

THE HOARDER

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN a hoarder. When I was young, our family lived on the Outer Banks, where I swept up and down the shore filling my windbreaker pockets with seashells of every shape and size. Back in the privacy of my room I loved nothing better than to lay them out on my bed, arranging them by color or form—whelks and cockles here, clams and scallops there—a beautiful mosaic of dead calcium. The complete skeleton of a horseshoe crab was my finest prize, as I remember. After we moved inland from the Atlantic, my obsession didn't change but the objects of my desire did. Having no money, I was restricted to things I found, so one year developed an extensive collection of Kentucky bird nests, and during the next, an array of bright Missouri butterflies preserved in several homemade display cases. Another year, my father's itinerant work having taken us to the desert, I cultivated old pottery shards from the hot potrerros. Sometimes my younger sister offered to assist with my quests, but I preferred shambling around

on my own. Once in a while I did allow her to shadow me, if only because it was one more thing that annoyed our big brother, who never missed an opportunity to cut me down to size. Weird little bastard, Tom liked calling me. I didn't mind him saying so. I was a weird little bastard.

When first learning to read, I hoarded words just as I would shells, nests, butterflies. Like many an introvert, I went through a phase during which every waking hour was spent inside a library book. These I naturally collected, too, never paying my late dues, writing in a ragged notebook words that were used against Tom at opportune moments. He was seldom impressed when I told him he was a *pachyderm anus* or *festering pustule*, but that might have been because he didn't understand some of what came out of my mouth. Many times I hardly knew what I was saying. Still, the desired results were now and then achieved. When I called him some name that sounded nasty enough—*eunuch's tit*—he would run after me with fists flying and pin me down, demanding a definition, and I'd refuse. Be it black eye or bloody nose, I always came away feeling I'd gotten the upper hand.

Father wasn't a migrant laborer, as such, and all our moving had nothing to do with a field-worker following seasons or harvests. He lived by his wits, so he told us and so we kids believed. But wits or not, every year brought the ritual pulling up of stakes and clearing out. His explanations were always curt, brief like our residencies. He never failed to apologize, and I think he meant it when he told us that the next stop would be more permanent, that he was having a streak of bad luck bound to change for the better. Tom took these uprootings harder than I or my sister. He expressed his anger about being jerked around like circus animals, and complained that this was the old man's fault and we should band together in revolt. It was never clear just how we were supposed to mutiny, and of course we never did. Molly and I wondered privately, whispering together at night, if our family wouldn't be more settled had our

mother still been around. But that road was a dead end even more than the one we seemed to be on already. She'd deserted our father and the rest of us and there was no bringing her back. We used to get cards at Christmas, but even that had stopped some years ago. We seldom mentioned her name now. What was the point?

Like the sun, we traveled westward across the country all the way to the coast, though more circuitously and with much dimmer prospects. I'd made a practice of discarding my latest collection whenever we left one place for another, and not merely disposing of it, but destroying the stuff. Taking a hammer to my stash of petrified wood and bleached bones plucked off the flats near Mojave, after the word came down to start packing, was my own private way of saying good-bye. Molly always cried until I gave her a keepsake, a sparrow nest or slug of quartz crystal. And my dad took me aside to ask why I was undoing all my hard work, unaware of the sharp irony of his question—who was he to talk? He told me that one day when I was grown up I'd look back and regret not treasuring these souvenirs from my youth. But he never stopped me. He couldn't in fairness do that. These were my things and just as I'd brought them together I had every right to junk them and set my sights on the new. Besides, demolishing my collections didn't mean I didn't treasure them in my own way.

We found ourselves in a small, pleasant, nondescript ocean-side town just south of the palm-lined promenades of Santa Barbara and the melodramatic Spanish villas of Montecito, where the Kennedys had spent their honeymoon a few years before. By this time I was old enough to find a job. Tom and I had both given up on school. Too many new faces, too many new curricula. Father couldn't object to his eldest son dropping out of high school, since he himself had done the same. As for me, having turned fifteen, I'd more or less educated myself anyway. It was a testament to Molly's resilient nature that she was never fazed entering all those unknown classrooms across this great land of ours. My responsibility was to make

sure she got to summer school on time and pick her up at day's end, and so I did. This commitment I gladly undertook, since I always liked Molly, and she didn't get in the way of my schedule at the miniature golf course where I was newly employed.

