

VISIONS

Fragments of a Novel by JP Allen

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The image cannot be separated from the person who views it.
Each mind creates a second image, a reflection of what it receives,
be it of a photograph or symbol or lifetime.

1

The most amazing and sensual still photographs that I ever took were of a woman who wouldn't tell me her name. I had never met her before and never saw her again.

I began getting phone calls late at night. When I answered, the caller paused for a moment and then hung up. The first night this happened, the person called twice. Each time, I said "hello", and when no one answered I assumed there was something wrong with the phone line and hung up.

A few nights later, it happened again. Again, I answered and said "hello" but there was no response. Again, after a few moments, the caller hung up. I started to think someone was trying to bother me, maybe one of my former girlfriends, or maybe a child who was playing pranks. But it was trivial, and when no one called again I quickly forgot about it.

But the next night, it continued. On the second call, I began to get irritated.

"Who are you?"

There was no answer but the person didn't hang up.

"Who are you?" I repeated.

There was a long pause. The caller stayed on the line. I started to hang up first, but then she spoke,

"I want you to photograph me."

"What? Who is this, please?"

She didn't answer. Again I asked her who she was.

"I want you to photograph me, without clothes. I'll come to your apartment tomorrow night, at seven. Is that all right?"

She had a deep, smooth voice. She said that a friend had told her about me and felt I could be trusted. She wanted the photographs as a gift for someone, and she would pay me.

I thought about it for a moment. The way she had phoned me was strange, but I decided to do it. I needed the work. I told her what I would charge and agreed to meet with her the following night.

The next day I prepared my camera, lights, and the apartment. I had a large white backdrop on one wall that I sometimes used along with various chairs and props. At seven-thirty, the woman hadn't arrived. I waited. I tested a light and looked at some photographs that I'd recently developed. Only one out of thirty-six was even slightly interesting to me. Several more minutes passed. At eight o'clock, the woman still hadn't arrived.

I assumed she wasn't going to show up. Everything about the way she'd contacted me was strange and so it wasn't that much of a surprise. I thought she must have gotten uncomfortable and decided not to do it. I started putting equipment away and thinking about getting something to eat. Then the phone rang. It was her. She apologized for being late but said she'd been delayed by an emergency. She asked if she could still come over. I reluctantly said "yes" and she said she'd be there in thirty minutes.

As I waited, I tried to imagine what she would look like. Her voice was unusual. It was very feminine and had strength and poise.

That contrasted with her reluctance and apparent fear about telling me who she was. I decided she might be a woman who was normally very conservative, and this was a new experience for her, or perhaps a woman who considered herself unattractive. In my mind, I had several visions of her.

She knocked on the door and I opened it. She said hello and extended her hand to me. Her eyes, which were deep blue, seemed bright but also unfocused.

I realized she was blind.

We shook hands and she held on to me. I asked her to come in and she allowed me to guide her. She was about thirty years old and had light red hair. She was wearing a green skirt and sheer top. She turned in a circle and seemed to be forming her own image of the room. She was smiling and she started to laugh. I asked her what she was laughing about.

"You must find this unusual."

"How do you mean?"

"That I can't see."

"Well, I wasn't sure. But it doesn't have anything to do with the photographs."

"Oh, yes it does," she said and quietly laughed again.

"How so?"

She didn't answer me and started taking off her clothes. She did it slowly, removing her blouse and then the skirt. It was as though she were feeling the material leave her skin and then feeling the air

glide over it. I became suddenly aware of how different our perceptions were, how mine were centered on sight, and hers on touch.

Her body was slender, almost petite. After undressing, she asked me where I wanted her to start. Most people have to get used to being in the nude, but she seemed completely comfortable with her body and with being naked in front of me. I showed her where to stand and asked her what she wanted from the photographs. She said they were a gift for someone that she loved. She said that she wanted to imagine that the camera was that person. Then she asked if I was ready. I said "yes".

With her eyes closed, she started to pose for me, or rather, for the camera. First standing, then with a chair, then with a scarf and some high-heeled shoes and jewelry that she'd brought, then on the floor. Her poses were absolutely unique. Perhaps because she couldn't see magazines and films and television, she was imitating no one. The poses sometimes seemed awkward, almost uncoordinated, like she was moving in and out of another gravity and world. But they burned with sex and emotion, especially playfulness and joy and touch. She loved to touch her own body, everywhere. It wasn't masturbation, it was like she was giving her most sensitive skin to someone, holding it out as a gift. As I photographed her, I was silent. I wanted to stay out of the way. She was laughing to herself and into the camera and into the person that she loved.

Afterwards, she slowly put on her clothes. She seemed almost disappointed that we'd finished. She paid me in cash. She asked me to choose my favorite pictures and mail them to a post office box address that she had written on a piece of paper. She asked that I destroy the negatives and any other pictures that remained. We shook hands, I led her to the door and she left without telling me her name.

When I developed the photographs at the lab, I felt stunned. Her features glowed with sensuality. Her skin seemed to shimmer, almost separate from her, bright and soft beneath her floating red hair. Looking at the pictures I had the feeling that, for the few minutes I photographed her, I had somehow disappeared inside her. It was as though she had taken the pictures herself, or that they weren't pictures at all. She was there, alive in those images, forever.

I mailed off almost all of the pictures. I imagined the joy that her lover must have felt when he or she saw them, the surprise. I destroyed the negatives and all the remaining photographs, except one. It was a close up of her just briefly opening her eyes. She was smiling, just slightly. In her eyes, it was like she could suddenly see, and for the first time she was looking at the sky.

I kept the picture for a few more days and then, as she had asked, I destroyed it.

2

Everyone said that Julie looked like Meryl Streep and it was partly true. She had long golden hair, a powerful face, and she did everything slowly, with an enigmatic detachment. She rarely spoke more than a few sentences at a time. That night, after looking around for a moment, I sat down on a bench near her and I asked where everyone had gone. She shook her head and said, "trying to find equipment".

We sat for several moments in silence. I watched the AC as he cleaned a lens. Julie finished her cigarette and then started talking without looking at me.

"I went to a movie and in it was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. It was foreign, THE DOUBLE LIFE OF VERONIQUE. Have you seen it?"

I shook my head "no". She paused and lit another cigarette.

"It's about two women with the same first name who live in different countries and who are mirror images of each other. They're total strangers and they see each other only once, when one of them is getting on a bus. But they sense the presence of each other and they have the overwhelming feeling that they're not alone in the world. Both of the women are played by one actress, Irene Jacob.

"On the day they briefly see each other, they're in a crowded area of a city. One woman sees the other getting on a bus and has an extraordinary sense of recognition. The other woman doesn't see her, but, without knowing it, takes a picture of her as the bus drives away.

"There's a man, an extra in the scene, one of the people walking on the street. He's wearing a winter coat and he's very tall. He only appears in the scene for a moment, looks toward the bus, and then he's gone in the crowd. His face is very strong and angular, intense. Most people would say that he's ugly. But to me, he was beautiful. His body . . . he looked like he worked in a factory . . . it was large and powerful, but there was an incredible gentleness about him too. It was sexy without effort or awareness. As he disappeared out of the scene, I was overwhelmed. I barely noticed what was going on in the film. I could only think of him. I imagined that strength and tenderness together, and all that it might do.

"Seeing him in the film like that, having that feeling, it almost mirrored the story of Veronique. She longs for a sense of connection in life but isn't able to find it. And so I thought maybe I was just imagining my feelings for him, taking the story of the film and putting it into my own life. But the feelings were specific and real, and didn't go away. It seems unbelievable, but I fell in love with him. Over and over, I dreamed of meeting him.

