



Eleven

Nonetheless, Edward kept returning to the topic. On their walks, he would point out a pedestrian who seemed familiar; he'd mention an unusual sounding, non-ancient name in the daily paper, or he'd remark that some situation, trivial in itself, reminded him of _ but here came the difficulty, because she refused to concede there might be something in his vague recollections, and he could do no better than assert that he or she or it was familiar, that he had known someone or something similar, that he *felt water moving*. Kara was at first evasive, then irritated, then indifferent. "Really?" she'd ask and change the topic.

Still, he kept groping for evidence, for reasons why he'd feel a chill in the now warm Ancient summer or why his vision blurred in strange places or why it seemed to him that smells, and even sounds, of whatever he'd known before lingered in the gaseous air.

"I remember very little," she said one day. "Mostly that I had reasons to leave." She was cross and pale with one of the severe headaches that sometimes afflicted her and were, Edward suspected, the main symptom of an imperfect adjustment. She often got one if he persisted in speaking of *before*, and he knew that she hated to be pressured. Now she added, "If you were really so fond of *before*, you'd remember, wouldn't you?"

Edward didn't know, and gradually, in spite of his happiness with Kara, he found himself lethargic and depressed. At work he was tired from lugging heavy trays all night and bored with the routine of the restaurant. He found himself looking out the window for glimpses of the night sky and longing, with an almost physical hunger, for the solitude of water and marsh. Occasionally this impulse grew so strong that instead of visiting Kara at the Gallows, he walked all the way to the river and sat looking into the swift dark water that rested his soul. But there, oddly enough, water was just water. The river ran within its banks, gulls settled on little backwaters, once an eagle soared overhead _ all lovely but suggesting nothing. No, it was elsewhere, on empty parking lots or along shadowy side streets that *before* returned to him with a kind of hyper alertness that detected other sounds and smells beneath the city bustle, sensations that remained tantalizingly just beyond recognition.

Kara's presence remained the highlight of his days, but Edward realized that he was becoming bad company, disinclined for the little excursions which she enjoyed. Then rehearsals started again, this time for a musical with dancing and singing _ *very strenuous*, Kara said _ and the additional preparation ate steadily into their time together. Without intention, and certainly without desire, they found themselves disputing trifles, unserious arguments that yet foreshadowed quarrels the way tree leaves turn up their silvery bellies before a storm. One day the disagreement was over the mall, a vast shopping precinct just beyond the city.

“It’s not far,” Kara insisted. She was washing up some dishes and Edward was drying.

“You don’t walk all night at work.”

“We’re not going to walk. There’s a bus goes right out. I’ve been and Meghan’s going, too _ no way we’ll get lost.”

Edward struck immediately. “Why would you get lost?”

Her eyes slid away from his. “I mean in the bus routes; I think you need a transfer. From the Old State House.”

Edward gave a sour smile, sure that was not what she’d meant at all. One of the things that irritated him about Kara was her refusal to recognize any of the peculiarities of their new abode, the most noticeable being the essential vagueness of any territory beyond the old CC. She pretended she had no problems, no problems at all, yet now and again she would let slip the evidence. *No way we’ll get lost*. What was that but an admission that she’d suffered from the same blurring vision and bending reality as he had? And Meghan! Nice as she was, what was she along for but to steer them both safely to and from this gargantuan bazaar? Of course, Kara would not admit that.

“Well, if you don’t want to go, I’ll just go with Meghan _ but it has to be Sunday. We’re not both off Mondays _ as you know.”

They went back and forth like this _ it was really too stupid, both of them making themselves miserable over a shopping trip when neither of them had money and when they might have made a terrific picnic and sat out in the park for free. Then Sam looked in from the hall and said she could drive them: they’d all go. She needed some item desperately _ that’s how she talked. This usually charmed Edward, but today her exaggerations sent him *fathoms deep*. Seeing his face, she took his arm and Kara’s and kicked up her feet, mimicking some dance from the new musical, and made them laugh, Edward, too. To please Kara and so that Sam and Meghan wouldn’t think him unreasonable, he agreed to visit the Mall.

