

Distant Eyes

In Which the Four Protagonists Seek Diversion in the Late Fall, and Go on a Mushroom Hunting Expedition in the Mountains.

"Can you see what I mean?" said Nicholas. Margaret stood close to him, looking out across the dark, tideless bay. It was a clear, calm night, and deeply cold; the water lapped so softly they could barely hear it slap the rocks and hiss through the pebbles.

"Yes," she said, "You're right---it's a wilderness. But there's something there, don't you think; not people, but something that thinks in its own way."

Nicholas frowned. "Maybe so. I do get nervous standing here; I thought it was just being on the edge that did it---knowing that north of here there was nothing as far as you could see---a huge blank spot."

"But there are people that live north of here."

"That's true, but just look out there. Standing here, do you feel that they're there? Can you feel any trace of them?"

Margaret looked out over the black water towards the distant bulk of mountainous islands. Here and there at great distances were tiny lights. "You're right," she finally said. "There's nothing. Just these mountains and the forest---and the water." She tried to shake off his suggestions, but in spite of herself a chill crept into her. The watery landscape seemed to grow larger and more silent with each passing moment, until she felt lost in a world with no boundaries. "Why would you feel this creepy sense of the world in Fairhaven, of all places," she said. She took a step down onto the shingle along the water's side, and began to slowly walk up the beach. Nicholas followed.

"I don't know that it's creepy."

"Yes---it's creepy. I feel as if all the stars were eyes, and they were watching me because I am about to cross a fence they've put up to keep trespassers out."

They walked slowly along the beach; occasionally an icy breeze blew off the water. Soon a dark shape rose up along the beach in front of the stars: an abandoned factory.

Margaret stopped and turned around. "Do you wonder why we really came up here? I mean, we were sick of California, wanted a new start, were looking for a new place. But all these are really such vague desires. Willie and I are artists---we ought to have gone to New York. Or Chicago. But we came to this border country instead. We'd never even seen it before---we just packed up and moved, sight unseen." She shook her head. "I feel so elated here, but I don't understand it. We were taken by the adventure of it all, but when I think about it I've never done a thing like this before. I'm not really that impulsive. More the methodical, calculating type."

Nicholas reached down and picked up a couple of pebbles. He rolled them around in his hand then tossed them into the water.

"It was no different for me," he said. "I picked the place on a map. But I was fascinated with it

long before I saw it."

Margaret looked up at him and nudged a big rock with the toe of her shoe. "So it's your dream we're getting mixed up in? That's the real difference between us, you know. You're following the little dancing lights, or whatever---we're just following you."

Nicholas grinned and put his arm around her. "Margaret, do you know that I've always had a crush on you?"

Margaret smiled and put her arm around his waist. Their big bulky coats crushed briefly together as they hugged; she leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. "Of course I know it. And who knows who else you've always had a crush on. You're an adolescent."

Nicholas looked briefly astonished. "I'd never thought of it that way, but you're right. I'm always lovesick. I've never been able to shake it off."

"You see? It's not me or Katrina you're in love with, it's simply some 'state' you're living in. You're one of those peculiar creatures who's in love at the drop of a hat."

"But why should that be? It seems that the more I'm with Katrina the more in love I am. But it's just the opposite with her. Sometimes she makes me feel like I'm less than nothing. I think she tries to make me feel that way. But I can't think of a damned thing that I've done."

"Nicholas, you're such an innocent," said Margaret. "You're just the type who would drive a woman crazy with exasperation, that's all. It's because of that 'state' you're living in. At first it was probably heady for her, all that emotion coming from you, until she began to suspect she wasn't the cause of it. And now she's confused. Since you're following some crazy "inner voice," your exhibitions of love probably don't have a thing to do with her behavior. When she's dying to make love, you're cold as a fish because you're thinking about music or some such. And when she's sullen and uncommunicative, you suddenly get desperate and decide that you've got to make love to her."

Nicholas nodded, stunned. "That's exactly the way it is. You're completely right." He was silent for a long moment. "But I think she's beginning to hate me. Whatever I've done I don't deserve that---it's really tearing me up. She can be a real bucket of ice."

"I don't think she hates you! But you're going to have to pay more attention to her, to try to understand what she's feeling. That way you won't drive her to distraction."

They turned around and slowly began walking back. Margaret kicked pebbles with the side of her shoe as she walked. She looked down at her feet.