"I watched the movie again and again and again. The feelings it gave me didn't go away, they grew. Even though the man was only in the film for a moment, I wanted to understand everything, the story, the dialogue, the direction, the themes. It's beautiful and haunting. I wondered how he got involved in it, how he got the job and what it meant to him. I bought a video copy and watched it almost every day. I tried to understand not only the characters but also the actors, what

was underneath the gestures and words. In the bus scene, I stopped the video when the man entered and watched him frame by frame. Finally, I decided to try to find him, the actor."

"But his name wasn't even listed in the credits and I didn't know where to begin. After a long search I finally got an address for the production company of the film, in Europe, and I sent off a letter describing the man and asking for his name and any other information they could give me. Three months passed and I thought I was never going to get a response. Then one day, I got a short letter that gave me his name, said that he had moved to Los Angeles and listed his agent.

"His name was Joseph, and I tried to find out more about him, find other movies he had been in, but I wasn't able to. It seemed like this was the only movie he had ever been in. Maybe he had only worked as an extra and had never gotten other parts.

"At about this time, I moved to Los Angeles. I got work as an assistant makeup artist on a film and I moved into an apartment in Burbank. After I'd been there a couple of months, I found out the address of Joseph's agent and I sent Joseph a letter telling him how much I admired him and that I wanted to meet him. I didn't know what else to say. I had no idea if the letter would ever get to him, but in about two weeks, I got a phone call. It was Joseph. He spoke English with a Polish accent. He was a little awkward but also friendly and we agreed to meet a few nights later at a bar in Studio City.

"That night, I put on my favorite blouse and a pair of blue jeans. The blouse was light yellow and it made my hair look almost gold. I kept imagining what my hair would look like draped across Joseph's body. I decided that I wanted to make love to him that night. I drove to the bar imagining what it would be like.

"Outside the bar, I stood in the parking lot. Blue fluorescent lights glowed all around me. The air was warm and I could smell smog. The sensations in that moment, everything around me, cut into my consciousness and made me realize that I'd never forget the next few hours. I was about to meet the reality of what I'd dreamed. Part of me feared disappointment but another part felt that disappointment was impossible.

"I went into the bar. It was quiet and almost empty, and very large. I looked at the tables and the bar, but Joseph wasn't there. Then I saw someone stand on a balcony above me. It was him. He was wearing dark pants and a black shirt with short sleeves. He looked so different from how he did in the film that I barely recognized him. Seeing him up there, on the balcony, also made him seem enormous, like a giant. He smiled. He seemed shy, and he raised his hand. I hurried up the stairs.

"There were two other men, also from Poland, I think, sitting at the table and he introduced me. I shook their hands. They were very polite but a little suspicious. I laughed at how strange it was to finally meet Joseph. Then I hugged him and he briefly put his arms

around me. Feeling his muscles and chest for the first time, it was like a shock of recognition. I didn't want to but I let him go and sat down.

"We talked about trivial things. Joseph spoke English well but he wasn't yet sure of himself and stopped a lot to think about what he was saying. He had a lack of confidence that he tried to hide, a self-consciousness, and it made me like him all the more. I was nervous and I kept laughing at everything and I think his friends didn't like me very much. They couldn't believe that I had only seen Joseph in that one scene and then had wanted to find him. Or maybe they did believe it and thought I was crazy.

"After about half an hour, we had run out of things to say and the other two men were beginning to look bored. One of them mentioned that they needed to go and Joseph nodded. I asked him if he could stay, and I told him that if he needed a ride, I could drive him. He hesitated, then nodded again to his friends. We shook hands and they left.

"Joseph and I sat without saying anything for a few moments. Then I moved my chair and sat very close to him. Without saying anything, I put my arms around him and put my head on his shoulder and neck. He seemed a little uncomfortable but also glad. Finally, I whispered that I'd like to go somewhere alone with him. He frowned and said that he wanted that too but that I should know that he had a girlfriend. I told him that I didn't care, that I just wanted to be with him that night. We left the bar and I drove us to my apartment.

"At the start of the film, there's a very erotic scene that takes place during a rain storm. As we entered my apartment, the wind was blowing. The sky was covered with clouds and I could smell rain. A storm was coming. Inside, a street light shining through my window made rows of blue shadows across the floor. I remember the sense of reality and fantasy merging. It was intoxicating, arousing. I felt aware of everything, the rooms of my apartment, the sounds, the street outside, the skin on every part of my body.

"I led Joseph into my bedroom. I could tell he was very self-conscious about how he looked. I slowly took off all his clothes, touched his large arms and chest and legs. To some people, his body might have seemed bulky or awkward, but to me it was perfect. I took him to the bed and we began to make love.

"All the times I'd watched that movie went through my mind. All the times, in that small city far away, that I'd seen the look of loneliness in that woman's eyes. All the times that I'd seen her look at that photograph and recognize her own double who was gone forever. All the times that I'd seen Joseph walk briefly in and out of that strange scene where the picture is taken. All of it came back to me. I made love to that image of him, to that need for connection."

She paused and looked at me.

"Later, I got to know Joseph better. We saw each other sometimes, talked on the phone, but the relationship didn't go very far. He had other obligations. He was an actor from another country who was trying to work in Los Angeles. We didn't have that much in

common. But there was something, a connection, that was real. That night I found it, and believed in it, and I was glad."

There was a long pause. Crew members were starting to arrive back on the set. A light was turned on and off. Julie threw away her cigarette and then looked at me.

"I've never told that story to anyone."

I smiled slightly, "Then why did you tell me?"

Another light came on. The assistant director announced that the lights were fixed and that everyone should get ready for another take.

3

Indirectly and without knowing it, Sam Shepard changed Michael's life forever. Like me, Michael was a photographer. He had been hired by a local magazine to take some photographs on the set of the film Shepard was making with Sissy Spacek. The film was called RAGGEDY MAN.

As on all movie sets, there was a lot of time spent waiting. Without knowing who he was, Michael sat down and began talking to Shepard who was friendly and relaxed. They spoke about various things relating to the film, about local events and also some about Michael's photography. While they talked, a woman working on the film stopped to ask Shepard for a cigarette. He casually introduced her to Michael.

Her name was Carol and Michael fell in love with her. Later that day, he asked her out and for the next several weeks, as the film was being made, they had an intense relationship. Michael loved her more than any woman he had ever known. But when the production was over, Carol decided to end the relationship. She told Michael that she was involved with another man.

Michael was stunned. It was the most painful loss of his life and he couldn't accept it. After Carol left town, he talked about her almost constantly. At first, I thought his feelings of loss were normal. We would get together, drink beer in his small apartment, and he would talk about how he felt. He would show me pictures of her and tell me about times that they had spent together. He wrote about her

in his journal and he would read passages from it. Again, I thought his feelings were extreme but not out of the ordinary.

But as the weeks passed, I began to realize that something was wrong. Not only did he continue to think about her and talk about her but gradually that was all he thought about and all he could really talk about. Michael was in his twenties. He was a slender muscular man filled with an almost frantic energy. When he spoke, his eyes rarely focused on any particular person or object but instead moved rapidly from one thing to the next, constantly searching. His energy was so forceful that it verged on violence. At the same time, there was an extraordinary gentleness about him. I doubt that he ever intentionally hurt anyone or anything. These contradictory impulses were at the center of his personality and created constant feelings of conflict and anxiety. After the loss of Carol, these feelings began to overwhelm him.

