

Wisp of Nature

In Which Margaret Despairs Over Losing Her Husband, and Seeks the Consolation of Her Old Friend Nicholas.

For more than a hundred miles now the lonesome woods lay shaggy on the lapping water as the little boat steamed up the coast towards Minstrel Island. Once the clouds cleared briefly in the east and a crowd of stupendous mountains appeared, unreal in their icy harshness and steepness. But mostly there was only the quietly lapping water and the soft disquieting woods. The little boat steamed north through the midst of it and made each scheduled stop.

Margaret sat in the passenger cabin next to a window and watched the mountainsides roll slowly past. Now and then she doodled in the sketchbook on her lap. The sketches were little hill-shaped abstractions, arranged in no particular order; she gazed at them absently as she played over their shapes in her mind. Their shapes were the shapes of the innumerable little waves that passed the boat as it passed over the water; their shapes were the endless backs of islands that bristled, lumpy and hunchbacked, from the water through which they passed. Their shapes were the pendulous bottoms of clouds that passed over the water and the islands in every direction. All of these shapes conformed to the rise and fall of the little humps she doodled on paper again and again. She absently thought of her art and the fact that she now headed farther than ever from its normal audience; viewing her strange little hills she toyed with the thought that perhaps the wilderness itself were an audience, and that her doodled hills were its behest.

The wilderness was not as empty as her old farmhouse on the tideflats. An empty house is a hidden sea where the waves roll over voids of timeless water. One day passes to the next; the same windows pass the day's light into the same rooms. The slow seasons alter the lights' track slightly but perceptibly, and the light itself becomes a wave that rolls from year to year. The kitchen cupboards and baskets, the papers on tables, the rough lumps of wood scattered across the porch and yard were merely the surface flotsam; they crested and troughed in the rolling mind of the house.

The wilderness also crested and rode on this wave. But its flotsam was living and populous; the islands and mountains and forests were a tumult at the opposite pole from Margaret's empty house. Each year her little northern world became smaller and her sense of this wilderness grew. When Willie left, the darkness of this world grew deeper and deeper; it haunted her house and even her art began to change from a friend to a sly adversary that promised fulfillment and understanding but demanded a devotion that hollowed her. It surprised her that without Willie around there was little love in her art; it became a stubbornness that held the world away. As the months passed on Willie called now and again. He apologized. He wanted her to move to Chicago. But the little stubbornness in her found pleasure in his distant pleading after the betrayal; it was a smiling little stubbornness that painted over the secret place where a snapping rage chewed freely under the art and the silence. And so between her painting and the occasional phone calls, she sat in the evenings on the farmhouse porch and watched the sunlight pass down the backs of the snowy peaks. She watched the light pass from pink to purple, and saw the deep blue glacial ice appear and shine from under the mountains' skin. In the darkness the porch quietly gathered a rimy skin of ice and Margaret's breath revealed itself as thin wisps on the air.

She often thought of Nicholas. When she looked north into the mountains she thought of him and

his little island somewhere in the boondocks. She pictured him sitting on a porch rather like hers, playing the flute. The pan pipes. She wasn't sure what he would be playing but she could hear the music piping away in the woods, all alone. The little notes would float among the woods like moths, where they would be seen for a while then vanish out in the air. Perhaps she was one of those notes. She had begun strong enough, but as she traveled north she felt her steam go out, until she felt as if she too would vanish in the air. Margaret looked down at the nervous doodles scattered across her pad and thought that it might be desirable to vanish. She could become part of the mist that penetrated the forests and mountains all around. She would be omnipresent, and know the lives of bugs and secret things that, like her, had vanished in the air. In this community she would learn the secret lives of those that remained. She would penetrate their lives as only air could penetrate; like a spirit, she could enter them as they breathed and know the most hidden corners of their selves. And eventually, perhaps she would end her solitary flutterings and become part of the larger world of which the air and the selves that breathed it were only the fingers and toes.

What was this larger world? She looked out across the lapping water and low islands, around the tiny cabin where she sat, down at the open book in her lap. She set her pencil down and opened her hand in dumb wonder, turning it over to see the veins stand out, the tendons jump as her fingers flexed. She saw the innumerable little hairs on her hand sprout from indentations so numerous that her skin became a cratered prairie seen from a great altitude, with prairie mounds and channels that were mountains of flesh, with hills that were thrusting knuckles, an isthmus a wrist, an ocean of air and a calm, monstrous mind that stood above and viewed this world and turned it left and right, and another mind yet larger that viewed and turned and smiled, and one larger still that laughed with narrowed eyes. The hair stood up on the back of Margaret's neck and gooseflesh spread down her back. She turned to the window again but this too was a nightmare: black water and trees become frightful toothpicks and splinters under a smiling, roiling sky. Margaret shut her eyes and cast about frantically in her mind, suddenly lost and afraid of the unexpected pictures that assaulted her eyes.