As they walked Nicholas looked ahead and saw the silhouettes of Katrina and William in the distance, still poking around an old abandoned pier and boathouse. He felt a conflict of emotions at the sight of Katrina that was becoming habitual: a sweet sense of sick longing, followed by bleak dismay that settled into his stomach like cold stones. He was so perverse that the further apart they seemed to get the more desperately in love he felt. But it had become a hopeless sort of love that only held brief glimpses of the joy he used to feel.

Margaret hesitated for a moment, then spoke. "I just have the most nagging feeling about Willie and I coming north, mostly because I don't understand it. But if it is really just a vague desire that

put us here, whatever we do won't come to anything. I just hope that there's something more permanent going on, something I'll understand eventually. It's the sort of thing I could end up doing for the rest of my life, wandering from here to there in an aimless sort of way, yet feeling like I need to do it."

Nicholas said nothing. They climbed up a steep little rise to where Katrina and William stood talking near the old pier. Katrina turned as they walked up. "Hello," she said. "Did you see the whale?"

Margaret raised her eyebrows in excitement. "There's a whale out there? Where?"

"Well, at least we thought it was a whale. It's awfully hard to tell in the dark. But something big was swimming out there---it seems to be gone now."

"Damn." said Margaret. She looked out into the bay intently, hoping to catch sight of whatever was out there. But it was very dark and nothing moved.

They began to walk back to the house. Margaret and William walked ahead together, Nicholas and Katrina behind. They didn't talk; Margaret and William looked around at the dark trees and the occasional house lights; Katrina looked down or straight ahead. Nicholas felt self-conscious as he walked along beside Katrina; he could feel her chilliness yet could think of nothing to say that would not be false or contrived. And so he continued to rack his brains for a way to break the ice, while he became more nervous as time passed. He was finally saved from his predicament by Katrina herself: "It's too bad you couldn't see the whale, or whatever it was," she said quietly. "Actually we were wondering what it was even as we were looking at it. Maybe it was a submarine." She did not sound cold towards him at all, and did not act as if there were a bone to pick. What had he been thinking of?

"A submarine!" he said, and laughed.

Katrina frowned. "Well, it could have been. There are submarines without the whatchamacallit on top, the antenna. It could have been one of those."

He saw too late that she had not been kidding him; he backtracked. "I suppose it could have been. But it probably wouldn't have been in the bay---I think the water is too shallow."

Katrina shrugged and was silent. That was the thing about Nicholas---he had an answer for everything. But did he ever know what he was talking about? When it came down to it, submarines or whales, it didn't really make a lot of difference. But if the bay was too shallow for a submarine, wasn't it too shallow for a whale? She looked ahead at Margaret and William as she walked. She could feel the tension in Nicholas beside her; it engendered a dull anger that she tried to suppress but couldn't. He was such a clam! Why couldn't he simply have out with it, instead of working it around from every known angle inside of him? The oddest, most absurd things came out of him sometimes! No wonder she could never tell what he was feeling---it had been twisted through so many brain cells by the time it got out that Nicholas probably couldn't recognize it either. She felt her anger beginning to grow and she sighed inwardly in dismay.

"Katrina," Nicholas said quietly. His voice startled her; it was calm, not nervous. He pointed to something in the bushes at the side of the road. She looked in the direction he pointed. He gently took her by the arm and they walked to the side of the road where something was moving in the

darkness. He parted the bushes with one hand and peered down.

"Nicholas, it's a frog," she whispered. "There." She pointed down. Down in the bushes was a tiny puddle with a frog at its edge; it blinked and began to croak. They looked at each other and smiled. Margaret and William came over. "What is it?" Margaret said. Katrina looked up and pointed. "Oh, it's a frog!" Margaret whispered. They all looked at the frog for a moment and let the bushes fall back into place. Nicholas and Katrina continued to walk behind; they walked hand in hand through the narrow little streets until they reached home.

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William and Margaret stayed a total of four weeks. They finally found the sort of place they'd been looking for: an old farmhouse with a small barn to work in. The rent was very cheap; the rooms were cold and drafty. They set up studios in opposite sides of the barn. Margaret continued work on a series of abstract oils, and William began a curious portrait in black, white, and grays. Even at the beginning there was something arresting about it; it grew to become uncanny within a short while. It was often hard to tell that he had worked on it at all, except that the face seemed to undergo subtle changes of mood. One day Katrina dropped by and saw that the eyes had been entirely removed; the left eye appeared days later but it was too high on the face. It moved down the face by the smallest increments until it looked about right; then the right eye began its strange dance across the face. Margaret was as bewildered as Katrina. "I don't know what he's up to," she said, "But there's something very unusual going on with that face." "Who is it?" asked Katrina. Margaret looked surprised. "Can't you tell? It's you."