Michael had taken hundreds of pictures of Carol. I only met her once, at a bar, but I looked at most of Michael's photographs of her and came to feel that I knew her very well. She was an attractive blonde, about twenty-five, and had worked as a model. On RAGGEDY MAN, she worked as a production assistant. To me, her face appeared intelligent but unremarkable. In all the photographs Michael showed me I felt there was always a slight emptiness in her eyes. Not a lack of intelligence, but an absence, perhaps, of compassion.

Michael thought she was incredibly beautiful. As the weeks passed, his obsession increased. He put away all other photographs he

had ever taken and covered his apartment with pictures of her. Also, he stopped cleaning the apartment. Pieces of paper, journal entries, stories and poems about her, lay scattered on the floor, the bed, the counter and tables. Michael and I usually got together once or twice a week, we liked to take walks around the city and discuss photography, but we began to see each other less and less. I soon understood that he didn't want to see me. Or if he did agree to see me it was only at his apartment and all he could talk about was her.

I tried to help him in some way, to suggest that he get out and stop thinking about her so much, but whenever I mentioned anything like that he became upset and said that I didn't understand. I said he was right, that I didn't understand and that I thought he was taking all of it much too far. These were the first serious arguments I'd ever had with Michael. It was completely unlike him to fight with anyone.

Although he was obsessed with Carol, as far as I could tell, Michael made no attempt to contact her. At one point, she even wrote to him to ask how he was but I don't think he ever replied. He showed me the letter but said that it only made him angry and confused. She was living with another man and Michael didn't want to bother them. He had no interest in a relationship as distant friends. He had loved her and anything short of sharing that love and abandon seemed pointless to him.

Soon, he began avoiding me. He rarely returned my phone calls. Or I would stop by his apartment and he wouldn't answer the

door even though it was obvious he was there. When I did get in touch with him, he made excuses to avoid seeing me. Finally, I became so frustrated that I stopped trying and assumed that the friendship was over.

A few months passed. I only occasionally thought about him. I met a woman that I cared about and was spending most of my time with her. A few people asked me about Michael and I told them I didn't know what he was doing. But then one day he called.

The conversation seemed normal at first, although a little tense. Michael asked how I was doing. I told him about my new girlfriend and about some photographic work I had recently finished for a national news organization. I asked how he was. He answered vaguely, mentioned that he might be moving and that he had stopped working. When I asked more questions, he evaded them. We ended the conversation with the idea that we might get together sometime soon. I felt a little irritated with him for not having called before but I was ready to let it go.

About a week later, I called and asked if he wanted to meet for lunch. He put me off and again mentioned that he was considering a move. When I asked him why, and also why he wasn't working, he suddenly became angry and said that he was tired of photography, that it only created "lies". I asked what he meant but he ignored the question and made an excuse to end the conversation.

Michael had loved photography to the point of fanaticism. He completely believed in it as an art form. He had taken pictures since he

was a small boy. The things he said now surprised and worried me. Of course, I remembered his obsession with Carol and the abnormal way he had behaved. He hadn't mentioned her in either of our recent conversations. Also, I drove by his apartment and noticed that his car was parked in the exact same place it had been parked several months earlier and that one of the tires was flat. It looked as though he hadn't used the car at all.

I called him again, but now he didn't answer. I waited a day and tried again. Still no answer. I called repeatedly at various times, but there was still no answer. Finally, I decided to go to his apartment.

When I arrived, I knocked but there was no answer. I could see a light on inside and so I knocked again and I tried the knob. The door was unlocked. I opened it slowly and went inside. The first thing I noticed was that the apartment was absolutely clean. There were no photographs of Carol, no journals or pieces of paper. Books, magazines, dishes, everything was put away. The walls were clean and recently painted white. In the center of the room were several large boxes filled with paper. The room was very warm. I called out to Michael but there was no answer. I could see a light coming from his bedroom and so I walked toward it. As I did, I briefly felt very nervous, almost afraid of what I would find. I went through the bedroom door and saw Michael.

He was sitting at his desk and staring at a photograph. It was hanging on the wall in a black frame. I walked closer. Michael seemed almost transfixed. He had lost some weight but for the most part he

was physically unchanged and was dressed normally. After a few seconds, he glanced up at me and nodded, as though nothing were out of the ordinary, then he gazed back at the photograph. I said "hello", stood behind him and looked.

It was a slightly blurred black and white picture of Carol. She was standing in a field smoking a cigarette and looking away from the camera. Behind her were small trees and rolling hills and clouds. I looked more closely and felt slightly surprised. Of all the pictures I had seen of Carol, this was the only one in which she appeared truly beautiful. In the foreground, a man with brown hair was sitting in a chair. His back was to the camera and his face could not be seen. In his hand was a package of cigarettes. Next to him was an empty chair. I realized that it was Sam Shepard on the set of RAGGEDY MAN.

I asked Michael what he was doing, why he was looking at the picture. He didn't answer for a few moments, just continued to look at the photograph. Then he began speaking very calmly, like he was tranquilized. He told me that this was a photograph he had taken just seconds after he had met Carol. He believed it was the first moment he had felt love for her. He had forgotten about the photograph because he had given the pictures and negatives to the magazine for which he was working. At that time, he and Carol were still together. About a month ago, the editor of the magazine sent the pictures back to him.

When Michael saw the photograph he became lost in it. He spent hours and days staring at it. There, on film, was the critical moment of his life, the moment that had changed him forever. He

examined the photograph from every perspective. Again and again, he asked himself — why? Out of all the possible moments, why did this one moment occur? Why was he hired for this job on this day? Why did he choose to sit down with Shepard? Why did Shepard happen to know Carol and introduce her to him? Why did he take this photograph of Carol and why did he begin to love her?

In that moment, anything could have happened. Michael could have felt nothing for Carol. He could have been interrupted and asked to photograph another person working on the production. While doing that, he could have met an entirely different group of people. Or he could have decided the job was complete and left without meeting anyone else at all. But that's not what happened. He took the photograph and, as he did, fell deeply in love.

Just before the photograph, as Shepard gave Carol the cigarette, Michael stood up and shook her hand. She was wearing blue jeans and a gray sweater. She and Shepard briefly discussed something relating to the production and Michael walked behind the chairs and tested his camera. He had just loaded a new roll of film. Without speaking to Michael, Carol lit her cigarette and walked away. She stopped and looked at something or someone in the distance, perhaps people working on the set. Michael raised the camera and took the picture.

Months later, as he examined it, he noticed different aspects, hints about things that were unknown to him. Although he could not see his eyes in the photograph, Michael noticed that instead of looking

toward the set, Shepard was apparently looking at Carol. Why? What was their relationship? Was it simply professional? Or was it something more intimate? Also, the expression on Carol's face didn't look like the expression of someone at work. It was removed, as though she were thinking of something very private. What was it, if anything? Was it about Shepard? About someone else? Or nothing at all?

These speculations cauterized Michael's mind. He couldn't stop them. Sometimes, he saw the absurdity of his questions and he was able to briefly stop thinking about them. But much more often, the various possibilities seemed totally real. They devastated him.

He told me all of this as he got up and finished packing. His sister was arriving in the morning to help him move. He had decided to leave the area. As he packed, we went into the living room. I stood beside him and again noticed the boxes filled with paper. Suddenly, I realized that they were actually boxes of photographs, hundreds of them, all ripped apart. And they were his. I didn't know to what to say. I asked him why.