Sam had a white motor with a door in the back and a serious set of coughs and rattles. Edward sat behind with Kara, holding her hand as they rumbled up onto the interstate. She smiled at him but her palm was damp.

“You can see the college,” she said, pointing across the dizzy lanes of motors and trucks.

He could, and very top of the bigger Travelers Tower, too. Edward rested his eyes on the brown and gray towers, the rest of the landscape swirled around him; he had a sense that the world was only a painted scrim like the backdrop to Kara’s play and that in driving west they were stretching everything, road, trees, buildings, the very curvature of the earth.

In the front seat, Sam chattered about going to Nordstrom, which seemed to be a favorite. “They have some very cool skirts and tops. Mine are all bor-ing.”

“Anything to do with that hot guy you met?” asked Meghan.

“Everything!” said Sam and the girls laughed.

“Where you going, Kara?”

“Furniture, of course.”

“Kara’s got Macy’s on her back.” Meghan said.

“Well, we know where you’re going.”

“Govida is research, if you must know. For my chocolateria of the future.”

“And indulgence of the present,” said Sam.

Edward tried to focus on the back of her blonde head and the interior of the motor where all was solid and real. Behind them, the the glass high rises and the intricately woven ribbons of the interstate diminished; ahead was a sharply curving ramp and a massive gray structure surprisingly ringed with water _ no, not water, parking lots. Full of motors, among which Sam searched and maneuvered until she found a space. She looked at her watch. “Meet at Au Bon Pain?”

“Four? Five?” Meghan asked.

They settled on 4:30 before venturing through the tall glass doors. Above were high white ceilings and, underfoot, marble, glossy as oiled water, reflected the hundreds of lights glittering off the merchandise. At least, Edward assumed it was merchandise, though there were dolls, bigger even than the ones used in Kara's play, all dressed up and looking, despite their gold or silver hands and faces, about to step off their pedestals.

"Aren't those dresses pretty?" asked Kara, taking his arm. What had been a blur of red and black became an assortment of frocks, ruffled or pleated or adorned by other dressmaking tricks beyond Edward's vocabulary. There were blouses, too, black, white, and every pastel shade, and suits, with both skirts and pants, and, despite the heat, sweaters for autumn in falling leaf colors.

They crossed the store, navigating the shoals of leather goods, and rounded the scent-drenched island of perfume and cosmetics, where pink and white coated women with elaborate hair and touched up eyes dispensed advice along with their artfully packaged concoctions. In the distance, the mysteries of lingerie gave way to pink, yellow, and blue infant garb before the vaulted main concourse opened under a domed net of triangular skylights. They made their way around ornamental planters filled with bright foliage to a steep moving shaft that plunged to a lower lobby where a tiny tropical grove thrived near a water feature surrounded by more gleaming marble. Disregarding posted warnings about the dangers to small children, bare feet, and wheeled carts, Sam stepped boldly onto this disconcerting contraption with Meghan right behind her. "We have to take the escalator down."

Edward and Kara followed cautiously, clutching the polished rail and suspicious of the ridged metal grills that folded and dropped to form steps. At the bottom, their momentum propelled them toward yet another array of gaily lit shops. Sam hurried off toward the promised lands of Nordstrom, while Meghan led Edward and Kara left into another wing of the mall. Past a closed up sports shop was a large store front noisy with the sound of tropical birds and animals. Edward stopped, transfixed.

"Rainforest Café _ kiddie treat," said Meghan.

“A restaurant?”

“Themed to the max. Haven’t you seen one? To be avoided.”