Katrina was pleased and astonished, but apprehensive. As she examined it she saw the resemblance, and it came to resemble her more the farther the work progressed. But there was a life to it that frightened her. The expression changed---or seemed to change---as she looked at it. Sometimes the expression was pleasant, but occasionally the odd smile seemed so calm and distant that she was terrified. And the expression changed with the light: when it was bright the face seemed gay, but when the room darkened the eyes took on a diabolical light. William didn't like to talk about it, but confessed that it had frightened him at least once. Katrina thought he was as amazed as the rest of them, and that he could not believe that he had produced this thing with a life of its own. No doubt a large portion of its power was simply the time he'd put into it: he felt that it was far from finished, yet he had worked on it every day for the past three months. Often he would spend a whole day in front of it and not make a single mark, only to minutely adjust the shading of an eyebrow at the end of the day. But he would look as exhausted as if he had spent the day at hard manual labor.

Katrina found that his approach to the portrait had a strange logic; it somehow matched her state of being. She usually thought of herself as a whole, indivisible person, but recently she watched herself react to things inexplicably, change rapidly from mood to mood, change her feelings about people suddenly. She would normally have chalked it up to some influence that she wasn't aware of, but watching William work she wondered if the truth weren't stranger than that. Instead of one Katrina that reacted to different things in different ways, perhaps there were several Katrinas that reacted to different things in the same ways, but were not aware of each other. This startling notion struck her with such force that she intuitively felt it might be true, but it had a nightmare quality that kept her from pursuing it. The face in William's portrait reflected this cast of mind however. Each feature of the face was in subtle conflict with another; at first glance it

was a harmonious whole; on the second glance it was in continual restless motion. And occasionally, it assumed an expression that was straight from a nightmare.

Katrina was aware that she had reached a time in her life when everything she did became continual restless motion. When she looked at the world, everyone she saw had a purpose except her. Her next door neighbor had a child. Margaret and William had their art work. Nicholas had his music. She had nothing. What was worse, she saw nothing ahead. This situation colored her view of everything, particularly her life with Nicholas. What was she doing with him? He understood nothing of what was going on inside of her, and in the long run wouldn't want to understand--he was too preoccupied with his music, his strange hypothetical world of the north. But really, she thought, how could he help her anyway?

In the whirl of her nervous thoughts the less sure of herself she became, the less convinced she became that Nicholas loved her. But this was to be expected: she wasn't worth a damn. She laughed a bitter, inward laugh. Everyone is worth something, she supposed; but if you can't place a specific value on that worth, the statement becomes meaningless. She mulled the question of worth until it wore deep tracks in her mind. When was a person worth something, when not? She could only see this as a social question because she had no sense of worth in herself. If a person helped others, that help was worth something. If a person accomplished things---wrote music, built buildings---that was worth something. If a person was responsible for the lives and property of others, that ought to be worth something to someone. Katrina had done many of these things. She had helped people at various times, accomplished things, even though they were small things. She was a responsible person. She had done many things that were worth something. But worth something to whom? This was where the canyon opened beneath her. Yes---perhaps it was all worth something to someone, but it was worth nothing to her. And while it might be easy to do things that seemed worthy to others, it was supremely difficult to do the same for one's self.

She had been unfortunate enough to fall among people who did not begin to understand her predicament: they were so full of a sense of their own worth they never thought to question if they were worth something to anyone else. What a presumptuous crowd she was in with! They preferred to work quietly away on their own private little universes, in a part of the country so secluded that no one might ever know of their efforts. Surely there was a huge presumption in this, that three people with no particular fame should choose as their place to work a wilderness where no fame would come to them. But what was stranger was that she was here also, with no private universe to inhabit, only the feeling of a great inner silence.