He told me that week after week, as he looked at the photograph of Carol and Shepard, all others photographs that he had taken of her, of anything, became insignificant. Soon, their insignificance, the pointlessness of all of his work and countless photographs, infuriated him. He began destroying them. He turned down job offers and stopped working. He destroyed every picture that he had ever taken except this one. He burned all of his negatives. He

packed his belongings and planned to move to New Orleans, nearer to his family. He didn't want to be reminded of Carol. He said that to him, that one photograph was everything that he had ever tried to do as a photographer. It captured the essence and radiance and mystery of reality, his own. Strangely, having taken such a picture by chance, it made him feel he had accomplished nothing and that he could never truly find the answers to the questions the picture provoked. Disillusioned, he decided that he would never take another photograph in his life.

4

I began with 8mm. It was the most simple, but also, 8mm often has a nostalgic, almost an expressionistic quality and I felt drawn to it. Just as 35mm tends to romanticize the subject, 8mm tends to make it abstract. At first, I filmed very simple events. A woman drinking coffee. A child playing in the grass. A friend opening a door. Each time, I could barely wait to see the film developed, to see what feelings the movement and style imparted. I was never disappointed. I projected the film on the white backdrop in my apartment and saw these simple actions take on new life. Loneliness, surprise, embarrassment — countless feelings were evoked with remarkable nuance.

During the Winter, as rain sometimes fell day after day, I sat in my apartment with an old projector and watched these simple unedited films again and again. Perhaps no other person would have gotten anything from them, but to me, that small window of light on the wall, and the shadows and blurs and scratches and saturated colors within it, were a kind of alchemy. I remember the sound of rain, the steady drops of water on the roof of my apartment, the clicking of the projector, the heat and smell of its lamp. I sat in a metal chair and watched in fascination. After each roll finished, there was even something about handling and rewinding the film that seemed evocative, as though there were a residual of what it contained.

There was one segment of film in particular that affected me. I watched it dozens of times. I had gone on a trip with a friend of mine

to a city in the desert. His name was Gene. He was an intense and somewhat unhappy person, although we got along well. He was several years older than me and had prematurely gray hair. I brought my 8mm camera and asked him to go with me on a walk across the city. Our plan was simply to walk a long distance, enjoy whatever happened, stop at an occasional restaurant or bar, and finally to return to our hotel. During the walk, I planned to shoot a roll or two of film at random.

We started early in the morning. It was immediately a hot day and the sunlight was intense. We drove our rental car to the start of one of the main streets in the city, parked, got out and began walking. For several minutes, we walked in silence. To me, the heat and sun felt incredibly good. I loved to walk and I wanted to get a feel for this new city, especially how it existed day to day. We walked further and began to remark on various things that we saw — the houses, the stores, the people. Gene seemed somewhat distant and depressed. I asked him why and he slowly began to tell me.

He was having marital problems. Gene had been married for several years but the relationship had been a constant struggle and they had separated several times. Gene loved his wife very much but he had gradually realized that they were incompatible. Still, he tried desperately to make the relationship work. He was the kind of man who believed that will power and effort could overcome any problem. He tried again and again to mitigate the past, to understand his wife

and fulfill her. But no matter how hard he tried, there was always something at the core of the relationship that was flawed.

Later in the relationship, frustrated by the stress of the marriage, Gene began drinking. He blamed himself for all the pain the two of them had suffered. He was a salesman and began having job problems. He became more and more distant from his wife. They stopped having sex and moved into separate bedrooms. This was somewhere around the time of our trip to the desert. As we walked through the intense heat, and the day gradually passed, Gene told me various details and incidents, discussed the arguments and confrontations. I talked about relationships I had been in, about situations that I thought might be similar.

After lunch, we were about half way across the city but I still hadn't shot any film. With all we were discussing, it didn't seem appropriate. We walked for another hour or so. It was the hottest point of the day. We were in a poor area of the city. The shops and houses began to look dirty and faded. There were failed businesses and old warehouses made with sheet metal that was now rusted. We noticed a bar in an adobe building and decided to stop for a drink.

There were about a dozen men inside. Most of them looked like they were probably out of work. Some were obviously drunk. The room was mostly bare. There were a few booths and a pool table, but the walls were undecorated and the floor was concrete. On the bar itself, which was very long, were two video monitors, the kind with games that show partially naked women.

We ordered our drinks and sat in a booth. For several minutes, we talked about our impressions of the city or about sports that we saw on the TV above the bar. We ordered another round of drinks. Then Gene was silent for several minutes. I watched the TV. When I turned back to him, I realized that something had changed. He was staring toward the exit of the bar. He looked at me and told me that he had just decided to divorce his wife, that the marriage was over. He said that after more than eight years of struggling, his love had finally died. He remembered the exact moment, when she had looked at him one night in a certain way. As he told me this, he spoke with an absolute finality and he seemed sad but also detached. He was no longer a person struggling. He was beyond it.

We talked for several more minutes. Then Gene noticed my camera on the table in front of us. He asked why I hadn't shot any film and said that this was the perfect place to do so. I hesitated and said that I didn't want to make any of the people in the bar feel uncomfortable. He nodded and then suggested that I shoot some footage of him, and film some of it in the bar. I put him off. We drank some more and Gene repeatedly asked me to film him. I finally agreed to do one simple shot.

I got out the camera and adjusted the settings. For no particular reason, I decided to shoot in slow motion. I told Gene to get up out of the booth, walk to the exit, look back at me, and walk out. He finished his drink and I said "go". I turned on the camera and Gene did exactly as I asked. When he walked to the exit, he opened the door

and bright light poured into the room and across his face. He looked back at me and walked out. I stopped the camera, put it away and followed him. That was all.

When I watched this footage later in my apartment, it had a powerful effect on me. To my surprise, although the bar was fairly dark, the picture — Gene's face and body, the two glasses on the table, an exit sign above the door — everything was grainy but clear. Gene moved in slow motion across the room. A drunk sitting at the bar slowly turned his head toward him. For whatever reason, the drunk appeared slightly afraid. Gene slowly opened the door and light burst into the room. The drunk squinted. Gene looked toward the camera with an almost imperceptible smile and then he turned slowly away. The door closed and the frame went to black. The entire action took about fifteen seconds.

Maybe I saw what I wanted to see, or maybe I had had a similar moment in my own life, or needed one. I'm not sure. But those few seconds on film contained a world for me. In that room was failure and despondency and fear and temptation and many shades in between. As Gene moved through it and out the door, a simple story was told. He was a person who was deciding to be someone new. That's what made it so remarkable, being able to see the moment of transition, the change. I watched it again and again. Each time he opened the door, and the light shone, and he walked out, I felt aware of an unseen power.

5

It's the middle of day and the air is humid and still. You're supposed to be meeting a friend for lunch but they haven't arrived. You wait over half an hour, but there's no sign of them. You check with someone who knows your friend, someone your friend knows and likes. You've been introduced and found this person attractive but, at the time, you avoided thinking about it. The person invites you to go on a drive, to look for your friend. You go to your friend's home but they're not there. You drive further. You go with this new person to an outdoor restaurant. The two of you discuss politics and a previous relationship. The conversation is light and flirtatious.

There's a sudden downpour of rain. Within seconds, your clothing is drenched. The person gestures for you to follow them to the car so that you can get out of the storm. You run toward the car laughing and get inside. Both of you are soaking wet and are breathing rapidly.

The sound of the rain hitting the roof of the car is loud. Water drips from your clothes on to the car seat. The windows fog up almost immediately and the light inside the car is a clear blue. You both continue to joke and laugh again and again. You try to avoid looking but you can see the person's skin and chest through the thin cotton of their clothing. Finally, you stop laughing and the rain begins to diminish. You remember the feelings from before, how you found this person attractive. The car now seems very private and you're strongly

aware of your body. It feels clean and healthy and exposed. You look at the other person with an uncertain smile.