When she opened her eyes again she saw her hands clenched around the sketchbook in her lap and heard the pulse of the boat's motor. She slowly raised her eyes from her hands to the window, and saw the green forest rolling by under the broken sky. It was all quite peaceful and calm, and gave no clue to the confused fear that heaved so strongly through her. She closed her eyes again and prayed. "God, what am I doing here?" She whispered it aloud. What was she doing here; why was her mind so feverish? She was so lonely! The months alone in the little farmhouse on the tideflats, with only the mountains to accompany her, had made her feel like a wisp of nature, like the little fogbank that moves over streams on fall mornings. Her damp and chilly life! There was no hope, no heart in it anymore. Willie was gone.

Margaret sat by the window and thought of how her fear had been realized after all; that she now passed aimlessly from place to place, that it amounted to nothing. Her hilly doodles on the page that expressed---what? A passing impulse, the mountains around her? What moved her hand to render these particular shapes? She looked at them and felt no purpose, no motive. They were simply accretions, like clothes; there was no trace of her personality in them.

And so she sat in her seat and waited for the boat to make its rounds up the coast. The seat and the deck boards shook from the work of the engine, whose pounding roar filled the cabin and the air around the boat. In the seat ahead of Margaret an elderly couple dozed; in front of them were

three dirty mail sacks and a crate of soda pop; a wrinkled calendar was nailed to the wall. Next to it the forward cabin window framed two ship's hands who talked and smoked and gestured near a large coil of rope; she heard the distant shouts of their voices though the walls and the pounding engine. And beyond this tiny island of noise and fume and pitch moved the endless range of water and islands and mountains that seemed huge and calm beyond time and reckoning.

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Margaret woke sharp when the boat thumped the dock and the deep squeak of the wood against rubber bumpers ground up through the boat's walls. She blinked stupidly and fumbled for the book in her lap. She had somehow missed the landing after all; for miles she had dozed, but felt the boat slow and turn as it maneuvered the maze of passages to Minstrel Island. She cracked an eye now and again, but had evidently drifted off entirely because now they were here. She blinked again and stretched her legs out in front of her. Goodness, she was stiff! She looked out the window. It was dusk. How in the world was she ever going to find Nicholas' place in the dark? She would have to find a phone and give him a call, assuming he was even home. Of course she hadn't bothered to let him know she was coming.

Margaret picked up her knapsack and duffel and stepped awkwardly out of the cabin to the deck. The boat was attached to the dock via a short, railed gangplank; one of the crewmen nodded briefly to her as she filed off the boat to the dock. Well, she was here. She stood on the dock for a moment, uncertain of what to do next. It dawned on her that there was really nothing here. There was this dock, which seemed to be a gas dock as there was a small outbuilding on it with gas pumps. There was a graveled area where the dock met the shore, and here were three small wood buildings, one of which might be a little store of some sort. The other two buildings looked quite vacant and were possibly storage sheds. Aside from the boat hands, there was a person at the gas dock. And that was it. The store looked like there might be people in it. Other than that she was alone.

The rest of the island, as far as she could see, was a solid mass of black firs that crowded right to the edge of the water and entirely hemmed the little settlement at the dock. In the dusk these woods seemed especially black and impenetrable, and she felt a wormy uneasiness begin to flutter in her belly.

Margaret slowly walked up the dock to the gas pumps. The man at the pump was talking quietly with one of the boat hands; they nodded to Margaret indifferently as she approached, which again caused her to hesitate and then to continue walking up the dock to what appeared to be the store. She stepped off the wood dock to the gravel and crunched up the road. As she walked she could now see lights here and there back in the trees; perhaps one of them was Nicholas' and it would not be so long a walk after all. She set her duffel down on the porch of the store and walked in the door. It was indeed a small store; there were wooden shelves with packages of soap, cereals, hardware, and other odds and ends. But there was no one here; although soon she heard footsteps and a woman walked in from another room.

"Hello," said Margaret. "I'm looking for the Vanderzee place."

"Goodness, did you just get in off the boat?"

Margaret nodded. "It's a long ride from Vancouver."

"And on the pathetic mail boat no less. That's a two-day ride."

"I suppose it could've been that long. It feels like a month."

"You're here to see Nicholas? At the Vanderzee place?"

"Yes. Just dropping by for a couple of days."

The woman frowned. "Are you his friend?"

"Yes. I'm an old friend."

"Just staying for a couple of days?"

"Well, yes. Maybe not even that if he's not around."

"Oh he's around somewhere. It's a small island and he hasn't left, so he is there. More than likely he's sitting out in the woods, which is not something we tend to do here. Although he may have jumped off a cliff, or fallen off, and we wouldn't necessarily know all at once."

