

### *October 6*

The trees have begun to shed their leaves. This afternoon as I walked home, I watched them drift silently out of the two-hundred-year-old maples. Heading east from the hospital grounds, I found myself fortified by the fresh air, the steady winds, the warm sunshine, the sensation of my limbs swinging along, after the silence of the intensive care unit where all the patients have been struck dumb. At five o'clock, the oblique sunrays turned the sidewalks into pathways of gold. I put the ornamental parks behind me, the sprawling mansions. My old heart knocking against my ribs, I climbed a gentle hill toward home.

Soon I'd entered sparer, simpler streets. For forty years this neighbourhood of fragile saltboxes stretching over three city blocks has been our home. Some of the houses, clad in tin siding, glint nakedly in the October sun. Others are covered with slate shingles, crumbling now with age. Four decades ago, this landscape was a bald plain. Before construction began, bulldozers were sent in to raze every living thing in sight, perhaps to remind us that, across the ocean, a war had devastated nature in its path. Soon the shadeless earth cracked and the thirsty gardens turned to dust and the parched lawns perished beneath the heels of growing families. But now we have mature trees and today, arriving home, I found Harry Lang standing in front of my house, a fan rake in his hand. Though a young man compared to William, he is, at fifty-five, retired and itching for chores.

"Oh, Harry," I said gratefully, "you don't need to rake my leaves. I could do that."

"We saw the ambulance last night, Morgan."

"William has had a stroke."

Behind him, his wife, Heather, lingered on their porch, her white poodle pressed to her cheek, her glittering silver hair sweeping in waves back over her ears, the corners of her mouth turned up ever so slightly in sympathy. She is a woman who smiles at Life.

The Langs were never able to produce children. Their hedges are neatly sculptured, their manicured lawns thick and green as a golf course, their pumpkin-coloured house without a flake of loose paint on it. All their energies have been poured into filling up the childless spaces in their lives. When our children were young, Harry used to tell William, "Heather loves to sit at the living-room window and count your children as they come home from school." Seeing her now on the porch, I wanted to ask: Harry, what on earth has Heather been doing these past twenty years, now that there are no more Hazzard children to count?

Harry is a tall man and many years ago he was handsome and raven-haired and sleek-bodied and graceful of limb, like Clark Gable. I had a crush on him then, but now that his hair and moustache are peppered with grey and his gut thrusts out with the pleasures of retirement, I wonder: Was I in love not so much with Harry himself as with the bouquets of iris and delphinia I saw him bearing home from the market for Heather? Or with the way he turned and gazed at her every time she came out of the house? The phrase *dashing young man* has always amused me, but in those days Harry really did seem to dash. He was so brimming with life, perhaps because, once it became clear that his seed would never flower in Heather's womb, the two of them could lie recklessly, wastefully, in each other's arms,

certain that their passion would have no consequences — no hope or labour or responsibility or betrayal or risk attached to it — and Heather could trust that Harry's little milky ejaculate pooling within her was solely for her thirst and he that her love channel existed only for his expeditions and not for the passage of a child into Life.

"Has anyone come home, Morgan?" Harry asked me.

"Morris will drive down as soon as he can."

"And the girls? Will the girls come home too?"

"I haven't had time to call them."

"You must do that, Morgan. Promise me you'll call. A person needs support at a time like this."

"But they're all so busy and so far away."

"I'm sure they'll come. They'll want to be here to shore you up. You're lucky to have so many children, Morgan."

Up and down the street, the young rake-bearing neighbours trickled out into the soft dusk to collect the leaves, heaping them like gravemounds against the sidewalk curbs. We watched their children shout and run through the fading light and leap suicidally into these funeral piles, only to resurface miraculously unharmed, immortal, their nostrils, their ears powdered with bitter leaf-dust. This new generation of parents on the street does not come and introduce themselves to us. They remain distant. They keep their silence, like young saplings certain that it's only a matter of time and patience before the ancient timbers — the hardwoods — fall and the forest is theirs.

It was a sweet, tender evening, full of perfume and grief.

"Were we ever young, Harry?" I asked.

"You bet we were, Morgan. I can still picture you pushing a carriage down the street. A new baby in it nearly every year. It was a wonderful sight."