Just as California would mark a deviation in my father's gypsy routine, it would be the great divide for me. Whether I knew it at the time is beside the point. I doubt I did. Tom noticed something different had dawned in me, a new confidence, and while he continued to taunt me, my responses became unpredictable. He might smirk, "Miniature golf . . . now there's a promising career, baby," but rather than object I would cross my arms, smile, and agree, "Just my speed, baby." When we did fight, our battles were higher pitched and more physical, and as often as not, he was the one who got the tooth knocked loose, the lip opened, the kidney punched. Molly gave up trying to be peacemaker and lived more and more in her own world. It was as if we moved into individual mental compartments, like different collectibles in separate cabinets. I couldn't even say for sure what kind of work my father did anymore, though it involved a commute over the mountains to a place called Ojai, which resulted in our seeing less of him than ever. The sun had turned him brown, so his work must have been outside. Probably a construction job—so much for his touted wits. Tom, on the other hand, remained as white as abalone, working in a convenience store. And Molly with her sweet round face covered in freckles and ringed by wildly wavy red hair, the birthright of her maternal Irish ancestry, marched forward with patience and hope that would better befit a daughter of the king of Uz than of a carpenter of Ojai—which our dear brother had by then, with all the cleverness he could muster, dubbed *Oh Low*.

The change was gradual but irrevocable, and would be difficult if not impossible to describe in abstract terms. To suggest that my

compulsion to hoard shifted from objects to essences, from the external world's castoffs to the stuff of spirits, wouldn't be quite right. It might even be false, since what began to arise within me during those long slow days and evenings at work had a manifest concreteness to it. Whether my discovery of glances, fragrances, gestures, voices, the various flavors of nascent sexuality, the potential for beautiful violence that hovers behind those qualities came as the result of my new life at Bayside Park or whether it would have happened no matter where I lived and breathed at that moment, I couldn't say. I do know that Bayside—that perfect world of fantastical architecture and linked greens and strict rules—was where I came awake, felt more alive, as they say, than ever before.

The first time I laid eyes on the place was early evening. Fog, which seasonally rolled in at dusk, settling over the coastal flats and canyons until early afternoon the next day, was drifting like willowy ghosts. I wore my best flannel shirt and a pair of jeans to the interview. My head was all but bald, my old man having given me a fresh trim with his electric clippers, a memento filched from one of his many former employers. Even though it was late June and the day had been warm, I wished I'd brought a sweater since the heavy mist down by the ocean dampened me to the bone. I could hear the surf, once I crossed the empty highway, and started thinking about what questions I might be asked during my interview and what sorts of answers I'd be forced to make up to cover a complete lack of experience. There was a good chance I'd be turned down for the job. After all, I was just a kid who had done nothing with his life beyond collecting debris in forests and fields, and reading comics and worthless books. If I hadn't been so bent on getting clear of our house, pulling together money toward one day having a place of my own, unaffected by my shiftless father and moron brother, I'd have talked myself out of even trying.

As I approached the miniature golf park, I was mesmerized by a ball of brilliance, a white dome of light in the mist that reminded me of some monumental version of one of those snow-shaker toys, what on earth are they called? Those water-filled globes of glass inside which are plastic world's fairs, North Pole dioramas, Eiffel Towers that, when joggled, fall under the spell of a miraculous blizzard. What loomed inside this fluorescent bell jar was a wonderland, a fake dwarf-world populated by real people, reminiscent of snow-globe toys in other ways, too. The fantastic, impossible scenes housed in each, glass or light, were irresistible. I walked through a gate over which was a sign that read BAYSIDE—FOR ALL AGES. What lay before me, smaller than the so-called real world but larger than life, was a village of whirling windmills and miniature cathedrals with spires, of stucco gargoyles and painted grottoes. A white brick castle with turrets ascended the low sky, its paint peeling in the watery weather. Calypso's Cave, the sixth hole. A fanciful pirate ship coved by a waterfall at the seventh. And everywhere I looked, green synthetic alleys. All interconnected and, if a bit seedy, very alluring.

By lying about my age, background, and whatever else, I got the job. When asked at dinner to describe what kind of work was involved, I told my father I was the course steward. In fact, my responsibilities fell somewhere between janitor and errand boy. Absurd as it may sound, I was never happier. Vacuuming the putting lanes; scouring the acre park and adjacent beach for lost balls and abandoned golf clubs; tending the beds of bougainvillea and birds-of-paradise; spearing trash strewn on the trampled, struggling real grass that lay between the perfect alleys; skimming crud out of water traps and ornamental lagoons; retouching paint where paint needed retouching. If Bayside was a museum—and it was, to my eyes—I was its curator. The owner, a lean, sallow, stagnant man named Gallagher, seemed gratified by my attentiveness and pleased that I didn't have any friends to waste my time or

his. Looking back, I realize he was quietly delighted that I hadn't the least interest in playing. What did I care about hitting a ball with a stick into a hole?

