

When Mountains Walked

Kate Wheeler

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For my father

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Thank you all.

Only fools get out alive.

—Wolf Zimmerman Lustik
"El Lobo"

THE ROSARIO was the deepest canyon in the world. Four thousand meters, twice as deep as the Grand, cut by a fast, north-flowing river of the same name which eventually turned eastward to braid itself into the Amazon. A chasm full of sky, too vast to think about. Even those times when Maggie was actually standing on the Rosario's top rim, she could never quite withstand the sight of it. She always had the same unbidden thought: This cannot be real. So much void, full of so much hazy hanging light; and the opposite wall striped like a tiger (Cretaceous limestones, according to her grandfather, who had been the first to map them); and past it, the black horizon; and past even that, the rain forest invisible on the back slopes but sending up sweet white puffs of cloud in the afternoons. The rain forest, full of ruins and bones and gold but uninhabited, stretched endlessly, the local people said, or anyway as far as the Atlantic Ocean.

At the bottom of all this was Piedras, barely clinging to the slim gravelly terraces of the Rosario River, which was cutting all too quickly through soft rock, rushing to attain the level of the sea. In Piedras, where Maggie and her husband, Carson, were living, all was airless heat and flies and bushes coated in dust. Somehow it never seemed to have sufficient reason for existing, let alone the importance it had possessed in Maggie's imagination ever since she was a child.

Back in February, when she and Carson had first arrived, Maggie had known immediately that she would never get used to the bus ride. It was near the end of the rainy season, and the road from Cajamarca had only recently been reopened after a section fell off during a torrential December rain. Going over the canyon's western lip, the bus had tilted like a roller coaster, and her stomach had dropped away.

She could not see the bottom of the canyon, just the road like a limp string flung impossibly far across the dark shoulders of the mountains. The canyon was vast, unexpected, a hole in the ground bigger than any idea of it could ever be. Then its east wall rose up, suddenly contradicting everything a frozen angry-looking wave of black stone. Distant details were clear, grainy as in an excellent photograph, so that Maggie felt she could have picked out a fly on a cliff face.

"Cliff tombs," she said to Carson, "waterfalls!" Her grandmother Althea had told stories of the strange things hidden in the canyon's folded cliffs. Tombs, waterfalls where you could take a shower. Maggie could almost feel a rope of frigid water shattering against her own skull, driving out every thought, and how it would feel, then, to step out onto the bare, bright, burning trail again: clothing drying instantly, skin staying cool.

Carson was making a guess that the canyon sides were about twelve miles apart.

Twelve miles, Maggie thought. How far was that? How did Carson think he knew?

She started shivering.

A cold wind whistled through the cracked window as the bus began threading its way down through standing rocks that looked like a demolished, or about to be constructed, Inca fortress, of the

type she and Carson had visited last week in the southern part of the country. They'd taken a honeymoon in Cuzco and Machu Picchu before settling down to a year of serious work, reopening Piedras's medical clinic.

"So then don't look," Carson said as Maggie gripped his thigh. But she couldn't stop. The chasm drew her in; its emptiness exerted a suction. In comparison, the road was too narrow. For the first time she realized what defined the edge of any mountain road. Nothing. Nothing was fine on its own terms. That was exactly what was wrong with it.

The road here was slimy white mud with big rocks in it and turns without protection, all causing the driver to manhandle the wheel, hand over hand; and to anticipate in the application of the brakes. The bus was overloaded and topheavy, too, partly because of Maggie and Carson's gear tied to a rack on the roof. They had purchased a small refrigerator in Cajamarca and had it reinforced with iron straps. If only this refrigerator could be sacrificed, she thought, they'd all have a chance to survive.

The road grew worse as it went down, mostly because the mud got deeper. Though it hadn't rained in a week, none of the mud had hardened. It did change from white to red, and brown, and yellow. Some places were as badly churned as if an army had recently retreated along them, full of ruts and hoofprints and the tracks of the heavy equipment that had gone down to repair the bad section, which was still ahead. Steering and braking would have been difficult under the best of circumstances, Maggie thought, but now the driver seemed desperate, wrestling with the wheel. Like this bus had things wrong with it, such as thin brake shoes, loose tie rods. Often she felt the wheels leave several feet of muddy skid. What if another vehicle came at them around these blind, unprotected curves? Fortunately, the bus was going downward; because of this, it stayed next to the mountain's body instead of the edge. The road was barely wider than one lane, so the bus would push any opponent off, but Maggie found little comfort in that idea. One day she'd have to leave, and it would be her turn on the outside.

Carson pointed out a wooden cross on the shoulder. "Third World warning sign," he joked.

"Comforting, aren't they?" Maggie said sarcastically. Grateful for an excuse to talk, she told him how, when she and her sister were little, in Mexico and in Colombia, they'd ritually crossed themselves each time they'd passed a roadside memorial, despite not being Catholic.

"The maids taught you how," guessed Carson.

"You know me well." Their Colombian maid, Gloria, had sat in the middle of the back seat, telling stories so enthralling that Maggie and Sonia had never needed games, nor pinched each other.

The bus heaved up to the point of a curve where a thicket of crosses surrounded a hutch of raw cement. With her right hand, Maggie performed a series of quick figure eights, fingertips swooping just short of her lips. "Bad spots are a lot of work," she said, though she couldn't remember any place as bad as this one. A whole bus must have gone off the edge here.

Carson leaned forward to peer at Maggie from the front. She was doing the crossbar backwards, he said. "That's Greek Orthodox or something." He ought to know: he had been brought up Catholic. Gently he corrected her, brushing his fingertips across her breasts. Left to right, opening her heart like a door—or closing it, depending on which side she imagined the hinges.

She crossed herself Carson's way at the next bend, kissing her fingertips at the finish, then let her hand fall into her lap. ~~Despite the dire reminder, she was glad to see the crosses. They returned her to herself.~~ It was curious too, she thought, how Carson saw them in reference to safe, North American highway warning signs.

He'd grown up in Baton Rouge, in the same house all his life. When he spoke, she could feel his childhood inside him, a solid grid of hamburger stands, summer lawns, blacktopped highways sticky in the sun.

Maggie Goodwin had been born in Mexico. She'd lived there until she was five, and then the family moved to Colombia. She was ten and her sister Sonia thirteen when their father's shoe factory had failed unexpectedly. Calvin Goodwin's Colombian partner had suggested to the authorities that they might inspect the books, enforce certain laws that protected against imperialism. Calvin's capital became the fine. By coincidence, Sonia had caught typhoid in the same month when Maggie's mother had begun firing the servants, packing some things, selling others. Her parents were euphemistic about what had happened, so Maggie first blamed her older sister and then her mother, Julia, for their departure. Julia kept insisting she was overjoyed to go back to the United States. She'd had it with the chaos, envy, and dishonesty that ruled the rest of the world.