She continued to look for a teaching job and worked at the bookstore. In the evenings she read novels while Nicholas worked upstairs. As she sat in the chair she could hear his heels scuffing the floor overhead, heard the chair legs creak, heard the occasional pencil drop to the floor. Nicholas was a noisy worker; he often broke his pencils in half when he was exasperated. He would sit for short intervals, then scoot the chair back abruptly and pace the floor, pick up a book and put it down again, walk to the door and back to the desk again. And more often than not Katrina crept into his thoughts. He looked down at the floor under his feet and a picture of the living room beneath would come into his mind: the gray-green rug, the fireplace, the circle of yellow light beneath the floor lamp and the chair where Katrina sat reading. She would be in her robe, her feet curled beneath her. They had not made love for a couple of weeks. They lived together but it seemed that they saw each other rarely; their meetings were perfunctory. The more briefly they passed in the dark the more of a magnet she became in his thoughts. Each

moment that he spent on his music was preceded by ten moments thinking about her. He could picture her so perfectly in his mind: her forehead wrinkled slightly as she read, her eyes wide and hard, her mouth pursed for moments at a time, to part slightly as she smoked her cigarette. At intervals she'd lay the book flat on her knees and look across the empty room, her mind suddenly taken by a passing thought outside the book. He could picture this perfectly even through the wall she'd thrown up around herself. How helpless he suddenly felt! When he came to bed at night he felt her stiffen as he lay next to her. This experience was entirely beyond him: he didn't know what to do. He kept to his side of the bed and tried to sleep among his crowded thoughts; she held her eyes closed, wide awake, stiff, raging at his incomprehensible silence. Their sexual appetites grew plump, ready to burst at a touch but hanging unfondled and swollen. Something in the autumn air fed this. The small green things that squeezed from twigs and pushed out of the ground, the spring bugs and horseflies, the nettles, the seething forests that rioted all through the summer now became fertile among themselves, monstrously heavy with accumulation. The cold started. Insects grew sluggish and vanished; the breezes stopped, the sky grew dark and purplish. The sudden cold and stillness, punctuated by warm, humid gusts, stopped the boisterousness in the landscape and made it something quiet, ripe, suspended: a breast swollen with milk. Their quiet house lay under the pear trees on the cold, bright evenings, and Nicholas and Katrina lay inside, not touching amid the fecundity.

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A little caravan wound up the dirt road. It was a caravan of two cars. Everyone couldn't fit into one car so they had taken William's car also. Margaret, Willie, Katrina, Nicholas, Janet, Paul, and Paul's friend Mavis all went up the mountain to collect mushrooms and have a picnic. There were a few berries still left in the bushes; Paul could see them nestled away in the thick brush alongside the road: salmonberries, raspberries, blackberries. Paul fidgeted in the back seat: he tried different postures, tucked his feet under him, straightened his legs. The car jostled and bounced. He bumped Mavis with his elbow; she frowned and slapped him on the shoulder.

Janet sat at the other end of the back seat. She felt like a third wheel, but was accustomed to this. She looked wistfully into the front seat where Katrina sat with Nicholas. When was the last time she had been with a man? It had been only a couple of months. She had rare encounters here and there: fleeting bouts, yet she could remember each of their names. Oddly enough, even the anonymous have names; every state of being, every thought has its little flag to wave. She imagined that in the old days names were different: there were fewer things to name, each name had a power. Names had no power now. She remembered them like she remembered the location of things in her cabinets. The men themselves---she barely remembered them at all. They passed in and out of her life so casually that except for the fact of their sex she might have been having affairs with herself. Sometimes she felt that due to the absence of men as a force in her life she had even begun to act like a man.

Katrina suddenly said from the front seat, "I hope you know where you're going, Nicholas, because I'm completely lost."

Pause.

"Well, we're on the right road. We've got to do some more climbing though."

Occasionally, through the trees, they could see the tumbled ice and rock of the high range above

them. But the forest was usually too thick to see anything; the little logging road wound up the steep mountainside so sinuously that they might at times be in a labyrinth, each turn making their destination more obscure. Nicholas had kept track of each fork in the road by keeping always to the left, where the slope rose. But they passed certain canyons where he chose the right hand path---they were four canyons southeast of the highway now, rising higher by increments into the swirling clouds, where the snow crept down from the black rocks into the woods.

"We're in the thick of mushroom country now," said Janet. "You can pull over any place you want. In fact, if we get much higher we'll be into the snow."

Nicholas frowned. "I haven't seen a place to pull off the road for miles." But ahead he could see the road pass through a clear-cut; on the edge of it was a wide turn out. "Voila," he said.

Mavis wrinkled her nose fastidiously. "Are we going to stop here?" she asked dubiously.

"Of course, we're going on a picnic in the woods!" said Janet.

Nicholas pulled into the turnoff and turned off the engine. In a few moments William and Margaret pulled up and parked behind him. Everyone began to get out of the cars. Katrina and Janet stretched; Paul and Mavis ran to the edge of the forest, picking up twigs and rocks.

