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Bliss

All my life, I seem to have been mistaken for someone else. The other day, a woman stopped me in the produce aisle at the market and said, “Michael?” When I pick up heart pills for my dad, the pharmacist always says, “Hi, Tim.” When I correct him, he smiles and says, “Good to see you.” When I walk down Idle Road from my apartment to my job, or along the highway, people I don’t know wave at me from cars. I wave back, it can’t hurt. One day a girl leaned out of a car as it shot by and yelled, “I love you, Jamie!” I am introduced to people over and over again. “Have we met?” they say. “It’s Walter, or Phil, or Daniel, isn’t it?” I have wondered if wearing a name tag would be a bad idea. Hello, I’m Cleave. Who could forget such a name? When I look in the mirror I realize that I am, to some extent, a fabrication. The face looks like mine, all right, but also looks, vaguely, like anyone’s: a racial cameo of smooth skin, fine hair. Mouth, nose, and eyes all where they should be, but somehow indistinct—the anonymous, undeclared face of a baby. A face you could put a face onto, including your own, or that of someone close to you whom you’ve not seen in you can’t remember how long. “Michael?” When the lady in the store said that, I just smiled and shook my head—and she looked confused, hurt, angry. Who had she lost? Yes, I wanted to say, but didn’t. Yes, it’s me.

I stepped from the mud and rain of my midday duties into the outer sanctum of the Pritchard Publishing Company. It isn’t what people think. No one ever says to me, Oh—you work for a publisher, because everyone around here knows that there is only one such out-
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fit in this part of the state and that it is owner-operated by the crazy Pritchards, purveyors of four-color brochures to the attractions of the Green Mountains. It’s a reprint operation. Mr. Pritchard is our only “author.” Oh, folks are more likely to say. You work for them.

And there is nothing glamorous about what I do: I am the “general help.”

When I came in, Mrs. Goodell, our executive secretary, blinked her smartly made-up martyr’s eyes at me in a code I could not interpret. She held up her heavily ringed hands; silver bangles rattled into the sleeves of her red blazer. Mr. Pritchard was burning up the telephone in the inner sanctum. “I can’t stand this,” Mrs. G. said. But I knew that she could. “And Cleave,” she added in a register of confidence and woe, “I have to tell you, there are no checks today.”

“Excuse me?” I said.

One of my jobs is to take paychecks to Billy and Jill, who make runs to the printer and distribute our materials. They usually hang out at the warehouse on Idle Road, minutes from here but far from here, if you know what I mean. Naturally, it registered that Mrs. G. meant my check, too, and I went into meditation mode, or tried to—not easy, what with Jack Pritchard ordering his daughter, LeeAnne, in a voice normally reserved for summoning Satan, to bring him the receivables, and she screaming that she could not find them and had he forgotten that receivables were not her bailiwick?

Their offices are two doors apart.

Nevertheless, I willed an interior stillness, visualized the cosmos within, and ascended: I looked down on the building, then rose higher, floating over the local greenery, then the county, the state—and on and on in a series of diminishing images until the earth disappeared in the litter of space and I approached the peace and quiet of infinite distance with its cool, clean open-ended light-years.

Someone spoke my name.

I opened my eyes. Mrs. Goodell was looking at me with concern.

“Cleave, are you all right?”

“Mrs. G.,” I said, “I’m fine. But I do need to be paid.”
“You will be paid.” Her face darkened with anger. “We will all be paid.”

I first encountered the Goodells years ago, when I was waiting on tables in a restaurant in the next village. As I made the rounds of my station, I saw that Mr. Goodell was in something like a drunken coma. I’d never seen anyone that paralyzed. On a return trip from the kitchen, I glanced at Mrs. Goodell, and her face wore the look of concerned and painful anger I was seeing now.

Mr. Pritchard called to me from the inner sanctum. As I entered, he turned his attention from the window and pointed at a package lying on his desk. “Take that to the post office, then go over to the warehouse and tell Billy to close up.” The telephone rang, but Mr. Pritchard just ignored it. He ignored me as well: his chair pivoted silently back to the window, to which watery view he appeared to surrender himself. From her office, LeeAnne yelled, “Dad, pick up!” But Mr. Pritchard did not pick up. For a few moments, he and I watched the rain paint the windowpanes.

I made myself ask him about the checks. A glimmering light washed pale shadows down the length of his face. “Cleave,” he said, as the phone continued to ring, “please just go.”