Margaret frowned. "How will I get to the place? Is it far?"

"Oh no; it's a mile or so up the east road. You could walk since he's not coming to get you, or if you want to wait a while Mike will probably give you a ride when he gets back."

Margaret hesitated. "It's really my fault for dropping by like this; if he'd known I was coming he'd have been here, I'm sure. I should have written; he doesn't have a phone."

The woman shook her head. "You certainly went to some trouble just to drop by. The only way here is a gasboat or a float plane. It's not on your way to the store."

Margaret smiled. "It does seem a bit silly. How many people live here?"

"There's about ten of us; a couple of kids. Not a big place."

"No, but it seems very pretty. It must be beautiful in the daylight."

The woman shrugged noncommittally.

Pause.

Margaret finally said, "I suppose I'll walk since it's not too far."

The woman nodded. "It's a pleasant walk. Dusk lasts a long time in this season. It won't be dark for a while."

Margaret smiled. "Well, so long."

"Take the east road; that's to your left as you leave the store. The road ends at the Vanderzee place."

"Thanks." Margaret walked out the door and bent to adjust the strap on her duffel, then picked it up and slung it over her shoulder. She started down the east road.

The gravel road made a dim gray line ahead of her that was framed by the blackness of the forest on either side. She counted three lights in the woods in the vicinity of the store; after that it was thoroughly dark. All she could hear was the sound of her feet crunching the gravel as she walked. Her eyes slowly became accustomed to the dusk, and after a few minutes the woods did not seem so black after all. They were lonely woods, but somehow they were not empty. There was a life in them, and as she walked up the little road, the thought of that life was chilling to her. "I'm going to give myself the spooks," she said quietly. She began to whistle softly. The sound quickly matched the cadence of her steps; she tried to imagine that it was cheerful sound, but all she could imagine was the attention she drew to herself. She suddenly stopped whistling and walking and turned around. She saw that she had been walking steadily uphill, because the road wound down through the woods. From here she could see no lights at all, and the silence was absolute. She turned very slowly around, listening to each stone turn under her feet as she moved, and began walking up the road again.

The road climbed steadily. She came to a sharp bend in the road where the trees opened up to a vista of islands and water and distant mountains through the clouds, all smoke-gray and lavender in the deep dusk. But around this bend the road became narrower as it moved towards the interior of the island; the trees crowded in more closely and soon even the sky disappeared from view. Margaret stumbled along the road, which seemed to become rougher as well. She plodded along up the dark road for what seemed like a very long time, until finally she saw a light in the woods. She picked up her walking pace and soon the road opened into a little clearing with a large house and outbuildings; lights shone from inside the house. "This has to be the place," she muttered, "But where is he?" She walked hesitantly across the clearing and approached the house warily. But she hadn't taken more than a couple of steps when she heard a clear voice from the woods: "Before you go any further you had better say what's in the bags."

Margaret stopped quickly and looked around for the voice. "These are just my clothes in the bag," she said. Then she heard footsteps approaching from out of the woods, and saw a dark figure moving. The voice said, "I must be dreaming. Certainly you can't be Margaret, carrying clothes around in the woods at night."

"Yes, it's me! I just dropped by for a visit."

"Good God, Margaret, you're a bolt from the blue!" Nicholas walked up, slung the bags off her shoulders and gave her a big hug. He pounded her on the back enthusiastically. "You scared the hell out of me!"

"Yes, I've been scaring myself too, all the way up the road. Boy, am I glad to see you."

Nicholas shook his head dumbly. "I am absolutely bowled over that you're here. What could you be thinking of, coming all the way up here like this?"

Margaret smiled and laughed and hugged him again. "Oh, who knows," she said.

Nicholas picked up her bags and said, "Let's go in the house. You must be cold."

"No, it's not really cold at all. I thought it would be much colder but it's not. It's rather balmy, actually."

"I'm still having trouble believing that you're here. What did you do, come up on the mail boat?"

"Yes. It took forever, but the scenery was very wild, when you could see it through the clouds."

They walked up the steps into the house. Margaret looked around at the bare little hall with the kitchen off to one side and a large room at the end of it. They walked into the large room, which appeared to be a living room but was exceptionally austere: there was a long sofa and a little bare end table, a pallet piled with wood, and a wood burning stove. Two bare bulbs in the ceiling lit the room. It had a distinctly un-lived-in appearance.

Nicholas dumped her bags in a corner. "Sit down. Do you want some coffee or something?"

"Yes, I'd like some coffee."

Nicholas looked around the room for moment, then walked over to the wood pallet and grabbed a log, fed it into the wood stove. Margaret sat down on the sofa and watched him fiddle with the stove. "I hope you have room for me for a couple of days. I know it's crazy to just show up like this, but I got this wild hare. It's nuts, I know."

