

# PRAISE AND AWARDS FOR *NORTH OF HOLLYWOOD*

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“A touching bittersweet remembrance... breathtaking...”

— KIRKUS REVIEWS

“Enchantingly written with a sure hand and a knowing eye.”

— ELIZABETH FORSYTHE HAILEY, AUTHOR OF *A WOMAN OF INDEPENDENT MEANS*

“I love the book! Insightful, honest, wise, and charming!”

— BERNARD SLADE, PLAYWRIGHT, “SAME TIME, NEXT YEAR”

“An actor’s intimate, sometimes hilarious, sometimes touching, and always honest account of making a living while living next to Hollywood legends.”

— PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“An essential book for anyone who has ever said they want to be an actor and for anyone who was lucky enough not to. Compulsively readable! ...perceptive and poignant wisdom...”

— MICHAEL KAHN, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE SHAKESPEARE THEATER IN WASHINGTON D.C. AND FORMER HEAD OF DRAMA AT JULLIARD

“I greatly admired Rick Lenz’s thoughtful and well written book.”

—PETER BART (VARIETY)

“I was totally engaged with *North of Hollywood*, start to finish. Sometimes it felt like Rick Lenz wasn’t just ‘opening the kimono,’ as they say in business, but was actually peeling off his skin. I admire his courage in telling it.”

—SCOTT CAMPBELL, AUTHOR OF *TOUCHED AND AFTERMATH*

“...kaleidoscopic form without breaking the rhythm of Lenz’s poetic prose. The effect is beautiful...” —FOREWORD BOOK REVIEWS

“Raises the genre of the Hollywood memoir to an art form.

— MICHAEL NORELL, WRITER’S GUILD OF AMERICA AWARD WINNER AND TWICE WINNER OF THE CHRISTOPHER AWARD

## AWARDS

Los Angeles Book Festival: First Place (Memoir)

Foreword Book Reviews Book-of-the Year: Finalist

London Book Festival: Runner-Up (Memoir)

Hollywood Book Festival: Runner-Up (Memoir)

Paris & San Francisco Book Fests: Finalist

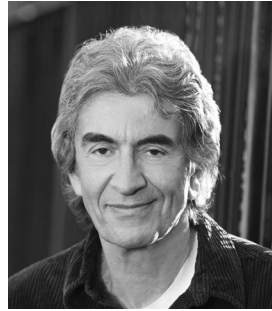
Beach Book Festival: Runner-Up (Memoir)



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Rick Lenz** has been a working actor almost all his adult life. He is at home on the stage as he is in front of the camera. His acting ranges from the serious to the comedic, and he has been featured in both starring and supporting roles on TV and in film. In addition to acting opposite many of the entertainment industry's biggest stars over the years, he is a playwright and author. His first book, *North of Hollywood*, has won several national awards. Rick lives in North Hollywood with his wife, and his favorite roles are husband, father and, recently, grandfather.





THE  
**Alexandrite**

A Novel



THE  
**Alexandrite**

A Novel

RICK LENZ

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## A NOTE ABOUT BRET EASTON ELLIS

I have to say something about using Bret Ellis's quotation on the front of this book. I must acknowledge that it's selective use of what he said. Bret wrote those words at the end of a complete, line-by-line edit he did almost twenty years ago. The story was more or less what it still is, but several other things were not in such good shape, like my research (or lack of), the characters, the logic, the conceptual through-line, and the writing itself.

Bret did that edit for me, as far as I could make out, for no other reason than to try to help a would-be writer he didn't even know. It was an act of utter generosity that I wouldn't have expected from a major writer—whom I had only met indirectly through his mother. When he was finished with his first edit (he later did a second), he wrote the words that are placed on the front of this book. The rest of what he had to say was not so much praise as blunt honesty about the book's shortcomings, as well as my shortcomings as an author. Like most smart writers reading other writers' work, he knew it wouldn't help me to tell me it was good when it wasn't.

In the years since then, I have done more drafts of this than I can possibly remember. It is now what I had hoped it would be. Some readers may wonder how it could have taken so long to get it this way. I have no answer to that.

I hope Bret will forgive me for using his words out of context. The only defense for my crass commercialism is—I hope—*The Alexandrite*.



# Dedication

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*This book is dedicated to Aaron, Riley, and Frances*

*And, always, Linda*



*“How do you find your way back in the dark?”*

— Marilyn Monroe, *The Misfits*  
(screenplay by Arthur Miller)



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*Alexandrite: A gem variety of chrysoberyl  
that appears green in daylight  
and red in artificial light.*

**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 1996**

At some unidentified point during the first time I live through the following events, it becomes as clear as my muddled brain has ever experienced clarity that most of us do not see what we see or hear what we hear; in fact, we can't tell what's going on right in front of us. As a result, few of us understand that life runs in a circle, that it's forever changing—but always, always in a circle. And the reason for this is, if it weren't in a circle, if life went out in a straight line, it would take us away from each other. And that wouldn't work because we are all connected, made of the same stuff. Most of us, to one degree or another, are terrified of the end of the path we're on, never understanding that our path is a circle, and that it won't end—because it can't.

Curiously—or at least I think it's curious—what I have just said is something I've yet to learn—yet I already know it.

Go figure.

I know this is an odd way to start a diary, but I am experiencing a lot of odd moments lately, and am having a new and alarming sensation of the (forgive me, psychobabble haters) *NOW* in my life. Everything that happens to me is happening as it occurs—not a few minutes ago, not yesterday, not last year, but *NOW*.

My name is Jack Cade. I'm a forty-year-old actor, going through a rough patch in my work life. My marriage is not doing well either—which is entirely my fault. Sophie is the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me.

Also, if I want to be *totally* honest (and what's the point of starting a diary if you don't plan to do that), my career is in the process of falling to pieces.

### **WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 9, 1996**

I go to an audition today—four lines for a cable television movie. It's for one of those TV characters who knows what he knows with absurd confidence. When I get to the casting studio, I feel pins and needles up and down my spine, and my stomach is dripping acid as if I've just taken part in a black coffee drinking contest. There are four other actors, who look just like me but confident, waiting in the outer office. On the walls hang photographs of Cagney, Garbo, Rita Hayworth, Henry Fonda, Bette Davis, and as always in my life—it seems wherever I go—Marilyn Monroe.

Inside, I jump all my cues—read the answers before the character I'm auditioning for has a chance to hear the questions. By then, perspiration is causing my shirt to stick to my chest and back, and it's clear the producers are not about to hire an actor whose clothing is pasted to him, who looks like he's just run a marathon, and is about to—as the first marathoner did—drop dead.



The producers, who seem knowing and sophisticated beyond their years in their super casual clothes and three hundred dollar haircuts, are disappointed. Who can blame them? They ask for “devil-may-care” and “wised-up”—kind of like they are—but I don’t have that on my menu today. I have worried. I have unsureness. I have bleeding actor’s ego. Almost immediately, I notice that these foolishly confident TV guys are all wearing Rolexes, except for the doughty TV gal, who sports a large Mickey Mouse watch. I’m wearing a Timex that stopped working last year.

My mother Rita looms up in my mind like Gypsy Rose Lee’s mama. She is disappointed in me. I *hate* that look.

Passing through the outer office as I leave the audition, I glance at the picture of Spencer Tracy on the wall and wonder if there is anything generous, anything un-ego-bound behind his eyes, anything that, even with the ultimate actor and movie star, one could hang onto that isn’t just part of “The Spencer Tracy Show.”

## **THURSDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1996**

I didn’t sleep much last night.

I’ve been having a recurring nightmare. I’m in a darkened hallway, standing at the top of a flight of stairs, trying to work up the guts to go down to the first floor. I’m terrified to start down, but there’s a relentless pounding in my brain, and it leaves me no choice. I can see light at the bottom of the stairs, coming through a short passageway from the next room.

I’m gripped constantly by two fears: that I am a perverse exception to the larger circle of life I sense in my guts, that *my* life is running in a grinding and infinite loop with no means of changing its course, *and* that the only way I can possibly escape is to jump from the frying pan into the fire—leap free of the rut

I'm stuck in and walk through that passageway into, for all I know, something even more sinister.

I wake up in a cold sweat just before I have to start down the stairs. I'm up for hours sometimes before I'm able to fall back into an uneasy sleep for the rest of the night.

Sophie sleeps heavily. She gets up early and goes to work as a private care nurse at the Beverly Vue Apartments for a gentleman she calls "the old boy."

Except for the times I gaze at her as I'm falling asleep, I hardly ever see her lately except in the evenings, and not always then.

Today, the telephone wakes me.

It's the director of a play I've been working on, a five-character *Hamlet* at a tiny non-paying workshop theatre in West Hollywood. I'm playing Polonius and, alternating with the other supporting actors, doing the narration (when you do a five-character *Hamlet*, a lot of things need to be explained).

An actor in his late thirties, named Douglas Crossley, is playing Hamlet. He is also directing. I was told Crossley almost became a star several years ago, having done nice roles in four big films when he was a young man. But evidently he didn't quite click because after that he was once again like most actors, struggling to get by. He's counting on this production of *Hamlet* to finally do it for him. I have my doubts.

On the telephone, Crossley says, "Hey, listen, Jack, rehearsal's cancelled today. I'm making a couple of cuts. We're running too long."

"Oh, yeah? What are you cutting?"

"Nothing of yours. I'll see you tomorrow. Three o'clock."

I hang up, trying to ignore my usual paranoia at such moments. I turn my electric clock toward me and notice it's five, which is impossible in either direction—the sun is high in the sky. It has to be a Department of Water and Power problem. The people in the San Fernando Valley lose power quite often. It gets too hot, or it floods, or fires sweep through,

driven by Santa Ana winds which, even if there's nothing burning, can do plenty of damage on their own, blowing down trees and high tension lines and tossing huge truck trailers off roads. Sometimes, the power sources seem to collapse for no reason at all.