Edward shook his head. The sound of birds, of water, even amidst what were now clearly fake ruins, seemed so suggestive that he followed the women only reluctantly to a shop front with a lavish display of clothing in sharp citrus colors. The dolls here were headless, armless, and footless, their truncated torsos _ svelte and busty _ propped up on metal poles like victims of some obscure torture. By the time Meghan and Kara reached the consensus that the sweaters were “very last year,” Edward felt himself getting warm even in the powerful air-conditioning. They moved on to admire gleaming leather bags, polished and swollen with expense, and lingered before a jewelry store where watches, pins, rings, and bracelets perched like rare birds on individual little dark velvet covered pedestals.

Spotting the chocolateria was across the corridor, Meghan angled away, promising the universe that she would buy just one small box. Kara and Edward turned into the Furniture Gallery and Men’s store, where they skirted the gray, blue, and brown ranges of men’s suits and jackets, crossed the bright suburb of sportswear, to reach a vast emporium set up, like old Mynd’s furniture store, as a series of little wall-less bedrooms, dining rooms, and living rooms. Kara gravitated toward the beds, each mattress covered in a resplendent heap of bedding and topped by an Everest of pillows. There were bed skirts and coverlets, overstuffed quilts that she told him were ‘duvets’, pillows that weren’t really pillows at all but ‘shams’, and needlepoint cushions strictly for decoration. There were sheets and blankets and throws and spreads. “Aren’t these pretty,” Kara asked.

The patterns began to waver before Edward’s eyes. There was a virtual forest of leaves and flowering branches, queerly intersected with stripes like the shadow of trees on water, and like those shadows, moving slowly on some interior current.

“I think I’m going to step outside,” he said. “I saw some interesting bromeliads in that big decorative planter.”

“You’re all right?” asked Kara, giving him a close look.

“Oh, yeah,” he said quickly. “But there are some other tropicals _”

She smiled, eager to be reassured. “It is fun here, isn’t it? Weren’t we right to come?”

“Sure,” he said with as much enthusiasm as he could manage.

She moved toward the next display with a smile. “Meet you at the restaurant.”

He got himself out of bedding, which, as soon as he separated from Kara’s besotted vision, threatened with its rows of bloated quilts and pillows to engulf him in softness like the swollen corpses of nightmare. He could feel his ears ringing, and whenever he looked left toward dining tables and dinette sets or right toward the dangerous ranks of couches and chairs, his vision blurred. Edward blamed his eyes, though the thought came to him that whatever lay behind the scrim of appearance might be coming to light. *I am ScienceSide*, he told himself, though where those words came from, he didn’t know. *I am ScienceSide and this is mysticism and Super*. These enigmatic words rang so clearly within his interior space that Edward stopped at the entrance to the lower concourse, momentarily becoming an obstacle to traffic.

Don’t look up, don’t look down. Focus on the plants, he told himself. A grove of tropicals: bromeliads, several palms, a banana _ was that really a banana plant? Yes, with fruit! And clivias, he knew clivias, and big leaf philodendrons, and was that perhaps an orchid? His legs rubbery, he made his way through the crowd to the safety of real and indisputable tropical foliage, and sat down on the wide marble ledge surrounding the basin with its fountain and coin dotted bottom. The water smelled of chemicals but the coins glittered like debris in shallow water, like metal fragments on mud.

He looked up, though he had warned himself not to: the concrete struts supporting the windows formed a pointed dome glowing blue with the high summer sky. For a moment, Edward’s heart stopped with the shock of remembrance: the struts, shattered and eroded, water everywhere, a rising storm wind. He remembered a massive ruin, bigger than anything he’d seen before _ where? _ he didn’t know _ and fear, fearfulness, some danger. *Don’t look up*, he thought, but his eyes were drawn irresistibly to the vast ceiling construction, to the

light. Light and concrete struts and the sound of water. And below, at his feet, the floor, no longer marble, but water, water moving beneath _ what? He couldn't remember and that combination of memory and blankness, of *before and after*, of prosperity and disaster, gripped him with premonition.