That said, I did become an aficionado, in an antiseptic sort of way. Just as I had about the classifications of seashells or the markings of dragonflies in times past, I read everything I could about the sport of miniature golf in the office bookcase, surrounded by framed photos autographed by the rich and famous who had played here long ago. The history was more interesting than I imagined. In the Depression they used sewer pipes, scavenged tires, rain gutters, whatever junk was lying around, and from all the discards built their Rinkiedinks, as the obstacle courses were called, scale model worlds in which the rules were fair and the playing field—however bunkered, curved, slanted, stepped—was truly level. Once upon a time, I told Molly, this was the classy midnight pastime of America's royalty. Hollywood moguls drank champagne between holes, putting with stars and starlets under the moon until the sun came up. One of the earliest sports played outdoors under artificial lights, miniature golf was high Americana and even now, though it had a degraded heritage, was something finer than people believed.

My favorite trap in the park was the windmill, which rose seven feet into the soggy air of the twelfth green. Its blades were powered by an old car battery that needed checking once a week, as its cable connections tended to corrode in the damp, bringing the attraction—not to mention the obstacle—to a standstill. One entered this windmill by a hidden door at the back, which wasn't observable to people playing the course, indeed was pretty invisible unless you knew it was there. Gallagher had by August learned to trust me with everything except ticket taking, which was his exclusive province when it came to Bayside, and about which I could not have cared less. So when, one evening, a couple complained to him

that the windmill blades on twelve weren't working, he handed me a flashlight, some pliers, a knife, and explained what to do. The windmill was at the far end of the park and I made my way there as quickly as possible without disturbing any of the players.

Once inside, I discovered a new realm. A world within a world. Fixing the oxidized battery posts was nothing, done in a matter of minutes. But then I found myself wanting to stay. What held me was that I could see, through tiny windows in the wooden structure, people playing, unaware they were being watched. A girl with her mother and father standing behind, encouraging her, humped over the blue ball, her face contorted into a mask of concentration, putting right at me, knowing nothing of my presence. One shot and through she went, between my legs, and after her, her mom and dad. They talked among themselves, a nice, dreary, happy family, in perfect certainty their words were exchanged in private. It was something to behold.

I stuck around. Who wouldn't? Others passed through me, the ghost in the windmill, and none of them knew, not even the pair of tough bucks who played the rounds every night, betting on each hole, whose contraband beer bottles I'd collected that very morning. It became my habit, from then on, to grab time in the windmill during work to watch and listen. I found myself particularly interested in young couples, many of them not much older than I was, out on dates. Having avoided school since we came west, and being by nature an outsider, my social skills were limited. The physical urgency I felt, spying on these lovers, I sated freely behind the thin walls of my hiding place. Meanwhile, I learned how lovers speak, what kind of extravagant lies they tell each other, the promises they make, and all I could feel was gratitude that my brand of intimacy didn't involve saying anything to anybody. The things I found myself whispering in the shade of my hermitage none of them would have liked to hear, either. That much I knew for sure.

One evening, to my horror, Tom appeared in my peephole vista. What was he doing here? What gave him the right? And who was the girl standing with him, laughing at one of his maudlin jokes? He had a beer in his pocket, like the toughs. His arm was slung over the girl's shoulder, dangling like a broken pendulum, and his face was rosy for once. They laughed again and looked around and, taking advantage of being (almost) alone, kissed. At first I stood frozen in the windmill whose blades spun slowly, knowing that if Tom caught me watching, he'd beat the hell out of me and back at home deny everything. But soon I realized there was nothing to fear. This was my domain. Tom could not touch me in my hide-away world. Much the same way I used to trespass his superiority with those words lifted out of books, I offered him the longest stare I could manage. Not blinking, not wincing, I made my face into an unreadable blank. Pity he couldn't respond.

Work went well. Some days I showed up early, on others left late. Gallagher one September morning informed me that if I thought I would be earning overtime pay I was mistaken and reacted with a smiling shrug when I told him my salary was more than fair. "You're a good kid," he concluded. And so I was, in that what he asked me to do I did, prompt and efficient. Players, it turned out, were more irresponsible and given to vandalism than I'd have assumed. Since the game had so much to do with disciplined timing, thoughtful strategy, a steady hand and eye, what were these broken putters and bashed fiberglass figures about? Perhaps I'd become an idealistic company man, but the extensive property damage Gallagher suffered seemed absurd. I helped him with repairs and thought of asking why he didn't prosecute the offenders; we both knew who they were. Instead I kept my concerns to myself, sensing subconsciously that it was best, as they say, not to call the kettle black. After all, Gallagher surely noticed my long absences within the precincts of the park and by mutual silence consented to them, so long as I got the work done.