It was windy last night. The Santa Anas have sucked the heat out of the desert and pushed it across the Valley and the LA basin to the sea. Tree branches are strewn across all the yards in our neighborhood and on the street in front of our house. I call up the automated time lady on the telephone (an eighty-year-old sacrament due to go defunct early next century) and reset my clock to 11:45, feeling depressed that so much of the day is already gone.

Looking out the front window, I hardly notice the pretty postal carrier as she drops my mail in the letterbox and moves off to the bungalow next door.

Sipping my coffee, I open an envelope that has no return address. Inside is a pawn ticket. I have no idea what it's about, and for a fraction of a second, I feel an eruption of *déjà vu*—a volcano locked up inside me with no vent for its energy, no way for it to identify and explain itself to me. I look at the ticket again, grateful for anything to take my mind off my nightmare or any thoughts of show business.

I dress, get into my 1984 sun-faded, pale green Jaguar convertible, and drive the Hollywood Freeway from the San Fernando Valley into the central megalopolitan ooze of Los Angeles. Exiting on Vermont, I make my way to Morgan's Gifts on a seedy part of Oxford Street in the Wilshire District.

The inside of the pawn shop looks like it's been put together by a Hollywood scenic designer, from the careful layer of dust on the long file of guitars to the shiny, age-worn wooden counter outside the cage and a bad acrylic painting (there she is again!) of Marilyn Monroe visible through the front window.

I've never been able to fully account for what feels like my lifelong connection with Marilyn. She's always occupied a corner of my mind—like a girl from the seventh grade did. The girl was a beautiful, delicate waif with a sad smile and a look in her eyes that transfigured my awakening teenage passions into something between fascination and obsession. I picked her name in the class drawing for an exchange of Christmas gifts. I bought her a bottle of Shalimar perfume that cost me every penny I had. When she thanked me for it, I know I turned crimson; I was unable to say a word to her.

It felt like a triumph anyway because I knew from the way she smiled at me that she understood the magnitude of my gift.

The day after Christmas vacation ended, on January 2, my father died.

Rita sold the house and we moved from Jackson, Michigan, to Los Angeles where, if Rita had her way, I would one day become a movie star. I have no idea what caused her to hatch this idea—madness is my guess.

Staring at this crude rendering of Marilyn now, I know it isn't a sexual fixation I have on her. It's romantic, something like the sentimental feelings I had toward the girl I gave the perfume to.

But this *waif*—Marilyn—goes on and on and in the back of my mind, always there, as needful of something in me as I am of *whatever* it is in her. It's as if we have a subcutaneous interdependence, despite the fact that she departed the world almost thirty-five years ago. There's something upsetting about the artlessness of this depiction of her. It's as garish as any paint by number piece but without the saving grace of guilelessness. This artist thought he knew what he was doing, in painting Marilyn, but he had no clue.

The only thing to distinguish Morgan's Gifts from most other pawnbrokers is a tiny but stoutish woman with a hairline about as high as the first Queen Elizabeth's (after she'd had smallpox). She

has a pinkish complexion and is fast asleep in a chintz-covered wing chair near the front window. A strip of midday sunlight creeps up her shins toward her pudgy knees, and she breathes evenly through her mouth.

I gaze at her for several seconds and am startled when she abruptly opens her eyes and catches me at it. I look away quickly as if I'm browsing the shop. By the time I glance back, her eyes are closed again.

Afraid to wake her—if she actually is asleep—I don't ring the bell at the cage. I whisper "hello" a couple of times.

A loose-jointed young man with no hair on the sides of his oblong head unfolds himself into position inside the cage.

"Help ya?"

I hand him the ticket. He frowns at it, looks at me, sniffs, then hitches himself around the corner where I hear him rustling through layers of other people's lives.

He reappears, holding a small brown, felt jewelry box. "Here ya go." He pushes it out to me.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Been paid for."

"By whom?"

"Don't know. You'd have to ask Mrs. Hightower." He points at the small, sturdy woman in the wing chair.

I look at her, wondering if she's overheard us, but her eyes are still closed, and she's again breathing rhythmically through her mouth. "Was it paid by check?" The young man shrugs. "Do you know when it was paid?"

"Dunno." He turns up the palms of his hands.

I thank him and start to leave.

"Hey, you got to look at what's in there before you take it."

"Oh, sorry." I snap open the box.

It is an antique-looking ring with a round, faceted stone, murky-purplish in color. “It’s a ring.” I move back to the window and hold it out. “Is this an amethyst?”

The young man takes it from me, gives it a perfunctory inspection, then hands it back. “Could be.” He shrugs and disappears into the rear of the shop, the way he came.

I stuff the ring in its box into a front jeans pocket and, with another glance at the plump little woman in the wing chair, go back out onto Oxford Street.

When the box starts hurting my leg on the freeway as I’m driving home, I wiggle it out of the pocket and open it up with my left hand.

At first, I think the kid has played some trick on me. It’s a different ring. The stone is now a bright bluish-green, clear, with almost the fire of a diamond.

But it’s the same ring. The kid only held it for a moment then gave it back to me. I try it on the ring finger of my right hand.

It fits as if it’s been sized for me.

Later, at our little house in North Hollywood, Sophie gets home from work in Beverly Hills and finds me asleep, under the influence of about half of a “family size” bottle of Deer Valley Chardonnay. I complain about what’s going on—or not going on—in my work life. She listens as much as she’s able to as I enlighten her about the ways in which reality television, already scourging through the European market, is about to start robbing me of my living, et cetera, et cetera. I quote some dire warnings from *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*.

I look at her out of the corner of my eye and see she’s under some kind of stress of her own. Sophie is pretty, open, and unguarded—so

unguarded I can tell now that something is definitely bothering her. She *can* be brusque and sometimes, frankly, a little cold, and she picks now, when I'm feeling shitty like this, as one of those times.

To be fair, she isn't *usually* cold...*or* brusque. I met her at a lecture on "Taking Care of the Elderly After a Hip Fracture" at UCLA. Rita had broken her hip, and I wanted to know how to take care of her. (It turned out her fall had been a freak thing. My mother has bones as hard as Bakelite, and nothing like that ever happened to her again.) After the lecture, Sophie and I struck up a conversation, and she invited me over for coffee. She didn't say, "Let's go *out* and have coffee." She invited me to her *apartment*. I couldn't believe this knockout girl was being so forward (I'm not saying I minded). I accepted her invitation, went over to her place, and we talked until dawn. We didn't mess around or anything. That came the next time. After that, we messed around a lot.

Just short of two months later, we got married.

I have my nightmare again and shudder awake, terrified as always. Sophie is asleep next to me. I know if I wake her up to tell her about it, she will do her best to comfort me, but I also know that won't fix anything.

Looking at her, I think about getting up and maybe reading a little until I get drowsy again. But her face is *so beautiful*—not in the usual way, but confiding, in her sleep, a heartbreaking vulnerability. I have a badly timed urge to nestle into her, burrow into that place on the pillow next to where she's adrift in whatever dream world she's in. I want to inhale her, get lost in her, be as close as I can, not from the fear of my nightmare anymore, but from this fanatical tenderness that multiplies in me, watching her sleep. I think of the Leonard Cohen lyric, "Your hair upon the pillow like

a sleepy golden storm.” I want to enter into her storm and keep her warm and safe.

A while later, I remember the ring. I had taken it off and put it in the pocket of my windbreaker. I slip out of bed and go out to the front closet to get it out. I sit down on the sofa, turn on a lamp, open the box and take it out. I hold it closer to the light.

The stone is a deep raspberry red.

I wonder what whoever left it for me wants.

I look into the deep red and feel the same sense of dread I feel in my nightmare.

But this is concrete. *It's a thing*. I'm holding it in my hand, which takes it out of the realm of fantasy; this is *real*.

## FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1996

I wake to Sophie, sitting on the arm of the overstuffed chair I fell asleep in. “I’m going to work. What’s this?” She’s holding my right hand, looking at the ring, green in the morning sunlight streaming through the window. “Is this an emerald?”

I rub my eyes. “I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

I tell her about the pawn ticket and redeeming it at Morgan’s Gifts.

“Aren’t you curious to know what it is?”

“I guess.”

“For someone in the arts, you certainly can act like a cement salesman.”

“Okay. I would definitely like to know.”

“Can you meet me outside the old boy’s apartment building at eleven thirty?”

“I guess.”



I go to Ralph's Grocery to pick up a few things we need. On the way back, just north of the Carmine's Carwash on Tujunga (advertising FREE PSYCHIATRIC HELP WITH HOT WAX), every gear but second on my Jaguar becomes unusable. I make it to our mechanic's shop on Lankershim, expecting it to cost five hundred dollars or more. I've known trouble was coming but I hoped it wouldn't happen for a while.

It takes ten minutes to fix. Parts and labor came to fifty-three dollars.

When I get home, there's a message from my agent, Gordon, scolding me for not having a pager and telling me I have an audition at ten thirty in Beverly Hills for an independent film. There won't be time to do more than quickly read over the scene before I go in. The director is in town from New York for only one day.

I change clothes, head over to Laurel Canyon and turn right on Sunset, just west of what used to be Schwab's Pharmacy, the one-time highly publicized actor hangout where, according to some forgotten gossip columnist, Lana Turner was discovered (I've heard that Turner said that story was a fable) by a talent scout. To my right and up a short steep hill is the Chateau Marmont Hotel, where during her post-Hollywood period, Greta Garbo used to check in occasionally under the name of Harriet Brown, and where John Belushi died of an overdose.