Margaret walked over to Katrina's car. "It's chilly!" she said. "And look." They all looked up to the nearby ridgetop. A large cloud pushed over the mountaintop, snagged the trees and slowly swallowed them up.

"God, it's a beautiful day," said Janet. "That cloud is going to catch up with us today though. It's going to take the sun away."

"Boo!" said Margaret, frowning.

"Oh no, it'll be great, you'll see," said Janet. "It will make everything very mysterious."

"We don't want mystery, we want to know where the toilets are," said Katrina.

Janet shook her head seriously. "No toilets."

William walked up with a knapsack in one hand and a coat in the other. "Let's eat." he said.

"Now?" Margaret wrinkled her nose in surprise.

"Sure. Who wants to wait?"

Nicholas looked at his watch. "Hmm... It's one o'clock already."

Katrina put her hand over her eyes and looked up into the sky. "We might as well eat while the sun is out. I think it's going to get chilly pretty soon."

Janet looked down the hill and pointed to a spot that looked good. It was a grassy area near a big rock in the sun away from the trees. Nicholas opened the trunk of the car and took out the food and couple of blankets. William had two bottles of wine in his knapsack. They all walked down the slope to the grassy spot Janet had discovered.

The sun was warm and the air was moist and hazy. As they sat on the grass and ate their food

they could indistinctly see the next range of peaks across the valley. Most of the autumn color had already left the slopes: the aspen and vine maple had dropped their leaves. The few remaining alder leaves turned brown. But high on their mountainside they enjoyed a little balmy pocket, where the tag ends of indian summer seemed to linger. Before long Paul and Mavis sat on the edge of the grass, then lay down and fell asleep. Janet sat with her back against a rock and watched them; as they sipped their wine in the warm sun they all grew sleepy. One by one they lay back and fell asleep; soon only Nicholas and Janet were awake. Nicholas sat with his back against the same rock Janet sat against; he held a half-full glass of wine and blew smoke rings into the air. They glided out until their backspin slowed them; they collided on top of one another in midair. "Janet, what does it feel like to have that boy?" he asked offhandedly, not looking at her. Janet turned to look at him for a moment, slightly surprised at the question. She saw that his offhanded attitude was studied, but could not gather what was on his mind. She leaned back against the rock and shrugged her shoulders against it. "Are you thinking of getting one?" she asked.

Nicholas blew another smoke ring and shrugged.

She finally said, "I don't usually even think about it. He's completely a part of me."

Nicholas was silent for a moment. "I think Katrina is a little afraid of kids."

Janet laughed sarcastically. "Somehow I'm not surprised that you would come up with an observation like that."

Nicholas turned around, frowning. "That sounds like a barb."

Janet raised her finger to her lips and looked down to Katrina who lay on the grass. Katrina rolled over slightly and opened one eye. "It's only fair to say that I'm awake," she said.

Nicholas looked at her in dismay.

"Don't look so stricken; you're probably right," said Katrina, rolling completely over onto her back. "The trouble with Nicholas is that he's usually right," she said softly. "But he keeps his own counsel, so who'd ever know it."

"Not always," he said.

"Often enough to make life with you very dismal."

Nicholas said nothing.

"You see what I mean?" Katrina said softly, after a moment. "Not a sound. Who knows what things are barging around in there."

"There's nothing."

"God, I hope you're wrong. I'd hate to have wasted my time trying to second-guess you all these months."

Nicholas's face became red and flushed. He swallowed the last of his wine. "If that's all you've been trying to do, then you have wasted your time," he said.

Janet plucked the grass from the meadow nervously.

Katrina sighed and picked at the grass, putting bits of it onto the upturned end of her nose and gently blowing them off. Her gestures were deliberately offhand and calm; her eyes were shiny with malice. "I wonder what it would be like to live with someone you could actually talk to," she said. "Someone who actually understood what you were saying to them, and had something to say to you back."

Nicholas smiled bitterly. "I often wonder the same thing. But it would be so unaccustomed I don't think I'd know what to do."

Katrina sat up, her face red with anger. "You damned ass! You wouldn't have the slightest idea of what to do. How could you know? You've never communicated with another human being in your whole life."

Nicholas opened his mouth slightly as if to say something. His lower jaw quivered; his eyes were angry and confused. He looked at Janet and gave a short, apologetic laugh that was painful in its confusion and falsity. His face reddened again, and he got up and walked off towards the road, embarrassed and furious with his paralysis.

Janet smiled weakly at Katrina, her face reddening.

Katrina whispered, "I'm sorry..."