"I don't remember it, Harry. I don't remember a time when we weren't old and wrinkled."

"You sound discouraged, Morgan. It's important to keep your spirits up."

### October 7

A cold draft rose off the window this morning when I got up and peered out at the gentle slope of our little crescent. Searching for my winter housecoat, I parted the old curtains hanging across the closet, their pattern of tropical palms and birds of paradise faded now to muted olives and ochres. I remembered when the girls used to disappear behind those curtains as into the exotic foliage of a tropical jungle, dress themselves there, hiding from each other their developing bodies, perplexed by the soft beauty of their swelling breasts. Stepping across a small landing at the top of the enclosed stair, I looked down at the pie-shaped rear yard, a row of back porches, a screen of poplars, a busy thoroughfare beyond, the hum of its traffic drifting over the rooftops.

How long, I tried to recall, had I made my bed here on the second floor, where the girls once slept under sloping ceilings? Was it only five years since William sent me creeping upstairs with my pillow tucked under my arm because, he said, my snoring had begun to shake the walls of our room? It doesn't trouble me, in fact it's a comfort to be exiled to the bedrooms of my daughters. Sometimes at night I lie awake and think of the sultry summer evenings when, to escape the hot sheets, the girls stole out of their beds in thin cotton nightgowns and lay like happy martyrs on the

bare floor, imagining they could feel a refreshing draft sweeping along the naked boards. Reminded of this, I imagine the cool of the wood along my own calves and feel in my brittle hip bones, in my shoulder blades, the tough comfort of the hard planks.

Down in the kitchen, I stood at the window and lit a cigarette. Outside, the street was on fire with autumn colours, blazing like Judgment Day. Up and down the rows of houses, the neighbourhood women sent their children off to school beneath the flaming trees. I reached for the window, thinking I might fling it up, call out to these young mothers with their blonde ponytails flying in the wind: *You're wasting your time! You're wasting your energy buttoning up these children and waving them off and calling after them, "Have a happy day!" Because soon they'll run away and forget you ever existed.*

One of my daughters once said to me: "What is the use of my coming home, Mother? You don't understand what I'm talking about. I try to confide. I take the time to describe to you, in the simplest terms possible, what's happening in my life. I tell you about my ambitions and my lovers and my depression and my shrink. And it all seems to go right over your head. What do I get back from you? Responses like: 'But do you have a warm winter coat?' That's all you have to say. Do you know how frustrating it is to make the pilgrimage home to talk to your own mother about the things that you value most, things that are *fundamental*, and she doesn't have a clue what you're talking about?"

"Tell me again," I answered. "Tell me again and maybe this time I'll understand."

And so, though I thought last night of contacting the children to tell them about their father's condition, I hesitated to do so because I was afraid of their impatience and their scorn. I'm afraid that if I were to tell them how the oxygen mask is held onto William's face

by two elastic bands looped over his ears — making them seem as large and baroque as cabbage leaves — or how in the lounge outside the intensive care unit there's such a smell of fear coming out of the vinyl upholstery that it sends me running back to William's sterile room, or how very silent it is in the intensive care unit with all the patients so terribly inert and wordless and uncomplaining in their crises and the nurses — passing soundless as ghosts in their crepe-soled shoes — flashing at me their deadly professional smiles: If I were to describe all of this to them, they'd surely howl and tear at their hair and say, "Oh, Mother, why are you so hopeless? Don't you understand at all what's going on? Can't you look for the bottom *line*? What is his *heart* rate? What is the oxygen content of his *blood*? How much of his brain is *dead* now? Ask, Mother! *Ask*."

Yes, my children have become worldly-wise, having scattered all over the globe. Only Morris has stayed close by, which is ironic because when they were growing up, he was the child I noticed least. But Merilee is still living on this continent, and because it wouldn't require me to sort through country codes and city codes and numbers beginning with triple zeros — which mystify me because how can a zero get one anywhere? — I picked up the phone after breakfast and dialled the United States.

A strange man answered and went away to get Merilee.

"Who was that?" I asked when she picked up.

"It was Alan."

"Alan?" I said. "Aren't you married to someone named Hugh? Or was that an earlier husband?"