Driving west through West Hollywood, I pass the sleek, deco-style Saint James Club, formerly the Sunset Towers Apartments, featured in at least a dozen film noirs; the Rainbow Bar and Grill, where Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio met on a blind date (I've never understood what she saw in Joltin' Joe—he looked like a bemused ant eater to me); the Roxy, where almost every rock star has played at least once; and the Comedy Store, previously known as *Ciro's*, where the studios used to send movie star "couples" to be photographed (then the couples

would slip out the back and escape to their real-life partners—other or same-gendered).

I learned most of this from Rita.

My palms are sweating by the time I get to my audition. I have ten minutes to look at the scene. I can't make much sense of it. Evidently, there are several other scenes that are about the same. It's a character who doesn't say much, just "reacts."

The director, a muddy-featured lump of a man, chewing on a thick wet cigar, says with an unlikely lateral lisp, "*I'd jusht like to shee you lishen sshum,*" and the casting director reads some of the star's speeches, and I pretend they are the most riveting words I've ever heard—could ever *imagine* hearing.

When the audition is over, the director makes a sucking sound with his tongue and front teeth, shakes his head and says, "*The feeling musht flow up from within or there will be no beauty on the canvash.*" He continues shaking his head.

Somehow this self-important humpty with what looks and sounds like a turd in his mouth, shaking his head in condescension, opens up the place inside me where the homicidal little boy lives, the potential assassin: petrified, wounded.

A few blocks from the Beverly Vue Apartments, where Sophie works, is a fancy Beverly Hills jewelry store, on Rodeo Drive, called Jewels By Jaxon. Sophie and I are buzzed through wrought-iron security gates into an intimidating space with plush sage-green carpeting, walls covered with elegant green and gold paper, floor-to-ceiling panels of mirror, and rich, dark walnut showcases full of expensive-looking jewelry.

An attractive ash blonde in her early forties, wearing a simple pink silk dress and only a strand of pearls and tiny pearl earrings

for jewelry, approaches us and says in a near whisper, “May I show you something?”

“Actually, we’d like to show *you* something,” I say. “I was given a ring. I wondered if you could tell me what it’s worth.”

She stiffens slightly. “Did you want an appraisal for insurance purposes?”

“No, we just want to find out...what this *is*—just to have a rough idea.”

“May I see it please?”

I take off the ring and hand it to her. She holds it to the light and makes a faint humming sound in the back of her throat. “This may be an alexandrite. I’m not an expert, but I’ll let you speak with Mr. Parsons. He’s our gemologist and appraiser.”

She returns the ring to me, disappears into a back room and very shortly returns with a slender gentleman dressed in what looks to be a forties-style Savile Row double-breasted suit like Adolphe Menjou used to wear, or Herbert Hoover. He is fine-featured, gray-haired, and appears to be in his early sixties. He takes us to a small immaculate room filled with books and gem-testing instruments.

“Won’t you have a seat?” He speaks in a firm, friendly voice but high, almost feminine. As Sophie and I settle into comfortable, armless leather chairs, he says, “Let’s see what we have here.”

I hand him the ring.

Parsons examines it with a jeweler’s loupe that springs miraculously to his right eye. He turns the ring over and back again.

“Do you know what it is?” says Sophie.

He looks up at her, startled by the interruption. “Yes, I know this stone. It’s an alexandrite. May I ask how you came by it?”

“It was given to me,” I say.

“And how did the giver acquire it?”

“I don’t know. Is it valuable?”

“It’s about seven carats. I’ll measure it in a minute. I’d judge the retail value to be about fifty thousand. It has a small feather-shaped inclusion that would lower its market value, but it’s an exceptional stone.” He flips a switch on a matte black high-tech lamp. “This is full-spectrum light source—the same range of illumination as the sun.”

He holds the ring under it. The alexandrite is now a deep bluish emerald green, as it was when I looked at it driving home on the freeway from Morgan’s Gifts.

“The changes in hue are due to the delicate balance maintained in the absorption color; a change in the color of the light transmitted is all it takes to produce a change in the color of the stone.” He turns it and studies it from several angles. “This is extraordinary.”

“Did you...? Was that *fifty...thousand*?” I say, glancing at Sophie.

She gives me the strangest look, as if she’s happy and sad at the same time.

Parsons looks off into the distance. “Depends on the buyer. It could be more.” He shakes his head slowly like a wine taster clearing his palate and returns his attention to the ring.

“Alexandrite is remarkable in the first place. It’s a twinned crystal, as unmatched in its way as diamond. But the color in this stone is unusually deep.” He puts the ring in the clip of a microscope, adjusts the focus and examines it again. “Here, take a look.”

Sophie looks at it. I follow. It’s a velvety green round stone, with a flat top, ringed by triangular and kite-shaped facets that sparkle as the stone absorbs and reflects the light. Near the bottom and off to one side is a tiny floating feather, a little lighter in color than the surrounding crystal. Gazing at it, I feel as if I’m in danger of falling, like I’m standing on the edge of a cliff, and for a half-second, I have the notion that I might, without meaning to, step off and drop into some bottomless abyss I’d never be able to climb out of.

I stare at it for a long time. “That’s...um, uh...that’s really... *fascinating*.” As I look up, congratulating myself on such sophisticated patter, Sophie purses her lips, frowns at me, then looks through the microscope again.

Next, Parsons puts the ring in something he calls a Leveridge gauge and measures the stone. “It’s just over seven and a quarter carats. Who gave it to you?”

“I don’t know.”

Parsons looks puzzled, almost annoyed. “If I were you, I’d try to figure out where this came from.” He puts an index finger to his forehead and massages lightly as if trying to soothe a sore spot. “Plato believed that precious stones were living beings. And this is an alexandrite. This could be your friend.”

Sitting with Sophie in Roxbury Park between Olympic and Pico in Beverly Hills, I say, “I won’t be home till late tonight. I’m having dinner with Rita.”

She isn’t listening. “*Somebody* pawned the ring. All you have to do is go down there and ask that woman.”

“She probably doesn’t know either.” I’m thinking how much better I’d feel if we had the fifty thousand in cash.

“Yes, but she *might*. Maybe it was paid for in person when the boy wasn’t there. Aren’t you dying of curiosity?”

“Actually, I don’t think I want to know anything more about it.”

She looks at me as if she’s never seen me before. “*Why?*”

“I don’t know. It blows my mind that this thing has...been *given* to me—anonymously, but it feels like there’s something maybe in the stone itself that I really...don’t want to know about.” She’s staring at me, and I realize she looks deeply sad. “I don’t have any idea what I’m saying,” I say. “Maybe it’s the fact that it changes color, and you’d never expect that.

Maybe it's the crystal itself. When I saw it under the microscope, I felt... Didn't it make you feel strange—as if you were about to pitch off into the depths of somewhere you knew you didn't want to be?"

She's frowning.

"Never mind. It's me. I *know* it is. I just don't like *change*...I realize you can't avoid it, but...sometimes I feel as if I'm barely holding it together."

Seeing that I'm disappointing her, I say, "*Okay, okay, I'll go.*" I'm gazing off toward the west. For some reason, I'm seeing in my mind the Pico Avenue gate of Twentieth Century Fox Studios, where Marilyn Monroe shot twenty of her twenty-nine completed movies. "Anyway, she's probably cashed the check by now."

Sophie looks at me like Rita used to when I was a kid and she was driving me home from acting class and I'd just told her I wasn't so sure I wanted to *be* an actor.

"But the customer would have been given a receipt," says Sophie. "And the woman would have a copy of it. You want to drive over there right now?"

"I don't think so. Maybe tomorrow...or next week."

She looks over my shoulder, off in the other direction, toward Hollywood, and shakes her head. "I hoped this would work out to be something nice for you. You *need* something nice. But you don't seem to court nice things anymore. You don't even reach out for them when they're offered to you. You court unhappiness. You don't *give* as if you expect anything good in return. It's as if you expect only *bad* to come your way."

"What are you talking about?" I hold up the alexandrite. "I just got this thing."

She doesn't answer. "I don't know how to say this..." She looks *shaken*. "...I think we need some time...*away* from each other."

I stare at her. "What do you mean?"

“We aren’t...*nice* to each other anymore.”

I’m *numb*. “*Sure we are*. It’s just kind of a bad time is all.”

“It’s *been* a bad time for five years. And it’s getting worse.” She looks more pained than I’ve ever seen her. “You’re sinking, Jack. I love you, but you’re *sinking*.” She shakes her head. “And I’m not going down with you.” She looks at the grass beneath our feet.

“Something’s going to break for me. I’ll get a job, a better attitude. I really will. I’m making an effort to tap into the good parts of me, into my thoughtful, selfless parts, into my...you know, my generosity.”

“I don’t see how that goes along with continuing to do something that—as you pursue it anyway—seems to be turning you into the opposite of what you’re saying.” She shakes her head again. “I don’t think, when you tap into the deepest parts of yourself, you get what you want; I think you get what you are.”

“That’s a really shitty thing to say.”

“I can’t let myself go under because you’re determined to. This has been going on way too long.”

I don’t even defend myself. I can’t even speak up for my marriage to a woman who is without question the best thing that’s ever come into my life. I think of her asleep on her pillow. I want to go back and be with her in a more loving, *transfigured* way, but I don’t have the tools for something like that.

When I get home, there are two messages on my machine. The first voice says, “Jack, it’s Gordon. They think your look is perfect, but you weren’t *there* with your reading. Sorry, babe.” Click.