Then Maggie had known that her mother was betraying herself, not to speak of everybody else in the family. Julia had been born in Bengal, and brought up in all the most unstable places, Peru, Turkey, Chile, India, and Afghanistan, where her father, a seismologist, had studied the world's most grievous faults. Maggie's grandmother Althea could always draw a protest from Julia by joking that Julia's dark hair and fathomless eyes came from all the Indian sun Althea had absorbed while pregnant. Maggie's features were almost the same.

Maggie liked to think of India as an explanation for her own thin ankles, and the way her skin turned yellowish when she was tired, and for the tiny hook at the tip of her nose, comparable to a drop of water beginning to form under a faucet. Julia wouldn't hear it, any of it. Her father, Johnny Baines had always attributed Julia's coloration to a Cherokee great-grandmother of his. To the end of his life he'd called Julia his Indian princess, Princess Oh-What-a-Part-o-Me.

Princess indeed: as soon as she'd reached ninth grade, Julia asked to leave Ecuador, where Johnny was inspecting the Cotopaxi volcano, and go to a Swiss boarding school instead. Not long afterward, arthritis and financial stress put an end to Johnny's geological explorations. Despite his reputation for eccentric thinking (he was determined to produce a theory predicting earthquakes), he'd gotten a job lecturing at Harvard, based on his work measuring tension in stable rocks.

Maggie was the opposite of her mother. She'd always been glad of her dark hair and eyes, jealous that her parents had given Sonia a name that was the same in Spanish. She blamed the United States for causing her to be a foreigner in every place she'd ever lived, including, eventually, itself.

As for her father^ Calvin Goodwin, Maggie had always understood how hard he had fought to escape from Connecticut. Through all her childhood, he'd seemed a foreigner in the family, paler than his wife and daughters, the red-haired gringo Julia married. They'd seen him as if from a distance, slurping his dinner cold long after the girls and their mother had eaten, alone in the dark kitchen, late

home from his factory. He'd sit worrying over his papers on a Sunday in his study, his presence defining the farthest room in every house. She'd been shocked to realize that it was Calvin who had held them in particular places on the surface of the earth; when he'd lost his grip, the rest must lose theirs, too. He'd been happiest in Colombia, but in the end he'd been lucky to get a job in his family's hardware distribution business, outside Bridgeport. His snake-proof boots grew mold in the closet.

Around noon, the bus reached the bad section of road: even softer mud than elsewhere, nothing but a few tons of new dirt dug out of the hillside and pushed together. Carson said, "Maggie, look." There was the old road, a small landslide spilling down for about a hundred yards before it reached the edge of a cliff and disappeared.

To Maggie's relief, the bus got stuck here, in an awesome slough where some kind of quicksand lurked at the bottom of a puddle twenty yards long. The driver and his helper donned rubber boots and first tried tossing some cabbage-sized rocks under the wheels. Soon they had to ask all of the men to get out and push. Maggie would have liked to help, but she was told to sit inside with the other women.

At least, she thought, there was little danger of the men's pushing the bus too far. She watched as her new husband took off his hiking boots and rolled up his jeans as far as he could, revealing calves as pale as fish and covered with long, dark, fine French hairs. She told him she was worried that he'd cut his foot on something sharp.

"Pfft," said Carson, stepping into calf-deep, murky water.

Despite twenty men's heaving, the bus rocked only slightly. The driver's boy stuck his head in to announce that the women must get out, too, in order to lighten the burden. Maggie declined his offer to be carried piggyback across the puddle, but the other two women accepted. She took off her shoes and waded through the opaque brown water. The bottom was silky, safe, the water cold.

Oh, it was grand to stand on solid ground again. Soon the bus was high and dry, a matter of rocks and ropes and grunting. Several men celebrated, sipping from a flat bottle. Carson had a slug, then came up to where Maggie stood on a tussock of muddy alpine grass that seemed to have been chewed down by sheep.

"What was it?" she wanted to know.

"Anisette. Pure sugar. It's coated all my teeth." He wiped one hand across his beard. His forehead already bore a streak of war paint. "Whew, that was rough. You okay? You look kind of pale."

"I wish I had an excuse to walk the rest of the way."

"Want to go home?"

He meant it, she saw. "No."

"Good!"

Maggie didn't speak to him again until they had sat down and the bus had begun to roll. Then she said, in a carefully quiet tone, "I can't wait to get to Piedras. It's just that I hate being trapped inside this box. I'd rather be in a truck I could jump out of."

"If we die, we die, that's my attitude," Carson said.

"If?" Maggie said. She returned to gazing out the window.

How dare he think he belonged here more than she did! She had no home, unless it was ahead of her. Even if she hated the road, she already loved the canyon. Its immensity drew her into a focused, particular joy, so that she felt she had discovered it herself. In fact, she had rights over it, at least compared to Carson. Her uncle had been conceived in Piedras, according to an intricate and perhaps unreliable story of her grandmother's. That was why, when she and Carson had been searching for a place to do health work together, and the name of Piedras had scrolled down the computer screen in white letters on royal blue, Maggie had stood up and looked for an atlas, then phoned her grandmother. First thing the next morning, she'd called up Catholic Charities, begging them to modify the job to accommodate two North Americans: a physician's assistant and an administrator-trainee. They agreed, perhaps because the post had gone begging for so long, or because Maggie had insisted, as her grandmother Althea was famous for doing, that two could live on the salary of one.

Getting to Peru must be the greatest achievement of her life so far—the only deed, Maggie thought, that had ever flowed from her own true character. She hoped happiness would ensue, of course, though she knew happiness was often too much to expect. This trip was an experiment, to see what resulted from acting purely on the intuitions of one's heart.

Her friends approved of her leaving Larry; they just thought she should have stopped there, rather than remarrying and running off to South America two weeks after the divorce was finalized. "Far," and "away," Maggie had argued, were relative concepts. Far from what? Away from what? In her own mind, she was running toward something. From the point of view of Piedras, it was the United States that would seem distant and bizarre.

Moreover, she loved Carson and he loved her, and she was pretty sure of both these things even though they'd known each other less than a year and had married mostly in order to satisfy Catholic Charities, which would not have allowed them to work together otherwise. Maggie hadn't revealed the detail to her mother, for whom Carson's willingness to marry her questionable daughter was his chief merit. Julia Goodwin believed that a wedding band was a woman's first line of defense, all over the world, beginning in her own house. She'd even pushed for Maggie to take Carson's name, Miller, but Maggie had refused, claiming she disliked the initials MM, which was true. She told Julia she'd do it the grand old Latin way, "Maggie Goodwin de Miller," and left it to her mother to recall how good it was that Maggie had never let herself become "Mrs. Larry Fabularo."

