

“Oh my God,” she cried. “Oh my God,” with heaving, gasping, snot-filled sobs.

“It’s all right, Sharon.” I pulled my visor down low over my face. People up and down the beach were looking at us. “It has a happy ending.”

“Oh Jesus!” Two tears raced one another down her cheeks.

“What’s the matter with her?” asked a voice by my left shoulder. I lifted my visor and looked up. Julianna stood over me dripping lake water all over my towel and staring at Sharon who continued weeping into her hands.

“Hey Juli-Wuli,” I said. “How’s it going?”

“Going all right.” Julianna’s eyes were pale hazel to the point of yellow, and tilted up at the comers. She wore a ragged old fishing hat with a white band around it that she’d found earlier in the summer and hadn’t taken off since. She was twelve years old on that Sunday afternoon in August and, like all girls before puberty erupts, she seemed indestructible.

“Is she sick?” she asked, still watching Sharon.

“She’s reading,” I answered.

“Wow.” Julianna turned on her heels in the sand and scuttled back to her grandma twenty feet away. Nana was large and soft with a grandmotherly braid wrapped around the crown of her head. Her swimsuit was modest with a pleated skirt sewn in. Upper arms swayed when she handed Julianna her plastic bottle of Seven-Up. I wanted to be pressed to that bosom, enfolded in the old-woman smell of Jean Nate or Lemon Verbena. I closed my eyes and felt the sun on my arms. Sniffles continued on my right.

“You okay, Sharon?”

“No,” she said, trying to catch her breath. “I’m not okay.”

I handed her a mini-pack of Kleenex out of my bag. The sun was relentless. My skin was tightening like a baked chicken.

“Come on,” I told her. “Let’s get in the water.”

“Let me finish the chapter,” she said, blowing her nose. It was *Middlemarch*, the scene where Dorothea goes to her rival Mrs. Lydgate and reassures her as to Will’s affections. I made a mental note to buy more Kleenex. Sharon had insisted that an afternoon at the beach would be just the thing to cheer me up, take my mind off the upcoming trial. I lay on my stomach, chin in my hand, and gazed at the prickly woods beyond the edge of the beach. The leaves on the trees were nibbled and torn, the squirrels nicked and ragged from playing too rough, flowers had had their nectar sucked dry by the hungry bees. God, I hated these dead August afternoons. When Sharon closed the book we headed for the water.

“You coming in?” I called to Julianna.

“Nah,” she hollered back. Now she and her mother were playing badminton while Nana dozed. They played without a net, just hitting the birdie back and forth, counting to see how many volleys they could make before it hit the ground. Her mother was younger than me. She nodded to me the way you do to someone you only know by sight. A tanned little boy ran past, leaving a trail of Cheese Doodles from the Snack Bar farther up the beach. They sold hamburgers, hot dogs, even nachos. When I was a kid they had licorice chains, candy cigarettes, and wax lips in the glass counter at kid-eye level. My favorite was the giant diamond ring made of solid Sweet-Tart. To this day I gnaw on my index knuckle when I’m tired or anxious, almost tasting the sugar that melted pink or blue or green on my numbed tongue.

Sharon and I walked down to the water and waded in. The lake was warm at my ankles, chilly at my knees, freezing at my thighs. I dove into the water, my skin shrieking and gasping with the shock. My head came up and I breathed in the hot sunshine. Sharon bobbed up about ten feet back. She was not a strong swimmer. I took first place at the State Swim Meet in Lansing for the one hundred meter butterfly in Class B, C, and D. Sharon’s head appeared, disappeared in the small waves. I stretched out into a leisurely backstroke, letting myself move with the lake. Noise was drowned out by the rhythmic hum of water beating on my eardrums. No laughter or yells from the beach, just peace and oblivion. My body undulated with the waves as if the lake were a rolling crib in which I lay. Sleep crept across the waves and held out its arms to

me. I drifted into them longing for rest. In the middle of the afternoon I was safe. It was the nights that were dangerous, nights that had been invaded all summer, my sleep torn up like old dishrags. Other people had dreams that slid in over their windowsill; I had the Night Visitor.