In my years of wandering far larger landscapes than Bayside, I had learned where the birds and beasts of the earth hide themselves against their enemies and how they go about imposing their will, however brief and measly it may be, on the world around them. All my nest hunts and shell meanderings had served me well, though here what I collected thus far were fantasies. I can say I almost preferred the limitations of the park. Finding fresh places to hide was my own personal handicap, as it were. And since this was one of the old courses, ostentatious in the most wonderful way—a glorious exemplar of its kind—the possibilities seemed infinite. They weren't, but I took advantage of what was feasible, and like the birds and crustaceans whose homes I used to collect, having none myself to speak of, I more or less moved into Bayside, establishing makeshift berths, stowing food and pop, wherever I secretly could. Like the hermit crab, I began to inhabit empty shells.

The girlfriend's name was Penny. Penny for my thoughts. Thin, with sand-colored hair that fell straight down her back to her waist, she had a wry, pale mouth, turned-up nose, and brown searching eyes, deep and almost tragic, which didn't seem to fit with her pastel halter and white pedal pushers. The desperate look in those eyes of hers quickly began to haunt me and, as I watched, my bewilderment over what she was doing with the likes of Tom only grew. In life many things remain ambiguous, chancy, muddled, unknowing and unknowable, but she seemed to be someone who, given the right circumstances, might come to understand me, maybe even believe in me. I developed a vague sense that there was something special between us, a kind of spiritual kinship, difficult to define. Molly was the one who told me her name. She said they had taken her on a picnic up near Isla Vista, and that Penny had taught her how to pick mussels at low tide. Very considerate of Tom, I thought, very familial.

Meantime, my brother and I had never been more estranged. Our absentee father kept a roof over our heads but was otherwise slowly falling to pieces, a prematurely withering man who spent his time after work in taverns, communing with scotch and fellow zilches. Molly had made friends with whom she walked to school these days, so I wasn't seeing much of her either. And I, always the loner, had never been more solitary. Time and patience, twin essentials to any collector, were all I needed to bring my new obsession around. So it was that I took my time getting to know Penny, watching from the hidden confines of the windmill, the little train station with its motionless locomotive, the Hall of the Mountain King with its par five, the toughest hole on the course. Having wrapped her tightly in my imaginative wings, it was hard to believe I still hadn't actually met Tom's friend.

He, who returned to Bayside again and again with some perverse notion he was irritating me, would never have guessed how much I learned about his Penny over the months. Anonymous and invisible as one of the buccaneer statuettes on the pirate ship, I stalked them whenever they came to play, moving easily from one of my sanctuaries to another, all the while keeping my boss under control, so to speak, Gallagher who had grown dependent on me by this time. She was an only daughter. Her father worked on an offshore oil rig. Chickadee was the name of her pet parrot. She loved a song by the Reflections with the lyric *Our love's gonna be written down in history, just like Romeo and Juliet*. French fries were her favorite food. All manner of data. But my knowing her came in dribs and drabs, and it began to grate on me that what I found out was strictly the result of Tom's whim to bring her to Bayside. I needed more, needed to meet her, to make my own presence known.

How this came about was not as I might have scripted it, but imperfect means sometimes satisfy rich ends. The first of December was Tom's birthday, his eighteenth. As it happened, it fell on a

Monday, the one day of the week Bayside was closed. Molly put the party together, a gesture from the heart, no doubt hoping to bring our broken, scattered, dissipating family into some semblance of a household. When she invited me, my answer was naturally no until, by chance, I heard her mention on the phone that Penny was invited. She even asked Gallagher to come. Thank God he declined. Molly and a couple of her friends baked a chocolate cake and the old man proved himself up to the role of fatherhood by giving Tom the most extravagant present any of us had ever seen. Even our birthday boy was so overwhelmed by his generosity that he gave Dad a kiss on the forehead. Molly and I glanced at one another, embarrassed. Ours was a family that didn't touch, so this was quite a historic moment. If I hadn't spent most of the evening furtively staring at Penny, I might have thrown up my piece of cake then and there.

It was a camera, a real one. Argus C3. Black box with silver trim. Film and carrying case, too. The birthday card read, *Here's looking at you, kid! With affection and best luck for the future years, Dad and your loving brother and sister.* My head spun from the hypocrisy, the blatant nonsense of this hollow sentiment, but I put on the warm, smiling face of a good brother, ignoring Tom while accepting from his girlfriend an incandescent smile of her own, complicated as always by those bittersweet eyes of hers, and said, "Let's get a picture." Tom's resentment at having to let me help him read the instructions for loading gave me more satisfaction than I could possibly express. We got it done, though, and the portrait was taken by a parent who arrived to pick up one of Molly's friends. The party was a great success, we all told Molly. That Argus was a mythical monster with a hundred eyes I kept to myself. Although the idea of stealing his camera came to me that night—Tom would never have used it anyway—I waited a week, three weeks, a full month, before removing it from his possession.