This is how I met Jill:

Once upon a long time ago, the eighth grade boys and girls were herded indoors for one of their foul-weather-Friday dances. A record player was set up, loafers and sneakers sprinkled onto the hardwood floor, and the musk of dead basketball games warmed and rose. When the needle dropped on the slow and baritonic Righteous Brothers, the boys rushed the girls, who had gathered into ranks of self-defense and availability. I grabbed Jill’s hand, led her out among the other dancers, and pressed her to me, and she was not reluctant. I had never held a girl—I had never even held hands with a girl—and here I was all but fused to one. We two-stepped in a small circle without speaking until the Brothers announced one last time that that lovin’ feeling was gone. “Thank you, Cleave”—
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she breathed these words into my ear. You know how that feels? We peeled apart and cool air rushed between us.

But for some reason, we never clicked, and I didn’t do anything to make it happen, and that togetherness—that little knot—untied. There was nothing left on the line but a murmur.

Now, Jill popped out of the warehouse and waved as I drove in, and my heart just laughed like it always does when I see her. “Cleave!” she called. The payday party had begun—she had a bottle of beer in her hand—so I quickly broke the news about the checks. They didn’t seem too surprised that we’d been stiffed.

“This bites, man,” Billy said. “Cleave: cigarette me.” I complied, and he glared at me with rage and affection.

A large, oblong man, top-heavy and uncomfortably hinged, Billy had spent eighteen years in the navy, wandered home to Ohio, where he had a series of adventures involving law enforcement personnel, and now, as manager of the Pritchard Publishing warehouse—a glorified garage—shoved a beer into my hand.

Jill leaned against a stack of shrink-wrapped tourist guides and sipped. Her expression suggested that she was surveying the map of a week without money. In my own mind, phantom digits blinked in and out of existence. Billy wandered in a deliberate slouch, his shoulders braced for battle and for surrender. Then he boiled up, shoving his lizard-skin boot against a stack of pallets, spilling them. “Bastards!” Whipping his empty bottle against the far wall, he reached into the front-loader for a fresh one. Jill scooted past me, grinning madly, hooking my arm into hers, and we escaped.

Now, despite the fact that we’d never gotten to know one another early on, we did get into the habit, years after our school days, of taking walks together. At that time, Jill was seeing someone—in fact, she was informally engaged. But she and Bud (not his real name) were having a serious problem. I got wind of this, and one day I happened to stop in front of her house. She came out—she’d love to take a walk!—and so it became a now-and-again routine: I happened by, and if she happened to be around, we took a walk.
We reviewed the school lives we’d barely shared. She offered me bits and pieces of the Bud problem, and I ate her words like candy. I listened, I nodded gravely, I suggested different routes we could take—riverbank? graveyard? fairgrounds?—and occasionally threw in my two cents’ worth. I imagined she might take a different path with Bud, and that my capacity as tour guide might somehow evolve into, simply, guide, and then to something better. But it didn’t.

And for a while, all was well. And then it wasn’t.

I hung around out front on that fateful December afternoon for what seemed a longer than usual time, and finally she hurried out, head-down, quick in her big boots. I noticed the light jacket and the speculative look she shot my way, and I thought, Well, this is the last time. A guide knows.

“God, it’s cold,” she informed me. I remarked that it must be polar air riding on the jet stream, and she nodded without looking up and hugged herself more tightly. She said, “Maybe we could just go around the block today.”

“Excellent idea,” I said. “A walk around the old block.”

“Because it’s just so cold today.”

“Do you want to go back? Not that we’ve gone anywhere.”

“What’s wrong?”

“How’s Bud?” I said.

She stopped right there. “What are you talking about?”

I said, turning to her, “Bud is back in time for the holidays, right? Bud has had a change of heart. Right? There will be an announcement on, oh, let me think now, Christmas Eve. Right?” I hated myself for talking this way, and even though it turned out to be true—right down to the impending Christmas Eve joy fest—I felt like a bastard, steamed up and shaking semi-righteously inside my coat. Jill’s green eyes glazed. Fingers of wind smoothed strands of hair across her face. Her hair—how can I describe this? There’s a ripple effect the wind can’t make or unmake. But I went on talking as if I’d spent my whole life making women cry.