"No, there's lots of room here. There's too much room! And no one ever visits me out here; it's the end of the earth. Let me get the coffee; I'll be right back."

He walked back into the kitchen where Margaret could hear him splashing around, making the coffee. She looked around the room again. It was not merely un-lived in, it was uncared for. It had a haphazard appearance, as if it had never received his direct attention, and was simply an afterthought. The firewood was heaped carelessly on the pallet, which itself belonged in a warehouse, not a living room. The floor around the stove was littered with bits of tree bark and wood slivers. This sofa that she sat on---it was something less than shabby. But of course Nicholas was a long way from a furniture store. Margaret relaxed and sighed, and unbuttoned the front of her coat. It was a great relief to simply sit in the same house with a friend.

Nicholas came back into the room and sat down across from her on the sofa. He lit a cigarette and settled back. "Now tell me," he said, "What put you on a boat here?"

Margaret shook her head. "I don't know. I just couldn't take that old farmhouse anymore."

"William never came back?"

"No. He's called a couple of times and succeeded in infuriating me."

"But he wants to come back?"

"I suppose he does, after a fashion."

Pause.

Margaret said, "But the real thing I'd like to know is what you are doing up here. What have you done with your life?"

Nicholas shrugged and smiled. "As you see," he said, gesturing at the room. "I seem to be becoming one with the woodwork."

"Like a knot hole?"

"Yes, something like that."

"How unusual." She wrinkled her nose as if at a bad smell.

Nicholas laughed. "I can't believe I'm sitting in the same room with Margaret from another world. I suppose it hasn't been that long but Fairhaven does seem like a different planet after living up here a while."

"It seems to me that this is the different world. I had imagined this place but until you actually take a boat up the coast you have no notion of how far it is from anything. There's just water and trees."

"There're critters, too. And bugs."

Margaret settled back into the cushions and sighed. "But Nicholas, it's like my little farmhouse---it's all empty, as crowded as it may be. There's just no heart in it."

"You seem pretty blue. Are you having a hard time of it, with Willie gone and all?"

Margaret nodded. She felt her heart coming up into her throat and swallowed hard. In spite of herself tears brimmed in her eyes and rilled slowly down her cheeks. She began to cry.

Nicholas said, "I'm sorry. I know what it's like to be lonesome, believe me."

Pause.

Margaret pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and dried her face, blew her nose. "God, Nicholas. What's happened to me. I've become a basket case---everything seems so bleak to me, and I'm ready to cry at the drop of a hat. My painting is all that's left, and that's shaky too. Damn that Willie!"

Nicholas frowned. "But he seems to want to come back."

"No, he doesn't want to come back here. He hates it here. He wants me to go traipsing back to Chicago, now that his lark has gone sour. How can I do that? How can I just go waltzing back? He left me. He went off in an ordinary way and then didn't come back---I didn't know if he were dead, gone, spirited off, or what. His childishness is so infuriating that I am beside myself."

"But he didn't betray you sexually."

Margaret's face hardened and she glared at him. "I don't know what he has or hasn't done. But betrayal is betrayal and sex has nothing to do with it. And I'm not at all ready to go running back now that he's got himself all lonesome and hang-doggish."

"Well, I suppose I can understand that."

Margaret stared at Nicholas. "Can you really?"

"I think so. But if you have to look at it that way, then you've betrayed him too, even though he may not know it yet."

"If you're referring to our relations, then I can assure you it would never have happened if he hadn't left."

"But as you said, betrayal is betrayal."

"He should never have left!"

"I know he shouldn't have. But there might have been a reason for his leaving as strong as your reason for betraying him. If you can forgive your own betrayal so easily maybe you can forgive his."

Margaret stared emptily at Nicholas for a long moment; her face began to soften. She finally said, "I'm sorry for being this way. You're right. I don't know that I can forgive him, and I know it's wrong, but I've never forgiven myself either."

Nicholas sat awkwardly in silence, then said, "I think the coffee's ready." He got up to get the coffee.

Margaret stared into the room. She felt a hollowness in herself that swallowed all of her: her feelings, her motivation, her mind. Forgiveness? Forgiveness was for people on speaking terms, and she was not speaking to Willie. But what was becoming equally clear was that she was not on speaking terms with herself. She skirted certain things in her mind quite easily, and then they did not exist. But these things were like bones that a dog buries: they were hidden, not forgotten, and in the back of her mind she always knew where to dig one up when she wanted a sniff of it. The dull fury she felt, pricked by Nicholas's unwelcome observations, attested to the propriety of these buried parts of her mind.

Nicholas came back into the room with coffee. He sat down across from her on the sofa and lit another cigarette. "Well," he said, "For not having seen you for months and months we are certainly jumping right into the muck of it."