Several days later you're in a small house that your friend has let you borrow. It's night. You're in Indonesia and there's a civil war going on. Poverty and violence are everywhere. You've come to the house secretly with the person that drove you to the restaurant. You've decided to have a relationship. You arrived only a few moments ago. The room is completely dark. You hear the other person moving but can barely see them and neither of you speak.

You both begin taking off your clothes. Outside the house, through the wall, you hear unidentified sounds, the wind or maybe animals prowling. You move toward your lover and passionately embrace. You feel the warmth of their skin and the shape of their shoulders and chest. With your eyes closed, you kiss and feel their tongue. You taste and smell them. Then you're startled by a feeling — the person in your arms seems different, not just new and unfamiliar but as though they're a complete stranger. You think that maybe this isn't the person who drove you to the restaurant, that maybe it's someone else. But this feeling arouses you even more.

As you both continue to kiss, caress and explore the other's body, you struggle with yourself, with what to do. The person you're touching seems more and more unfamiliar. You now feel certain that he or she is a stranger. But how can that be? Maybe it's just a feeling. Who else could it be and why would they be here? At the same time, you don't want to know. You press your eyes closed and lie down on

the bed and let the other person touch you more and more intimately. With your head turned to the side, you briefly open your eyes. In the mirror facing the bed, you see the vague outline of the stranger moving passionately on top of you.

Suddenly, you hear gunshots being fired nearby. You get up from the bed, open the blinds and look out the window. An army truck speeds by. In the distance, you see huge spotlights swinging across the sky. You realize that you're in danger, that the military police are searching for you.

The person you're with, the stranger, comes up to you from behind. They hold you lightly by the shoulders and begin kissing your neck. There's something about their hands, something very subtle and suggestive. The fingers feel long and smooth and graceful and gentle and each touch is electric and hot. They reach around and touch the front of your body. They know exactly how and where to touch you, the things only you like. Still, they're the hands of a stranger. He or she kisses you and slowly pulls you back toward the bed. You continue to hear gunshots in the distance. Bizarre images surge through your mind — of your friend Billy, of a military leader, of small shadows shifting on a wall.

You give into the stranger and lie back down on the bed. Again you hear noises outside the house. You sense that you're being watched. But you kiss the stranger more and more deeply. Another car passes on the road outside. Moments before, you left the blinds

partly open and now headlights swing through them, across the room and across the face of the stranger on top of you.

It's a beautiful man or woman — the person who took you to the restaurant. He or she looks down at you with a mix of understanding and desire. Your names are Hamilton and Bryant. The headlights vanish and the room becomes quiet. The thought of an identity seems arbitrary and unreal.

6

Karen loved this film and dreamed about it many times. She told me that she heard the voice of Billy Kwan over and over. She walked the streets of Jakarta with Guy Hamilton and sometimes made love with him. She spent hours talking with Jill. She felt sorrow over the desperation and poverty of the people in the city. She waited for me, alone, in small rooms while it endlessly rained.

Karen admired my photography but wanted me to use film in new ways. She was the first woman who posed for me that I also filmed with a motion picture camera. It was with her that I first began planning the creation of narrative films. But we started simply and experimented, again with 8mm.

And again, most of the shots and actions were very basic — Karen doing simple movements or changing positions, often in the nude. Many of the shots were extreme close ups of her face and eyes and hands. We played with light and shadow and exposures and speeds. I was trying to capture the essence of individual moments, of truths about Karen. Occasionally, I appeared in a shot with her. We both loved doing this work and couldn't wait to do it again and again.

Karen was very innocent and unselfconscious. I met her when, for the fun of it, she was modeling for an ad agency. She was in the background of a group photo that I was hired to arrange, something for a clothing catalogue. She spoke to me afterwards while I was loading equipment, shyly asked me a few questions and we went for drinks.

Our love was easy, like walking through an open door. Much of that was Karen. She had an unforced faith in other people and herself. She almost never worried. She was too busy quietly enjoying herself. Once we started seeing each other, our photo sessions and short films were like candy to her. She consumed them by the handful. She had very little interest in the technical side of photography but she loved creating and understanding and opening herself to all of it. She believed in me, perhaps naively, and in the work I was doing. I needed that from her more than anything — *faith*. It was faith, mine and hers, that allowed the phantoms we sought to enter the waking world and take form.

As the work accumulated, I soon realized that these films were very different from what I'd done before. For the most part, the scenes were very intricate and created brief, unique worlds. Of course, there were boring segments or shots that failed, but surprisingly few. I can't take credit for this. The work had special qualities that were inspired from outside, partly by Karen, partly by something else.

Almost from the start, for various reasons, my relationship with Karen was ending. We only saw each other for a few months. Perhaps because of that, the films we made seemed to repeatedly capture that strange instant when something moves, inexorably, from the present to the past, from now to then. These short films illuminated the only ghosts I've ever seen, spirits gently reaching out from an existence that was slipping away. When we projected these films, I could barely watch. Even now, just the thought of them, of

Karen's face and the shape and mood of her eyes, fills me with emotion and makes it difficult for me to breathe.

7

She gazes at him as he gently pulls the bra strap down from her shoulder, but not all the way, because he's teasing her. He seems very different from when they were together, many years ago. Then he was a young man, he was rough and sometimes awkward and had only a partial understanding of her sexual needs. Now, he's stronger but also seems smooth and easy and sensitive and playful, everything that she likes.

During the last few weeks, she loved working with him on the film. She constantly toyed with the idea of being with him again. Each day, she talked with him and played with innuendo and wondered what he was thinking and if he was understanding her. She wasn't sure because she wasn't sure that she understood herself. In a way, she didn't want to. She wanted to feel things that were outside her understanding, that could go in any direction, that might or might not be.

Some days, after being in rehearsal or on the set, she felt angry that he didn't spend more time with her, that he didn't offer to go to her hotel or at least to a private dinner. Other days, she felt that it was all deliberate, that he was as subtle or maybe even more subtle than she was, and she felt elated and renewed. What did he mean when he was directing her and told her to touch another actor in a certain way? Why did he look at her at specific moments while using provocative words? What did it mean when he seemed to inadvertently brush against her as a rehearsal ended? What were

the hidden messages, the hidden feelings and actions? She knew he was interested. That much was obvious to her. But was he afraid? Was he excited? Was he in control or not? Was he pursuing her and, if so, how far would he go and when?

She had asked people about him, other women working on the film, and found out that he had ended a serious relationship a little over a year ago and that he hadn't been involved with anyone else. But was there someone new that she didn't know about? Sometimes, she thought there was and that was why he hadn't spent more time with her. Then she felt disappointed and lonely. On other days, she felt that maybe there was no one and she felt glad and filled with anticipation. As for herself, she had been seeing several men and she got frequent phone calls at her hotel, but none of the men really mattered to her. Before, everything felt half-right and that had been enough. Now she wanted more.

In the blue shadows of the hotel room, he slowly turns her around as he kisses her shoulders. Then, with her back to him, he begins to touch the front of her body very lightly, beginning with her ribs and stomach and hips. As he does, he sees the anonymous room and objects around him — an antique dresser, a table with two chairs, a mirror, a soft bed with a dark wood headboard and cream bedspread. The room is warm. Sounds from the city repeat in the distance below.

Her body seems more muscular than he remembers, less fragile. It's the body of a woman who is constantly on show, an actor. He remembers seeing her in various films, many romantic or erotic, and

the strange feeling of distance that each had evoked in him, a dual sense that he was observing something both familiar and unknown. And there was something else, a unique feeling that the camera was, in a way, stealing her from him. Her image was, at moments, on the verge of replacing the actual person and all that they had done together.