The second caller is a woman. “This is Friday, ten thirty in the morning. My name is Maggie Partridge. I’m a psychophysicist.”

“You’re a *what?*” I snort at the machine.

“I’ve come across something in my work that you may be very interested in. Could you meet me today? Say three o’clock? The address is 1833 Shoemaker Drive in La Vieja. It’s extremely important.” She has left her telephone number.

“What the hell’s a”—the phone rings—“psychophysicist?” I pick it up.

“Hiya, Jack. I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news.”

I don’t say a word; just wait for more bad news.

“It’s not going to work out,” says Doug Crossley. “I have to replace you.”

“But we’re into *dress rehearsals*.”

“The guy who was going to play it before I hired you has suddenly become available, and I owe it to him. He’s played the role before.”

“You *owe* it to him? That’s not a reason. What about *me?*” It feels as if this is the *second* red-hot skewer I’ve had plunged into my guts in an hour. “You can’t do this to me, Doug. It’s just not decent. You weren’t making cuts yesterday, were you?”

“Whoever said show business was decent, Jack? Hey, listen, buddy, there’ll be other parts. Polonius isn’t much of a role anyway. This is no comment on your talent.”

I hang up, take several deliberate, deep breaths, gobble a couple of pills, wonder why Sophie doesn’t love me anymore, *force* myself to stop thinking about her, then, mechanically, telephone Morgan’s Gifts and ask to speak to Mrs. Hightower.

The young man tells me she’s out and won’t be back until late in the afternoon. I tell him I’ll call back later.

I lie down, try to straighten out my tangled thoughts, whimper for a while, and fall asleep.



In our backyard, next to my faux Zen garden, not *feng shui* the way I'd pictured it but crowded with grasses that looked perfect at the nursery, I practice the ritual training moves of judo but can't concentrate.

My attempt at mind control melts into blind rage: "*Shit, fuck, shitty shit fuck!*" It's not enough that I've been *dismissed* by my wife. Now, I'm fired from a job I was doing for fucking free. How can someone fire you when you're working for fucking nothing? And how can my wife, who promised "for better or worse," leave me when all that's happening is I'm going through a *little rough patch*? It's not *permanent*. I'll get a better *fucking attitude*.

I sink to my knees as if I'm going to pray, but instead I shout, "WHEN I'M GOOD AND FUCKING READY!"

Like a rabbit in high weeds, my instincts tell me I'd better be alert for predators, monsters in my own backyard. It doesn't matter how well I think I've hidden myself. I have to watch out for *everything*—my own crazy impulses, for example.

For a few seconds I feel a wash of serenity. I stand up, and with my right knee bent, my left leg stretched back and my right hand reaching toward the sky, I gaze upward, avoiding looking at the sun.

I see it anyway, reflected brilliant green in my alexandrite.

I am changing too, into an angry man whom I don't recognize but also do. I don't know why this is—that I've lost all perspective. I *had* been telling myself lately that I was getting more tolerant of change, but my wife has left me with no warning at all—and for *no fucking reason*—and I feel like a pathetic fraud.

I guess that's a reason.

Maybe—it occurs to me—my real problem is that until now, the characters I've played have been at least a little under my control and that *that's* something I've come to need. Now, the world seems to be acting root and branch on *me*, randomly shifting my colors and the colors around me. Considering my ghastly breakdown of confidence

and my nightmares, I wonder again if I've finally gone the whole tree and am now entirely insane.

But I don't necessarily want to do anything about it. To be honest, I've always been a little afraid of that part of me that I *don't know*—that thing that goes on *underneath* in people, the *ghost in the machine*, I think it's called. I don't trust the ghost in my machine.

I have an image of my new life, living by myself, no wife, no children, no work, no interests; and it crosses my mind that it wouldn't necessarily be such an awful thing if I went to sleep tonight and didn't wake up.

Then it strikes me that I've just had about the saddest idea a human being can possibly have.

“What the hell's a psychophysicist?”

“Fuck it.”

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**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1996 (CONT'D)**

*I* drive west toward the community of La Vieja. I haven't been this deep into the San Fernando Valley for years. When my mother and I first moved to California, it was still the Los Angeles I recognized from books and movies. Now, it defines urban sprawl—strings of North Hollywoods, Burbanks, Sylmars, and Pacoimas spreading off in every direction from the ocean to the mountains and all the way up the sides of those mountains as far as they can get without falling back on top of themselves.

Following a Thomas Guide, I find Shoemaker Drive just below the foothills. The houses are a mongrel mix of brick, stucco, and wood. As I drive nearer to the mountains on the north, I see a road sign: NO THRU TRAFFIC. Shoemaker Drive seems to be ending. I drive around for a while trying to find a continuation.

Finally, I make my way back to a gas station/restaurant I passed a quarter mile earlier. It's a bleached clapboard structure with a couple of pumps out front. A sign hangs from a frayed wire cable. It reads: DICK'S GAS AND HOT FOOD.

Inside, a middle-aged woman sits behind the cash register, waxing hair off her legs. A Sally Hansen box lies open on the counter,

spilling out a half-dozen strips.

“Hi. Excuse me. Can you tell me what happened to Shoemaker Drive?”

She glances up at me but her concentration remains on her chore. “Shoemaker’s right out there.” She nods in the direction I’ve come from.

“But it ends at fifteen-hundred.”

She chuckles. “Yeah. I know.” She rips a strip of hair off her leg and winces. “Jesus, I hate that.”

“Do you know where the rest of Shoemaker Drive is?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“Is anybody around who would? Is Dick around?”

“No, but I’m his wife. My name’s Bernice.”

I see. “Okay. Thanks anyway.” As I start to leave, she heaves a sigh, as if she’s telling me this against her better judgment.

“If you just drive down that road by the wash there and take a sharp left just before it dead-ends, I bet you’ll run right into Shoemaker again.”

“Thanks.”

“Come again.” She rips another strip of hair off her leg.

I find the rest of Shoemaker Drive; 1833 is at the head of another cul-de-sac.

It’s a two-story Georgian home made of stone and brick, with impressive, peaked dormer windows on the second floor and a portico, over the front entrance, supported by white fluted columns, looking as though it has been magically lifted from its natural setting, somewhere in nineteenth century New England perhaps, and set down, by way of some absentminded real estate developer’s typographical error, in the San Fernando Valley.

I park my Jaguar on the street at the end of a long flagstone

driveway lined on either side by a density of blue agaves, walk to the front door and ring the bell. No one seems to be in any hurry to answer. I notice that two of the columns supporting the portico must have collapsed or almost collapsed once, judging by the white plaster patching job and some steel supporting struts. I hate being under heavy things that look like they could fall on me, so I move back to the front steps and gaze around at the neighborhood.

La Vieja (“the old lady”) is unsurprisingly not a newly developed area of the Valley. The houses nearby are mainly single-story wooden structures barely substantial enough to keep out the Santa Ana winds and very few of the lawns are well looked-after. On a couple of them, old cars sit, rusting, but there is a pleasing variety of trees: elms, oaks, Brazilian peppers, olives, silver maples, liquidambars, a full range of citruses, a half dozen varieties of palm, loquats, guavas. Some of the trees have buckled the sidewalks they shade.

I ring the bell again and move back to the front steps. A little girl is pedaling a tricycle a few houses away. I wish Sophie and I hadn’t put off having children.

*Oh, God. That’s all we need: another victim of a toxically ambitious actor.*

Maybe this is turn-around day. Maybe today I’ll put an end to the world of the terminally self-involved. I need to explore other places, other people; actually see the world through the eyes of the CHARACTER I hope to God is somewhere inside me. I look out at La Vieja again and feel in my guts that there are new and friendly universes *somewhere* out there, ripe for discovery. I’ve been so obsessed I’ve finally gotten to crisis point, my dried up humanity like a thirsty dog, lying by his empty water bowl, hoping his master—or actually, any passer-by would do—will spot his problem before it’s too late.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Cade. Thanks so much for coming.”

I swivel around. She’s opened the door without a sound. A

handsome woman, about thirty-five, with a way of looking deep into my eyes. She has an athletic, feminine figure and is dressed in tailored slacks and a matching silk blouse. She wears her auburn hair in an attractive blunt cut.

“Dr. Peacock?”

She corrects me. “Partridge.”

“Oh, of course. I’m sorry. I think I remembered that name from the game Clue—‘Mrs. Peacock.’”

A whisper of a smile. “It’s perfectly all right.”

Inside, seeing the gray slate floor of the foyer, I look abruptly up toward the top of the stairway and the second floor.

A blade of ice stabs into my spine and slices out to every extremity. Even in the warm light of day, and from this reverse angle, I recognize the scene of my nightmare.

She leads me through a low-ceilinged passageway, no more than six feet long, into a spacious, once-elegant living room. I feel dizzy. I stare at several nicely made reproduction Victorian pieces—a moss green sofa with a pattern of pale yellow flowers, a rocking chair, a couple of small tables, and some imitation Tiffany lamps. On one of the walls, over a massive stone and carved-mahogany fireplace, is an oil portrait of a lovely golden-haired woman. I don’t know why—she isn’t a lookalike—but she trips a memory of the picture of Marilyn Monroe in the window of Morgan’s Gifts.

A modern television monitor is in the nearest corner, next to a videotape camera on a tripod.

Dr. Partridge gestures to a low-backed chair, upholstered in faded velvet. “Would you like some coffee? I brought a thermos.”

“No, thanks.” I sit heavily.

“You’re *sure* you’re all right? You look pale.”

“I’m fine. What is this place?”

