...slaughtered by torrents...suffocated...crushed to an ocean floor they'd believed was land...so scantily memorialized: only within her mind!...desperate, minuscule triumphs buried under the waters—languages, gestures lost—along with the autumn trees, just turning, drowned—

With a hideous grimace the infant reared back mewling. Simone's arms tightened suddenly into a vise that thrust the baby's face into her breast, stifling its whine. Its one free hand began to flail. Her arms loosened again, and a thin, piercing shriek erupted. She looked at the struggling creature she had savaged against her empty breast and felt a rush of dire shame and grievous apology, not to the child so much as to its trusting, unknowing father—

—Mark lay out there, at the bottom of that ocean! He had known, then, how to die? She'd thought him as incapable of it as she. Had he yielded, last night, to the fact of never coming back? Simone knew suddenly, with a burning certainty, that in his final flicker of reason he had pictured her survival, generously willed it. Could she have done as much for him? She had slept...

—Her groaning had become sonorous as the tones of an organ, and the baby stopped screaming to look at her with curious eyes. This is the music now, she thought, this is the lullaby.

In the screech of a bird she thought she heard the shrillness of a phone. Cackling irony: Mark promised to call today—

Mark, who shared the common lot, mistakenly sucked into their vortex—

Had he remained, it would be conscionable, even the protracted death: the three of them huddled together, the last to look down, to judge, to reconsider...to forgive...

What was the pattern, the commonality? —all of them submerged, suddenly: how to mourn? how to eulogize? If she had read the landscape, would she have seen it?: death—yes, in the blazing leaves, stalking the mountains— But squirrels hoarding nuts: all of it busy and brutal as ever...Why—when—had a New Age been conceived?

The pattern, the pattern shredded to pieces by Mark's absence...

She and a child, a furred, rapacious soul, marooned on a puny island: ugly comedy—and for whose eyes? The evil genius of it: there must always be an actor left onstage. The curse: denial of oblivion—and yet: her own rank inability to countermand her consciousness...Who preserved her breath? was *she* the deity?

Over what? A woman and a child... Ahhh!

Blesséd be the fruit...Yea though...He maketh me to lie down beside...*still waters*—

Simone stomped about the room, infant clutched to one armpit, dress dangling, teats swinging wide. Bow-kneed, splayfooted, her simian hulk lunged from wall to wall, bellowing at the blinding flashes off the laminated plaque figures. With

scrabbling fingers she tried to seize and claw one off the wall: a lacquered slab, smooth, cut in the double profile of a pair of goats. It stayed affixed; she roared, clutched at another: zebras, two abreast. She rushed the largest one: the wide, tilted, smile-shaped one: the Ark..! Terror and hilarity gabbled from her lips, nattered grotesque at her ears; she brought the baby aloft, stiffened her arms, prepared to launch it at the ark, ratcheted to silence...

...sudden, bracing joy!

She pulled the baby to her chest, illuminated by second sight: the reason she and the child remained—*the ship!* headed toward the western hemisphere as of three days ago. *There* was the pattern—there, where she had failed to seek it: in the bloodline.

He was on his way. She might scan the horizon with something other than unmitigated terror.

Simone held her forefinger out, and the baby's seeking hand caught hold of it purposefully. Like a recovering invalid, ecstatic yet chastened by an awful fragility, she crept back to the chair, perched the baby on her knee and looked searchingly into its inexpressive face. This was the sacred repository of Mark's living presence; here he survived as thoroughly as she, and here would they live henceforth commingled. The milk flowed—with tears, remorseful and sublime.

Simone nursed the baby tenderly, sang to it, gave herself over to a recital of nursery rhymes, folk songs, snippets of tales and legends. Important to preserve. Vital. As the sunlight faded, she finally rose, tucked the baby in, and went to the livingroom shelves to appraise the remnants of her culture: several masters nearly whole, many others represented. Both testaments must be somewhere in the house. Or did the ship have Gideons?

And all the while, singing and cherishing, she valiantly battled atrocious fears: what if the ship had capsized in the storm? were expanded oceans navigable? could life be sustained on board—would there be fish to catch in such diluted seas?