It had been nearly a week gone by with no sign of trouble until last night. I awoke quietly, no thrashing around or crying out. I opened my eyes and there I was in my bed as though something had delivered me there wide awake and alert. I was pinned, arms and legs paralyzed. I could only take small, shallow breaths because he was on my chest pressing my lungs into the mattress. The Night Visitor was a gargoyle made of crumbling gray granite. He crouched on me, gripping my ribs with his cold stone toes. His face was kept hidden in shadow. I saw the knuckles on his granite clawed hands, the scaled elbows, the dull matted texture of his back when he turned this way or that as if I were no more than a ledge upon which he sat, not a living thing; as if I were not there at all.

Frank was at the corner of the bed, stretched out, asleep. His fur was tinged with the moonlight gliding in the window. The cup and saucer were on the nightstand where I'd left them. Familiar shadows clung to each other in the corners of the room. Outside the window the usual trees stood dark and silent. But inside, the Night Visitor shifted his stone weight and breathed slowly. It was pointless to struggle, cry out, beg or threaten. There was nothing to do but lie wide awake in the silence of deep night and wait for him to go away.

I don't know how long he stayed. Time stopped, thought stopped, the beating of my heart stopped, while he continued to crouch with numbing indifference. I waited as weeks and years went by, broken by swift-sharp pictures that flashed and were gone. Like old snapshots they appeared then disappeared, there but not there. A door opening, but then gone before I could discern was that her foot? Yes, the same toe poking out from the same old hole in her sock. And later, a close-up of her face. I lay there, growing old, watching.

Then no more pictures. He was lifting himself off me, slowly, because stone moved at an eternal pace. He dissolved into the shadows outside the window. My sheets were clammy from icicle sweat. I waited for a count of one hundred although he rarely returned the same night. Then I got up, went to the kitchen, and switched on the light that hung over the table. The clock on the stove said

4:52 A.M. I returned to the bedroom for my robe and wool socks to mitigate the harsh reality of the kitchen's tile floor. The threat of impending cold reigned high at that hour. Pockets of October chill were lurking in the dark of an August night. I grabbed a Stroh's out of the fridge to help me back to sleep. Picked up a stack of National Geographics from the couch and dropped them onto the kitchen table. If anything were standing outside the window near the woods, at the dark line where the trees met my yard, they would see a window; and inside the window a warm island of light encompassing the kitchen table, a woman sitting alone with magazines scattered around her. The birds were starting up already, singing a greeting to the day that had not yet arrived. A single car went by out on Route 108. It wouldn't be long until the purple blue crimson pink gold of the sunrise.



Something grabbed my foot and yanked me under the waves. Water closed over my head and rushed up my nose. I kicked myself free and reared up into the sunlight.

"Gotcha," Sharon said.

"You asshole." I blew lake water and snot out of my nose. Tried to breathe with soggy lungs.

"It won't kill you," she said, playfully slapping her palms flat on the water. Crack, crack, crack. I lunged upward and braced my hands on her shoulders, laughing as I pushed her down into the water. She backed out of my grip and bobbed up again several feet away.

"Come on," she said. "Let's head back in."

We were parallel to the buoys marking the edge of the swimming area, the cutoff point that separated swimmers and motorboats. We were out more than fifty yards.

"If I hadn't grabbed your foot, you'd have floated all the way across to the marina." The marina was on the other side of the lake. I looked across the water as a big speed boat jetted by, leaving a wake that bobbed the pontoons like a

row of gleaming metal ducks. That's where I'd been headed when Sharon pulled me back. How long had we been in the water?

We both swam for shore: Sharon in a clumsy freestyle, me in a steady breast-stroke. It felt good to stretch out and move, arms and legs reaching, pulling me through the water. Moving like an animal gives the illusion of control, as if you have some say over what you will or will not do, as if it's as simple as killing what you will eat, mating when ready, and dying when something larger, faster, hungrier gets you. The muscles in my thighs pushed against the waves as I strode toward the shore. Sharon was a few feet ahead. She was shorter than me, slimmer. If it were a bare-handed contest then and there, I could have had her in a choke-hold in two seconds flat. I doubt the thought had ever occurred to her. Wondered why it had occurred to me.