People made big changes all the time, Maggie thought. There would always be voices, inside and out, shouting reasons why one shouldn't. If this venture didn't work, she could always go back and make peace with a half-life, like everybody else. Until then, she couldn't identify any one thing she had to lose. Until then, at the very least, she and Carson were in this together.

She jerked her head back, a reflex, for her window had come within inches of an outcrop. The bus had not ceased to fling its passengers violently about, lurching unpredictably on several tilt-axes at

once, as if attempting to dislodge their vital organs. Carson turned away and stuck his long legs into the aisle to avoid crushing his knees against the steel back of the seat ahead of him. Absurd, under these conditions, to wish for him to kiss her. If she wanted a kiss, the back of his neck was available, but then she ran the risk of crushing her lips between Carson's spine and her own incisors.

She picked out a dark spot on the opposite wall of the canyon, a cave, or maybe just a huge black spot of mildew that had dripped from the roots of the hanging vegetation. This scenery justified everything it had taken to reach it.

"Carson," she said, turning to him again and finding, happily, that he was facing in her direction. She asked permission to lick a speck of mud off the corner of his eyebrow. "No," he said, but he was tickled, she could see; he permitted her to rub it off with the ball of her thumb while with the other hand, invisible to the other passengers, she caressed his penis. He clamped her hand between his legs for a few seconds. "Dirty girl," he said approvingly.

By now both of their clothes were dry. Halfway down, still before you could see the river bottom the canyon had suddenly turned into a desert. A rain shadow, Maggie explained: the upper slopes took all the moisture. Cactus and mesquite grew here, just like in a western, but there were orchids in the jacaranda trees. Nothing smaller than trees grew from the bare yellowish dirt.

The road here was no less bad, except for being dry. All by itself, the mud on their jeans began cracking off and falling to the floor. Dust came in the windows until Maggie's teeth were gritty.

She exulted when the bus finally rattled off the wall of the canyon onto the relief of the river flats. She pinched her husband's biceps. "We're here. I can't believe it. I'm totally happy."

Carson pinched her back, more gently. "Yeah, I know."

They were entering a mango grove, surely the same one her grandmother had talked about. You could hear the river even in the bus. These crumbling buildings must belong to the hacienda, maybe the same one where Althea and Johnny might have taken shelter after their raft broke up in the whirlpool, back in 1932 or so—her grandmother was bad at years. "Piedras, Arenas, Aguas, Piedras. Yes," Althea had said. Did Carson remember hearing about the raft that had the live cow tied to the back of it? He did not, even though Maggie was sure she had mentioned it, high among the marvels of her grandparents' trip. What could have distracted him? The cow's fate had worried her deeply as a child. Which was worse, she had kept trying to decide: drowning tied up or having your throat slit by someone who had taken care of you all your life? She'd asked her grandparents about it again and again. Sometimes they didn't remember. Other times they just said whatever came into their heads—that they had sold her to someone before they reached the whirlpool, that they had eaten her somewhere downstream. Even today, with a fervor strong enough it could almost alter the past, Maggie still hoped that the cow had swum to shore.

"Points for spotting our first patient. See that guy on the verandah?" Carson pointed out. The man, about sixty, was staring at the bus. His clothes were so old they had turned the color of river water.

"Why is he our patient? What does he have?"

"Cataracts!"

"I didn't see them," Maggie said. "What could we do for him? You can't operate, right?"

"We'll get a doctor down here. Line up all the cases, guy comes down for a few days? The surgery's easy."

"Great. I'll write the letters, translate the interviews." Maggie saw herself in the modest dark skin she'd brought for formal purposes, persuading the Cajamarca health officer, a fat bureaucrat in aviator sunglasses, to disburse some tiny amount of funds.

"We'll do it," Carson promised.

Satisfied, Maggie went back to inspecting the hacienda, which consisted of several buildings and many walls. A trio of ragged children stood in a doorway. They might have been the same children who appeared in all villages. Maggie waved at them. The littlest one balled up a fist and lifted it halfheartedly to her mouth.

This hacienda must have been abandoned by its owner in the agrarian reform, then taken over by local families. Its stuccoed buildings still showed decrepit remains of grace. Through the trees, Maggie glimpsed the chapel where Grandma Althea had looked into the glass eyes of the saint.

Here was an iron bridge, the only means of crossing the river for many days' travel in either direction.

They crossed, the bus tires loud on dusty planks, and almost immediately passed a low adobe building with a corrugated roof. It stood far from its neighbors, between the road and the river, and was painted a thick, shabby government-green with a blood-red cross. "That's it," Carson cried, "that's our clinic!" Shuttered for years, the building didn't offer any encouragement.

"Looks pretty well closed," Maggie observed.

It had been shut down five years ago, due to generalized subversive activity in rural Peru. Maggie had checked carefully, finding a few bombings and assassinations in Cajamarca, the nearest big city, but nothing in the Rosario area. Piedras was remote from everything, including terrorism.

Now most terrorist leaders were in jail, and even the worst parts of the mountains had been officially pacified. After years of internal warfare and lack of foreign investment, the new government couldn't afford to run its rural health care system, so international organizations had stepped in. Carson and Maggie had a one-year contract with Catholic Charities. If things went well, it would be renewed, but eventually the goal was to replace the gringos with Peruvians.

Now they were arriving in what they would soon call downtown Piedras. On the left side of the road, against the mountains, were more mango groves, and cane fields and corn and some low leafy stuff, probably vegetables. All this must be irrigated from the river. The first houses were half hidden behind a long fence of living cactus and hibiscus plants that were choked with road dust. No one came out to wave. One woman was trudging alongside the road. She stood aside, turning her back and putting her hand over her face against the bus's passing.

So this was Piedras: two dozen houses crammed between the river and the east wall of the canyon. ~~Call them adobe or mud brick, they were of mud plastered together with mud, most of them unpainted, with corrugated roofs, shaded by mango trees and papaya trees with fruit like giant milky breasts.~~ The stringy road ran in one end of town and out the other along the river's terrace. Skinny dogs slept curled up in the soft dust at the bottom of potholes. If a truck or the bus came (all year, there would be only one car), the dogs got up leisurely, inches ahead of the oncoming wheels, and sauntered off not looking back. At the center of town was the general store, with a small area of beaten earth in front of it, the main arena for Piedras's social life. On that first day, as on most days, the store owner had set out a lawn chair and collapsed into it, so relaxed that when Maggie first caught sight of him, she had felt with a little thrill of fear that he must be the local AIDS patient.

But he was only Don Nasir, the Syrian. As Maggie would soon learn, he was a person who did not rise to occasions unless rising was profitable.

The bus shuddered to a halt. So this was the center of town. Maggie spied a man sprawling face-down in the sun next to the door of the general store, inert as death.

