

Floating upward through a confusion of dreams and memory, curving like a trout through the rings of previous risings, I surface. My eyes open. I am awake.

Cataract sufferers must see like this when the bandages are removed after the operation: every detail as sharp as if seen for the first time, yet familiar too, known from before the time of blindness, the remembered and the seen coalescing as in a stereoscope.

It is obviously very early. The light is no more than dusk that leaks past the edges of the blinds. But I see, or remember, or both, the uncurtained windows, the bare rafters, the board walls with nothing on them except a calendar that I think was here the last time we were, eight years ago.

What used to be aggressively spartan is shabby now. Nothing has been refreshed or added since Charity and Sid turned the compound over to the children. I should feel as if I were waking up in some Ma-and-Pa motel in hard-times country, but I don't. I have spent too many good days and nights in this cottage to be depressed by it.

There is even, as my eyes make better use of the dusk and I lift my head off the pillow to look around, something marvelously reassuring about the room, a warmth even in the gloom. Associations, probably, but also color. The unfinished pine of the walls and ceilings has mellowed, over the years, to a rich honey color, as if stained by the warmth of the people who built it into a shelter for

their friends. I take it as an omen; and though I remind myself why we are here, I can't shake the sense of loved familiarity into which I just awoke.

The air is as familiar as the room. Standard summer-cottage taint of mice, plus a faint, not-unpleasant remembrance of skunks under the house, but around and through those a keenness as of seven thousand feet. Illusion, of course. What smells like altitude is latitude. Canada is only a dozen miles north, and the ice sheet that left its tracks all over this region has not gone for good, but only withdrawn. Something in the air, even in August, says it will be back.

In fact, if you could forget mortality, and that used to be easier here than in most places, you could really believe that time is circular, and not linear and progressive as our culture is bent on proving. Seen in geological perspective, we are fossils in the making, to be buried and eventually exposed again for the puzzlement of creatures of later eras. Seen in either geological or biological terms, we don't warrant attention as individuals. One of us doesn't differ that much from another, each generation repeats its parents, the works we build to outlast us are not much more enduring than anthills, and much less so than coral reefs. Here everything returns upon itself, repeats and renews itself, and present can hardly be told from past.

Sally is still sleeping. I slide out of bed and go barefooted across the cold wooden floor. The calendar, as I pass it, insists that it is not the one I remember. It says, accurately, that it is 1972, and that the month is August.

The door creaks as I ease it open. Keen air, gray light, gray lake below, gray sky through the hemlocks whose tops reach well above the porch. More than once, in summers past, Sid and I cut down some of those weedlike trees to let more light into the guest cottage. All we did was destroy some individuals, we never discouraged the species. The hemlocks like this steep shore. Like other species, they hang on to their territory.

I come back in and get my clothes off a chair, the same clothes I wore from New Mexico, and dress. Sally sleeps on, used up by the

long flight and the five-hour drive up from Boston. Too hard a day for her, but she wouldn't hear of breaking the trip. Having been summoned, she would come.

For a minute I stand listening to her breathing, wondering if I dare go out and leave her. But she is deeply asleep, and should stay that way for a while. No one is going to be coming around at this hour. This early piece of the morning is mine. Tiptoeing, I go out onto the porch and stand exposed to what, for all my senses can tell me, might as well be 1938 as 1972.

No one is up in the Lang compound. No lights through the trees, no smell of kindling smoke on the air. I go out the spongy woods path past the woodshed and into the road, and there I meet the sky, faintly brightening in the east, and the morning star as steady as a lamp. Down under the hemlocks I thought it overcast, but out here I see the bowl of the sky pale and spotless.

My feet take me up the road to the gate, and through it. Just inside the gate the road forks. I ignore the Ridge House road and choose instead the narrow dirt road that climbs around the hill to the right. John Wightman, whose cottage sits at the end of it, died fifteen years ago. He will not be up to protest my walking in his ruts. It is a road I have walked hundreds of times, a lovely lost tunnel through the trees, busy this morning with birds and little shy rustling things, my favorite road anywhere.