With it I began photographing Penny. At first, my portraits were confined to what I could manage from various hiding places at the park. But the artificial light wasn't strong enough to capture colors and details in her face and figure, and of course I couldn't use flashbulbs, so the only decent images I managed to get were on the rare occasions when she played during the day, often weekend afternoons, and not always with Tom. I kept every shot, no matter how poor the exposure, in a cigar box stowed inside a duffel in a corner of the windmill along with the camera. During off-hours I often took the box, under my jacket, down to some remote stretch of beach and pored over the pictures with a magnifying glass I'd acquired for the purpose. Some were real prizes, more treasured, even cherished, than anything I'd collected in the past. One image became the object of infatuation, taken at great risk from an open dormer in the castle. It must have been a warm early January day, because Penny wore a light blouse that had caught a draft of wind off the ocean, ballooning the fabric forward away from her, so that from my perch looking down I shot her naked from forehead to navel, both small, round breasts exposed to my lens. The photo was pretty abstract, shot at an odd angle, with her features foreshortened, a hodgepodge of fabric and flesh that would be hard to read, much less appreciate the way I did, unless you knew what you were looking at, whose uncovered body you were seeing laid out on that flat, shiny silver paper. Thinking back to those heady times, I realize most pornography is very conventional, easily understood by the lusty eye, and certainly more explicit. But my innocent snapshots, taken without her knowledge or consent, seem even now to be more obscene than any professional erotic material I have since encountered.

Things developed. I made the fatal step of finding out where Penny lived. Her house was only a mile, give or take, from ours. It became my habit to go to bed with an alarm clock under my pillow, put there so that only I would hear it at midnight, or one,

or two in the morning, when I'd quietly get dressed and sneak out. These excursions were as haphazard as, if not more than, what I did at the park. I took the camera with me and often came home with nothing, the window to her bedroom having been dark, or worse—her lights still on, the shade drawn, and a shadow moving tantalizingly back and forth on its scrim. But there were occasional triumphs.

Milling in a hedge of jasmine one moonless night, seeing the houses along her street were all hushed and dark, I was about to give up my one-boy siege and walk back home when I heard a car come up the block. Tom's junker coasted into dim view, parking lights showing the way. The only sound was of rubber tires softly chewing pebbles in the pavement. Retreating into the jasmine, I breathed through my mouth as slowly as I could. Penny emerged from the car many long minutes later and dashed right past me—I could smell her perfume over that of the winter flowers—and let herself into the house with hardly a sound. Good old cunning Tom must have dropped his car into neutral, as it drifted down the slanted grade until, a few doors away, he started the engine and drove away.

The lateness of the hour might have given her the idea that no one would notice if she didn't close her shades. Or maybe she was tired and forgot. Or maybe she was afraid to make any unnecessary noise in the house that would wake her parents. She lit a candle, and I saw more that night than I ever had before. To say it was a revelation, a small personal apocalypse, would be to diminish what happened to me as I watched her thin limbs naked in the anemic yellow, hidden only by the long hair she brushed before climbing into bed. How much I would have given to stretch that moment out forever. Though the camera shutter resounded in the dead calm with crisp, brief explosions, I unloaded my roll. After she blew out the candle, I retreated in a panicked ecstasy, dazed as a drunk.

The film came out better than I'd hoped—the blessing that would prove a curse, as they might have written in one of those old novels I used to read. The pimply kid who handed me my finished exposures over the counter at the camera shop, and took my crumple of dollars, asked me to wait for a minute.

“How come?” I asked.

Not looking up, he said, “The manager's in the darkroom. He wanted to have a few words with whoever picked up this roll. You got a minute?”

“No problem,” I smiled.

When he disappeared into the back of the shop, I slipped out as nonchalantly as possible and walked around the corner before breaking into a run, until I reached the highway and, beyond, the golf park. Gallagher mentioned that I was even earlier than usual, not looking up from his morning paper in the office. I explained I wanted to do some work on the Calypso Cave if he didn't mind. He said nothing one way or the other. Toolbox in hand, I hurried instead to the windmill, wondering what kind of imbecile Gallagher thought I was. Nothing mattered once I spread the images in a fan before me in the half-light of my refuge. Aside from having cost money to be developed, these new trophies were just as virtuous, as pure and irreproachable as any bird nest or seashell I'd ever collected—perhaps more innocent yet, I told myself, since nothing had been disturbed or in any way hurt by my recent activities. I had given the camera shop a fake name and wrong phone number. Everything was fine. To describe the photographs of Penny further would be to sully things, so I won't. She was only beautiful in her unobservance, in her not quite absolute solitude.