Suddenly she felt a gut-sinking certainty that, having confirmed the existence of the canyon, river, hacienda, chapel, and mango grove, she had already done all that was possible for her here. The bus would leave, and she and Carson would stay, and there was nothing for them. No school, no phone, no post office, no movie house. No doctor other than Carson, and Carson was only a physician's assistant, though he'd worked for twenty years overseas and knew more about wounds and tropical diseases than many M.D.S.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry," she whispered, almost involuntarily.

"What?" Carson was watching the drunk struggle to his feet, revealing a face half covered with bright fresh blood. He turned. "What did you say?"

"Nothing."

The passengers were crowding into the aisle all at once, pulling bags and boxes with them. The drunk fell down onto his hands and knees.

"Terrible," Maggie said.

"*He's* the reason we came." Carson began pushing forward through the struggling passengers. Maggie wondered whether she should follow, translate, but he'd left her with all their hand luggage. Besides, he hadn't asked for help. Before coming here, he'd requested that Maggie not hover excessively or worry about translating for him. He knew how to make himself understood; he'd done in Thailand, India, Angola.

The drunk struggled to his feet again and zigzagged toward the bus, each step correcting a severe mistake made by the previous foot. He laughed at the disembarking passengers, who insulted him in return. A short, barrel-shaped, brown, indestructible-looking person. Maggie didn't like to think this way, but his face looked coarse and corrupted. His lips were purple, turned inside out. His forearms covered with blurring tattoos—one was a tick-tack-toe.

He and Carson met at the bottom of the bus's stairs. Maggie saw Carson step down onto the ground and raise his right hand tenderly toward the drunk man's cheek, indicating the bleeding wound. The drunk pulled his head back like a boxer and said something that gave his face an ugly look. Carson gathered a couple of supporters who seemed to be trying to explain to the drunk that he was offering help. At some point the message reached the drunk man's central nerve ganglion and he made an even uglier face than before. He put out his hand, insolently begging for money.

At this, Maggie slung all of the hand luggage about her body and squeezed forward through the aisle, straps catching, bags banging against the seats.

Carson had given up and gone around the back of the bus to unload their larger bags. The drunk was gripping the handrail at the bus steps, swaying as if a wind were blowing from the opening of the door. Clearly he intended to climb the steps and was only waiting for Maggie to start down them.

She waved at him to get on and he did. His smell was complex, shocking.

The bus driver explained to Maggie that this man was a *minero* and had spent the weekend drinking in Piedras. He had drunk, and fought, and slept, and his paycheck was gone, and now he wanted a ride back to La Tormentosa, the gold mine eight hours uphill, but he had no money left.

"This man is from Huancayo," the bus driver concluded. "He is not from our zone."

"Here you don't drink like that?"

"Oh, no, here we drink until we crawl home on all fours! Get on," he said to the drunk. "Sit down, you man without a conscience."

Maggie thanked the driver and got off. She found Carson standing behind the bus, trying to slow the boy helper, who was flinging their bags and boxes from the roof of the bus directly onto the ground. Three men struggled to lift down the refrigerator, but having completed this task, they disappeared.

The bus drove off, leaving Maggie and Carson standing amidst an immense amount of stuff. Together, they dragged their suitcases and boxes closer to the store. The refrigerator was a small one but very heavy with its lockable iron straps, so they left it in what, now that the bus had pulled away, had again become the middle of the road.

The man in the lawn chair watched them, still immobile. A boy with a shaven head was fanning him with a folded glossy magazine.

They walked into the store wondering who was responsible. The air smelled edible, thick: motor oil, cheap perfume, dust, rancid flour, sunlight, cigars, and last night's frying onions. Voices could be heard from the back room. This was a restaurant, too: it had two long tables covered with plastic, with vases of dirty plastic flowers and napkin holders stuffed with sharp triangles of wax paper. A couple of used tumblers remained at the end of one table, with two related chairs pushed back at careless angles. A poster of a fat, garish baby decorated one wall. Carson said it looked like an ad for contraception.

They leaned over the glass counter, peering into the kitchen. It seemed deserted. Under the counter they saw wax matches and cigarettes, sold one by one from an open box. Carson pointed out a tiny brass scale, a miniature of the one used by blindfolded Justice; soon they'd learn that it was used for weighing gold dust. Maggie liked the dried piranha, apparently not for sale; and the loops of PVC joints, faucets, and machetes clipped to nylon ropes, festooned diagonally under the ceiling. Shovels, pickaxes, and hoes leaned in a corner. There were stacked boxes of yellow and blue batteries, hinges and chisels, open sacks of rice and flour and coarse gray salt, and a small shelf of items where the beautification of women commingled with good and bad sorcery: jasmine soap, bleaching cream, Florida water, myrrh, envelopes smelling of sulfur with dollar signs on the front, love soap, lucky soap, soap to get rid of devils.

Carson called out, "Hey! *Hola!*"

Eventually a woman came out. She was about four feet tall, stout, and her face had a kind expression. She wore a green-and-white-checked pinafore.

Maggie explained in her best voice that this was her husband, a doctor, el Señor Doctor Miller, and that she was his wife and assistant and trainee, Señora Margarita Goodwin de Miller. They were here to open the clinic. They had brought many things with them but would purchase more. Just now they needed transport. Was there a taxi, any kind of vehicle for hire?

"Nasir!" the woman howled, and went back into the kitchen.

At last the man unfolded from his chair. He smiled, showing incisors rimmed in silver. His shiny skin and small mustache reminded Maggie of a card shark; in another life, he would have worn a Panama hat. "Nasir," he said, offering his hand to Carson, but not to Maggie. She stepped forward and put her own hand out. With some surprise, Nasir took it.

While she repeated their introduction, Nasir smiled and actually rubbed his hands together. At the end he said he had a truck that he would rent to them for fifty *soles*.

"Fifty!" Maggie said. This was almost twenty dollars. The clinic was a thousand yards away.

"Tell him we expect a discount," Carson said. "Tell him we'll be buying all our food from him for a year. And tell him we may need to rent his truck at other times. Maybe, you know, we'll have some emergency and we'll have to drive someone up to Cajamarca Hospital in it. Oh, and ask him if we can borrow a crowbar and a hammer."

"You're so smart," she told him. Yesterday, the Cajamarca health officer had announced that there was no longer a key for the Piedras clinic.

"The padlocks are Chinese," Nasir told them. Taking one from under the counter, he showed where to strike it so that the lock sprang open.

"*Descuento*," Maggie reminded him. "On the truck."

Nasir said he paid to have all of the gasoline trucked here from the city. Surely they appreciated his difficulties.

"Ten *soles*," Maggie said, wondering why Nasir didn't drive the truck to Cajamarca and load it with barrels of fuel.

They agreed on fifteen.

The truck was stoutly chained into its own dark shed, a monster rarely allowed to emerge. When it did, it was so enormous that Maggie almost understood why Nasir had wanted fifty *soles*. He could have charged five just to look at it.