“So why are we even—shit. What is even the point? You don’t have
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to walk with me, or tell me about Bud and Bud's history and Bud's problems. I don't actually give a good goddamn about Bud, or whatever his name is. I never liked the son of a bitch anyway.”

“Well, what do you give a damn about? Goddamn it.” Her long, fine red nose was pointed right at my chest. And now she was crying openly and swearing, and who, in truth, doesn't love this in a woman? But of course there was only one answer to her question: You. But I couldn't say it.

She said, I thought I could talk to you.
She said, I thought you cared.
She said, I thought you were different.

Then she turned and ran back to her house. I did a forced march till my legs started to shake, sucked up a second wind, and continued on out of the village by way of the thruway overpass, where I gripped the empty squares of the anti-suicide chain-link fence and looked down on the cars. Senseless, soulless fools, I thought—the way you do when you’re miserable and other people’s lives seem abstract, their trajectories pointless. I walked on across the bridge and into a turnout where I found a path that opened on a clearing where the milkweed pods saw a real fool coming and nodded their hairy chins in cold agreement. The moon rose over the mountain and I lay down on the body of the dead earth and watched the rimed and frozen sky turn its back on the day, and my fingers and ears sang and stung with perfect, blissful pain.

What happened was, we didn’t exactly make up—how could we make up when we were never together? But I continued to happen to walk by her house, and one day out she came. But I could tell—by the way she eased the door shut, and then by the way my heart turned over once and lay still—that she had news for me. She put her arm through mine.

She said that she and Bud were getting married.
She said that things were really fine at last.
She said that she was happy.
It’s hard to be angry when someone who will never walk with
you again, or love you in the way you want to be loved, or roll over in the morning and look into your eyes and say, “Why don’t you fix me a cup of coffee?” is smiling at you. Isn’t that hard? And that was that.

And of course, things were not really fine, but that was her business.

But look at us now, as they say.

We walked away from the warehouse arm in arm, up Idle Road in the rain, not talking much, and not about money when we did talk. There were other jobs. Her breast caressing my arm had put me into a trance in which I saw the two of us living together in the zero gravity of the space station, sipping iced coffee through straws and enjoying a sunrise every couple of hours, performing important experiments in the common sense of outer space, linking our two souls and bodies and lives. Making up for every day we’d missed down below, where even the air pushes you around.

So we walked along through this scattershot October rain. She told me about a birthday party she’d had for Dylan, her four-year-old—and she asked me what I remembered about being a kid.

“When I was four,” I said, “I used to lie in the grass by the side of our house and look up at the sky and feel the sun. Or, other times, it looked like a big messed-up bed with gray sheets—like today. And I could see the drops falling from far up there, and imagined someone wringing out those sheets. God? I don’t know. I didn’t know where the sky began. I still don’t.” I spread my arms and put my face into the rain—and the memory of my mother hit me hard.

“My mom would run out and scoop me up. I’ve been happy other times, but I was completely happy then. However—”

I would have liked to bring my hands together, right then, to send a prayer out to my mother’s spirit, but they had ideas of their own, and covered my face.

“However,” I managed to finish, “I’m completely happy now.”

I waited through some painful moments, as we set out again, expecting Jill to say something nice and soothing and less than personal that would let me know that I was still the tour guide and
Bliss

should stick to the book. “Well, that’s good,” is all she said, pulling a little closer to me in a perfect docking maneuver, and I played those three words through every aural filter I had on board. Bud—father of little Dylan, but now banished forever from their lives—floated along beside us in spirit, but I just nodded to his troubled, truculent ghost and then ignored it, the way a man does when he knows what matters and what doesn’t.

I left the truck with Jill at the warehouse and walked over to West Mountain Road to check on my dad. I went in, calling, then out through the kitchen to the backyard, where he spends time when he’s feeling well and the weather’s nice. He was there, sitting on the bench between the two maples—“Cleave maples,” my mother used to call them, because Dad planted them when I was born.

I’d come along when they had stopped believing any children were going to show up—Dad was past fifty and Mom was forty-three when I was born—and they seemed never to get over the fact that I’d arrived. In family pictures they hold up baby Cleave the way a farmer holds up a monster zucchini. *We didn’t really expect this.*

Then Mom got leukemia—like you’d catch a cold or a chill, or fetch a bus up over the curb—and it ran her down, one-two-three. Just about the last time she left the house was for my high school graduation. She then went back into the hospital to see if the doctors could detain the life that was rushing to get out of her as if her body was on fire, and then she came home to die in the house she and Dad had lived in together, and where I’ve lived, on and off, since appearing on the planet.