Working with her on this film had been much more difficult than he had expected. Each time he saw her he felt very emotional. At night, after rehearsal or filming, he couldn't stop thinking about her, about things she had said, ways she had looked at him. He decided at the start that he would do everything he could to hide these feelings. Above all, he wanted her to be at ease. He felt that if he spent too much time with her she might feel there was some kind of expectation for a new relationship. He deliberately held back and found reasons not to be alone with her.

But he began to notice things. She was much less shy than when he had known her before. She seemed to be playing friendly games with him and he couldn't help but be playful in return. She joked with him about directions he would give or about the role he was playing or about camera moves or costumes, but each joke was also a kind of invitation. Everyone who worked on the film seemed to want to talk with her and go out with her, but, if she went, she always asked him to go as well. He was flattered but still tried to put all feelings out of his mind.

One night, he spent a few minutes alone with her in the hotel bar and he felt that he might have said too much. He didn't want her to think he had asked her to work on this film because he wanted to renew their relationship or somehow manipulate the situation. If anything, asking her to be involved was an effort to put the past behind them. And, for a while, it all seemed to go as he had hoped. But then his feelings returned, repeated feelings of attraction and admiration and longing, questions about why they hadn't stayed together. He had almost told her how he felt while drinking at the bar.

But the next day he redoubled his efforts to conceal his feelings so that she wouldn't misinterpret the night before. On the set, she was even more playful than usual, but he tried to act professional and detached. He avoided eye contact with her. He stood as far from her as possible and completely avoided touching her. He concentrated on talking with other actors and production staff. At the end of the day, he felt that his intentions were clear. Again, he wanted her to be at ease and under no pressure. He was slightly surprised when she seemed irritable as she left for dinner.

A few nights later, she insisted that he go out with her and the cast. By this time, he felt more relaxed about all that had happened and he let himself joke around much more. At yet another bar, she wanted him to drink shots of Tequila with her and he went along. They got through only a few shots before they were both laughing and shouting. She repeatedly took his hand and held it but he forced himself to believe that it all meant nothing. Still, as he laughed with

her, high on alcohol, he couldn't stop himself from feeling the intimacy that was between them, that seemed new and alive. Again, he struggled to put it out of his mind.

Her dress is now at her feet and she's facing away from him. She feels her buttocks press easily into his hips. She wants him to take off his clothes but he's forcing her to go slowly. She decides that she can play that game too. She takes his hand, turns around and pulls away from him. Then she pulls him toward her and puts her lips very close to his, but doesn't kiss him. She puts her lips to his ear and whispers very softly that she has wanted this, that she's waited in this bed hoping he would come to her. She begins unbuttoning his shirt and slowly kissing his neck and chest, scratching him, softly, with her long fingernails. She takes off his shirt and drops it to the floor. She hears a jet flying overhead and someone talking in the hallway outside the room.

He unexpectedly kneels in front of her and begins kissing and caressing her bare stomach. He reaches up and lightly strokes his fingertips along the sides of her tits but avoids her nipples. He reaches around to the small of her back and pulls her body into his mouth and face. She drops her head back and delves into the sensations, feels his tongue slide along her skin. Then she drops to her knees and fights back, kissing him and biting him and rubbing him.

She briefly thinks of other men she's been with in the past months and years. Vague images move through her mind, shadows of erotic moments. She feels lucky. Many of these men were beautiful

and talented and had done everything they could to bring her pleasure. Some loved her, some wanted her for selfish reasons, some she had pursued. Thinking of them, as he touches her, she feels her arousal, how it's spreading through her back and legs and skin, quickly increasing. Then she lets go of her thoughts as the momentum of their sexuality carries her forward. She loves the sensation of lightness, the connection with him, the feeling that each part of his body can touch her and send pleasure suddenly twisting through her. And she knows she can do the same to him and she repeatedly does it and smiles.

Sometimes, she likes sex to be trivial. She chooses men like choosing her favorite deserts, superficially, fulfilling brief interests and random desires. Sometimes, she wants sex to be more, to be full of love and understanding and possibility. But that's been much more difficult to find, except maybe with him, tonight, and that makes her feel insecure and out of control.

Walking on the street a few minutes earlier, she didn't know for sure what was about to happen. She was afraid he might not come to her room, that there might be some obstacle that she didn't know about. The thought of missing the chance to be with him was very painful. She could barely believe she was about to leave, that her time here had already passed. It had all gone so quickly. Why hadn't he approached her? She asked herself that again and again. Still, in a way, she was glad that he hadn't because it was all the more exciting. But she didn't want the moment, the possibility of what might be, the sex, to pass them by.

He pushes her to the floor and gets on top of her and holds her down by her wrists. Their kisses are quick and deep and almost rhythmic. The beige carpet is new and soft beneath them. She playfully tries to break free from him but he won't allow it. He pushes her back down and their fingers intertwine and release and intertwine again.

He once saw her in a film, a Hollywood thriller about a series of murders. There's a scene in which she takes a man that she barely knows to her apartment and dominates him and has very aggressive sex with him. The film uses many clichés — she's a beautiful and misunderstood prostitute, she wears bright red lingerie, stockings with seams, black high-heeled shoes, she ties the man up and fucks him from on top, the camera shows her long hair falling across her face and close-ups of her lips, with dark lipstick, as she comes.

At the time he saw this film, he hadn't spoken to her in a few years. He watched and felt the cheap arousal that the film was trying to evoke. Of course, she was a beautiful and sexy woman and watching her was fascinating. But also, he remembered the real woman and the actual way that her hair and lips looked and felt, and her true personality. Again, he experienced a sense of distance from her. At the same time, the images somehow came together and affected him in a new way.

And that happens again, now, as he holds her down, but in reverse. He sees her naked body, real, in the blue light of the hotel room, and he also sees unreal, exaggerated images of their love

making years ago, of the prostitute scene, of 8mm films that they made together, of fantasies of her that he's avoided over the last several weeks — the real and unreal come together. He can no longer control himself and it transforms into fevered sex and lust as he bites and sucks and licks and tastes her body. He goes down on her as he plays with her tits. He caresses her instinctively and rapidly, feeling her subtle and sharp responses. His hands and arms and muscles feel extremely strong and totally connected to all that she wants and needs.

He now experiences himself as both real and unreal, as both in the situation and distant from it. As he touches her, he suddenly feels the presence of the camera and he sees them both on screen. It's a film of romanticism and clichés, art and vulgarity, a film of honest feelings and also, lies. All of it is on the screen and also on the soft beige carpet of the hotel room.

8

I met Marta through a photography class I was teaching. She was a dancer with a local ballet company and was hired to model for the class. We became friends and arranged to meet for dinner. I went to pick her up but, instead of going out to a restaurant, we went into her bedroom and had sex.

Marta was, for the most part, an isolated person. The main way she reached out to others was through her body, and through sex. I never found out for sure but it seemed that something traumatic had happened to her, something that she couldn't share. I liked her most when, without realizing it, she showed moments of vulnerability. With sex, she was passionate and obsessive.

That first night, when I went to take her to dinner, she smiled, took me by the hand, led me into the bedroom and began taking off her clothes. Her body was slender and very muscular. The surprise of her aggressiveness was intensely arousing and we had sex for several hours.

From that night on, we both wanted the other almost constantly. She wanted to have sex in her car, in cheap hotel rooms, in public places like an office building, anywhere we could be even briefly alone. And she sincerely loved it all and wanted it. It was her way of being free from the weight of her unusual solitude.