Its rust-brown cab had a tall oval grill like whale baleen. Its windshield was two dull eyes separated by a piece of metal, shielded by a narrow aluminum eyebrow. The gas cap was a petroleum-soaked rag that converted the whole thing into a rolling bomb. Tent cloth had been draped over part of its back platform, which was wood planks, surfaces white and eroded soft as suede. The planks were so long that Maggie was sure Nasir had stolen them off the bridge, which, she recalled, had been missing several.

The bridge had not existed when Althea was here, Maggie was sure of that.

THE RIVER SWELLED more strongly against the raft's prow in the afternoons. Green-brown, it was dangerous to drink, even though it looked perfectly clear and clean squishing up between the soft logs of the raft. Lighter than paper, the long white logs felt like suede under Althea's bare feet. Balsa. A gigantic tree that grew in the rain forest, Johnny said.

Johnny Baines stood at the prow wearing his cane cutter's straw hat so that his face was hidden in a wedge of shade. First he'd peer up at the canyon walls with his binoculars, then quickly take notes on his pad in minute, irregular handwriting. He had a contract from Standard Oil to map the strata, see if these were continuous with others where the company was drilling. Johnny wasn't an exploration geologist but he was good at mapping. Years later, on another continent, he'd make a crucial contribution to World War II. Just now, in Peru, on his own account, he was trying to understand just why these rocks that had been so far underneath the ocean could end up high in the air. They'd floated, Johnny believed. When he explained Wegener's theory to Althea, it made her think of baked Alaska.

At times they'd beach the raft so that Johnny could chip off samples. Sometimes he sent the oarsman's fifteen-year-old boy up a cliff, barefoot, with the geologist's hammer. The oarsman and the boy were interested in the rocks too. Some were full of fossils which Johnny said were crinoids, and the oarsman, roses.

Althea's place was to recline against a fifty-kilo sack of rice under a small canvas awning built just for her. If not for the smell of the cow tied just behind her, she would have felt like Cleopatra on her barge. Who knows why, but some sections of the river had more flies than others; here she fanned herself with a palmetto leaf the boy had cut down to size when he saw the lady from the Estados Unidos swatting at the air around her face like a crazy woman. If the boy would fan her, if the boy were wearing golden cobra armbands, then she truly would have felt Egyptian.

Althea sighed, imagining herself pregnant, her belly bloated like the rice sack, but precious, the most precious thing floating up this river. Floating toward what? Thebes, or an Inca ruin? More likely, one more lost Peruvian town, all shanties made of sticks.

The country of hills and thorn scrub where they'd started was two days behind them now; the walls of the Rosario Canyon were beginning to rise, close in. All morning they'd glided along, the brown man moving the raft with one long, narrow oar. Early in the afternoon there began to be small dramas, a rapid or a boulder ahead. The oarsman would pull the raft onto the bank, and then he and the boy and Johnny would scramble up to whatever eminence they could in order to chart a path through the next stretch of river. Usually Althea amused herself collecting rocks and stones, leaving them in a pattern on the sand when they started up again. She never bothered showing them to Johnny; he had his own rocks, collected under his own criteria. At night he painted white dots on them, then code numbers in India ink, fine as insects' legs.

The river beaches were small, each one a revelation nested in the arms of its cliff. They seemed untouched and useless to man, so that Althea imagined her footprints were the first since the world was made. She liked it that the beaches offered so little to do, although she was sorry to ruin them with her messy traces. Sometimes a bush with a red bird in it, sometimes a dead thing rotting on the sand or at the edge of the water, or a jam of driftwood like forked, naked corpses tossed into a pile.

She was beginning to identify the smell of Peruvian dirt: it was rich, like dried beans, but not exactly pleasant.

Mostly she was dreaming about the baby whose sweet, dusty blue eyes she could see in the air in front of her. It had fair, thin, whitish hair. Though it wasn't clear whether it was a boy or a girl, she could feel it, as palpable a person as any on this boat. It loved her, she loved it. Already she could imagine things that it might say, all the ways it would surprise her.

"All aboard! Darling? We've figured it out," Johnny would shout to her, proudly, and kiss her brusquely on the cheek. Who is he, she wondered.

Then they'd get on again, the cow rolling her eyes in fright at the roaring and splashing of the water. Sometimes she'd quiver and shit in fear, and try her best to escape from the ropes that held her. Althea would stand up then, put her hand flat against the sweating hide, and say things that seemed to soothe the cow for a second or two. The first morning she'd thought the oarsman cruel as he tightened the gray rope around the cow's horns and neck. Now she saw his mercy, for the cow was suicidal.

Meanwhile, the oarsman plied his oar, his boy toiled with a long pole, straining every muscle to get them all past the obstacle. Up front, Johnny peered down into the water, shouting warnings and gesturing with his arms. Right, left. Water washed up through the logs, everything was soaked in spray. Althea admired the oarsman's knotty calves, his feet like a monkey's; Johnny said he could walk on tacks or coals. Yet she was afraid, too, of his pulsing brown body, covered with shiny drops of sweat and river water, at work so close to her. It was difficult to accept his hand when he held it out to help her onto shore, but she always took it. The man must be about sixty. Everything about him was pure strength. He was missing two knuckles from his right forefinger.

Why?

When the waters were calm she went up front, sat next to Johnny, let her feet slide into the water. Once, she whispered that she was afraid of them. The man, even the boy. Johnny teased her, being he was the same old Johnny Baines, saying the oarsman's father had been a cannibal in the Amazon jungle. Again, she believed whatever he told her, until he removed the curse.

That night they camped on a bigger beach. They came to it at three o'clock and Johnny wanted to go on—too early to stop. He said the oarsman was shirking, but the man stubbornly explained they'd not find a better place before dark. He wanted to scout the next stretch of river before morning; there was dangerous water ahead. Besides, it was hot between the canyon walls. Here there was shade, a bit of long grass for the cow, driftwood for a fire, and a waterfall with clean cold water for bathing and drinking.

Althea watched the boy untie the cow. She sank her muzzle into the river for a long time, then he took her to the grass and hobbled her. She was a young cow, too young to have had any calves yet. She was quite stupid, Althea realized, but she emanated some kind of emotional warmth. She seemed to recognize Althea, so that Althea felt the two of them were similar. Females, future mothers, one destined to devour the other.

While the men were making camp, she took her things up to the waterfall and let the cold, cold water blast down upon her head. Gasping, she looked down at her white body, the belly round as a

shell. Maybe the cold would shock her womb into fertility. Tonight, she thought.

That night around the campfire, the oarsman spoke to Johnny in urgent, despairing tones. The river was terrible ahead, unnavigable. The Senor had agreed to turn around when they reached this point. The river was accursed, and many people had drowned in it. Johnny barked back, disagreeing. He expected a full six days of travel upstream. They'd spent two days before even reaching the beginning of the canyon, and only one day now below the clear rock walls. The oarsman defied Johnny to climb up the cliff with him and see, tomorrow morning. Johnny insulted him, said he was superstitious and a coward.