As I approached the shaded bench, I saw that Dad’s eyes were closed under the brim of the world’s dirtiest cap. Asleep or meditating?—I slowed my step. His eyes flicked open to glazed slits, spied me, and instantly closed again, but his face blinked into a smile.

“Come on and sit down, Cleave.” Voice as soft as an old shirt.

“How are you, Dad?”
“Oh—the same.” He looked at me vaguely, and I knew that he had been asleep. “You’re off early?”
“I think I lost my job today. I don’t know what’s up, but the checks weren’t ready. Something’s going on.”
“Jack Pritchard still running the place?”
“Sure.”
He shifted his weight with care. “I’m not surprised,” he said. “I knew him when he was a kid.”
“You knew everybody when they were a kid.”
I followed his gaze up to the house where, in other days, my mother had hummed some bit of a song to distract herself from the kitchen chores she tolerated; and I recalled her whispering in the weeks before she died, “Cleave, I’m just so tired,” a look of surprise in her face that was mostly bright, panicked eyes by then. She had never seemed tired to me, and now her life was draining from an opened tap into the bottomless bucket of the universe. I recalled how my father read to her as she drifted in and out of sleep, how he’d sometimes crawled into the bed and held her till she woke. I walked long distances in those days, past exhaustion, to where the stars flickered at noon.

When I looked again, his eyes were closed. “Time to go in?”
His smile blinked on. “Plenty of time.”
“You’re a goddamned old Buddha.”
“I’ll Buddha you.” He opened his eyes. “Who’s that girl you’ve been seeing?”
“What girl? Do you want me to move back in?”
“You think I need a nurse? What’s the girl’s name?”
“Jill,” I said—in an unguided moment.
Dad turned his face back to the house. He removed his cap and pushed crooked fingers through his hair, then screwed the cap back on. He looked unaccountably sad. “Pretty name,” he said.

That night I reviewed my day and concluded, in the inflexible dictation of darkness, that I had less reason to be hopeful than I’d imag-
Bliss

Jill’s face was there—it held the lambent brightness of a candle's flame—but the image wavered as if a veil of water hung between us. I seemed to be in the street. Then I was standing in front of her house. I walked into the yard, not knowing for sure which window was hers. But I picked one that seemed likely and sat down in the grass beneath it. The night was not cold, so I lay back to smoke and look at the stars. The stars were all smiles. We got you here, they seemed to say. Now what? Far down the interstate, a big truck plied its gears in a ghostly, diminishing progression of power chords. As I watched the stars, they worked loose and began shooting around the heavens; some streaked down, striking the earth silently, their massive energy flowing into the ground. Jill’s face, upside down, looked over the sill at me; her smiling eyes glittered like sickle moons. Drawn to her, I righted myself and put my arms out to her—but she held out a package to me. Two men stood behind her in the darkness of the room. I backed away from my balked desire and the room's threatening shadows, the energy of the subterranean star-flow ran into my feet and coursed through my body, and I rose into the sky.

When I awoke, a voice was speaking my name in the dark. A soft voice, like a woman’s, pressing gently but insistently against me. It was so sweet-sounding and so clear that I sat up, startled, and said, “Yes?” But the enticing voice was gone. I got up and made coffee and sat at my little table in the first light, and when I stopped thinking about anything, the presence returned. When I felt it enter the room, I closed my eyes and waited. I raised my hands in supplication.

The presence pressed against me like a wind that doesn’t blow. Then it opened me like an envelope.

When I got to work, there were two shiny state troopers’ cars sitting in the lot, one empty, the other discharging a trooper. He met me at the corner of the building.