Dew has soaked everything. I could wash my hands in the ferns, and when I pick a leaf off a maple branch I get a shower on my head and shoulders. Through the hardwoods along the foot of the hill, through the belt of cedars where the ground is swampy with springs, through the spruce and balsam of the steep pitch, I go alertly, feasting my eyes. I see coon tracks, an adult and two young, in the mud, and maturing grasses bent like croquet wickets with wet, and spotted orange Amanitas, at this season flattened or even concave and holding water, and miniature forests of club moss and ground pine and ground cedar. There are brown caves of shelter, mouse and hare country, under the wide skirts of spruce.

My feet are wet. Off in the woods I hear a Peabody bird tentatively try out a song he seems to have half forgotten. I look to the

left, up the slope of the hill, to see if I can catch a glimpse of Ridge House, but see only trees.

Then I come out on the shoulder of the hill, and there is the whole sky, immense and full of light that has drowned the stars. Its edges are piled with hills. Over Stannard Mountain the air is hot gold, and as I watch, the sun surges up over the crest and stares me down.

We didn't come back to Battell Pond this time for pleasure. We came out of affection and family solidarity, as adopted members of the clan, and because we were asked for and expected. But I can't feel somber now, any more than I could when I awoke in the shabby old guest cottage. Quite the reverse. I wonder if I have ever felt more alive, more competent in my mind and more at ease with myself and my world, than I feel for a few minutes on the shoulder of that known hill while I watch the sun climb powerfully and confidently and see below me the unchanged village, the lake like a pool of mercury, the varying greens of hayfields and meadows and sugarbush and black spruce woods, all of it lifting and warming as the stretched shadows shorten.

There it was, there it is, the place where during the best time of our lives friendship had its home and happiness its headquarters.

When I come in I find Sally sitting up, the blind closest to the bed—the one she can reach—raised to let a streak of sun into the room. She is drinking a cup of coffee from the thermos and eating a banana from the fruit basket that Hallie left when she put us to bed last night.

"Not breakfast," Hallie said. "Just *hazari*. We'll come and get you for brunch, but we won't come too early. You'll be tired and off your clock. So sleep in, and we'll come and get you about ten. After brunch we'll go up and see Mom, and later in the afternoon she's planned a picnic on Folsom Hill."

"A picnic?" Sally said. "Is she well enough to go on a picnic? If she's doing it for us, she shouldn't."

"That's the way she's arranged it," Hallie said. "She said you'd be tired, and to let you rest, and if she says you'll be tired, you might

as well be tired. If she plans a picnic, you'd better want a picnic. No, she'll be all right. She saves her strength for the things that matter to her. She wants it like old times."

I let up the other two blinds and lighten the dim room. "Where'd you go?" Sally asks.

"Up the old Wightman road."

I pour myself coffee and sit down in the wicker chair that I remember as part of the furniture of the Ark. From the bed Sally watches me. "How was it?"

"Beautiful. Quiet. Good earthy smells. It hasn't changed."

"I wish I could have been along."

"I'll take you up later in the car."

"No, we'll be going up to the picnic, that's enough." She sips her coffee, watching me over the rim of the cup. "Isn't it typical? At death's door, and she wants it like old times, and orders everybody to *make* it that way. And worries about us being tired. Ah, she's going to leave a hole! There's *been* a hole, ever since we... Did you feel any absences?"

"No absences. Presences."

"I'm glad. I can't imagine this place without them in it. Both of them."

Long-continued disability makes some people saintly, some self-pitying, some bitter. It has only clarified Sally and made her more herself. Even when she was young and well she could appear so calm and withdrawn from human heat and hurt that she fooled people. Sid Lang, who is by no means unperceptive, and who was surely a little in love with her at one time, used to call her Proserpine, and tease her with lines from Swinburne:

Pale, beyond porch and portal
Crowned with calm leaves, she stands
Who gathers all things mortal
With cold immortal hands.

Her cold immortal hands got to be a joke among us. But long before then, back during the years when her mother was having to

stash her like a parcel in any convenient place, that was when she learned quiet, the way fawns are supposed to lie unmoving, camouflaged and scentless, where their mothers leave them. Some hand, very early, brushed her forehead serene as stone; she seems as tranquil within as without. But I have known her a long time. The refining of her face by age and illness that has given a fragile elegance to her temples and cheekbones has concentrated her in her eyes.