He stood up. His impulse to warn about water, storm, and collapse was stifled by a sudden flight of youngsters, bright and noisy, whose sandals clacked on what was indisputably the floor. They passed, and Edward smelled water again and saw broken concrete overhead. Forgetting even Kara, he bolted down the darkening concourse which flowed around him in a swirl of colors like oil on water, formless but infinitely suggestive. The chatter and rustle of shoppers passing suggested wind moving through the narrow alleys of the CC, and the light bouncing off the glistening floor tiles once again created the illusion of water, ankle deep, knee deep, thigh deep. He might have sunk into that liquid hallucination and never emerged but for the sound of birds squawking and a medley of jungle sounds that drew him through the doors of _ what had Meghan called it? _ the theme restaurant.

Giant sculptured elephants, raised trunks and spread ears frozen in fiberglass, a spotted cat reclining on a branch, the broken pinkish walls of a ruin ornamented with barbaric designs, and, everywhere, palms, vines, and shrubs, real, fake and indeterminate. Tables, too, people eating, the bustle of late lunch, afternoon snacks, early dinners. Spotting a tray beside a not yet cleared table, Edward stacked the plates deftly, transferring dishes and glassware to the tray. He reached behind him for the cloth he usually wore at his waist before noticing a spray bottle and sponge nearby. A squirt and two wipes and the table was ready for resetting. He hoisted the tray onto his shoulder and went through the double doors to the kitchen, dodging a waiter on the way and collecting a surprised look. A quick glance around for the dishwashing station, tray down, then straight for another door at the back. There were some voices directed at him, definitely at him, but Edward was already entering the interior corridor beyond, gray and functional, lit with white, sour lights and leading deep into the building, the

building where he had once met, once found, once helped _ but memory failed him and he broke into a run.

He took the first corner with an electronic crackle behind him: security of some sort; he had to get out of the building. He spotted an exit door and, disregarding the alarm warning, thrust himself against the bar; locked. Further down the corridor, dizzy with the chase and the blurring of his vision, Edward saw a row of doors labeled with shop names. He could escape back into the mall, and he was reaching for the door to Lane Bryant, when he spotted the camera. Thinking there would be an alarm, and he lunged ahead toward another exit in the outer wall, this one apparently without security technology. He crashed the handle, ready to disappear amidst the motors and shoppers, but saw, not the parking lot, but a gray stair leading down. Edward was choked by an apprehension of quick mud and darkness, then with running footsteps in the corridor, he rattled down a staircase with metal treads. He found himself in a long, low passage, festooned with wiring and cables on both sides and topped by pipes and ducts. He frantically tried every door he passed, but all were locked with those special boxes for key cards. Security would catch him and what could he say? How could he explain his mad sprint through the mall when all his explanations would sound like madness? And possibly were madness, for he smelled water again and saw dead ahead a trickle of darkness issuing from under a door, a door that was, doubtless against all regulations, propped open with a piece of wood.

Edward heard the metal treads ringing behind him and slipped inside to white fluorescent lights over a long workbench littered with tools. The patient *du jour* was a vast metal box full of leaking coils and tubing. Edward stepped over the puddle and let the door close softly behind him. He clambered behind a stack of supply cartons and held his breath. Soon the security detail was noisy in the hall outside, calling on their radios and rattling at the doors. Had he missed all the water? Had he left a footprint? They would think he was crazy, he might be confined, he might never get back. Why not escape now, return to wherever he had been before? Leave this place with all its strangeness _ it must be possible, it must be. But

he could not leave Kara; the laws of the universe are not infinitely flexible; they had to stay or go together.

The electronic crackle of the radios faded, but Edward suspected that they would be thorough: Ancient Hartford was afflicted with paranoia. Perhaps they would bring a dog. It was all up if they had a dog. He strained his ears for the rattle of canine claws, for the eager bark, for alert handlers praising their beast. Nothing. And then, just as he was thinking that enough time had passed, that he might make his exit, an annoyed feminine voice was followed by the sound of plastic slipping into metal. The door opened, followed by the bang of something catching the casement, and the thump of a heavy item being dragged along the floor. A scrape of metal, a clatter of tools. Edward eased his head around the cartons to see a woman dressed in a gray maintenance outfit. She had a lot of wavy dark hair pulled back from her face, and, though small, she had already wrestled the large box from her hand truck onto the floor and was now clearing a space on the work table for the contents.

