

'No ...' he said.

Then he settled back into the pillows and was gone. Around him the crinkled sheets were like the white surface of a pond on which he was impossibly floating. I stared at him for a long time. He stared back, but his eyes were clouding over, as though smoke had filled the inside of his head.

After a while I stood up. I went to the windows and closed the last little gap in the curtains. Then I pulled the bedclothes straight over him and gently eased his head on the pillow. With the tips of my fingers I smoothed his eyes closed, as they do in films. I stood, looking down at him: a face as white and tight as bandages on his skull. On the coverlet, his right hand was stretched out, frail and grey, amphibian with age. He wore, as he'd always done – day and night, for forty-six years – a gold ring on his middle finger. I touched this ring. It was a cold, hard contact. I bent over and kissed him on the mouth. (I realised I'd never done this before. Even as a little boy on my way to bed, he'd always turned his head slightly so that I kissed him on the tiny dent of flesh at the corner of his mouth.) His lips were cold and clean as the gills of a fish. I straightened and, with a last glance round at this room – so bare, so neat – I turned and went out to my mother.

She sat in the wooden straight-backed chair in the lounge. She always sat here. It was angled towards the white-barred windows and the garden beyond. A pale sunlight came over this garden now, so that the trees stood

against it as hard as wire. I approached from behind. I could see at first only her head over the back of the chair, round and dark as a cannonball. (Her hair was actually grey, I knew, but she dyed it black. She bound it up into a dense knot, which she fixed against the back of her head with three silver pins. The position of this knot had never varied from day to day.) I could hear the relentless clicking of her needles before I came round the side of the chair and saw the white wool flickering in her hands.

She was always knitting – jerseys, scarves, socks. But since he'd been put to bed she'd been knitting something I couldn't make out; it didn't seem to be anything useful at all. It poured off the edges of her long needles, metres and metres of white wool, row after row, that now lay collected about her feet in ripples. All day she sat in this chair and knitted. I'd heard her at night too, long after I'd gone to bed. *Clickety-click. Clickety-click.*

I sat in the armchair to the right. From here I could see her in perfect profile as she sat, staring out at the garden. She didn't look down at her hands as they worked. She didn't, at first, turn her head to look at me. She only continued to sit in the straight wooden chair, stately and grim, weaving out like a white web from her bony hands the strange patterns that mounted about her feet.

'Mother,' I said.

After perhaps a minute the needles stopped. She stared straight ahead silently, into the garden, for another moment. Then she did, eventually, turn her head and look at me. I glared back at her. She turned her head to the front again. From her suddenly limp fingers I saw the knitting slide. The needles and their endless strands of wool tumbled from her grasp and fell to the carpet. They made a soft noise as they landed, like a small, perfunctory sigh.

LOVERS

I never saw her knit again.

She didn't cry, my mother – not then, not ever. The days that followed were difficult and sad. I'm not given to tears myself; I have always found them unnecessary. But I cried from time to time over the week that followed his death. At unexpected moments, as I spooned sugar into my tea, or as I closed a certain door, there would flash into me a violent scarlet grief I hadn't experienced before. And I would cry: fierce tears that didn't last long. I tried to remember my father. My earliest recollections were sparse and thin. They were of a tall skinny man with black hair brushed back straight from his forehead. Below his left nostril was a mole, round and neat, with hairs growing from it. Later he would pluck these hairs. And the hairs that made his eyebrows meet in the middle. I would come into the bathroom to brush my teeth before school, and he'd be standing in front of the mirror in his pyjama pants and vest, leaning toward the glass in concentration as he tweezed from the bridge of his nose these small, offensive hairs. He dropped them carefully into the bin. My mother kept a neat bathroom and would have disapproved of even tiny hairs on the floor. We both, he and I, understood this.

He was not fond of words. He didn't speak much and, if he did at all, it was usually to offer advice. 'If I were you,' he'd say, 'I would put my shirt away.' Or: 'I suggest, old man, that you make up your bed.'

My mother approved of shirts put away, of beds made up. She would sweep through the house in her colossal skirts, inspecting the rooms. She made a rushing noise as she moved, like a purging fire.

'Clean up there,' she'd cry in a voice that could only be described as spotless. 'Wash the dishes, James.'

My name is James. I can't help that. It's a name, I

believe, that my mother gave to me. Her father's name was James. She felt obliged to signify due loyalty by naming me after him. Family loyalty is something by which my mother has always placed a lot of store.

Her name is Lydia. My father's name was Ivor. She was born in Cape Town and lived there for the first eighteen years of her life. He was born in Pretoria, but met her in Cape Town when he attended university. He studied business science. He was a businessman all his life, up till four years before his death, when he retired. I knew little of his work. He had an office in town. He would go to work after I had already left for school. His departure in the mornings was an event I could only imagine. I knew his return, however. At five every afternoon he would arrive on the bus. I could see him from my bedroom window, walking with tentative steps up the drive, his briefcase under his left arm. He had three suits, blue, brown and beige. He wore different suits on different days; my mother laid them out on the bed in the mornings. She took them out in a certain sequence, following a private pattern I could never decipher. Perhaps it was the blue suit on Monday, the brown on Tuesday, the beige on Wednesday. Then the sequence would begin again, so that Monday was beige again. Perhaps this was the way it was. I don't know.

I would go to the kitchen when he arrived. I would always go on some pretext, such as to make tea. I would be there as he came through the door. I would look up as he stepped inside, as if surprised. 'Hello, Father,' I'd say.

'Hello, James,' he'd say, and smile. I seem to recall - though I could be mistaken here - that he had a moustache at this time. If so, it has been gone for many years. But I seem to recall a moustache, through which his front tooth, capped in gold, glinted at me.