Spring came and with it all kinds of migratory birds. This would normally have been the season when our family meeting—which

the old man called, as we might have expected, one Sunday morning—meant the usual song and dance about moving. Out of habit, if nothing else, we gathered around the kitchen table, Tom thoughtfully drumming his fingers and Molly with down-cast eyes, not wanting to leave her new friends. Whatever the big guy had to say, I knew I was staying, no matter what. I was old enough to make ends meet, and meet them I would without the help of some pathetic Ojai roofer. I could live in the windmill or the castle for a while, and Gallagher would never know the difference. Eventually I'd get my own apartment. Besides, where was there left to go?

He came into the room with a grim look on his heavy brown face. "Two things," he said, sitting.

"Want some coffee, Dad?" Molly tried.

"First is that Tom is in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" my brother asked, genuinely upset.

Our father didn't look at him when he said, "I might have thought you'd make better use of your birthday present, son."

Tom was bewildered. "I don't know what you're talking about." He looked at me and Molly for support. Neither of us had, for different reasons, anything to offer. Surely it must have occurred to my dear brother that having misplaced his fancy birthday present and kept it a secret would come back to haunt him. On a lark, I'd started using his name when I went to different stores to have the film developed. Seemed they'd caught up with their culprit.

"Much more important is the second problem."

We were hushed.

"Your mother has passed away."

No words. A deep silence. Tom stared at him. Molly began to cry. I stared at my hands folded numb in my lap and tried without success to remember what she'd looked like. I had come to think of myself as having no mother, and now I truly didn't. What difference did it make, I wanted to say, but kept quiet.

“I’m going back for a couple weeks to sort everything out, make sure she’s—taken care of, best as possible.”

It was left at that. No further questions, nor any answers. However, when we put him on the flight in Los Angeles, Tom having driven us down, I could tell my brother remained in the dark about that first problem broached at the family meeting. Dull as he was, he did display sufficient presence of mind not to bring it up when such weightier matters were being dealt with. The old man, waving to us as he boarded his flight, looked for all the world the broken devil he was becoming, or already had become.

Things moved relentlessly after this. Mother was put to rest and her estranged husband returned from the East annihilated, poor soul. Molly withdrew from everybody but me. Penny and my brother had broken up by the time June fog began rolling ashore in this, my year anniversary at Bayside. It fell to me, of all people, to nurture family ties, such as they were. To make, like an oriole, a work of homey art from lost ribbons, streamers, string, twigs, the jetsam of life, in which we vulnerable birds could live. I had no interest, by the way, in mourning our forsaken mother. But for a brief time, I tried to be nice to the old man and avoid Tom.

Which is not to say that my commitment to Penny changed during those transitional months. I continued to photograph her whenever I could, adept now that I had come to know her routines, day by day, week by week. Instead of hiding from her at Bayside, or downtown, or even in her neighborhood, where sometimes I happened to be walking along and accidentally, as it were, bumped into her, I stopped and talked about this or that, when she wasn’t in a hurry. If she asked me about Tom, I assured her that he was doing great, and changed the subject. Did the Reflections have a new hit song? I would ask. Did she want to come down to the golf course, bring some girlfriends along, do the circuit for free? She appreciated the invitation but had lost interest in games and songs and many other things. Rather than feeling defeated I became even

more devoted. My collection of photographs throughout this period of not-very-random encounters and lukewarm responses to my propositions grew by leaps and bounds. I enrolled pseudonymously in a photo club that gave me access to a darkroom where I learned without much trouble how to develop film. Hundreds of images of Penny emerged, many of them underexposed and overexposed and visually unreadable to anyone but me. But also some of them were remarkable for their poignant crudity, since by that time I'd captured her in most every possible human activity.

The inevitable happened on an otherwise dull, gray day. Late afternoon, just after sunset. The sky was like unpolished pewter and late summer fog settled along the coast. I was down near my windmill, loitering at Gallagher's not great expense, with nothing going on and nothing promising either that evening, except maybe the usual jog over to Penny's to see what there was to see, when, without warning, I was caught by the collar of my shirt and thrown to the ground. I must have blurted some kind of shout, or cry, but remember at first a deep exterior silence as I was dragged, my hands grasping at my throat, through a breach in the fence and out onto the sand. The pounding in my ears was deafening and I felt my face bloat. I tried kicking and twisting, but the hands that held me were much stronger than mine. I blacked out, then came to, soaked in salt water and sweat, and saw my brother's face close to mine spitting out words I couldn't hear through the tumultuous noise of crashing waves and throbbing blood. He slapped me. And slapped me backhanded again. Then pulled me up like a rough lover so that we faced each other eye to eye, lips to lips. I still couldn't hear him, though I knew what he was cursing about. Bastard must have been following me, spying, and uncovered my hideout and stash.