"No," said Janet quickly, putting her hand to Katrina's wrist. "I understand, I know how you feel."

"No, I shouldn't have done that." Her eyes followed Nicholas as he walked up the road.

William and Margaret began to stir in the grass below. Tiny wisps of cloud now blew over the sun, casting intermittent shadows on the grass. Each time a shadow passed, a chill entered the meadow air. William sat up and rubbed the top of his head. The warm sunlight and the wine combined to form a dull thickness under his skull. He blinked and lay one hand on Margaret. She rolled over and lay still for a moment, then sat up with a peevish expression. "Mushrooms?" she said.

William looked at her and said nothing.

Margaret crossed her legs under her on the grass and rubbed her face in her hands. "Well?" she said. "Is it time to go for mushrooms?"

Janet looked at Katrina, hesitating, then stood up, brushing the folds out of her pants with her hands. "Yes," she said, "We'd better get going." She walked down the slope to where Paul and Mavis lay sprawled on the grass, mouths open and eyes closed, sound asleep. She nudged each of them gently. "Come on, wake up," she said.

Katrina lit a cigarette and stood up. She looked around herself absently, then glanced up the road to where Nicholas stood. The sun passed behind a cloud and suddenly everything fell into chill shadow. She walked slowly down to where Janet and the children were. William and Margaret packed up the remains of the food and put them back in the car.

"Mushrooms?" said Paul, groggy with sleep. Mavis was nearly awake; both stumbled up the hill towards the car.

"We might as well fan out up the hill and keep going until we're pooped," said Janet.

Paul came up alongside of her, rubbing his eyes. "Which ones are poisonous, mom?" he asked.

"I don't want you or Mavis to pick any mushrooms by yourself. Stick close to me and tell me before you pick something. All right? Mavis?"

"All right."

"Well, let's go."

"Where's Nicholas?" Margaret asked, then spotted him a ways up the road by himself; by his attitude she knew something was wrong.

They walked across the road and scrambled up the rocky bank into the woods. "Come on, Nicholas," Margaret called.

"I'm coming," he said. And he leapt up the bank into the trees. Margaret sought him out and they walked together quietly. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing---my big mouth. And Katrina's so sensitive lately." He paused. "I told Janet that I thought Katrina's afraid of kids, and Katrina overheard. She---well, she let me have it."

"But what did you mean by saying that?"

"God, I don't know. I suppose I was talking off the top of my head, as usual."

"Well, why was she so sensitive? My god, I'm afraid of kids."

Nicholas stopped. He looked around to make sure that they were out of earshot. Then he sat down on a log. "I just think she doesn't know what to do with herself. I don't know. She doesn't talk to me half the time anyway. I'm not really sure what she wants of me, or expects."

Margaret looked dismayed. "Well, what are you going to do?"

Nicholas frowned. He didn't know how to answer that. Do two people ever know what they want to do together, other than be together? Aside from this it seemed to him that the rest was merely accretion, aimed at making the 'being together' something permanent and indissoluble. But he wasn't sure that Katrina even wanted to stay together. And amid the doubt and uncertainty he was left with a blank feeling of growing separation, not only with Katrina, but with himself. Because something that worked in love had changed him. He felt that he was becoming a stranger to himself; he could barely remember himself as he had been before Katrina.

Nicholas looked at Margaret in dismay. "I don't think it's a question of what we're going to do, because there's no 'we' in this. I want to stay together. But we're not at all on the same wavelength with this; it's really Katrina's decision."

Margaret looked at him scornfully. "It's up to her? You'll do nothing?"

"What should I do that I haven't already done?" he asked angrily.

"I don't know what you've already done," she said, her eyes still scornful. "But why don't you try, well, something drastic..."

"Drag her home by the hair?"

"That's the idea---not as a steady diet, of course."

He sat moodily, saying nothing for a moment. Then he said, "Do you know what it is, Margaret? We don't even have a relationship; it's all a mish-mash."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we were in love for a while and now it seems to be gone but we're so far into each other that for amusement we've begun to tinker with each other; or rather, she tinkers with me: I'd just like to write my music and come home to her, but she wants to examine my mind, and then examine the features of each of her old lovers as if each were still alive in some mental compartment of hers."

"God, Nicholas---you're jealous!"