She is charmingly embarrassed. “I’m sorry, love. You don’t know anything about this, do you? This is a wonderful old white elephant of a house, leased to the county by the private party who owns it. It was built in the 1930s by an eccentric old man, who loved this climate. He did it for his wife. But as it turned out, she didn’t love this climate. She spent one night here and fled back to Boston. Now, the county takes care of it. They run occasional tours through it, although, as you can imagine, this part of the Valley doesn’t draw many visitors. The owners would like to get rid of it, but they can’t get their money out of it. So they’ve just been sitting on it—for years. You’re sure about the coffee?”

“Yes.”

“And you don’t know why I’ve asked you here. I’ll get to the point.” She sits across from me, on a small settee. “You took part in a field experiment in hypnosis a couple of years ago with something called the Southern California Psychology Group through the Screen Actors Guild, right?”

“That’s right. How would you—?”

“Would you mind telling me how you happened to get involved with that?”

“I don’t mind. I was between jobs. Sometimes out-of-work actors get approached to do that kind of thing. They paid me basically carfare to be hypnotized and to answer a bunch of questions.”

“What questions?”

“I don’t know. I was hypnotized.” I feel as if I should be angry, but I’m not. For some reason I feel giddy. “How did you know about that? Did you have some connection with it?”

“No. But audiocassettes were made. The project fell apart—insufficient funding—and the tapes were destroyed, but not before I came across some of them. Most were not very interesting, but *yours*

were. If it makes you feel any better, I was told at the time that the participants had signed off on those tapes.”

“How did you reach me?”

“Through your agent.” She clears her throat.

Looking around the living room, I have the feeling I’m in it for some good reason that I simply haven’t heard yet and that soon this game will be over and everything will be made clear to me.

“Then, listening to your tapes, I made a discovery. And I couldn’t keep it to myself. This hasn’t gone beyond me, and it won’t.” She gazes into my eyes without blinking. “Don’t you want to know about my discovery?”

“Okay.”

“How would you feel about my videotaping our conversation?” She points at the camera on the tripod.

“I don’t think I’d like it. Are you going to tell me why you asked me here?”

She takes a sip of coffee from a plastic cup and puts it down. “What do you know about string theory?”

“Pardon? Not much. Very little. Something to do with physics. Infinitesimal strings inside...what, quarks? Something like that?”

“That’s right.”

“Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know much about it either,” she says. “The best of us don’t. We’re just pretty sure we’re on the track of something that’s up there in significance with the wheel, the printing press, and digital technology. Did you ever hear of someone called Richard Blake?”

“No.”

“Your tapes from that experiment told me very little about you but a lot about a man named Richard Blake, who lived in this house during the fifties.” She gets up and moves to the television. “I’d like to show you a piece of videotape.” She turns on the monitor.



A tall, middle-aged man with a high forehead, long but fleshy face, ears flat to his head, twinkling eyes, and an open, cheerful smile appears on the screen. He is delivering a lecture, intercut with shots of an attentive audience of college students. On a blackboard behind him is an equation:  $R_{\mu\nu} - \frac{1}{2}g_{\mu\nu}R = 8\pi T_{\mu\nu}$ . Beneath that is scrawled “Einstein’s ten independent equations, condensed into one.”

The man speaks enthusiastically in a croaky baritone. “Light travels at one foot per nanosecond. If you stand eight feet from a mirror, the image you see of yourself is sixteen nanoseconds younger than you are as you see it. If we had a mirror in a distant galaxy and looked at it through a more sophisticated telescope than now exists, it might show dinosaurs walking the earth. Einstein explained gravity by showing how mass causes space-time to curve—not to obey the rules of Euclidean geometry. A time traveler is someone whose timeline loops back and intersects with itself—as a helix does. This despite the fact that, from the time traveler’s perspective, he has been traveling toward the future all the time.”

The professor smiles at the mesmerized faces of his listeners, then continues, “According to quantum mechanics, you can make an object appear spontaneously. Physicist George Gamow demonstrated that years ago on a sub-atomic scale.”

“Wait a minute.”

Not taking her eyes off the screen, Dr. Partridge says, “Listen. Please.”

“Time is the fourth dimension,” says the lecturer. “If I am to meet my daughter in the city, we must agree on three space coordinates and another number signifying time. Aboriginal wisdom, however, tells of a *second* time—dreamtime. If that existed, the universe would be five-dimensional. Some theorists, myself among them, are saying that if there were two dimensions of time—time, and let’s just call it dreamtime—I could meet not only my daughter, but also myself.”

With conspicuous glee, he throws a hand over his head and sweeps it around in large circle.

“We could loop around in the time/dreamtime plane and visit anywhere in time we wanted. If I’m an eligible subject, I can see myself off on the journey I just completed, simply by capitalizing on my presence in time/dreamtime. Superstring theory suggests that our universe actually has eleven dimensions. Some physicists have discussed the possibility that one of the curled-up dimensions connoted by superstring theory could be a time dimension—such as dreamtime. If it exists, then we can most certainly time travel. Now, then”—he rubs his hands together like he’s about to serve barbecue—“we know that there are two subject requirements for movement through time: an absolute duplication of location and a person wholly susceptible to hypnosis.”

“This man’s insane.”

Partridge hits the freeze-frame, leaving the professor with his mouth half-open on the screen.

I’m woozy all over again. “Who *is* that?”

“This is a tape of a lecture delivered recently by a physicist named Robert Hinkle. And he’s anything but insane. He’s one of the leaders of a small group of physicists who have recently reopened dialogue on the possibilities of time travel.”

“And you’re showing it to me *because...*?”

An audible gulp of breath, then, “I think you’re more than coincidentally tied to a man who once owned this house. I think you used to *be...*” She pauses and takes in another gulp of air. “*I think you used to be someone called Richard Blake.*”

I find the presence of mind to close my mouth. When I open it again: “*Is this a JOKE?*”

“I want to try to send you back in time.”

I look over my shoulder. “Am I on *Totally Hidden Video* or something?”

“This is very difficult.” She seems hurt. “I believe absolutely in what I’m saying.” Behind her, the professor is still frozen on the screen, mid-lecture. “I’m trying to give you some context to help you understand my work and the reason I’ve asked you here...Mr. Cade?”

“*You want to send me back in...*” She opens her mouth to speak, but I find my voice again. “*You’re a PSYCHOPHYSICIST?*” This has come out of me piercingly, nearly at the top of my voice.

She blinks, startled. “Yes. I am. Actually, ours is a subspecies of the psychophysics that was coined by Gustav Fechner in the middle of the eighteenth century.”

“What are you *TALKING* about?” I stare at her stupidly. “Have I been hypnotized again? Is this a follow-up to that...to that earlier thing?”

She shakes her head, then blinks again. “Okay, yes, it *is* hypnosis in a way.”

“What do you mean ‘in a way’? I’m either under hypnosis, or I’m not. Those people that other time apparently thought I was a good candidate for it.”

She’s watching *me* steadily. “All right, yes. You’re hypnotized. You have no choice but to do what I tell you to.”

I manage to stand up.

“That’s what *YOU* think. I’m sorry for whatever’s wrong with you, but I have to go now.”



# 3

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I stumble, then regain my footing and weave toward the passageway.

Either through stunning determination or exceptional agility, or both, Partridge stands between me and the way out.

“Dear God, hear me out please. I *beg* you!”

There is *such utter desperation* on her face, it feels as if it would be the cruelest thing I’ve ever done if I don’t hear the rest of what she has to say. She’s just *begged* me.

*I suppose I can put up with her psychosis for a few more minutes.* I summon all my resolve, turn around, make it back to where I was, and sit again.

“I don’t blame you for thinking...*whatever* you’re thinking.” She gathers herself, breathing deeply again. “We’ve been working on Einstein’s theories for a relative nanosecond. The Kaluza-Klein theory unified the forces of gravity and electromagnetism, explaining both in terms of curved space-time, even though serious doubts were raised... You have a question?”

“If there’s such a thing as time travel, why haven’t I ever met a time-traveler?”

“Good. You’ve nicely rephrased Stephen Hawking’s question, ‘Why haven’t we been overrun by tourists from the future?’ But

who says we haven't? Maybe there's a reason we haven't. It's easy to postulate a dozen. For example, aren't we likely to think of those who tell us they've traveled to us from the future as psychotic?"

"But how can there be time travel if the...way to do it hasn't been discovered before now?"

"Wonderful question."

*My God, she's sucking me in again.*

"It's called a 'Cauchy horizon,' named after a nineteenth century French mathematician. The Cauchy horizon separates regions of time that are not available for time travel. Such regions are like the inside of an hourglass—there's no way to get to them." She holds up a hand. "But then, in 1976, a researcher named Frank Tipler studied Cauchy horizons under the theoretical conditions of zero mass energy density, suggesting that occurrences of Cauchy horizons might alter, depending on energy fields. Recent hypothetical experiments have connected that concept with dreamtime theory."

The words squirt out, "*I'm no more hypnotized than you are.*"

She holds up a hand and seems to consider this. "It's *all right* for you to *believe* either way. All I'm saying is that if you hear the case I'm making for exactly what it *is*, you *will* understand more, and it'll work better."

"I'll tell *you* what *I* think will *work* better: *I* think this will all make more sense if we both agree that you're an escaped mental patient."

She smiles. SMILES!

As I think of getting up and heading for the door again, I remember the thought I had—not much over an hour ago—of going to sleep and never waking up. I don't move.

"Think about this," she says. "Max Planck, the father of quantum physics, said, 'Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of nature, and that's because we ourselves are *part* of nature and

therefore part of the mystery we are trying to solve.’ But Planck’s further inference was—given the nature and breadth of his own work—that we can realize incredible scientific achievements simply by *believing* we can.”

“If you build it, they will come?”