What bothered me most was that Tom, not I, was destroying my collection. He had no right, no right. None of the photographs that swept helter-skelter into the surf, as we fought on that dismal evening, were his to destroy. Much as I'd like to sketch those

minutes in such a way that my seizing the golf ball from my shirt pocket, cramming it into his mouth, and clamping his jaw shut with all the strength I had were gestures meant to silence, not slay him, it would be a lie.

Lie or not, Tom went down hard, gasping for air, and I went down with him, my hands like a vise on his pop-eyed face. He grabbed at his neck now, just as I had grabbed at mine moments before, the ball lodged in the back of his throat. A wave came up over us both in a sizzling splash, knocking us shoreward before pulling us back toward the black water and heavy rollers. Everywhere around us were Penny's images, washing in and out with the tidal surges. Climbing to my feet, I watched the hungry waves carry my brother away. I looked up and down the coast and, seeing no one in the settling dark, walked in the surf a quarter mile northward, maybe farther, before crossing a grass strip that led, beneath some raddled palms, to solitary sidewalks that took me home, where I changed clothes. In no time, I was at work again, my mind a stony blank.

Whether by instinct or dumb luck, my having suppressed the urge to salvage as many photos as I could that night, and carry them away with me when I left the scene where Tom and I had quarreled, stood me in good stead. Given that I had the presence of mind to polish the Argus and hide it under Tom's bed, where it would be discovered the next day by the authorities when they rummaged through his room looking for evidence that might explain what happened, I think my abandonment of my cache of portraits was inadvertent genius.

Genius, too, if heartfelt, was my brave comforting of Molly, who cried her eyes out on hearing the disastrous news. And I stuck close to our father, who moped around the bungalow we called home, all but cataleptic, mumbling to himself about the curse that

followed him wherever he went. Though they had not ruled out an accidental death—he disgorged the golf ball before drowning—our father was, I understand, their prime suspect. A walk on the beach, man to man, a parental confrontation accidentally gone too far. In fact, their instinct, backed by the circumstantial evidence of his having been troubled by his estranged wife’s demise, given to drinking too much, and his recent rage toward his eldest kid over having taken weird, even porno snapshots of his girlfriend, led them in the right direction. Just not quite. Molly and I had watertight alibis, so to speak, not that we needed them. She was with several friends watching television, and Gallagher signed an affidavit that I was working with him side by side during the time of the assault. Speculating about the gap in the fence and faint, windblown track marks in the sand, he said, “Always trespassers trying to get in for free,” and, not wanting to cast aspersions on the deceased, he nevertheless mentioned that he’d seen somebody sneaking in and out of that particular breach at odd hours, and that the person looked somewhat like Tom.

Our father was eventually cleared. Turned out Sad Sack was a covert Casanova with a lady friend as alibi in Ojai. This explained why our annual rousting had not taken place. He need not have been shy about it, as his children would prove to like her, Shannon is the name. Whether Gallagher’d been so used to me going through my paces—efficient, thorough, devoted—that he improved on an assumption by making it a sworn fact or whether he really thought he saw me at work that night, ubiquitous ghost that I was, or whether he was covering for me, not wanting to lose the one sucker who understood Bayside and could keep it going when he no longer cared to, I will never know. Gallagher himself would perish a year later of a heart attack in our small office, slumped in his cane chair beneath those pictures of stars who gazed down at him with ruthless benevolence.

The initial conclusions reached in Tom’s murder investigation proved much the same as the inconclusive final one. They had been

thorough, questioned all of Tom's friends. Certainly, Penny might have wanted him dead given how humiliated, how mortified she was by the photographs that had been recovered along the coast. Asked to look through them, she did the best she could. While she did seem to think Tom had been with her on some occasions when this or that shot was taken—they were all so awful, so invasive, so perverse—she couldn't be sure. Given that he was present in none of the exposures, that the camera used was his, and so forth, there was no reason to look elsewhere for the photographer. Penny had a motive, but also an alibi like everyone else.

None of it mattered, finally, because good came from the bad. Our family was closer than ever, and Dad seemed, after a few months of dazed mourning, to shake off his long slump. He brought his Ojai bartender girlfriend around sometimes, and Molly made dinner. Penny too was transformed by the tragedy. Before my watchful eyes she changed into an even gentler being, more withdrawn than before, yes, but composed and calm—some might say remote, but they'd be wrong, not knowing her like I did. It was as if she changed from a color photograph to black and white. I didn't mind the shift. To the contrary.

The morning she came down to Bayside to speak with me was lit by the palest pink air and the dank, hard wind of late autumn. I'd been the model of discretion in the several years that followed Tom's passing, keeping tabs on Penny out of respect, really, making sure she was doing all right in the wake of what must have been quite a shock to her. Never overstepping my bounds—at least not in such a way that she could possibly know. Meanwhile, I had matured. Molly told me I'd become a handsome dog, as she put it. Her girlfriends had crushes on me, she said. I smiled and let them play the golf course gratis, why not. Then Penny turned up, unexpected, wanting to give me something.