All right, the oarsman said. We will go on, then. But you will double my pay and we must leave the cow, she is too heavy. We'll get her on the way back.

What will we eat, Johnny said. What will my wife eat?

Fish, the man said. If we are alive enough to be hungry.

Okay, we leave the cow. But forget the double pay. Either this or nothing.

In the tent that night, Althea asked Johnny why he didn't listen to the oarsman. Domingo was his name. Domingo was a riverman, even if he didn't know this section. Johnny said local men always did this. Porters, mule drivers. The trip was not their own quest. They wanted to get their money and go home as soon as possible to their wives and children.

Althea said she understood wanting to get home to a family. Besides, she said, if the raft breaks up, Domingo will have no more way of making a living.

He can make another raft in a week, Johnny said. That's the beauty of these people's lives.

What about me, Althea thought, but she didn't say anything. She'd begged hard not to be left behind in horrible, cold Huaraz, where they'd been living for three months. Johnny was finishing his Ph.D. dissertation, trying to find the fault that was responsible for the mountain's falling on the town again and again. People in Huaraz were unfriendly, mountain people passing by all wrapped in their blankets and never changing their expressions. If Althea greeted them, they turned their faces away from her. Stone people, Johnny said, was their name for themselves in Quechua.

That night Johnny lay awake on his folding cot, thinking and thinking. From a foot away, Althea could hear the noise inside his skull. Near midnight, she reached across the gap between them, lifted the sheet, and touched Johnny's side with her finger, but he didn't pay any attention.

The next day was almost continuously terrible, the raft bucking, awash. The ropes that held the logs together began to bite and loosen. Johnny stood in the bow; the oarsman and his boy worked in such a deep silence that Althea worried they might do something to cause Johnny to fall in. It would have been easy as they negotiated whirlpools with rocks underneath them. Once, the boy got out and towed them up a rapid as long as a giant's bowling alley. Afterward there was no more calm river. Althea got soaked to the skin, no longer reclining but standing, hanging on to the ropes of her canopy. The bread got wet and so did Johnny's drawing paper, even though it was encased in two waterproof canvas bags.

"I'm not finding anything, that's the hell of it," Johnny shouted. "These oilmen, they claim to be scientists, but they shoot the messenger if there isn't anywhere to drill." He had wanted to work for the oil company a few more times, to save money for his own, less profitable seismological idiosyncrasies.

The child, Althea thought. What will I feed it when there's no money? "We've got to go on," she said.

"That's my girl," said Johnny.

A boy, Althea thought.

By four o'clock, the shadows were beginning to creep down the canyon walls, and they had not yet found a beach wide enough for tents. Domingo suggested they could tie the raft to any overhanging tree, or stake it on any patch of dirt, but Johnny wanted just to get around the corner of the next cliff. Luckily, there was some flat water there, almost a lake but for the deep pulling current.

Even if Althea had felt like making love, it was no night for romance. Menace hung in the darkness, as if this beach were haunted by the evil spirits and ghosts Domingo said lived in the upper parts of the Rosario River. At two in the morning, Johnny heard a rustling noise like voices and put his head out of the tent. He reached back and grabbed his hunting rifle by the barrel, sliding it out of its long ugly holster, then slid through the flap and was gone. Althea heard him shouting in Spanish, but she was too afraid to go and see what was happening. She got off the cot and lay on the canvas floor instead, just in case.

The oarsman had been trying to slip away in the darkness, abandon them. Johnny said he was so mad he wanted to shoot the bastard and his kid right there and then, except that if he was going to shoot them, he might as well have let them go. So he tied them to a tree instead, and covered them with their own blankets against the cold.

It was a matter of principle now, Johnny said. The vein on his forehead was pumping, and Althea could see the lines where he gritted his jaw. Half a day more upriver, then they could call it quits. He seemed to be defying Althea to join the rebellion herself, but she was quelled by his gray eyes, sharp as picks. Johnny left Domingo's kid tied to the tree while he and the oarsman walked up as far as they could, to see what was coming next. They crossed the river on a series of gravel bars, wading in thigh-deep water, Johnny keeping the gun above his head. Then the two of them disappeared around a long bar of rock. They were gone an hour and Althea began to half listen for a shot, to worry that the oarsman had overpowered Johnny. She'd be left with the boy, maybe the boy and his father. She imagined the fate worse than death. Would she be able to love that kind of baby? She didn't think so. It was a certain person, this pale child who wanted to come to her. When she felt his presence—and it had been given her to know he'd be a boy—she knew her husband would come back in one piece.

Soon he did. Ahead was not as bad as yesterday, Johnny said. He'd offered Domingo double pay to continue, just until noon. Johnny wanted to find one or two familiar strata, but if he didn't, he had to be able to say he'd gone twenty miles up the canyon.

Domingo seemed satisfied, if a little grim; he admitted there was an hacienda up this way; they should already have reached it.

Johnny kept the rifle in reach, though wrapped in oilcloth.

Indeed, it was not as hard as the day before, until eleven A.M. They began negotiating a combination of problems, not nearly as bad as others they'd seen even that morning, when the nose of the raft got pulled under by a wave roaring off one boulder, and the tail of the raft slued sideways and hit another boulder. The oar caught and flipped, throwing Domingo into the air, and then the raft began falling rapidly back toward the whirlpool. While the accident was happening they entered another kind of time, faster and slower at once, so that Althea later remembered Johnny shouting, but at the time everything was one simultaneous shouting, her ears full of inward and outward sound. Johnny was shouting to warn her about a long tree trunk jammed sideways, four feet above water level; it knocked Althea between the shoulders and suddenly she was in the water, water the color of dying leaves, water full of light and motion. She kicked, hoping to propel herself upward—no resistance, her foot was out in air. Twisting like a fish she wriggled, poked her head out, saw a steep beach the size of a bed, and swam to it without thinking of anything or anyone else.

Eventually she and the boy and Johnny were squatting together on that rocky sand. Domingo had disappeared. He didn't know how to swim, his son said. Maybe he'd been swept down to last night's campsite, where he could get himself to shore, Althea suggested.

They were all soaked and shivering. They could not stay where they were. Cautiously they swam around the corner of the cliff to another small beach. Then, froghopping boulders, swinging from trees, avoiding the water, in less than an hour they reached the beach where they'd camped last night. The boy was crying. It was no longer difficult for Althea to accept a hand as he helped her negotiate certain gaps. The cow was here, cropping grass, but Domingo was nowhere.

At the beach's southern end the boy discovered a faint trail leading away from the river, and they decided to follow it. Soon Althea's legs were covered in red-brown dust. Her bare feet began to bleed, so Johnny ripped his shirtsleeves off and tied them around. How can this be happening to me, she thought over and over, finding herself helpless, stripped, alone, crawling over the body of the awesome world.