She laughs. “Oh, yes. They’ll come. Please listen.” She seems so sure of herself. She points at the television set, takes another deep breath, and switches it on again.

Robert Hinkle continues from where he left off. “The surprising but *not* surprising aspect of all this,” he says, “is that no one has yet demonstrated publicly what has already been verified privately.” There is a murmur from the audience. “Exactly. People don’t elect politicians these days who vote for expensive avant-garde programs. As a result, some experimental projects are operated in a completely classified manner.” He spreads his arms, his palms turned upward. “Which means nobody knows about them but the people involved.”

Partridge turns off the VCR. “Assume for the moment that I am crazy. What have you got to lose?”

I realize I’ve been giggling. “No. I’ve changed my mind. I don’t think you’re crazy. I’m positive now; it’s not *you*. It’s *me*. I don’t know exactly when it happened or what caused it, but for some reason I’m not computing properly. I seem to be in a dreamtime of my own.”

“Which brings me back to why I contacted you.”

“Am I dreaming you? Am I dreaming *all* this? The reason I ask is that I’ve been here before—in this house, in this room, in a nightmare. Do you know anything about that?”

“It’s your unconscious confirming exactly what I’m telling you.”

I get up, walk to the front window, and look out at my Jaguar in front of the house and the double row of blue agaves next to the

driveway. The smell of sage has filtered into the room from the Valley outside, acrid like the pain of loneliness.

I turn back toward her. “Let me tell you some private thoughts I’m having. I don’t know you, so I shouldn’t care what you think of me.” I realize my eyes haven’t readjusted from looking out into the bright sunlight and I can’t make out her face. I can’t seem to *remember* it either, even though I’m still talking to her.

I cross back to her and feel a rush of relief that I recognize her. “I’ve just lived through the most bewildering twenty-four hours of my life. And now I’m out in the middle of the desert, listening to a perfectly reasonable-sounding woman suggest I do some time traveling like she was outlining an investment plan or something. I don’t suppose you know why my wife has left me, do you?”

She frowns and looks at me with what seems to be genuine sympathy. “Sorry, love.”

I extend my right hand to her. “Do you know how I came to have this ring?”

“I beg your pardon?” She looks at the alexandrite, obviously puzzled.

“Whoever orchestrated this little fantasy knows something about show business. You seem well cast.” I look back at the television set. “You know, what that man said was all just...*Greek* to me. I’d have been more convinced if you’d told me you were going to shoot me back to a previous incarnation by magic.”

“But I *am*—if everything goes right.”

“Pardon?” I watch her lips move, but I’m not sure I’m hearing all her words.

“What *is* real magic but the bending of natural law past where we’d heretofore thought it could bend? Jesus walked on water. But maybe he just understood how to use the laws of a category of physics we haven’t yet become aware of. We all have perceptual filters,” she



says. “It’s a commonly ignored fact of life. Certain things we pay attention to; others, we have zero patience for. For example, if I were to ask you to fall to your knees and repent your original sin, you would probably get up and tell me you had an appointment right now, yes?”

“Yes.”

“There are trigger words and phrases—trigger thoughts in our culture—that we tune out because we perceive that they’re saying something crazy, or at least something that distinctly repels us.” She claps her hands together, creating a pistol shot effect. “I’m saying the ramifications of becoming aware of that fact are *earthshaking*. My work is based on the premise that our perceptual filters shroud almost entirely an incalculable mass of what in plain speak we would otherwise call miracles.”

I consider the possibility that a part of me may not be in this room with my body. I’m pretty sure she just used the word “miracle.”

“If I were to take you to a ‘psychic,’ and if that someone were able to tell you things about your life that he had absolutely no way of knowing—and this sort of thing *does* happen, whatever the cynics may tell you—a rational reaction on your part might be, ‘Well, that is indeed spooky.’ And you’d tell the story of that experience for the rest of your life. But you probably wouldn’t make any more out of it than that. Well, what I and some of my colleagues are saying is that there is a growing mass of real evidence by those who study time, space, and the human mind’s ‘extrasensory’ potential, that clearly indicates we are not dealing in this regard with—as most of the world thinks of it—*supernatural phenomena*; that our theories are in fact not supernatural at all, but lie entirely within the confines of natural law. We just haven’t been able to communicate it yet. And the reason we haven’t is *people—their limitations, their selective perceptual filters*.”

I feel myself grinning shark-faced at her, like Jack Nicholson having just heard a clever double entendre. “Well, okay. Cool. I’m hooked.”

Partridge frowns.

“I don’t have any plans today. So, I’ll just see if I can’t suspend my perceptual filters for a teensy bit. Do you know why I *really* got fired from *Hamlet*?” I giggle again and scratch at my face like I’m on methamphetamines. “Never mind. What time in old Richard Blake’s life would I go back to?”

She clears her throat. “It would be a time, we believe, when something ‘memorable’ was taking place. A person remembers smelling a flower, receiving a raise at work, getting married. There’s no way to predict.”

I’m amazed at the matter-of-factness with which I react to all of this. I know now that I’m out of my mind, yet I’m listening to her time travel prospectus (and her scientist on tape) for the most part politely. It’s as if I’ve watched too many absurdist comedies in a row and my frame of reference has gotten bent around to the point that *everything* seems preposterous and *nothing* provokes surprise.

“What happens if I don’t come back—can’t find the right wormhole or whatever?”

“Don’t worry, love. You’ll come back.”

“How do you know? I mean, couldn’t I just get...*stuck* in Richard Blake’s life?”

“No, that couldn’t happen.”

“Why not? It would save my wife the trouble of divorcing me.”

She waves that off. “You have to live your *own* life. Jack Cade’s life can’t just end arbitrarily because of a psychogenic experiment. Everything that happened in the past and everything that will happen in the future is all happening right now. Your life has to continue as it would have.”

“This does bring up another minor issue that I wouldn’t ordinarily expect to be discussing with a physicist—not that I talk to that many physicists: *Do* physical scientists dabble in reincarnation these days? Because, unless I’m hallucinating, you *did* say you think I used to *be* this Richard Blake. Didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did.”

“So then...?”

“I told you, I’m a psychophysicist. And I do indeed dabble in... such things. Physics and metaphysics haven’t traditionally mixed, but who says they shouldn’t? They’re not mutually exclusive. Great breakthroughs *usually* happen when someone realizes that two things, thought to be incompatible, turn out to be profoundly harmonious.” She takes in the expression on my face. “Look, there was no scientific knowledge that recommended going out into a developing rainstorm, as Ben Franklin did, and flying a kite with a key at the end of the string.” Seeing the expression on my face, she interrupts herself. “All right, maybe that story’s apocryphal, but you take my point. A huge number of the most important scientific discoveries are generated outside normal scientific guidelines.”

She studies me and steeples her fingers to her lips. “Maybe the way you’re seeing it is useful.” She spreads her arms. “Okay. You’re temporarily deranged. I’m a master magician, and the only thing left is for you to put yourself completely in my hands and you’ll be safe—magician’s ethics, okay?”

Feeling like a hunter, stalking something that’s actually over my shoulder—in the shadows—watching me, I show her what is no doubt a goofy smile. Then, abruptly, for no reason, I feel resigned to whatever awaits me. And again, I’m giggling.

“Well, what the hell. My wife’s left me. I can’t get a job. There’s nothing else happening on the crumbling back roads of my life. When would we begin?”

“Anything wrong with now?”

“Yeah, sure. Why not? How long would it take?”

“Not long. Minutes, I think.” She’s telling me I’ll be back from this acid trip, from this gig as a magician’s subject, in time for my dinner date with my mother.

“I just have one question, before we do this.”

She nods.

“Who the hell is Richard Blake?”

“A gemologist,” says Dr. Partridge.

“*What?*”

“A gemologist.”

“I heard you.” My voice sounds as if I’m underwater. “You’re kidding.”

“Why would I be?”

“You know as well as I do that this whole thing is someone’s elaborate put-on.” I try to recall how I could have accidentally taken that acid. I feel as if I’m being carried along like a cork in the white torrents above a waterfall. “Was Richard Blake married?”

“Yes.”

“Aren’t you going to give me the rest of this character’s bio?”

“I don’t know much more than that. But I’m not sure I should tell you anyway.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to send you back there with any preformed opinion from me.”

“All right, I think you’ve laid it out clearly enough. So since I’m obviously *already* in ‘dreamtime’ and none of this is actually happening—at least the way it feels like it is—why don’t you just go ahead? What do you do, wave a watch fob or a coin at me? I don’t

have to *ingest* anything, do I? I'll be honest, the part of me that thinks I'm really doing this is doing it despite the fact I don't think I should be making *any* decisions today." I hear Sophie's voice in my head: "Is this an emerald?" I stare into the probing eyes of Dr. Partridge. "The thing is, I sort of *have* to take any challenge that sets itself up for me now. If I don't, I'm just...*nothing*." I wipe at my cheek and am surprised to realize my hand is wet. "How do you plan to...*get me back there?*"

Without a word, she reaches into a Coach leather bag and pulls out a shiny ebony music box, about seven or eight inches square. It looks like some mystical article stumbled on in the attic of a gypsy fortune-teller. Strains of a generic early rock and roll song—not tinny sounding as I would have expected, but a gentle, haunting replication of rock and roll as if played by miniature guitars and basses—flow from it as she removes a front plate, revealing a diminutive, enameled painting of deep space, black, with tiny white specks: stars.

"Perfect." Even though I know none of this is real, chills surge up and down my spine again. "And when does this thing you're going to do to me start to work?"

"It already is."



*I*t's like being a missile in one of the early video games that goes off the right side of the screen and immediately reappears on the left.