She was very giving. She seemed aware that her sexual needs were sometimes overwhelming so she did everything to avoid being selfish. She did anything I wanted, she constantly asked what I

needed or found sexy. At first, I couldn't get enough of her. I took what she did and went further with it, creating more and more extremes. But after a few weeks, there came a moment when my desire changed.

Marta was very aroused by pornography, especially the kind that's light and ridiculous. She had her own collection of pornographic films. Many were soft porn that were intended to tease and arouse. The hard core films were very specific. They either fulfilled a certain sexual interest of hers, men or women with attractive bodies or voices, or they had unusual scenes, or had scenes that were laughable, or in very rare cases, scenes in which there was something beautiful, even sincere, in the way the couples bit and licked and fucked. Marta liked to watch the films and make love.

But pornography is a confusing use of images. In a way, it's the opposite of everything I've tried to create as a photographer. It's almost always superficial and spiritless, images mechanically aligned to provoke the most basic response. Still, I can't deny the power of raw sex on film. And for a time with Marta, watching her favorite pornographic scenes, laughing and then making love, it was pure and wonderful. We watched the large stiff cocks, bouncing tits, the moist cunts being fucked, the tongues teasing delicate skin. We laughed at the women moaning, the lewd words, the absurd music and acting and plots. We watched Marta's favorite couples, the ones who seemed truly sexual and connected. The women smoothly sliding their hands up and down a cock while sucking it, the men who gently aroused a

woman then dominated and fucked her. We watched and made love and enjoyed.

Soon, however, the extremes became empty. One night, as Marta watched one of her favorite pornographic scenes, I was overcome by loneliness. I felt acutely aware of Marta's own emotional isolation. I saw the blue light shifting across her white skin as she watched and her eyes reflecting the color, like glass. The action on the small TV screen, a man rubbing a woman's clit, suddenly seemed vacant and pointless, and not arousing to me at all. I didn't say anything to Marta and, afterwards, we had very gentle and loving sex. I wanted very much that night to reach her. In a few days, however, we stopped seeing each other. Marta told me that she wanted to remain friends. But we never saw each other again and I spent several months alone.

9

I can't escape it. It is both beautiful and horrible. I am enthralled by it and at the same time deeply afraid. I can't avoid or postpone it. Suddenly, as I stand in my room, it exists for me and I cannot deny it, forget it or destroy it. It is for me, as you have yours.

I am in my apartment building on a hill overlooking the city. I can see many buildings, the bay, the highway. It's early morning and cars, lights on, move on the highway like blood cells through tiny veins. Red lights flash on towers to the south. I'm standing near the window, looking through it, or through a small part of it which is open. I think of Karen and the night we spent in the hotel room.

Like that night, I see buildings and cars and sky. Near me, small clouds float past. They reflect the early morning light, pink-orange. I hear various sounds — bells from the street cars, a police siren in the distance, a man shouting in a garage below me (impatient for something entirely different from the object of his anger). I smell the moist, cool ocean air mixed with pollution. I see many rooftops. I see glass in the nearby buildings and car motions reflected in the glass. I see a red neon "Chevrolet" sign and a ship floating in the water. I begin to be pulled further and initially don't resist.

A woman in a building below is washing her hair in a basin. She wears a towel wrapped around her body. Her hair is long and is covered in white suds. I've seen her several times before. She lives alone. I feel guilty that I'm watching her. I don't want to intrude on her privacy but I can't stop. I no longer see her outer body except as

something very much apart from her, like the walls of the building, or like the cloth wrapped around her. Her body seems only a protection, a cover hiding her. I see through her flesh. I see her heart beating and the other organs moving inside her. I see her bones giving shape to the skin and the muscles. I see fluids moving. I continue to look and see further, inside the organs to a place where this is no tangible thing, only the invisible. I see the invisible inside her skull and I see it directing the motion of her limbs as they rub her head and hair. I see and feel the invisible. I feel the sorrow of her loneliness trying to cleanse her hair and shape. She tries to wash it away but it will not go. She is insane, imagining the act of washing, the towel, the mirror, the soap, but nothing is there, only the effort to cleanse, a repeated pantomime.

She realizes I'm watching her. She turns and looks at me. Her eyes filling with anger and resentment — I have seen that which we are both hiding — draw me further inside. I now try to resist but can't. She rapidly closes the curtains of the bathroom window. But it doesn't matter. I've already gone further, through her eyes.

I'm in a place of dreams and memory. Random objects surround me and quickly change. I'm in the mountains, a battlefield, a photographer's studio, a bedroom, etc. I see people I know or that the woman knows or people I've never met or people who have died and in this place are young again. I meet lovers and make love with them, as with ghosts. Soldiers surround me and I kill them. Trivial problems arise. I'm without money and the woman humiliates and berates me,

telling me that I'm a failure. Next, I'm a king with many servants. I order them to behead a criminal, the woman, who then begs for mercy. I relent and forgive her.

I realize I must escape but still I'm pulled further. I'm in a tunnel and at a distance see an opening and sunlight. I move toward the opening and realize that my body is aging rapidly. At first I am young but soon my skin begins to wrinkle and my muscles grow flaccid and weak. I hurry toward the opening of the tunnel. I'm closer. I see the light. I try to run but my legs are weary. I notice that my flesh is beginning to fall off in large pieces and that my soul is pouring out of my body like sand through closing fingers. I must reach the opening before it's all gone. I'm very close to escaping but can barely move. My legs begin to crumble. Then the sunlight touches me and I escape. I pass outward through my eyes.

I am standing in my room in the building on the hill. I'm in front of the window. I no longer see buildings or sky or the woman or the dreams and past. I see the window. Nothing else. The woman sees it and does not want to look. You see it and do not want to look. I see it and do not want to look but have no choice. Finally, no one has a choice. I can't see through the glass. It's opaque. I see nothing in the room except the window. I want to leave, to see other things, to return, but I can't. I see the window and I can't escape it. There are no memories or future actions, only the window.

I'm drawn closer. I move closer to the window and it opens wider. Still I can't see out. The space in front of me is total emptiness, not even darkness. I'm terrified.

I realize that I am going to jump from the window.

That is what I have been pulled toward and have tried to avoid. I must go out. No. Maybe there's some way to escape. Maybe I can do something else. Maybe the woman washing her hair will stop me. Maybe you will stop me. Maybe the sky will stop me. No, I must go out. All that I have done is nothing. All that I have seen is nothing. The sky, the building, the people I know, my body, all of that is nothing. I must go out.

I touch the window. My hands and arms are shaking. I'm breathing rapidly and feel as though I'm suffocating. I climb on to the window ledge. The window is very large and I can almost stand upright. I grip the walls and hold myself in place. I realize I'm at a great height although I can still see nothing. I know what I must do and yet I don't want to do it. I begin to cry and my screams, like children trapped in a small room, begin to increase inside my body. I'm drawn further. I can't help myself. I can no longer breathe and I'm swaying, losing a balance which I know to be false.

I jump.

I am standing in my room in the building on the hill. It's starting to rain. I leave the building and go out on to the street and walk. I see a woman in a raincoat taking letters from a mailbox. Her back is turned to me. As I approach she turns around.

Her face is a window and I begin falling.

10

I rent a car and drive into the mountains. For several days, I drive slowly on high twisting roads. I stop at various small towns. Throughout the trip, the scenery is incredibly beautiful, but I barely notice. I'm numb to almost every sensation. The only thing that brings me any peace is driving, the sense of motion, the curve of the roads, the sound of the tires, the shifting glare on the windshield, the wind against my arms and face.