And in this way, Althea and Johnny Baines, together with the boy, Wifredo'Sánchez Aliaga, reached the Hacienda Chigualén on August x, 1931.

A DESICCATING WIND blew through the canyon, thickening the gringo doctors' hair with dust. They stood at the front door of the clinic, locked and bolted since four years ago.

"Five years without aspirin," Nasir intoned. "Thus we lived the people's revolution."

Wham! Wham! The Chinese lock resisted the first blow of his hammer, but not the second. Sliding aside the thick iron bolt, Nasir stood back and kicked his heel against the crack between the clinic's narrow double doors, which popped open instantly. "*Pedazo de mierda*," he growled, fingering the snap lock that had held the doors, like a button holding together a knitted shawl.

"He says 'piece of shit,'" Maggie translated for Carson.

Carson practiced "*mierda*" under his breath while Nasir permanently disabled the snap lock with a chisel, explaining that the nurses had installed it in order to come and go at any hour, independent of one another. "You, Doctores, are decent people, and will not need it."

Carson fingered the hand-forged sliding bolts, one inside and one outside. "What's he say?"

"He says we're decent people because we intend to sleep on the same side of the door." In Spanish, Maggie defended the bad, unmarried women to Nasir. "Maybe they only wanted to *independizarse*."

Nasir grunted disapprovingly. "Ask yourself, Señora—freedom, for what purpose?"

Carson observed that anyone could come along and bolt the door from the outside, thus trapping them in the clinic.

This was the instant Maggie would have regretted leaving Cambridge, Massachusetts, but the clinic stood open now before them, full of all the possibilities of the year to come. There was nothing to see at first except for a scintillating body of dust, raised by the canyon wind and the doors bursting open. As it thinned and fell, Maggie saw that the room was nearly bare. The floor was of cured cement. A broom leaned in the corner, a black comma worn to the stitching. The examining table was homemade, draped with a coarse grubby sheet. Against the far wall was a counter and a stool and a set of wooden shelves, empty but for a stack of folders and scattered debris: brown medical bottles, tiny boxes, balls of hair.

On Maggie, the vacant space exerted an ecstatic pull. She glanced at Carson.

"I've seen better," he said, lacing his fingers through hers. His voice was low and flat, reminding her that, once upon a time, he'd tried to leave this kind of life behind. She hoped she'd been right to convince him to drop out of Harvard Divinity School. "I've also seen worse."

As he spoke, she saw the room's ugliness and filth. She let Carson drag her by the hand across the room, not pausing to inspect a single thing. They passed through an opening in the far wall, into the living quarters, the back half of the house. Nasir opened a barred window at the end of the hallway, admitting light and the roar of the river.

In the kitchen lay a mouse's bones, a black, exploding aureole of decay.

Nasir preceded them into the bathroom. The toilet was a tall box painted red, with a seat and cover. "The jewel of Piedras," said Nasir, lifting the lid.

Maggie couldn't resist peering over his shoulder. She saw a dry cement trough with a fossilized human turd sitting at the bottom.

"*Mierda!*" Carson uttered his new vocabulary word.

"*Correcto,*" said Nasir, letting the lid slam shut. River water should be flowing here, but someone must have diverted it. The toilet was a luxury, a sanitary achievement; Nasir wanted one, too.

"Not sanitary! *Sucio,* dirty," Carson said. He was standing in the shower. "Tell this guy about fecal-oral transmission downstream."

"Ugh, do I have to?"

Carson glared. "Please, that's the point." According to Catholic Charities, education and prevention were duties equal to the treatment of disease.

As she began, uncomfortably, to explain to Nasir (taking refuge in the formula "My husband says..."), Maggie inadvertently stepped back and kicked over a plastic wastebasket which spilled out liver-pink screws of toilet paper and an ancient sanitary napkin. Her stomach contracted painfully. She turned and left the room.

Nasir hadn't been listening anyway, she told herself in the hall.

Carson came out. "You okay?"

"A little queasy." Her stomach clamped again.

"You'll get used to squalor." He put one cool palm on the nape of her neck. "We'll get the place cleaned up. I'll dig a toilet outside."

She said she was fine, happy; she didn't really mind. It was true: even nauseating filth was interesting, far better than the subtle dread she'd grown familiar with in Cambridge, a feeling that she must have done or said something reprehensible quite recently but couldn't remember what it was.

"It's okay even if you do mind," Carson said.

"I do mind, a little bit," she said to please him.

In the bedroom more dust, the color of ground bones, covered everything: the wooden chair; the metal *armario* for clothes; and the two uneven iron bedsteads, with their rolled mattresses and knotted, clubbed mosquito nets. Here the floor was wood, darkened by the kerosene that was used to wash it and prevent termites. A faint reek still pervaded the room; its walls were so hot, Maggie wondered why the clinic had not caught fire spontaneously.

"Reminds me of summer camp," said Carson.

"Really?" Maggie said. The beds should have had skeletons in them.

"Camp Gimme My Mommy."

It took her a few seconds to realize that Carson had never gone to such a camp. During that time he and Nasir left the building to unload the truck, leaving Maggie to perform female tasks inside the house. Instead of airing the mattresses or starting to sweep with the evil broom, she selfishly went into the kitchen, hoping to open the back door and admit the sight and sound of the river. This door, too, was locked. She kicked at it, not hard, for it was massive, some rain forest hardwood, more solid than the wall.

There was a window, though, high up. Small and square, it was just the size to lead Maggie to wonder whether her hips could fit through in an emergency. Standing on one of the kitchen chairs, she opened its brass latch on half blue infinity, half canyon wall.

She went back to the bedroom, unhooked the dire mosquito nets, and dragged them outside to air. Next, the mattresses, but these were stuffed with extremely heavy, rotting foam rubber, so when she tried to embrace the first one, it slipped from her arms and bounced back onto the bedsprings. How she hated the intractable weight of large objects, the nightmarish sensation that she could not hold on.

She plunked herself down abruptly on the edge of the metal bed frame, and might have burst into tears except that when she hung her head she spied, down through the spiral grid of bedsprings, a comic book on the floor. Its hot-pink cover was laden with soft furry dust. She made out a busty woman kneeling on a bed, fully clothed, hands pressing at the sides of her screaming mouth as a dark man fled the room with a pistol in his hand.

He Killed to Save Her Honor.

She shook it, and, holding it from its spine, carried it to the doorway where there was light, and read it from cover to cover. Men in turtlenecks argued with each other. Women wept, and kissed their hands. Maggie felt lifted into another life, simpler and more fantastic, where it was no longer necessary to be herself.

Now Carson and Nasir came tromping back inside, shouting for her help. They were carrying the refrigerator and needed her to dust the counter so they could put it down.