“Are you Cleave Noone?”
“Yes, sir,” I said. “Please don’t shoot.”
“That’s not funny, Mr. Noone.”
“No, sir, I’m sorry. Long night.”
Several people were paying attention from a little distance. A woman wearing wraparound sunglasses loitered intensely with coffee and a cigarette. “They’d like to talk to you inside,” the trooper said.
A couple of the spectators slipped their orbits and wobbled toward us. The coffee-and-cigarette lady, feeling the love, took a step into the street. This seemed not unsafe, but distances, in space, are deceiving. And I felt an odd compression—a condensation of cold words—filling my ears.
“If you would just step inside,” the trooper said.
As I approached the outer sanctum, I beheld a tableau: Mrs. Goodell huddled in her honest cloth coat; LeeAnne Pritchard, in a blue jogging suit, crouched beside her, speaking low; and at the edge of the frame a heavy man wearing a nouveau-sharkskin suit. I came closer and both women looked up into my headlights, so to speak.
“What’s going on?” I said.
“Who is this?” the shark hissed.
Pale LeeAnne inch-wormed upright, ignoring him. “Well, well,” she said. “You’re a little late today, Cleave.”
“You didn’t have to call the police,” I said.
“LeeAnne,” said the man, “I’m asking you not to talk to anyone right now.”
“He’s just the janitor,” she said. “Well, how about it, Cleave? Did you make out last night?”
Mrs. Goodell stood up so quickly that her chair threw itself into a filing cabinet. “This young man is Cleave Noone,” she said in a voice that suggested I was about to be knighted, or sent to prison. She turned a look of concerned and painful anger on LeeAnne. “And I am going home now.”
“Oh—great,” LeeAnne said as Mrs. Goodell swept through the door. “That’s just great. Why don’t we all just go home.”
“It’s what I would do,” I said, “only I’ve just come from there.” The hard stuff in my ears had begun to crumble, and sounds were sprinkling onto the floor of my mind, where Jill swept them into a pile. “What’s going on?”

At that moment, the door to the inner sanctum opened and Jack Pritchard emerged. He marched straight past me and entered into communion with LeeAnne and the shark. A trooper and another man came to the door of the office, and I was beckoned inside.

The other man—a detective—wanted to know all about my job. This took about three minutes. He then nodded to the trooper. Through a miracle of modern communication, this trooper had learned from his partner that I’d said I’d had a late night. The detective turned to me.


“Why was that, Cleave?”

“You tell me.”

The lines on the detective’s face had been bent into sadness by the gravity of too many lies. “Okay, Cleave, I will. We believe that someone broke into this office some time last night or early this morning. Do you know anything about that?”

“I don’t.”

“Okay. Do you know where we might find Billy?”

“The last I saw Billy, he was at the warehouse. Okay? I went for a walk with Jill—is this what you wanted to know?”

“Sure.”

“When we got back, I left the truck—”

At this point, I remembered the package Mr. Pritchard had asked me to mail—and I remembered last night: surely these were the men standing in Jill’s room in my dream? You left this in the truck,
she had said then. In my mind, now, she swept the debris of words into a small box.

“I don’t know what’s in the package—the box—I don’t know anything.” And I got up to leave.

The trooper was in front of me instantly. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Take a seat, Mr. Noone.”

“What package, Cleave?” the detective said.

My legs gave way, and I sat down hard. “I didn’t ask to fucking come here,” I said.

“Okay,” the detective said. “What package, Cleave?”

“And I didn’t see that crazy son of a bitch after that, either.”

“Who’s that, Cleave?”

“BILLY.” I was out of time. “I did not ask to come here.”

“Okay, Cleave. Cleave?”

I had to laugh then, because suddenly I was standing by the window—a space walk. And I missed it! The detective was looking distinctly nervous and I wanted to reassure him, but what came out of my mouth was an alien language of groans and slurs and shushes. Words that weren’t words fumbled from my lips and fell to the floor like stricken bees. Something inside me was bent; something that was kinked needed to be straightened out, but stretching my arms out the window until my fingers touched the stars didn’t help. The stars had worked loose again and spilled like sparks over a sky that held the hard, flaring blue of sheet metal pressed against the sun.

The men were pulling me back into the room. Then, looking up, I saw a watermark crusted high up on the walls, just beneath the ceiling. “This is a room that has flooded before,” I said, but did they hear me? Did they understand that all that is integrated will be dissolved? I let them do what they would. I hadn’t asked to come here. And as the level of the water rose, I took back everything I had ever said or done or been, and the rest abandoned ship. Even the presence, occupying my last hiding place—the whole of me, just under the skin—left me. The universe darkened down to an infinitely small box Jill held out, whose angles enfolded, comforted, and silenced me, and held me fast.
Bliss

The rule about the locked ward seemed to be that you could talk or you could listen, but if you did neither, they kept you there until you did something. They needed clues, too.