Margaret nodded. "Yes, but we're always in the muck; we're just cavorting where we usually slog, and you can't cavort without noticing that you're in up to the waist."

"Yes, that's true. You know, Margaret, it occurs to me that you ought to just bury the past and take up with me, now that you're here."

"What a caddish suggestion! I came here as a friend, for a little friendly commiseration, and you try to persuade me to shack up with you! Which means pet you and have sex with you; God what a selfish bum! Is this all you've been doing up here, idling and fantasizing?"

"It's pathetic, but that's all."

"I have no doubt you're in desperate need of a woman's company."

Nicholas laughed. "It's a dog's life up here all alone. But, it seems that Katrina is showing her ugly face again."

"No!"

"Yes, she's going to show up for a visit in a week or so. I would have been pleased once but that's all gone now."

"Then why does she bother to visit you?"

"Oh, she's at loose ends as usual. She managed to get herself pregnant and now she's on maternity leave or some such. At any rate she's unattached and has some time to kill."

"God, how casual you sound! You're a cold fish if I ever saw one. Is it your child?"

"No; I haven't seen her for over a year."

Margaret shook her head and frowned. "We are the most pathetic creatures on the face of the earth. We can't seem to do anything right."

Pause.

Nicholas said, "Margaret, do you think we love one another?"

"You and I?"

"Yes, but any of us; you and I, you and Willie, Katrina and I."

Margaret frowned. "Our lives are such disasters. We might, I guess, but our love is like picking flowers as you fall off a cliff, you know, we are so distracted by the fall that our love is all rush and frustration."

Nicholas nodded. "I think that's more or less the way it is. By God, that's a long way from love isn't it?"

"Yes."

Nicholas stared thoughtfully into the room. "I've been up here for months trying to calm down and think straight about my life without distractions, but when the distractions are gone I'm left to face the biggest distraction of all, which is this sense of falling off a cliff, as you put it. And then it gets to the point that you'll do anything to stop that horrendous sensation."

"Yes. Well, not anything."

"I don't know. Look at poor Austin."

Margaret shook her head vigorously. "You're getting too carried away by my little notion. Certainly there's more to life than a horrendous falling sensation."

"Yes; there's also that horrendous "hitting-the-ground" sensation."

"What a cheery thing to say. My blue funk feels like sunshine alongside your horrid outlook."

"You always were a cheery person. I don't think I like it much when you're down in the dumps; I always counted on you to buck me up and I'm too self-centered to reciprocate."

"You could reciprocate by showing me where I could take a shower and then sleep off that boat ride."

"I can be that much of a host." He stood up and stretched. "I think we do love one another, Margaret. It may be a tentative, knock-kneed sort of love but it's love anyhow."

"I hope with all my heart you're right."

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Margaret awoke several times before turning over on her back and looking up into the room. Each time the light had changed by increments; first it was dead night in the room, then deep gray, then the ruddy gray of the hour before dawn, and finally the slow lightening of day as it spread over the island.

There was no heat in the bedroom and it was frosty cold. Margaret pulled the quilt around her shoulders and swiveled her head slightly as she looked around the room. Nicholas had scrounged the house for spare sheets and blankets but in the end remade his own bed for Margaret and took a sleeping bag for himself. The bed was an old iron frame with springs and a single mattress; it squeaked slightly whenever she moved. Now as she lay in the bed, she tested this by flexing her hips rhythmically against the mattress. The springs squeaked with each flex of her hips. At the corner of her vision she could see the brown metal tube of the frame; she reached up with her finger and flicked it. It made a hollow, bell-like sound.

Margaret buried her head down into the pillow. Well, here she was. What now? Somewhere in the house she could hear the faint sounds of footsteps and kitchen pans. She sniffed the air. There was only the warm smell of her skin and the sheets. She shifted down further into the bed and pulled the quilt over her head. She closed her eyes and began to imagine that she was back at the farmhouse in Fairhaven; Willie was asleep beside her. In her mind she saw their room and the door at the end of it, the stairs down to the kitchen, the back porch littered with alder rounds and the remains of stumps. Willie sleeping like a bear along side of her, all dead weight and heavy breathing. She would nudge him in the ribs but it was like nudging a big sack of rocks. And so she would roll out of bed into the freezing room and put on her sweatpants, slippers, and coat; and stumble down the stairs to the kitchen and feed wood to the stove, make coffee; stand in the warm room and look out the kitchen window towards the barn and tide flats beyond. And after a few minutes the floorboards upstairs would thump and creak; the house would shake with the footsteps down the stairs; and Willie would stumble through the door into the kitchen, sit down on a chair, and rub the top of his head with his hand. "It's magnificent," he would say. And Margaret would pour him a cup of coffee.