I'm driving a big car through partially irrigated terrain. Or it *seems* as if I am. Chills come in waves now, down, then up my spine—and down again—and up and across the top of my head. I'm rolling through what looks like the San Fernando Valley, except that there are citrus groves in every direction and the whole region looks more rural. My first emotion: desolation. The word “marooned” pops into my head, and I know what it's like to be alone in the world. These feelings hit me all at once, like snapping out of a daydream to realize you've wandered away from familiar paths onto a dark, forbidding landscape.

Only I'm still dreaming. I have to be. None of this is possible. My problem is that no matter how hard I concentrate on waking up I can't do it.

I pull off the road at a Dairy Queen and, startled by the odd sound of my own voice, order a cone from a pretty, brown-haired

teenage girl, dressed in a pink angora sweater and black skirt under a blue checked apron.

She smiles brightly at me. “That’ll be twelve cents, sir.”

Behind her, on the wall, is a calendar. I can’t make out the day or month but as I fish into the pockets of the baggy seersucker suit I’m wearing, I see that the year in this dream is 1956. I *guess* it’s spring—according to the feel of it—although it’s hard to tell in Southern California. If it *is* Southern California.

“Pardon me. Can you tell me the name of this area?”

Her smile remains bright. “Sure. The town right over there—well, kind of a town—is La Vieja.” She points behind her.

I pull a quarter out of my pocket and hand it to her as she gives me my cone. “That’s a lot of Dairy Queen for the money,” I say.

She looks doubtful. “You think so? They raised the price last month from ten cents. My mother won’t come here anymore.”

I use a world-weary smile and join her on the other side of the issue. “Yeah, a buck doesn’t go very far these days.”

She serves up a little hum of agreement with my vanilla cone and thirteen cents change. “There you are, sir. Thank you. Come again.”

It crosses my mind to grab her by the shoulders, shake her firmly and say, “What the hell kind of a dream *is* this?” But she is so young and sweet, and I don’t want to alarm her.

I get back in the car, noticing it’s a tan Oldsmobile 88, and drive on along the country desert road in the West San Fernando Valley. I don’t know where I’m going. It’s as if I’m *not* dreaming but newly awakened to discover myself—not driving *this* car—but a tongue-tied passenger in the back seat of a speeding limousine whose destination I don’t know. There is nothing I can do about it and no way to get out. At the same time, I don’t



want to get out. It is simply my path for the moment and there's no point in fighting it. I remember going to Saturday matinees when I was a kid, peeking out between my fingers at Godzilla on the movie screen. It's like that too. I'm scared to death, but I *have* to know what's going to happen next.

Glancing at the rearview mirror, I see the Valley and the Santa Monica Mountains to the south, behind me.

I hit the brakes and pull to the side of the road. I turn off the engine and swivel the mirror to look at myself.

It is not Jack Cade.

But whoever it is, he is definitely wide awake.

I wish I'd stopped in at Carmine's Car Wash for the free psychiatric help. I've paid too little attention to such needs—probably why Sophie is leaving me. From the moment I got the pawn ticket, my life has been moving in slow motion. Now, it has decelerated to a bare crawl. All my boundaries have become blurred. The boundaries between the boundaries have become blurred—between now and time past, between day and nighttime, between what I wish for and what I get, between who I am and who I *think* I am. And what I wish for now is that it could all be simple again, and that I could be in some warm, friendly restaurant with Sophie, sipping coffee and feeling...unafraid.

And now, *reductio ad absurdum*, what's left of my mind conjures the final image of my nightmare: someone sitting in a rocking chair, lit by a single lamp.

I look again at the image in the mirror. The notion that I might possibly be conscious and now no longer one but two people slowly begins to turn itself over in my mind like a loop of film in a

projector without a light source, and I'm helpless to provide one. One thing I know: This is beyond doubt not a man in a typical state of twilight sleep.

I stare at the man in the rearview mirror for I can't imagine how long. No illuminating thought comes to me, except that we seem to be traveling together, this Richard Blake—if that's who he is—and me. We are, for the moment it seems, chauffeur and visitor. But it's as if there's a sign that says, DON'T TALK TO THE DRIVER. And Richard, the driver, won't or can't talk to me.

I continue staring into the eyes the way Maggie Partridge stared into mine. She used the word "miracle," then dismissed it. She said miracles only *appear* to be miracles because of our *selective perceptual filters*. I examine the face of the man in the mirror.

What would I have expected if I could have imagined this? That Richard would look like Jack? The truth is, if my eyes are giving me accurate information, Richard is better looking, not exactly an Adonis, but a solid leading man face and head, attached to what appears to be a well-toned body. He has deep-set, hazel eyes, straight aquiline nose a little on the generous size, good cheekbones, utilitarian mouth and chin, and thick brown hair brushed back from his face. It occurs to me that I could have borrowed this guy's looks for a couple of movies I was up for in the early nineties. We're about the same age. I could have done worse. The only thing I might have tried to do something about was the apparent lack of humor in his eyes.

But that's not so surprising. It doesn't take much imagination to figure out Richard may not be finding this to be an amusing experience.

Why doesn't he *speak up*? Are these my thoughts *alone*? Does this other...*person* have *no* say in his own life? If I am now myself (Jack Cade), sharing a body with this Richard Blake, is

he LETTING me control him? In any case, he doesn't *look* like a miracle, he looks like a...*guy*—and for sure not a guy in a *dream*!

But between me and me, what does it matter? The business I've spent almost all my adult life in is, face it, escapism. I and whoever this is I'm being carried around in—this Richard, I guess—we are a *study* in escapism. We seem to be coming together to play one role for the moment. No! Two roles.

Driving again, feverish as Frankenstein's monster out on his own for the first time, I take a right turn off the road I've been on and head northwest. The San Gabriel Mountains rise from the desert floor ahead of me, richly mauve and purple, and more vivid than when I last noticed them on the way out to meet Maggie Partridge, only about three hours after my wife told me she thought we needed some time "away" from each other.

I make another turn, drive through scrub bush and scattered boulders for about fifty yards, then pull to a stop, partly in the shadow of a scrawny yucca tree. I reach into the back seat, grab a case of geologist's tools, open it, and find exactly what I somehow know I will: a couple of short-handled shovels, some hand hoes, several other small digging/scraping implements, and seven or eight variously-configured files.

There is some quartz on the underside of a sandstone cluster at the bottom of a crevasse beyond the maple tree. I work my way down and proceed to harvest as much as I can.

I am a gemologist, scrambling around an arroyo, collecting a kind of quartz I've never heard of before—desert rose. It is gray-lavender, and the variety I've found is used mostly for decorative purposes because it's so granular and has little industrial value.

“It’s *got* to be a dream,” I say out loud, recognizing but not recognizing the voice.

I hold my right hand with my left—to pinch it.

I feel a ring on the ring finger. I hold up my hand and stare at it. It looks like Jack Cade’s alexandrite.

But that’s impossible. I bring the ring closer to my eyes, squinting at it. “It’s *im-fucking-possible*.”

I turn, lose my footing, and lurch off to do what I know I have to do—travel with Richard Blake. He’s alive in there; he’s going to do at least *some* of what...*he’s* going to do. But I have a *say* in his life.

Then again, *I don’t know*. Right now, it’s obvious Richard Blake is due somewhere, and I don’t have any choice but to go along for the ride.

I pack up the quartz in small plastic canisters and drive off, still heading northwest in the Valley.

I pull into the driveway at 1833 Shoemaker Drive again.

It looks the same as it did when I got there after my stop at Dick’s Gas and Hot Food, only now the trim needs painting, and it seems as if the place is not being cared for as well as the county will be doing it forty years later. The driveway is now cement and the agaves have not yet been planted alongside it. The surrounding area is almost all brand new. Most of the houses have been built very recently, and there are several under construction. Off to the north, which will be developed all the way to the mountains by 1996, there is nothing but a vast sweep of orange groves.

As I walk around toward the back door, a sinewy, rodent-faced woman, about fifty-five, peers over into my backyard. Her eyes are dark and purposeful, mean like a cartoon rat.

Our gazes meet for an instant, then she acts as if she hasn’t seen me. She produces a pair of pruning shears and behaves as if her only

purpose for being at the edge of her property is to trim a camellia bush.

I walk into the backyard.

Two women sit beneath a large mesquite tree. I wonder who they are and what I'll say to them, although I realize with fascination that part of me already knows.

The elder of the two, who is in her mid-thirties, is seated in a lawn chair with a cocktail in one hand and a book in the other. I (Richard) look at her again and I (Jack) for the first time. I see that she is a strikingly handsome woman. She has shining black hair pulled tightly back into a chignon and fastened with hairpins. I often find myself casting people I meet in roles they might play if they were actors. This woman would play headmistresses or mother superiors—ones who might be in danger of transgressing in dark and unnatural ways. Her name is Margaret Blake. She is Richard's wife.

The other woman, whose name is Lily St. Carnes, is her sister. If Margaret's arresting looks don't always register, it's because she is almost always with Lily, whose beauty commands attention. She has a satiny complexion and dark eyes like her sister's but larger and deep. They are a bottomless cobalt blue. They watch people with an unashamed curiosity that invites intimacy and sometimes slides over into insolence or a childlike vulnerability.

Something else about her: She is the golden-haired woman in the oil painting that was hanging over the fireplace in the living room of 1833 Shoemaker Drive when I met Maggie Partridge. If I didn't know Lily has been mentally troubled from birth, I'd cast her in a second as Helen of Troy or a blonde Cleopatra or possibly—as I glance warily at her—Marilyn Monroe.