Now her eyes give the lie to her passive, acceptant face. They are smoky and troubled. She fixes them on her hands, which she folds, unfolds, refolds, and speaks to. "I dreamed about her. I woke up dreaming about her."

"That's natural enough."

"We were having some kind of fight. She wanted me to do something, and I was resisting her, and she was furious. So was I. Isn't that a miserable way to ...?" She pauses, and then, as if I have contradicted her, bursts out, "They're the only family we ever had. Our lives would have been totally different and a lot harder without them. We'd never have known this place, or the people who have meant the most to us. Your career would have been different—you might have been stuck in some cow college. Except for Charity, I wouldn't be alive. I wouldn't have wanted to be."

"I know."

I am sitting with my back to the window. On the bed table is a tumbler of water that I set there for Sally last night. The sun, coming in flat, knocks a prismatic oval out of the tumbler and lays it on the ceiling. I reach out my foot and kick the table. The rainbow image quivers. I lift a hand and block the beam of sun from the glass. The rainbow goes out.

Sally has been watching me, frowning. "What are you telling me? It's all over? Accept? I get tired of accepting. I'm tired of hearing that the Lord shapes the back to the burden. Who said that?"

"I don't know. I didn't."

"Maybe it's true, but I don't need any more shaping. I wake up here where everything reminds me of them, and I'm dreaming we're quarreling, and I think how I let myself judge her, and how long it's been, and I just want to weep and mourn."

Rebuking herself, she makes a disgusted face. We look at each other uncomfortably. I say, because she seems to need some expression of distress from me, "I'll tell you one place I felt absences. Last night. I knew Charity wouldn't be out with a flashlight cheering our arrival, but I expected Sid. I suppose he's needed up there. But I felt how serious it is, my heart went down, when only Hallie and Moe appeared as a proxy welcoming committee. This morning I forgot again, it felt as it used to."

"I wish she didn't have this idea we'll be too tired to come up this morning. Isn't it like her? I guess noon will have to do. Will you get me up? I need to go."

I get her into her braces and lift her under the arms and set her on her feet and hand her her canes. With her forearms thrust into them she lurches off to the bathroom. I follow, and when she stands in front of the toilet and stoops to unlock her knees, I ease her down on the seat and leave her. After a while she knocks on the wall and I go in and lift her up. She locks her iron knees again and stands to wash at the washbowl, stained by minerals in the spring water. After a few minutes she comes out, her hair combed and the sleep washed from her face. By the bed she stoops once more to unlock her knees, and sits down suddenly on the rumpled covers. I lift her legs and straighten her out and put the pillows behind her.

"How do you feel? Okay?"

"Maybe Charity is right. I do feel tired."

"Why don't you sleep some more? Want the braces off?"

"Leave them on. It's less nuisance for you if I have to call you."

"It's no nuisance to me."

"Oh," she says, "it has to be. It has to be!" Her eyes close. Then she is smiling again. "How about peeling us an orange?"

I peel us an orange and pour the last coffee from the thermos. Braced against the headboard with her legs making a thin straight line under the blankets, she shapes her face into one of its game, sassy looks as if to say, What fun!

"I like this *bazari* idea," she says. "Don't you? It's like Italy, when we woke up early and you made tea. Or the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay. Remember *bazari* there? Only there too it was fruit and

tea, not fruit and coffee. All we need is a big ceiling fan, the kind Lang broke by throwing a pillow at it."

I look around at the bare walls, bare studs, bare rafters, and naked green blinds. Every element of the compound, even the Big House, is much the same. Charity imposed austerity evenhandedly on herself, her family, and her guests. "Well," I have to say, "not *quite* the Taj Mahal."

"Better."

"If you say so."

She drops to her lap the half-clenched hand with the half orange in it—the hand that will never quite unclench because while she was in the iron lung all of us, even Charity who thought of everything, were so concerned that she go on breathing that we forgot to work on her hand. It stayed clenched there for too long. Now for a moment her controlled serenity, her acceptance and resignation, her stout and stoical front, dissolve away again. The woman who looks out at me is emotional and overtired.