"I don't think so. I don't care that she has memories or whatever. But I don't understand her need to confess. I thought at first that she simply had some old things that were bothering her and that I was somehow helping out by listening. But now it's my duty to listen, and when I object or complain I suddenly don't love her, or don't care." He paused thoughtfully for a moment. "And there's something frightening about these confessions. It's as if there's a whole world she's made in her mind, populated by old characters and repeated events. And because of her feelings for them they have endless significance and interest. But it's all in conflict with whatever it is we have." He sat on the log staring into the fog. It seemed to him that this world of old emotion and love was her secret creation, her own private edifice of music she begged to tell but that was too personal and unfathomable to live outside her mind. He could not discuss the resentment it caused because he felt it was the result of his love being deficient---of his not being strong enough to live without jealousy and fear. This was in spite of a small inner voice that told him his unwillingness to understand and live with himself as he was was absurd.

Margaret stood by unhappily, not knowing what to say. "Well," she finally said, "I guess we'd better get going."

"I'm sorry---this is all so ridiculous."

"Well, it's very complicated. I had no idea."

They began to walk up the hillside. The cloud mist swirled silently among the dark branches of the trees. They heard the distant voices of others farther up the hill in the forest. Margaret began to follow a small path that bent to the contour of the hill; soon Nicholas slipped off along another path. She heard the muffled crunch of his footfalls, saw his receding back as he slowly disappeared up the hill. In moments she was alone; the dark weight of the forest with its gloomy trunks and black branches settled into her mind with softly grasping fingers. The dead grayness wormed into her heart and weighed on her spirit. But as she walked along she saw a bright orange trumpet under a fern frond; it was a chanterelle as big as her fist. She examined it for a moment in curiosity. Its bright, cheerful color was a relief in the alien grayness that surrounded

her, but as she looked it over she realized that with the exception of its color, it was a thing that might as well have belonged to another universe. It rose from its stout, white column into an orange bewilderment of fluted buttresses. These held the thick meat of the thing, which at the top gave way to a deep indentation like the inside of a snow cone. This was filled with water, in which swam small floats of algae, bits of moss, and a wet crowd of cold, sluggish insects. Suddenly she could not bring herself to pick the thing, and although she had eaten many chanterelles, she could not now even imagine putting this thick, outlandish, inhabited organism into her mouth. She stuffed her sack back into her pocket and sat down on a log, looking down absently at the forest floor beneath her feet. Mosswort, horsetail, and clubmoss crowded over each other in a small open space beneath the ferns. Pieces of wood, decimated by fungus, damp rot, sow bugs, and innumerable crawling things, lay scattered about. She picked one up and squeezed it; it was like a sponge: a brownish water drop issued from it and splashed onto her pant leg. She dropped the wood and wiped her fingers on her pants. She was suddenly aware of the contrast between this miniature world of sprouting fungus and anonymous crawlers and the solitary world of the trees that climbed high above it and covered it with their shadows. The worlds seemed entirely separate, and yet when those big ones fell they were run inside out by the cannibal world under her feet. Each world seemed so private and hermetic that she could not imagine her place in them. But here she was: in the middle of it all.

Margaret got up and began walking further into the forest. Occasionally she looked under logs and ferns for more mushrooms. Besides the soft crunch and splash of her feet, there was not a sound to be heard; she was alone in the silence. In the distance, however, she saw Katrina's red sweater. The mist thickened as the clouds slowly rolled over the mountain, and before long even the red sweater disappeared.

It was a wonderfully eerie feeling to be swallowed up by the fog. One felt the mist swirling around one's face as the big trees slowly faded from view, lost in the enveloping white. It was a white, soundless world, but beneath it all one could feel a pervasive movement that advanced in cadenced intervals, that followed one's footsteps and somehow made them harmonize with little wind gusts, rasping bark, and the twirling fall of twigs. Katrina wandered through this buried music like a scattering of grace notes. She walked slowly along a fallen log. Her fingers tingled with the bite of the cold, damp air; she could feel her cheeks turning red. She pulled her sweater around herself tightly and put one hand in her pocket. The other hand clutched the bag full of mushrooms. She had found many of several kinds: boletus, chanterelles, chicken of the woods; amongst them was a large puffball. As she walked her footsteps slowed and finally she stopped altogether on the log. For some time now she had been unable to see anyone, but now she could not hear anyone either. She looked around into the swirling whiteness at the dark shapes of the silent trees. She set her sack down and cupped her hands to her mouth. "Nicholas!" she called. Her voice fell flat in the dead fog. She turned in the opposite direction. "Nicholas!" But she heard no answer. She sighed and sat down on the log. She recalled the ridiculous argument they'd had and felt miserable: now she was lost and calling for his help.