The first important thing Carson had said to Maggie was that she did not seem to belong in the United States. How had she gotten trapped in Cambridge? At first, she'd been embarrassed to admit that she'd never considered settling anywhere else. As she spoke to him, however, she realized she hadn't felt entitled just to go and live in someone else's country. Carson had replied that, in his opinion, she'd closed the door too firmly behind her. If a missing piece of her soul resided in South America, why not go reclaim it?

Soon she'd returned the favor, pointing out that Carson should listen to himself, and go back to

the work he'd been born for, the life he knew was real.

He'd been one of her ex-husband's graduate students. Older than most, he was part of a special program for people who'd run upon the rocks and shoals of life and needed time to think. They spent year, or two, writing a long paper about the reason for suffering, or where was God in an imperfect world. At the end they had master's degrees in divinity but were discouraged from leading congregations. Maggie worked in the divinity school administration, and for some reason she had identified with these students and looked forward to their visits to the office. One man, whose brain had been damaged in a car accident, could not stop himself from sharing his deepest emotions with strangers. A black M.D. had a son who'd disappeared. The daughter of an infamous billionaire had changed her name, renounced her fortune. Even the aging ladies who'd left their husbands after thirty-three years, hennaing their pageboys, were full of a sense of adventure.

Like all other first-year students, they were required to take a course in Religion and History, taught by Dr. Larry Fabularo, Maggie's ex-husband, Larry designed his curriculum to destroy a broad spectrum of wrong thoughts. He punctured creationists, materialists, and idealists with equal glee, brought empty nesters up to academic speed. In the case of older students, Larry felt a special mission to disabuse them of the idea that life should have a meaning. To wish for meaning was a source of torture, Larry believed. Maggie had observed that this belief was at least an equal torture to Larry, but that he felt less pain when he was inducing others to adopt it.

Larry often said he envied his wife because she had a passion for experience, experience for its own sake. One of his pet theories, based on a study of infants grabbing toys, correlated the highest intelligence with a lack of ambition, pure curiosity. Maggie was flattered by his analysis, but when she turned thirty, she'd begun to wonder what she was becoming. It wasn't Larry's fault that she'd adopted his opinion of her; yet as long as she was with him, she didn't know how to figure out whether or not she was the person they'd agreed on.

She'd married him right after graduating college, taking this job he'd found for her, to pay bills while she chose a graduate school. First she'd tried counseling psychology, but soon it was clear she'd lose her mind if she were to be locked in a small room with one neurotic after another for the rest of her life. In reaction, she'd gotten certified in massage. She'd loved feeling the ghostly sensations of her fingers on her own legs and shoulders as she kneaded her patients' flesh, but then afterward, for a few unnerving hours, she became the person she'd been touching: she smelled, felt, thought as they did. Often her clients dreamed of her on the night after a treatment. Kinesthetic possession, Larry called it.

Another year she took up night photography, long exposures in the dark with a moving penlight, but this was not a career.

Everyone in the divinity school office was similar. Overeducated, or anyway too intelligent for the third-grade skills required, they'd unofficially decided it took ten years to give up the idea of ever becoming anything. Their salaries were nearly as good as the professors'. Shoats locked on to the teeth of Mother Harvard, they shared an airy, pleasant pen, an office with high ceilings, and windows looking out on a tidy oak-treed lawn. Boredom and lack of prestige were the main job stressors; otherwise, working there was a bit like playing "school," licking stamps and answering the phones.

The fall Carson arrived, two people in the office decided to have crushes on him. He stood out, a craggy, self-conscious, almost comically luring romantic presence, the overseas health worker now

stalking the long, wainscoted hallways in his battered leather jacket, jeans, and boots. His hair was dark. His skin was pale. His nose was thin. He spoke with a slight accent, Southern, mixed with the kind of forgivable affectation people picked up overseas. He looked either Dutch or French. The head administrator, Brian (he edited gay porn videos on the side), and the departmental secretary, Rita (she had a black belt in tae kwon do, two kids, and a restraining order against her husband), both found devious ways of summoning Carson into the office to fill out forms or straighten out his scholarship. He'd lean over the counter and play with the doodads on Rita's desk, guessing which was a gift from which professor.

Maggie took the scoffer's position, saying Carson was too conspicuous—too, too *something*. But she noticed his hands, the long fingers fitting together as if never to let anything run through them uselessly. Rumors said he'd been under bombardment in Angola; his girlfriend had recently died of brain cancer; he'd been cured of leprosy, of exposure to chemical weapons. Bit by bit, Brian and Rita drew him out, proving most of the rumors true. He'd worked in seven countries, seen famines, wars, epidemics, refugee camps, the worst poverty. His British girlfriend, Maxine, had died—of breast, not brain, cancer. He'd held her in his arms at the end.

Carson entertained them with his wicked opinions. Women in Boston had the worst hairdos on earth. The summer heat reminded him of Bangladesh. But Harvard! He'd feel more useful mopping floors at a homeless shelter. The main thing taught here was that education took away your right to speak. Even if a hundred people agreed a cat was gray, none of them could say so. They had to ask the cat. If the cat didn't feel like answering, too bad. Obviously if those same hundred people confronted a gray building, they were in deep, deep trouble. This way of thinking was a disguised intellectual blight, death to compassion and imagination, and its chief perpetrator was Professor Larry Fabularo. Fabularo's stance was forgivable only because he was clinically depressed. "Untreated," Carson called him.

That day Maggie hid her face behind a ream of laser printing paper, recognizing her husband's lecture, one of his most provocative. When, later, her co-workers had commiserated with her, she'd said Carson wasn't the first to have such thoughts. Lately Larry had fallen away from himself in some deeply dismaying way. His book was five years overdue; he couldn't resolve the last chapter. He'd smoke pot for inspiration and end up losing heart, let the sun set without turning on the lights, then play computer games so obsessively he'd had to get a wrist brace. Maggie hated walking past his office door in the evenings, seeing him silhouetted in the sick glow of the screen. Once she'd asked him to consider getting help, and he'd retorted that her request was self-centered. After that, she'd been unable to consider leaving him.

He always gave a cocktail party in the middle of the fall semester. For days beforehand, Maggie cooked, arranged flowers, and ironed tablecloths, the way her mother Julia had taught her. Maggie's spread was famous. Everybody came; useless to expect Carson not to. Larry had aimed him right at Maggie, saying, "You'll be interested in talking to my wife. She grew up in South America. Maggie, this is Carson. Carson has lived everywhere."

She began by apologizing for not identifying herself in the office. In turn, Carson said he hoped he hadn't been insensitive, but Maggie should know he'd said all the same things to Larry's face, in class. Now, if it was okay to change the subject, he *would* like to hear about South America, a place he'd never been. How had she felt growing up there? Didn't she find the United States harsh and

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