Brought before a panel of whitecoats, I was awarded a medal for psychotic tendencies under dissociative conditions and moved to a ward where I was blended with the run-of-the-mill sick. I rose like thick, quiet cream, was scooped into a bed discreetly equipped with the hardware of restraint—fortunately not needed—and in my idleness got to know the nursing staff, rattling off Linda, Cecilia, Maryanne, Sally inside the empty barrel of my head. This between naps brought on by doses of some very nice stuff that came through a needle and turned out my lights.

Mostly, I lay back and looked through a glassy rectangle at late, cold October, and drifted.

My very own psychiatrist came by once a day, or I shuffled through the traffic to his office. “So, what happened?” he asked me right off—eager beaver. “Any place is the right place,” he added, meaning I should spill it. A box of Kleenex hunkered between us. Weep, damn you! I appreciated his patter and the fact that, like me, he seemed to know a lot more than he was telling. We got along. I’d fall into the water and he’d fish me out, and then we’d talk about what being wet was like. After a week of this, he said, “Don’t you think it’s time to go home?” “Fuck you,” I replied, even though I was not particularly angry. “And the horse you rode in on.” “What’s that about, Cleave?” he asked.

It was about him being my age, and not crazy.

Dad came and went. They’d brought in a decent chair so he could be comfortable. I turned my head and there he was. Blink. “Hey,” I said.

“Hey, yourself. How are you?”

I fumbled my way through dozy synapses, but couldn’t discover what was wanted, so I just returned the question.

“Well, Cleave,” he said, “not so good. Everything takes so long. I have breakfast, then I lie down for a little. What’s the point of that?” He reached to turn on the lamp. “The doctor says you took
a little break from reality—more than a little. This room is all right, is it?”

“I’m ready to say good-bye to it. I feel older than you. Stop fussing.” He was picking at the tower of flowers Mrs. G. had had delivered. I continued, ungratefully, “I want to go home.”

“Well, you can’t go home today. Which reminds me, that girl came by and I gave her the key to your place.” He closed his eyes. “Nice girl.”

“What girl? Jill?”

“Mmm. We had a nice talk.”

“So—what are you telling me? You were hitting on Jill? That’s unseemly.”

“I’ll unseemly you.”

Nurse-errant Sally came in, bearing her wonderful little needle. “Time to rest,” she said. “You can stay if you like, Mr. Noone. He’ll be out, though.”

“Just pretend like I’m not here,” I said. “It’s what I do.”

“All right, now, hon, roll onto your side for me.”

Dad rose and pulled on his coat. “I’ll be going. Be good, and do what they tell you. As if you wouldn’t. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He dithered at the foot of the bed. When Sally gave me the needle he turned away, cranking his cap on.

“So when is she coming to see me?”

“Hell should I know?” he muttered.

“What’s your problem, old-timer?”

“Don’t have one. Maybe if you were a little less . . . seemly, you wouldn’t have to ask me what you should already know.”

“Is that right?”

“Damn right it’s right.” He dithered some more, but with less attitude, then moved back to the side of the bed. The nurse marked my chart and left, and Dad sank into his chair again. I didn’t know what to make of his mood, and I struggled against the drug that was pulling at my sleeve—right this way, sir—as the last leaves of light fluttered over his shoulders.

“Dad?”
Bliss

“Hmm?”

“Stay a while, would you?”

Dad’s restless in the middle of the night. He calls out at two in the morning, a cry with words wrapped in it. By the time I make it in there from where I’ve nodded off on the couch and switch on the bedside light, he’s sitting up, staring with wild eyes. I smooth down his covers and ease him back onto the pillow. “I think I’ll stay over tonight and babysit,” I say, hoping to get a smile, but he just closes his eyes obediently, and I feel rebuked. But I stay fewer and fewer nights at my place.

On my first day home, I’d discovered that Star Trek is on every night of the week. But the closing theme gusting up behind a close-up of the bemused Captain Kirk just kicked my ass. I slept, when I could. I stood at the west-facing window in the afternoons and watched the stars glimmer on.

The note Jill left me on the night table lay curled like a little paper hand on the palm of which were the words Call me.

Finally, I give up the apartment. Without a job, I can’t afford to keep the place, anyway. I move in with Dad and begin looking for work, making my way down through the layers of labor until I hit bottom at the HangUps coat hanger plant on Connector Street. But they’re down to seventeen employees, from forty-three, and half the workers have carpal tunnel. It’s a sad place. The foreman hands me an application form and asks, a little too loudly, if I didn’t used to work at Pritchard’s. I give him the short version of what Mrs. Goodell told me when, still simmering, she came to see me in the hospital.