He said that she was afraid of children! Even as she recalled this she felt a giant fear sweep through her that left her weak, her skin crawling. Such a huge fear: but it wasn't of children! How could she be afraid of that? Because that was just another of her unspoken secrets, another of the things never talked about: in her inner confusion and emptiness the thought of her own child was like a little candle flame, throwing light into every corner of her. And yet she could not think of it without the gust of fear following close behind. The gust came from clean outside of

her, from this place in which she continually sat: the world of dead whiteness and vicious circles. In all of its fecundity, amidst all the proliferations and excesses, it was a childless place; she could not accept her own place in it---where on earth would her child sit?

Katrina sat on the cold, wet log, scraping up her thoughts on this subject she detested and loved. It led to another aspect of her present quandary: she filled her life with men but denied herself a child. How empty this life had become! Even her passion had become something unfamiliar to her. Somehow it had defied all she knew about education: the more she pursued and experienced it, the less understandable it became. And now, with she and Nicholas: what would become of that? She had been so certain that there was something he had for her, something she could use, but where was this thing? Certainly, there was something missing between them, but what? She thought that it was a certain passion or feeling that she could not seem to grasp in their relations. He was closed to her. It was like coming to a house in the thirsty desert, finding the door open and walking through the rooms, but discovering eventually that the well was hidden away somewhere, not to be found. She did not doubt that Nicholas possessed a well, but it had not been offered to her.

She felt overwhelmed by self-pity and tears came into her eyes. Why hadn't he offered her his love? She had examined him from every angle, at every side. But she felt nothing. Whatever he felt was still inside of him somewhere, where she couldn't get at it. And without it she didn't think that she could stay with him much longer. Babies! she suddenly thought, and the thought was like loud, bitter laughter. Who could take care of babies when one couldn't take care of one's self? The tears now came freely into her eyes and coursed down her face. Afraid of babies! She got up from the log and brushed her pants off. The accusation had taken hold of her mind and she couldn't let it go. Afraid---Nicholas was not really the person to be accusing others of fear. He, who cast a screen over the world before daring to look at it. And when his little glimpse of the world had been taken, what did he do? He reduced it to notes. He tried to reduce it, that is: but the world is not so small as that. She wiped the tears from her face and began to wander back in the direction she'd come from. But what direction was that? The fog had grown so thick that she couldn't see more than twenty feet in any direction. She sighed and sat back down on the log, upset and confused. Why was she all alone? She took several deep breaths and tried to empty her mind. She picked up the sack of mushrooms and began to poke through it; she arranged the mushrooms by type on the log next to her: the morels, the boletuses, the chanterelles... The morels with their convolutions resembled brains, and the spongy undersides of the boletuses were lungs. The chanterelles were fluted trumpets, and the puffball was exactly that---a rough sphere, pure white. But she suddenly saw that the puffball looked rather peculiar; could she have mistaken it for something else? She felt a distracted concern as she turned it over. As she examined its base her prying fingers broke through a thin veil, and to her dismay she saw a thick ring and pure white gills beneath. It was a destroying angel. In her carelessness she had mistaken the deadliest for the most harmless, and she knew that by now it had contaminated everything else she had picked. She slowly swept everything from the log with the back of her forearm.

Katrina got up and began to walk. In the absence of landmarks, she headed steadily down. The fog settled in more thickly, concealing everything but the slope of the land. But in this funny, shrouded world even the slope of the land could deceive, and where you went down you could find yourself suddenly traveling up. Where you seemed to be in a flat meadow a deep gulch might open up. The soundlessness of such a place is terrifying, and if only to hear the sound of a voice, Katrina occasionally called out to Nicholas. But she heard no answer. At times she

thought she heard other voices away in the woods, calling to one another, but they were too dead and distant to recognize. It also seemed to her that she could sometimes hear people walking somewhere nearby, passing her by in the woods. And she suddenly had a strange idea that everyone else might be in the same predicament as she; that they had all wandered off by themselves into the woods and the fog had overtaken them unawares, that all searching for mushrooms had long since stopped, and that the dead air was now filled with their echoless voices, calling to one another and never answering. She stopped walking and stood dead-still, straining her ears and as if out of a dream she heard the distant, muffled voices of her friends. She discovered that her strange idea was true. For the rest of the day Katrina and each of her solitary friends strained their ears for these lost sounds of each other's voices. They wandered through the woods in ones and twos searching and calling to each other in the fog. And it was only after many hours that they eventually found themselves together again, like wandering planets slowly drawn together by an unspoken, mutual attraction.