It strikes me that Marilyn is still alive, at the peak of her career. She is probably, at this moment, only a few miles away, on the other side of the Santa Monica Mountains. I wonder

what she's doing. She's probably looking around at her peculiar surroundings, like I am at mine, nervous as a cat set loose in a strange neighborhood.

Lily sits in a children's swing that hangs from the bottom limb of the mesquite tree. Her eyes glow, and she beams an open, enchanting smile at me.

I kiss Margaret on the cheek. "Hello, dear. Good evening, Lily."

Margaret makes no effort to return the gesture, but Lily echoes the greeting in a happy, quavery voice, "Hello, Richard." She continues to swing.

"What is it, Richard?" says Margaret as I study my circumstances.

"Nothing." I study *her*. "I'm sorry I'm late. I found some desert rose quartz, over on Hillshire. The University of Wisconsin wanted me to find them some, so I stopped to collect it."

"Do you remember we were planning to go out to eat tonight?"

"Of course I do." There is a combative edge to my voice.

(There are no words to say how startling it is to have such firsthand knowledge of another human being's *being*. But again—although I sense Richard intimately, I don't think I sense him—at least yet—very deeply. I'm aware of one other thing: Richard seems to be VERY interested in Jack.)

"I'm going to wear my elegant dress," says Lily.

"Are you?"

"Oh, yes. But Margaret hasn't pressed it yet. Margaret had better press my elegant dress."

Margaret makes a clicking sound with her mouth. "Would you like to hear me scream, Richard?"

"No, thank you."

"She can, too," says Lily. "Today she screamed at the radio. I don't like it when we're not nice." She smiles. "We're not always in our right senses out here."

Margaret makes her clicking sound again. “That about sums it up.”

“You don’t have to be alone. You can come with me.”

“Rock hunting? It gets old, Richard. It gets old if it’s not your passion.”

“I have to earn a living.” She doesn’t respond. “You have books and radio...and the television.”

“Have you looked at the television, Richard?”

“I know the reception isn’t too good.”

“Isn’t too *good*? Like any other sensible thing, the TV signals don’t want to come all the way out to this godforsaken nowhere.”

“They’re working on a cable system. Once it’s perfected, they’ll be able to send TV signals anywhere.”

“That’s nice. Only by then I’ll be as batty as my sister.” She looks at me with something both pleading and dismissing.

I hold my hand out, just as I did to Maggie Partridge—moments ago? An hour ago? I say super-casually, “Do you remember where I got this ring?”

Margaret studies me as if I’m the crazy man I’m sure I am. “I have no idea, Richard. You’ve always had it. Don’t *you* know?”

“I forget. Isn’t that odd?” I don’t wait for a response; I grin foolishly and excuse myself.

Inside the house, I notice several—not only nicely made but I’m pretty sure the real deal—Georgian pieces of furniture. They must be worth a small fortune. Margaret and Lily inherited them. At a well-stocked bar, I pour myself a double Dewars over ice and move out onto the back porch, a large screened-in room furnished with rattan chairs and a glass-top rattan table.

I sit in a comfortable chair next to the backyard, sipping the drink. I can taste the Scotch. I feel hunger pangs and a soft

breeze on my face, hands, and arms and the relief of sitting in a comfortable chair. I also have the dismaying sensation of not knowing, if I had to sign my name right now, whose signature I'd use. It is not clear who's driving this Jack/Richard buggy. So far, the control seems to be very much mine. *So far.* This "occupation" of Richard's body feels as if it's the most challenging role of a lifetime.

From where I am, I can hear and see Lily and Margaret, but they couldn't see me unless they were to get up close to the porch and peer in. Neither of them shows any indication of having heard me.

Lily is humming. Margaret sits as before, her book in her lap, sipping her drink.

Now, Lily sings in time with her swinging:

*Two old maids in a folding bed—*

*One turned over to the other and said—*

She segues into:

*I'll get by as long as I have you—*

She stops, looks over at Margaret, and says in a pouty voice, "You always laugh when I sing that." When Margaret doesn't reply, Lily tells her, "That's a radio song."

Margaret looks up listlessly at her. "I know."

Lily winds the swing up as tight as she can with a series of little steps around and around in a small circle, then lifts her feet, leans back, and lets herself spin until she and the swing have come to a near rest. "That makes me dizzy every time I do it." She leans her head back and stares up at the sky. "Read to me from the story."

"But you don't know what's happened in the last three chapters."

"That's all right. I still like it when you read the mysteries to me."

Margaret sighs, then reads aloud:

"Marianne felt as if she were slipping now, slipping through all



the years of her youth—afloat in a whirlpool of all the times, places, and people she'd ever known. But always, always aware of the eyes, the eyes of the man who was watching her now—”

Lily has started to hum “I’ll Get By” softly, widening her eyes then closing them, over and over, as she listens to her sister.

When Margaret trails off in disgust, Lily looks up. “Why did you stop?”

“You’re humming. I won’t read to you if you hum.”

“But I like to hum.”

*I was once arrested. I was a child, sitting in a roomful of comic books, reading. A friend and I had gone in through a window that somebody else had already broken, in an abandoned house, and we’d found someone’s Golden Age comic book collection of vintage Atlas and National titles. We sat among these four-color treasures, poring through them—until a routine check of the neighborhood and this abandoned house, by the local police, had yielded up a pair of villainous comic book aficionados. The other kid was cool about it. I froze, as if I’d been caught strolling into the Department of the Treasury with a sawed-off shotgun. It was the pressure of the moment. It was real life that was the problem. Once I get to know the situation, I’m okay. It’s just these extemporaneous moments in unfamiliar circumstances that give me difficulty, occasions like this whole thing for example—being under post-hypnotic suggestion in some strange house at the far end of the San Fernando Valley and a raw-boned female physicist suggests that I spend a little time in a previous incarnation, and I immediately respond as if she’s asked me to pass the salt or something—that I find myself in trouble. I’m a good actor when I can slip into the flow of things but a lousy auditioner. I don’t or can’t apply cold, detached logic to a problem—except at moments when I’m not trying, or at least not trying too hard.*

*Only now I have no choice but to bear down and think this out rationally. Even if it doesn't work, I have to try to apply some common sense to this one.*

*I don't know where to begin. I've always hoped my unconscious has its own kind of intelligence, to guide my hapless conscious—if it can ever get through to it. I'm convinced that if I've ever had an important thought it has come from deep in some vault I have no wakeful access to.*

*But now I have two vaults to try to crack and one of them appears to be sealed as tight as a pharaoh's tomb.*

*The only thing I know for sure at the moment is that this Richard Blake has some strange and shadowy forces at work inside of him. Talk about the ghost in the machine.*

Looking out a living room window, I notice a newspaper on the front porch.

I bolt outside, pick it up and read the headline: DE GAULLE OUT OF RETIREMENT.

I look at the date:

## **TUESDAY, APRIL 10, 1956**

"Jesus." I repeat myself, whispering it slowly: "JE-SUS!"

In the bright sunshine, I look at the alexandrite ring I clearly recognize and wonder how it will find its way from bright green on Richard Blake's hand in 1956 to murky purple on Jack Cade's, standing in the dusky gloom of Morgan's Gifts in 1996.

I close the front door behind me, go into the living room and stare at the picture of Lily above the fireplace. I'm amazed at how accurately the painter has captured her vulnerability, the detail of her, her overall beauty, her essence, her touching fragments of hope.

I climb the stairs. At the top, I stop and look back down at the foyer and the passageway beyond it.

I unlock the door to my room with a key. I know it's the only interior door in the house with a key lock. I feel as if I ought to know why, but I don't know a lot of things yet—including whether I ever *will*, and Richard is volunteering nothing. I go into the room—a large, all-white chamber with a vaulted ceiling and two dormer windows, plus a spacious bathroom with art deco porcelain fixtures.

I turn the key from the inside and lock the deadbolt. Although Margaret and Richard are married, they don't spend their nights in the same bedroom.

Richard is scrupulous about his privacy.

I lie down on his single bed, which has a very soft mattress, and try to feel what it's like physically to be Richard Blake. I stretch out my arms and legs and after a few moments, experience the odd sensation of being comfortable living in someone else's body.

I get up from the bed, take off my jacket, shirt, and tie and look at myself in the mirror above a mahogany dresser. Richard Blake takes care of himself. Except for Jack's judo practice and a little weekend tennis, I've never been able to find the discipline for regular physical exercise. Now, it's been done for me. Richard is very fit, with good definition to the muscles of his arms and chest. I suppose it's all that running around the countryside digging up mineral specimens.

I feel a little embarrassed about what I do next, but there is no question of *not* doing it. I take off my shoes, socks, pants, and underwear and have another good look at myself.

*"Du-ude."*



I'm driving the Oldsmobile. Margaret sits next to me. She has a French silver flask with a filigreed overlay in her purse from which she takes a sip every once in a while. Lily is in the back seat. The night is clear and starry, the moon full with only an occasional wispy cloud drifting in front of it.

"If we got pulled over by the police and they found that, we'd be in trouble," I say.

"We aren't going to get pulled over, Richard. You never drive over the speed limit." She stares out at the passing countryside. "Who'd have dreamt my heart would one day go pitty-pat from the thrill of getting out to a scrubland suburb for a not even mediocre dinner."

"We could go into the city," I suggest.

"You know we can't do that. You know it excites her too much." She glances over her shoulder at Lily, who is gazing out the side window at the passing countryside. Margaret takes another sip from her flask. "My father took me on a business trip once when I was a child. And he always wrote me when he was away. He always called me his 'best beloved. Do you see?' See, after he called me his 'best beloved,' he would always add 'Do you see?'" She giggles. "Do you see?"

"I'm sorry, Margaret," I say. "I'm sorry."