Each night, I lie in bed at small motels and watch television. Nothing interests me, especially nothing that has substance. I watch the worst programs I can find. I watch sports and news and game shows and commercials and talk shows. If I'm lucky, I fall asleep. If I don't, I sometimes try to read magazines or newspapers, but they don't interest me either. The nights are unbearably long. Often, I pace the floor of the motel room until I'm exhausted.

When I do fall asleep, I remain unconscious for twice what I would normally sleep, sometimes up to twenty hours. A few times I awake and have no idea where I am or what day it is, and that's partly a relief. As I begin to remember, my energy quickly vanishes. I rapidly lose weight. I try a few times to get drunk but alcohol seems tasteless and unappealing.

At other points in my life, caught inside problems, I might analyze all that had happened and all that might be done. This time, my mind is strangely blank. If anything, simple sounds and phrases repeat randomly and pointlessly through my attenuated thoughts.

Each night, I stare into the TV screen. I see an immense and fathomless void. Lying in bed, the simplest movement, even to change the channel, requires enormous effort. Boredom becomes morbid and crippling. I lose track of time. I contact no one. Again, I feel emptiness and oblivion tempting me. I'm ceasing to exist.

One evening, at a restaurant in a small town, I eat part of a sandwich and then sit staring out the window or at the remaining food. I'm disturbed by a deep, inarticulate voice.

"You gonna eat that?"

"What?"

A man is standing above me.

"Are you going to eat that sandwich?"

"Ah, no, I guess not."

"Can I have it?"

"Well . . . all right."

He sits down and quickly eats the sandwich. He's an obvious drunk, about thirty-five and fairly muscular. He's wearing dark blue overalls, is blonde and has very red skin. The waitress looks at him irritably. After he finishes eating, he stares at me again.

"You driving through?"

I nod.

"Can you give me a ride? I need to see my sister."

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"I want to be alone."

"I won't bother you. And it's not that far."

"Sorry. I need to be alone."

"It's only about forty miles!" he says impatiently.

"Can you please leave me alone?"

He doesn't get up and then asks me for money. I refuse. He asks me if I could buy him another sandwich. I think about it for a moment and then say that if he'll sit somewhere else and leave me alone, I'll buy him another sandwich. He says "okay", moves to the counter and looks at me. I call the waitress over and tell her to give him a sandwich and put it on my bill. She quietly says that I shouldn't do that but I tell her that it's all right. She gets him a sandwich and I forget about him. I continue to stare out the window.

It's getting dark outside. Above the dense trees, the sky turns to gray. Lights are turned on in a store across the street and on the porches of nearby homes. When I finally look back toward the counter, the man is gone.

I pay the bill, go slowly outside and walk toward the parking lot. I randomly decide to leave town, to keep driving. As I walk around the corner of the building I notice something falling toward my head — I move quickly to the side but a metal bar lands heavily on my shoulder and I'm knocked to the ground. I look up and realize that it's the drunk, that he was trying to hit me on the head with a pipe.

He rushes toward me and again swings the pipe toward my head. I barely avoid it. I lunge toward him and knock him to the ground. He drops the pipe and it rolls to the side. As I realize what

he's trying to do I become furious and start punching him in the face. Each blow hurts my hand. He retaliates with an extremely hard punch to the side of my nose. He pushes me away. I feel warm liquid on my lips. He stands up and looks at me like he's going to try to kill me. I find the pipe on the ground next to me and quickly pick it up. He looks at the pipe, and then at me. In his eyes, I see something vaguely familiar. He abruptly runs away.

I stand for a few moments, uncertain about what just happened. I realize that my nose is bleeding. I walk back into the diner. The waitress sees me and anxiously asks what happened. I don't say anything and walk into the bathroom. I stop the bleeding with some brown paper towels and then look at myself in the mirror. On one side, my cheek and nose are bruised. My shoulder hurts and is throbbing.

For the first time in over two weeks, I actually feel something fully. Even though it's pain, it's exhilarating. I suddenly start laughing. My problems seem trivial compared to the suffering of the man who just attacked me. He's an alcoholic, appears to have no money for food and probably nowhere to live. He was willing to injure or kill me simply to get a few dollars or maybe steal a car.

I remember his eyes. What was it that was familiar? I think about them again and again. Then I realize what it was — they remind me of my own.

I wash my face, carefully walk back out to my car and drive away. I don't see the drunk anywhere. With the windows down, the

cool night wind feels incredibly good across my injured face. I drive through foothills along a river for over an hour. I stop the car, get out and look up at the stars. I haven't truly looked at them in months, maybe years.

For a few nights I camp near the river and swim and hike during the day. I develop an enormous appetite and make large meals over a fire. I know that I have to go back to the city soon, but don't want to. Finally, I drive down through the foothills to the ocean.

On the night before going back to the city, I camp alone on an isolated beach. I meet a woman walking two large dogs.

11

There was a woman who lived in a town near the ocean. She owned a small house and she lived alone. When she moved into the house, she decided not to have a television or telephone. She was trying to escape something, although she wasn't sure what it was. Sometimes, she got very, very lonely, and sometimes scared. She decided to buy two dogs to protect her, a male and a female. The dogs had short gray hair, and were both extremely muscular. They seemed wild, almost like a wolves. They had powerful teeth and fangs. They scared almost everyone that saw them except the woman. They were loyal to her, almost jealous.

There was one night in the Summer, it was very foggy but the woman decided to take the dogs for a walk. She walked down toward the beach with a flashlight but could barely see anything, and the dogs started acting very strange and restless. Then the woman saw a light moving toward her from the beach and the dogs became even more agitated. They tried to run toward the light but she held them back. And then the woman noticed something amazing. The bodies of the dogs began to change. They began to get larger. Their heads grew larger, and began to look almost like human heads. The other light got nearer but the woman couldn't tell what it was. Suddenly the dogs broke free from her and started running toward the light. When they reached it, they disappeared. The woman ran after them. When she got to the light she saw a man walking toward her along the road carrying a flashlight. She looked at him but then ran after the dogs.

The fog on the beach was dense and she couldn't see the dogs anywhere. She called out and searched for them along the shore but they didn't come back. In the sand, she found footprints and followed them. But as she did, the shape of the footprints changed. At first they were the footprints of animals but then they grew larger. They became human. She followed them through the sand until she came to a tent. The footprints stopped.

The woman was very frightened but also excited, very excited. She felt different somehow, like she was changing. Slowly, quietly, she went into the tent. Inside, there was a man standing in the dark. It was the man she had seen on the road. He was naked. They began to kiss and caress each other. As they did the woman realized that both of them were changing. She wasn't just a woman. She was a woman but also a dog and a wolf. He was a man but also a dog and a wolf. They were becoming the animals. Every fear and restraint and inhibition and judgment was gone. They didn't think, they took each other instinctively. They bit and scratched and fought. They smelled the scent of each other, tasted the saliva, the sweat, the blood, the moisture. They played and fought for dominance. She couldn't tell where she ended and he began. She felt his fangs biting up and down her neck. She felt his powerful animal muscles moving above her. She scratched him with her claws. She howled into the darkness. There was an instant and unspeakable love between them. They were the only two of their kind in the world.

Afterwards, lying in the dark, they began to be human again. He held her very close for a long time. Their bodies shifted back to what they had been before. The woman's claws and fangs disappeared. Her mind began to understand thoughts, and words, and time. She could hear the ocean, and the dogs barking somewhere near by. She felt tenderness and understanding for the man lying beside her. He was sleeping now. Before she left him, she put her head on his chest and felt his heart, and everything in the world seemed fragile and fleeting. Like a breath surrendered into the sky.