Now Margaret imagined the big barn behind the house. The big doors would be opened, held to the side of the barn with stones. As you walked through the turf through the door you see Margaret and William standing at their canvases. Margaret is standing with one foot on a stone, three brushes stuck in one fist, the other hand stuck in a coat pocket. Four feet away William adds highlights to an immense forest that bristles in wild light under mountains; he frowns terribly as he paints, as if he were delivering vengeance to an enemy. It is clear that neither William nor Margaret are aware of the other's presence. The light is pearly and diffuse and shines from out of the north, illuminating the inside of the barn and the canvases. Little by little the light begins to go from the barn. The sky outside fills with dark, heavy clouds that roll in from the sound. Fat raindrops spatter the ground. Margaret turns from her work to watch the dark clouds roll amidst the rain, the trees twist and shake in the blustery wind. William looks up from his work and smiles at her. "Take a walk, Margaret," he says. "I'm going to finish here but you go on ahead." Margaret hesitates but finally says "Ok, Willie." She takes up her rain jacket and hat strolls over the turf of their yard to the edge of the bluff and descends.

It's a fine day for a walk. She descends the bluff to the shore of the tidelands and walks slowly north along the sound. Soon she is all alone. The rain and bluster buffet her coat and hair and her feet squish through the muck and shingle along the shore. She stops to look back but she can no longer see the bluff or the farmhouse through the rainy mist. She turns and continues walking north. She perceives an indistinct dark mass in the distance ahead of her, faintly at first, but growing darker and blacker the farther she walks. Soon the dark mass resolves itself as the outskirts of a forest. She stops here nervously, unwilling to enter the woods. And as she stands in her hesitation, she perceives a slight movement of the grass far ahead of her. Something is approaching her from out of the woods. After watching it travel slowly for a long moment, she sees through the grass that it seems to be a cat; a large, dark cat with green eyes. But she knows it is no cat; it is a stealer of souls.

Margaret's eyes opened and she pulled the quilt from over her head. The gray morning light filled the room; now she could smell bacon cooking. She rolled over onto her back and waited until her heart slowed down and she was breathing normally. She stared up at the ceiling. "God," she whispered. "What am I going to do?" She lay on her back and blinked. Finally she rolled out of bed and fetched her pants off the chair. She put on her pants and sweater, pulled on her socks and shoes. She sat on the edge of the bed with her head in her hands, then got up to look for Nicholas.

* * * *

"I thought we could take a walk around the island; show you the sights, such as they are."

"It's beautiful everywhere you look."

"Do you have your sketchpad?"

"Oh, yes."

Margaret and Nicholas walked together on the trail that led south from the house. Margaret fished through her shoulder bag as she walked; Nicholas looked mildly around and tapped the ground with his walking stick. The trail led gently down through a passage of sedge flanked by masses of devil's club and spruce; as the forest closed in the devil's club gave way to moss and fallen logs.

"I hope you know these woods," Margaret said. "It's getting mighty dark in here."

"I know them well enough. I've got plenty of time to explore and I've combed the whole island at one time or another."

"With all this time to explore, what's happened to your music?"

"Nothing's happened to it. I write more of it now than I ever have."

"Well, do you play it, or just stick it in a binder or something?"

"I just stick it in a binder or something," he laughed.

"Is it my imagination, or have you lost your high seriousness about life?"

"I think it's your imagination. Unless you just mean that living alone up here has made me a little

squirrelly."

Margaret frowned. "Maybe that's what I mean."

"Well even so, I don't feel particularly squirrelly. But I did have a pretty good case of the screaming meemees the first couple of months. A "stranded on a desert island" sort of feeling."

"Yes, I can imagine that."

Pause.

Margaret said, "Why are you having Katrina up here if you don't care for her any more?"

"I suppose I really do care for her after all. Or maybe I'm fooling myself and I just crave a warm body around the place."

"What doubletalk! Don't you know your own mind?"

"I'm not so sure I know the difference between love of others and love of self anymore. I mean as a practical distinction."

"If you can't tell the difference then you love only yourself."

"Yes, but it seems to me that even people who claim to love others usually act out of a hidden self interest, and serve themselves in spite of appearances."

"That seems so cynical! If that's true, then no one really loves---we're fooling ourselves."

"It does seem cynical. Maybe I'm wrong."

Margaret looked at the ground in front of her feet as they walked. "But it does account for my mixed feelings about Willie. It's my own wounded feelings that concern me, not the how or why of his actions as he sees them."

Nicholas turned to look at Margaret and smiled. "By God you are a rare bird. I don't think Katrina could possibly look at herself in those terms."

"What nonsense! I'm sure she can. She just can't act differently, and neither can I. Look at the state I'm in."

"Well. That's what I mean."