“For your birthday,” she said, handing me a small box tied with a white ribbon. There was quite a gale blowing off the ocean that day and her hair buffeted her head. With her free hand she drew a long garland of it, fine as corn silk, away from her mouth and melancholy eyes. It was a gesture of absolute purity. Penny was a youthful twenty-one, and I an aged nineteen.

I must have looked surprised, because she said, “You look like you forgot.”

She followed me into the office, where we could get out of the wind. All the smugly privileged faces in Gallagher’s nostalgic gallery had long since been removed from the walls and sent off to his surviving relatives, who, not wanting much to bother with their inheritance of a slowly deteriorating putt-putt golf park, allowed me to continue in my capacity as Bayside steward and manager. Like their deceased uncle—a childless bachelor whose sole concern had been this fanciful (let me admit) dump—they thought I was far older than nineteen. The lawyer who settled his estate looked into the records, saw on my filed application that I was in my midtwenties, and further saw that Gallagher wanted me to continue there as long as it was my wish, and thus and so. A modest check went out each month to the estate, the balance going to moderate upkeep and my equally moderate salary. What did I care? My needs were few. I spent warm nights down here in my castle, or the windmill, and was always welcome at home, where the food was free. And now, as if in a dream, here was my Penny, bearing a gift.

I undid the ribbon and tore away the paper. It was a snow globe with a hula dancer whose hips gyrated in the sparkling blizzard after I gave it a good shake.

“How did you know?” I asked, smiling at her smiling face.

“You like it?”

“I love it.”

“Molly told me this was your new thing.”

“Kind of stupid, I guess. But they’re like little worlds you can disappear into if you stare at them long enough.”

“I don’t think it’s stupid.”

“Yours goes in the place of honor,” taking the gift over to my shelves, which were lined with dozens of others, where I installed the hula girl at the very heart of the collection.

Penny peered up and down the rows, her face as luminous as I’ve ever seen it, beaming like a child. She plucked one down and held it to the light. “Can I?” she asked. I told her sure and watched as she shook the globe and the white flakes flew round and round in the glassed-in world. She gazed at the scene within while I gazed at her. One of those moments that touch on perfection.

“Very cool,” she whispered, as if in a reverie. “But isn’t it a shame that it’s always winter?”

“I don’t really see them as snowflakes,” I said.

“What then?”

Penny turned to me and must have glimpsed something different in the way I was looking at her since she glanced away and commented that no one was playing today. The wind, I told her. Sand gets in your eyes and makes the synthetic carpet too rough to play on. In fact, there wasn’t much reason to keep the place open, I continued, and asked her if she’d let me drive her up to Santa Barbara for the afternoon, wander State Street together, get something to eat. I was not that astonished when she agreed. Cognizant or not, she’d been witness to the character, the nature, the spirit of my gaze, had the opportunity to reject what it meant. By accepting my invitation she was in a fell swoop accepting me.

“You can have it if you want,” I offered, taking her free hand and nodding at the snow globe.

“No, it belongs with the others.” She stared out the window while a fresh gale whipped up off the ocean, making the panes shiver and chatter as grains of sand swirled around us. I looked past her silhouette and remarked that the park looked like a great

snow globe out there. How perverse it was of me to want to ask her, just then, if she missed Tom sometimes. Instead, I told her we ought to get going, but not before I turned her chin toward me with trembling fingers and gently kissed her.

As we drove north along the highway the sky cleared, admitting a sudden warm sun into its blue. "Aren't you going to tell me?" she asked, as if out of that blue, and for a brief, ghastly moment I thought I'd been found out and was being asked to confess. Seeing my bewilderment, Penny clarified, "What the snowflakes are, if they're not snowflakes?"

I shifted my focus from the road edged by flowering hedges and eucalyptus over to Penny, and back again, suddenly wanting to tell her everything, pour my heart out to her. I wanted to tell her how I had read somewhere that in some cultures people refuse to have their photographs taken, believing the camera steals their souls. Wanted to tell her when Tom demolished my collection of adoring images of her, not only did he seal his own fate, but engendered hers. I wished I could tell her how, struggling with him in waves speckled with swirling photographs, I was reminded of a snow globe. And I did want to answer her question, to say that the flakes seemed to me like captive souls floating around hopelessly in their little glass cages, circling some frivolous god, but I would never admit such nonsense. Instead, I told her she must have misunderstood and, glancing at her face bathed in stormy light, knew in my heart that later this afternoon, maybe during the night, I would be compelled to finish the destructive work my foolish brother had begun.