For days, against the crushing improbability of rescue she pitted the moral logic of her father's return, and was bedeviled by other pressing questions: If her present life-craving were to thwart death (as indeed it *must*), then when—how—would she ever consent to her end? Was it conceivable that all the others had welcomed theirs in unison?

A metaphysical ingredient was missing, she knew. That it was a deity, she also knew. But how dare she venture beyond her lay mysticism—that gilded conviction of personal transcendence—to recognize the sea outside as itself the louring face of God? This she must not do, because of Mark; she mustn't concede that God's judgment might differ toward him, that he lay rightfully submerged by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. And why hadn't the implacable forefinger trained itself on her? Either she was elect, the exemplar of virtues invisible to herself, or—solipsism rushed to its inevitable conclusion—none of the others had ever been as vital. Or, in the final, most appalling scenario, she was uniquely

damned, doomed to suffer her extinction slowly. Then why the baby also? —But God's mysterious ways had never spared the innocent and might now be designed to stoke her bewilderment and pain. So she dared not invoke God.

And she sought also to overlook the slow, steady rising of the water. Daily, awakening on the couch, she braced herself for the first glance at the sea. For the heather was being quietly swallowed up, the sky going leaden, and rain surely falling again somewhere in the world. By the sixth evening the clouds had thickened, and small ripples charged the front steps, though in the back the land still lay clear, out to the boulders.

And on the seventh day she woke in her increasing dishevelment, scanned the darkened seascape, and saw the ocean liner, looming close—closer than she had ever dared to picture it—huge as a city block and sleekly white against the purple-gray sky. She leapt to her feet, knee-deep in cold water, sloshed wildly to the crib, grabbed the baby, and waded out the back door and up the rise to the narrow strip of dry land with its phalanx of boulders.

Clutching the baby in one arm, she grappled her way from small to larger boulders and, at last, atop the highest one, stood tall and thrillingly straight, waving to the oncoming vessel. The ship circumnavigated her disappearing island as the dark water rose about the house, reaching the level of the windowsills. It continued to circle slowly as Simone strained from her rock, restlessly conjecturing that the captain must be sounding the submerged mountain in order not to run aground. She knew that the land fell off steeply behind the boulders and gesticulated fiercely toward that side.

At closer and closer range, the vast luxury liner exhibited a uniformity, an aloof majesty that intimidated Simone, bleating with ever more agitation from her rock. The decks were empty; the tinted portholes betrayed nothing of the inhabitants. Behind the massive vessel the clouds were darkening to stormy twilight. Suddenly, far above her on the middle deck, a figure appeared, perhaps a man—perhaps her father! though the dim attire was unfamiliar and hard to distinguish from the body of the ship.

"Here!" Her voice was thin and shrill. "Father..?"

Unmistakably the figure bent over the railing, hovering in an attentive attitude.

"Father?!" It was less a question than a screeching summons with a querulous ring. "Here! Here!" Inspired, she held the baby aloft.

The ship rose infinitesimally upon the water, huge and blinkered, its sole visible passenger motionless. Simone—disoriented—swayed, steadied herself—and in that moment saw that the water now surrounded the very boulder on which she stood, staggering, in the middle of an ocean. She raised a desperate appeal to the unknown listener above, her piercing outcry answered by the child, still held aloft. Ahh! Simone was smitten with revelation: there must be a further sacrifice, some oblation more. She had been presumptuous, had misconstrued. She clasped the infant to her breast a final time; then, like a woman laying something gently in the reeds, she knelt, offered it forth upon the water, and bent her head in

worshipful subjection. And she watched the baby's eyes widen momentarily beneath the water in the brief blessing of its silent disappearance.

And in that moment was the swelling, thunderous resurgence of a primal force. With raised face, prideful and ashamed, she loathsomely struck out across the seamless ocean—swam, swam, hungry as ever for breath, spiteful with need, craving and cursing the figure somewhere high above her in the dark.

And took no solace from the branch-bearing dove that skimmed the water closing over her eyes.