They walked along in silence for a moment. Ahead of them the forest opened up around the head of a bluff; an ocean channel and more islands lay beyond. Blue sky poked here and there through the clouds, and shafts of sunlight played down. They slowly walked up to the head of the bluff and watched the birds pass back and forth across the sea cliffs.

Margaret said, "There's such extravagance here. It's everywhere you look."

"Yes."

"Is this what you brought me to see?"

"Oh, it's just a little stop along the way. I thought we'd head east down to the shore and poke

through the village site."

"A village!"

"Well, there's hardly anything there. It's an old Indian site. A Kwakiutl town. It's mostly old boards and a few carvings. There's a midden on the beach---that's a garbage dump; interesting garbage, though."

"Goodness. I should have brought my camera."

"It's not very photogenic, I'm afraid; but then I'm not a photographer so what would I know."

"Where is it? Can we see it from here?"

"No; it's around that point to the east. There's a little bay capped by an island. You can see the top of the island over the point."

"It looks very snug down there."

"Yes."

They began to walk down the east side of the bluff and headed towards the point of land and the Indian town.

Margaret said, "Nicholas, have you ever felt that something has robbed you of your life?"

Nicholas frowned. "Something?"

"Well, that's the sense of it. I suppose it could be something in you, but for me it feels as if something outside myself has done the stealing."

"What do you mean? An evil spirit?"

"That sounds silly, but something like that, yes."

"I'm not really sure what you mean, but no."

"What I mean is that this business of love or the lack of it that we were talking about is at the center of our lives, but we are so easily talked out of it. Our reasons always sound convincing---we're betrayed, we shouldn't be doormats, and so on, but at the end of that reasoning we're isolated and then dead. We've dogged ourselves out of the herd, then the wolves get us."

"But look at this splendid isolation! God, it's better than living in a herd, which describes the normal run of "company" you get! What are a few wolves!"

"I'm not talking about the normal run of company---I'm talking about the people you love, that you've chosen or have chosen you. These are who you've rejected, this is the love you're talked out of."

Pause.

Nicholas said, "It was Katrina that left me."

"But look where you are; you've completely isolated yourself! You've done more than reject love; you've rejected the world."

"But all this extravagance you've been raving about, this beauty around us; isn't this the world? And have I really rejected it?"

"This is the world, but you have the luxury of limiting your experience of it; you don't have to live in it as it is. You can admire it without qualification because you don't have to sleep in the cold and the rain. You have a view of the world you accept, but as for the rest, I think you do reject it, or ignore it at any rate."

"And Katrina is in there with the stuff I've rejected."

"Yes."

"I feel small and rather smelly in that picture. What it boils down to is that I'm inadequate, which I overcome with dishonesty, and am therefore contemptible as well."

Margaret laughed. "It does sound rather disgusting and hopeless. But if it's true then I do the same thing; everyone does. If we didn't filter the world we couldn't hope to understand it; it would be too much for us. You could never make sense of the world as it really is."

"But after all the filtering and ignorance, do we really understand anything?"

"Well, that's the point. What I'm getting at is that love seems to be at the center of it, and if you cut that out then all the rest will go sooner or later. And love is exactly what you and I seem to flirt with eliminating from our lives."

Nicholas frowned. "That may be true of me. But you came here to see me, not a desert island."

"Yes, but it's a last ditch effort. I hate Willie for leaving me, and I want to keep hating him. Loving him seems to be unjust and foolish. But what's left when the love's gone? Even hatred has no meaning."

"And you are being robbed of life, and your thief's tool is this reasoning that discards love?"

"Something like that. Yes."

"It sounds very diabolical. Like a conspiracy."

"Oh, Nicholas... Damn you. Can't you take anything seriously?"

Nicholas laughed. "Yes, I can. But I lack the proper perspective here. Look." He pointed through the trees. Below them was the crescent of a little bay fringed with beach; a tree-shagged island stood offshore. "There's our village."

"Where?"

"There's not much to see. The village is right below us, on the west side of the bay. Those depressions in the ground are old house foundations. The Indians build huge wooden houses, but they've all rotted away. There are a couple of roof beams left down there and a few boards."

"Where did everyone go?"

"I think it was smallpox that killed most of them; there were too few left to make a go of it in the villages, so they left."

"How sad!"

"I don't know the details, but no, it's not a pretty story."

They picked out a meandering trail through the trees and fallen logs. Here and there they encountered little rivulets and streams which they hopped over or splashed through. And once they encountered a huge fallen cedar that lay uprooted on the forest floor. At length they emerged from the woods onto the grassy shelf that led down to the beach. A brisk breeze blew off the water.

"God, how it must have been when the people lived here," said Margaret. "What a magnificent spot." She walked through the grass down to the windy beach. The beach, she discovered, was not sand but tiny bits of shells. And scattered through the shells were other things: iron bits, pottery scraps, tiny glass beads, and things that defied description but were clearly made, not found. "Nicholas, look!" She picked up a light-blue glass bead and held it to the sky.