“Jack was in terrible trouble—the business was failing. I didn’t know a thing,” she said. “He jerry-rigged the books and took out a loan. Then he cashed in whatever he could and made it look like the office had been burglarized.”

“You don’t say.”

“Yes! The package poor Billy stole was full of cash.”
“Who sends cash through the mail?” I felt a loony laugh coming up fast. I had already read about Billy being picked up. It seems he’d been heading due south but got sidetracked. In his haste to reach an ocean, he rear-ended a police car in downtown Providence, and when the officers got out, he did too, and ran, briefly, away. “Was LeeAnne involved?”

“That little bitch.” Mrs. G. shook her bangles with a shaman’s briskness. “Don’t laugh, Cleave. Like father, like daughter. Now, settle down. They tell me you’re going home today. What will you do?”

Through my tears, I said, “I thought I’d retire.”

But the HangUps man just shrugs and shows me the door. I try to walk through it as little like a mental patient as possible.

Deciding to loosen up, I throw away my Paxil and feel better (I think) immediately. January thaw helps—who minds being made a fool of at midwinter?—and so does walking. The schedule of classes taped to the door of the Eight Smiles High yoga studio tells me to bring myself and ten dollars on Monday afternoon, and on the day, I roll out my mat and await instructions. The studio’s in a corner of an old factory, and stern light sits up straight in the tall windows. Cathy, the teacher, modulates the stereo’s wood-flute-and-whale song and I attempt to do as she asks, bending and unbending myself discreetly. “Form an intention for your practice today,” she tells us. “Breathe.” More specific, but puzzling, instructions follow. “Locate your abdominal muscles. Find your shoulder blades.” By the end of the hour, I’m tired and cranky. I throw my mat into the basket and go home.

The next sessions are better. I can’t stretch, breathe, or bend with anything like intention, but I fake it until something like intention happens. I attempt a simple mountain pose—arms up, hipbones floating over the feet, spine stretching—and wonder if my neck is supposed to hurt this much. Cathy circulates in my direction, then steps up to my mat and touches the small of my back. “Drop your
butt,” she says softly. “Let your shoulders go. Feel your feet. Press those index fingers through the ceiling.” She observes my effort. “And breathe, Cleave.”

We end the hours lying on our backs in corpse pose. “Practice,” Cathy smiles, “for the day when we'll stop breathing.” I want to hear this? An Eastern bell’s note goes on and on. Cathy drifts above us, turning off the lights until only one lamp is left burning. Layers of denser shadow wash over my eyelids; my backbone comes close to being one with the mat. When the session ends, I sit up slowly, reluctantly, and breathe deeply. Bonnnng, (bo(bong)nnngg) goes the bell. Nothing hurts. I breathe again, pull on my socks and hold on to my feet. Again, tears. And a snake of joy hustles through me at a crazy angle.

The following week, I bring Dad. He's a big hit. He finds his shoulder blades right away. He immediately has three or four girl-friends, middle-aged women who can’t pay enough attention to him. He buys a CD from Cathy. That night, whales sing while we have dinner, and we grin at one another across the table. We both start sleeping better.

Then one night I awaken to the sound of a voice, soft as a woman’s, speaking my name. It comes again and I follow the sound to his bedroom. “Did you call me?”

“No,” he says, bewildered. His eyes glisten in the fall of light from the hallway. Then: “Yes. Yes, I heard it, too, Cleave.”

The sky is hard and bright after a brief, early shower of snow. By the time I leave the house, the storm clouds have moved into the east, and I follow these ghosts as far as Jill's house, where I pause to knock on the door. I hold my breath—then I breathe. The door opens.

She says she is glad to see me.
She says she’d love to go for a walk.
She tells me she’s been wondering about me.

We walk through the village and then out of it, passing the hang-er plant, where the workers having a smoke on the loading dock raise their braced and bandaged forearms to return our greeting.
The wind bears down, blowing our breath back down the hill as we cut across Idle Road and walk up through a development of newer houses. To the top, where the street ends in a cul-de-sac and barren plots slotted with driveways await the promised homes. Turning, we look down on the way we’ve come. The broad roofs of the split-levels and capes and ranches glimmer like the blades of a magnificent mobile, but all that moves is the wind.