"Hugh's moved out, Mother," she said curtly. "We're getting a divorce."

"Another one? Isn't this your fourth?"

"Only the third."

"Your father and I have been wondering if you're trying to set some kind of record."

I heard her sigh. "It's not so unusual, Mother. I don't know anyone who hasn't been divorced a few times."

"You should come back to Simplicity. You should come back to Canada," I said, "where things are solid."

Merilee has run away to live in a part of the United States where there is never any snow. She's quit nursing now and is a salesperson for a big cosmetics corporation. She has an expense account and a company car, a small white convertible. I picture her steering this convertible through the hot yellow palm-lined streets of a southern city, wearing dark glasses and a miniskirt. Since she went south, she's bleached her hair and worn it in a cumbersome antebellum style. She diets until she has the waistline of a little girl. She's had breast implants, a facelift, liposuction, an abortion. She's sick enough to be in the hospital herself. She has nervous rashes, a stomach ulcer. Like a gypsy, she moves from husband to husband, apartment to apartment. She can't sit still or be alone for more than five minutes. William used to say to her, "You're running away from yourself," but she just laughed, her face, caked with makeup, breaking into deep cracks. "Dad, you sound more Canadian every day," she told him. "I'll never come back to Canada. The cost of living is too high. Nothing there is worth what you pay for it."

"Did you call to give me a lecture, Mother?" Merilee asked today on the phone. "Or was there some good reason?"

So I told her about William.

"Why didn't you let me know before this?" she asked with irritation.

"I didn't want to bother you. I know you're busy selling your lipsticks."

"You should have called me the moment he fell."

"I knew I'd get that machine of yours. I get tongue-tied when I have to talk to one of those."

"What have they done for him? They should have done a CT scan on him right away. If it's not an aneurism, they could have given him TPA. But that has to be administered in the first six hours. It's too late now. Mother, you've got to be vigilant. In Canada, with a man Dad's age, they won't want to waste medical dollars. They're still in the nineteenth century up there. Jesus Christ, what a country! I'm so glad I left. I'll probably live twice as long down here as I would have if I'd stayed in Canada. Listen, Mother. Up there the squeaky wheel gets the grease. You've got to be aggressive. You've got to keep on top of the doctors. You've got to jump up and down."

"People my age aren't very good at jumping, Merilee."

"Look, Mother, promise me you'll demand a CT scan immediately. That and an MRI. How do they know for sure it's a stroke? How do they know he doesn't have a tumour the size of a grapefruit at the base of his cerebellum? He could have cancer of the brain. He could have a metastasis of lung or prostate cancer. You've got to ask hard questions, Mother. And you've got to start thinking about the future."

"The future?"

"What we're going to do if Dad deteriorates. If he deteriorates, how far are we willing to go to keep him alive? I don't think he'd want us to use extraordinary means. This is something we should all decide together."

"But we so seldom hear from any of you that your father and I have often wondered if you care at all what —"

"Dad's our flesh and blood, Mother," she cut in. "In that sense

we have a greater claim on him than you do. You're only his wife. There's no blood tie there. All you've got is a marriage certificate."

"But —"

"It's too bad Morris is the only one living close by. He'll be more nuisance than help. Leave him alone in the room with Dad and he'll try to baptize him. Watch out for that. The cold water could bring on another stroke. Morris is probably on his knees right now praying for a miracle. You're not counting on a miracle, are you, Mother? You don't believe in them any more, do you? Have you contacted all the family?"

"I don't really know how to do that. Your father used to place the overseas calls."

"Airmail them, then."

"My hand is so shaky lately. My writing is barely legible."

"Dictate the letters to Morris. He's got nothing better to do than pound that bible."

"He has his shift work. The hours are hard on him. And the uncertainty. They're laying off workers again at the plant. He could lose his job any day. And the boys keep him busy."

"Pack of brats."

"They're good kids."

"You don't like them yourself. Be honest, Mother. Do you love those destructive boys?"

"Well —"

"I've got to go now. I'm late for my exercise class."

She hung up. I pictured her at the gym, dressed in one of those bright skin-tight costumes and others in similar attire, young Lycra-clad men and women leaning, bending trancelike before a wide mirror, stretching their firm, glistening, immortal limbs.