"This beach is the midden I told you about---the garbage heap. There's a little bit of everything here."

"There is everything here!" Margaret said. She stood still, looking down, then began to wander slowly up the beach and examined the innumerable objects under her feet. Now and again she looked up to see where Nicholas was; he had found a rock to sit on and there he remained, and appeared smaller each time she looked back. After a while she stopped her stroll and stood stock still on the beach. Nicholas was a colored spot down the beach. The thick, tufted grass rustled in the breeze off the water, and Margaret watched it wave thickly in the wind. Her eyes played over the grassy village shelf above the beach and the dense forest behind it; midway down the beach towards Nicholas she saw what appeared to be a man standing in the woods near the edge of the grass. Gooseflesh sprang up on the back of her neck and forearms and she began to walk slowly back along the beach the way she came. The figure did not move, but it was clearly a man, with outstretched arms. What on earth? She began walking more quickly, then broke into a run. She ran as fast as her legs would move; she saw Nicholas stand slowly up from his rock, staring in her direction, then begin to walk towards her slowly, then quickly, until finally he too was running down the beach towards Margaret. "Nicholas!" she shouted.

They met at the middle of the beach. "What is it?" Nicholas said.

"I'm sorry," Margaret said, catching her breath, "But there's a man up there and he scared me to death."

"Where?"

Margaret pointed to the now distant edge of the woods. "He's standing there in the woods at the edge of the village."

"Damn it, Margaret, you scared me! That's not a man."

"But it is!"

"No, that's the Dzonouqua. It's one of the few carvings left around here. It's a kind of statue."

"Thank goodness. It scared me to death!"

"It's supposed to. It's truly rather frightening; up close even more so."

"Let's go take a look."

They walked up through the grass towards the edge of the woods. In the distance Margaret could see the Dzonouqua standing back under the trees, its arms outstretched. As they approached she began to feel the terror of the thing, its uncanny posture and wild gesture. She also saw that it was not male but female; huge pendulous breasts hung down to its waist. The Dzonouqua's face was a wild, intense grimace; its lips were pursed as if whistling. "Nicholas, what was this thing?" she asked.

"Dzonouqua was a stealer of souls; particularly little children. She lurked in the woods and whistled to attract the children; she would capture them and take them away."

They walked up under the trees where the Dzonouqua stood. The wooden image was well over six feet tall and exceedingly weathered; it leaned slightly to the side.

Margaret stared at the image and said, "I'm bombarded by these horrid pictures of theft. We were just discussing this sense I had of something stealing my life; last night in my dream I saw a cat that was a "soul stealer." And now this horrific thing. Did the people here worship this?"

Nicholas shook his head. "No; this was a warning to their kids. It was to scare them away from the forest where they might meet a real Dzonouqua."

"Do you think there are such things as this?"

"Who knows? I suppose you could call it a legend or superstition, but as you say, there is something in the world that seems to steal life. Your "conspiracy theory," you know." He grinned.

"There's nothing very funny about it."

"Yes there is. Why do you need a spiritual conspiracy to account for something we're perfectly able to do for ourselves? My God, we rob ourselves blind with short-sightedness, fear, and everything else. Are you saying that we're not accountable for this, that the devil makes us do it?"

Margaret stared at the ground in a frown. Then she looked up at Nicholas and smiled. "I don't know. I suppose you're right. But this thing here," she nodded towards the Dzonouqua, "Is some other kind of a horror. Just look at it; it's anti-human. It's a nightmare, like the little cat in my dream. This is something that would leave no trace of you when it was finished."

"That's fantasy! Neither of us know enough about this to know what it was really all about."

"That's true enough but in all of this world around us, is there really nothing to fear but fear? These people lived in the midst of the world, unprotected by lights and electricity and automobiles. Now that we have this protection, can we say that they just imagined these horrors?"

Nicholas stood for a moment thoughtfully, then shook his head. "I can say that you are beginning to give me the creeps. I live here too, don't forget, and not all that far from this spot. The lights of my house are very small in the middle of the night around here."

Margaret laughed. "I was beginning to think you were a lost soul."

"I have no doubt that I am; you don't have to rub my nose in it."

Margaret put her arms around Nicholas' waist and hugged him. "What are we going to do?" she said.

"I should warn you that your innocent hug is like a drumstick dangled in front of a starving dog."

"Yes, but it is innocent and I will not allow you to take advantage of it so take that thought no farther. We learned our lesson once."

Nicholas nodded and put his arms around Margaret in a friendly way. And so they stood at the edge of the woods in the mild breeze, mildly watching the soul-stealing ogress with her outstretched arms.