"Ah, Larry," she says accusingly, "it does make you sad. It makes you as sad as it does me."

"Only when I laugh," I say, for emotional or not, she puts up with long faces no more than Charity does. She lets herself be rebuked, lets me tuck her in, lets me kiss her, smiles. I draw the blinds. "Hallie and Moe won't be here for two or three hours. Sleep. It's only five in the morning, Santa Fe time. I'll wake you when they come."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing. I'll be out on the porch, looking and smelling and *recherching temps perdu*."

Which is what I do for a good long time. It is no effort. Everything compels it. From the high porch, the woods pitching down to the lake are more than a known and loved place. They are a habitat we were once fully adapted to, a sort of Peaceable Kingdom where species such as ours might evolve unchallenged and find their step on the staircase of being. Sitting with it all under my eye, I am struck once more, as I was up on the Wightman road, by its change-

lessness. The light is nostalgic about mornings past and optimistic about mornings to come.

I sit uninterrupted by much beyond birdsong and the occasional knocking and door-slamming of waking noises from the compound cottages hidden in the trees off to the left. Only once is there anything like an intrusion—a motorboat sound that develops and grows until a white boat with a water skier dangling behind it bursts around the point and swerves into the cove, leading a broadening wake across which the skier cuts figures. They embroider a big loop around the cove and roar out again, the noise dropping abruptly as they round the point.

Early in the morning for such capers. And, I have to admit, a sign of change. In the old days forty academics, angry as disturbed dwarfs, would already have been swarming out of their think houses to demand that the nuisance be abated.

But apart from that one invasion, peace, the kind of quiet I used to know on this porch. I remembered the first time we came here, and what we were then, and that brings to mind my age, four years past sixty. Though I have been busy, perhaps overbusy, all my life, it seems to me now that I have accomplished little that matters, that the books have never come up to what was in my head, and that the rewards—the comfortable income, the public notice, the literary prizes, and the honorary degrees—have been tinsel, not what a grown man should be content with.

What ever happened to the passion we all had to improve ourselves, live up to our potential, leave a mark on the world? Our hottest arguments were always about how we could *contribute*. We did not care about the rewards. We were young and earnest. We never kidded ourselves that we had the political gifts to reorder society or insure social justice. Beyond a basic minimum, money was not a goal we respected. Some of us suspected that money wasn't even very good for people—hence Charity's leaning toward austerity and the simple life. But we all hoped, in whatever way our capacities permitted, to define and illustrate the worthy life. With me it was always to be done in words; Sid too, though with less confi-

dence. With Sally it was sympathy, human understanding, a tenderness toward human cussedness or frailty. And with Charity it was organization, order, action, assistance to the uncertain, and direction to the wavering.

Leave a mark on the world. Instead, the world has left marks on us. We got older. Life chastened us so that now we lie waiting to die, or walk on canes, or sit on porches where once the young juices flowed strongly, and feel old and inept and confused. In certain moods I might bleat that we were all trapped, though of course we are no more trapped than most people. And all of us, I suppose, could at least be grateful that our lives have not turned out harmful or destructive. We might even look enviable to the less lucky. I give headroom to a sort of chastened indulgence, for foolish and green and optimistic as I myself was, and lamely as I have limped the last miles of this marathon, I can't charge myself with real ill will. Nor Sally, nor Sid, nor Charity—any of the foursome. We made plenty of mistakes, but we never tripped anybody to gain an advantage, or took illegal shortcuts when no judge was around. We have all jogged and panted it out the whole way.

I didn't know myself well, and still don't. But I did know, and know now, the few people I loved and trusted. My feeling for them is one part of me I have never quarreled with, even though my relations with them have more than once been abrasive.

In high school, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a bunch of us spent a whole year reading Cicero—*De Senectute*, on old age; *De Amicitia*, on friendship. *De Senectute*, with all its resigned wisdom, I will probably never be capable of living up to or imitating. But *De Amicitia* I could make a stab at, and could have any time in the last thirty-four years.