Had he touched something? Had he moved, by even a millimeter, one of the boxes? The woman froze, one hand still reaching toward a tool, and though Edward pulled his head back and held his breath, she'd detected something _ or, more likely, was on high alert thanks to the security detail. "Who's there? Is someone there?"

He did not answer.

"I have my phone."

At the warning beep, Edward stepped out from his hiding place. "Please don't," he said. "I can explain."

She had a sizeable wrench in one hand; the other was moving swiftly across the buttons, bringing security, perhaps police.

"I remembered water," he said desperately and held his hands up to show he was not armed. "I remembered *before* and panicked and wanted to warn _ and next thing I was in the restaurant, the one with the birds and elephants. I work in a restaurant," he said. Her hand still hovered over the last digits.

“Don’t come any nearer,” she said.

“No, no. I just want to get out. The floor, the floor turned to water, and I remembered the sky light, broken, eroded, and a dangerous marsh.” *Unintelligible*, Edward thought, *I’m totally unintelligible*. “My name is Edward Nemph,” he said then. “And I’m really not crazy.”

“Dora,” she said. “I’m Dora.”

He saw now that there was a label on the front of her blouse: Dora Ashansa. A familiar name, a modern name that he somehow knew.

“Hey,” she said. “You’re not going to pass out, are you?”

“I don’t know. If I could maybe sit down?”

She pointed to an office chair he had not previously noticed. He put his head between his knees and breathed rapidly.

“You haven’t been here very long, have you?”

When he looked up, he saw that she was leaning casually against the workbench.

“Long enough to know I should be getting back.”

“Some adjust, some don’t. It maybe depends on what you’ve left behind.”

“I came for someone,” Edward said and stood up. She was one of them, and, with that realization, the room stopped spinning and he found his feet were *back on dry ground*. He started to elaborate, but she held up her hand: footsteps in the corridor. He moved toward the cartons but she pointed under the workbench which was protected by shelves full of tools and supplies. After he was safely stowed, she resumed work, and when someone called, “Security check,” she put down her tools with a convincing rattle.

“Nothing,” she said in response to their question and opened the door wide so that the two uniformed men could look inside.

“...disappeared,” Edward heard one say.

“Up in the ductwork with the rats?” That was Dora, joking.

A laugh. “Give me a break.”

A little more banter, almost unintelligible, as if she had let the door nearly close, then the click of the latch, and the sound of scraping metal.

“You can give me a hand with this,” she said after a few minutes.

He crawled out to help her lift a box of belts onto the table, then leaned against it and watched her work. She had a pretty round face and broad capable hands with short fingers and green painted nails.

“You said you came for someone.”

“Yes,” Edward told her about Kara, about finding her again. “We were in the mall,” he said. “She loves the furniture stores. I stepped out to look at the planter and things fell apart. Nothing was quite real anymore and I saw the water and remembered _”

Dora looked at him curiously. “What did you remember?”

“Not enough. Just enough to know I’d been here. I mean, here *before*. Before I came.”

“I know what you mean. It’s not uncommon. Why should it be, all this can be wonderful but it’s not real in quite the same way, is it?” Something about her seemed so familiar when she said that. Not the words, so much, as the tart and logical delivery. There was something in her voice, some half forgotten timbre.

“No,” said Edward with a kind of relief. “Though Kara thinks it is.” He had not admitted that fully to himself before. “She aims to stay forever.”

“I thought about that.” Dora tightened up a bolt in a practiced way.

“And what did you decide?”

But she wasn’t telling. “I think we’d do better to figure out how to get you out of here,” she said.