'How was work?' I said.

'Work was fine. Was fine.' He stood, unsure of himself, as if arriving at a stranger's house for the very first time.

'What did you do today?'

'I did nothing ...'

'You must have done something, James.'

'I did nothing, Father.'

This was true, I think. I did in fact do nothing in the long afternoons when school was finished. I did not have friends. I was not a popular boy. Looking at old photographs of myself, I see a bloodless, anaemic child looking back at me through square glasses. I had a thin neck in which my adam's apple stood out like a knuckle. My hair (the shame of it!) was wet down with grease and combed across the top of my head in an arc. My mother did this to me. I'm sure of it: she would stand me in the bathroom and drag the comb across my scalp like a weapon. She bathed me every night long after I was too old for it, scrubbing my face with the rough edge of a flannel. 'Stand,' she would say. 'Let me soap your legs.'

I hated my mother. I accepted this fact by slow degrees as I grew up, till it resided in me, tiny and dark, a germ that lay too deep for her hands. I hated her with a calm, an easy, and sometimes a pleasant hate. There was no passion in it. She would not have approved of that.

'James,' she said. 'I would appreciate it if you could help with ... with things. It would be too difficult for me.'

'Of course, Mother,' I said. 'Of course I shall help.'

I helped. While she sat in the wooden straight-backed chair in the lounge, I went through his possessions and packed them into boxes. There was little enough to do. In the bedroom there was a small white cupboard and a chest-of-drawers in which all his clothes were kept. (His were

separate from hers, at opposite ends of the room.) I had the privilege of touching the garments I could recall him wearing from my days at school. My fingers came into contact with those suits, blue, brown and beige, that he dressed in to go to work. Although different in colour, they had the same fabric: a smooth felt, worn thin at the elbows. I folded them up and packed them into boxes. I folded everything up and put it all away: shoes, shirts, ties, belts. And the more intimate garments that I could only imagine till then – his socks, his underwear. From all the clothes came a faint scent of mothballs and powder. I pressed my nose into the cloth, squeezing it to make it yield up some other odour, some whiff or trace that might give me a hint of a history, an event, a happening in a life gone past. But there was nothing at all.

Mothballs and powder.

I put the boxes into the garage.

‘James,’ she said. ‘If you could help with ... with the other room. I would be so grateful.’

‘Of course, Mother,’ I said. ‘I shall be glad to help.’

The other room was the study to which he retired at night after supper. I suppose he worked there, though I cannot guess at what. As a child I’d been in there only seldom, and then only on brief errands for my mother. ‘Tell your father he is wanted on the telephone ...’ I recalled it from then as a cavernous chamber, carpeted in fur and walled in with books.

Now it was a small and modest space with nothing impressive about it. The carpet was thin and pale. There were only three bookcases and the volumes in them were covered in a brown skin of dust. (Nevertheless I looked them over and decided on them for myself.) His desk stood before the window. Light came in from the neat winter

garden outside. The walls were covered in faded wallpaper and there were some prints hanging at eye level.

I went through the drawers in the desk. Their contents I also packed into boxes and consigned to the garage. If I'd hoped for a clue here to the heart or mind of the man who fathered me, I was again disappointed. The desk was almost empty, and what there was in it was completely anonymous. Writing pads, pens, staplers, rulers. My hopes lifted when I came upon a tattered brown file in the bottom lefthand drawer, but it contained only some tax forms from years ago. There was not even a signature to be had.

At supper that night, as I faced my mother down the length of the table, I murmured as gently as I could: 'Is there any more to be done?'

She didn't look up from her soup, but continued to stare into the bowl as her hand conveyed the liquid to her mouth in neat sips. She paused for long enough to say, 'No, James. That is all.'

And, two sips later, 'Thank you.'

'It was a pleasure to help,' I said. 'Mother.'

'I thought,' she wheezed, 'that you could have the books in the study. You may have the room,' she said, 'when you come to live here.'

'Thank you.'

'Would you like some more soup, James? It's minestrone and very good for you.'

'Thank you,' I said, 'but I won't.'

'All right then,' she said.

I went back to the study after supper, duster in hand. Sunk into a kind of white and featureless despair, I began to go through the books in the bookcases, wiping them clean, opening them up and riffling through their pages. He'd always loved reading, though she hadn't approved and had

insisted after a while that he take books out of the library instead of buying them. 'The expense, Ivor. We cannot afford ...' I also loved reading, and the bedroom of my tiny flat in town was packed with shelves and shelves of books: thrillers, biographies, literature and trash. I tried to imagine now how those books would look in here, in this room: arranged in rows against the one bare wall. I tried to imagine myself behind the desk, my back to the garden, as I sat and listened to the soft slurping noise of my mother's footsteps in the passage outside. It was too much to conceive of.

I'd known, I suppose, that this would be the nature of my dry and tedious fate: to return to this sombre house in which I had been born and spent my first twenty years of life, to become the father I had never begun to recognise or comprehend. I'd known this, I suppose, since he had first taken to his bed on his long, stuttering decline into death. But now that she had made her pact with me, her pagan contract across the shining surface of the table and the steaming bowls of soup, I felt my frightened soul go into revolt. I wanted to scream and cry. I wanted to bang my head against the walls and tear at the drab, fading wallpaper, in which the dim outline of a pattern could still vaguely be seen.

I didn't, of course. I continued to stand, cloth in hand, and wipe stupidly at the covers of the books as I took them one by one from the shelves. In the small oval mirror to the right of the desk I caught a brief glimpse of myself and saw with horror that I was still bloodless and anaemic, that I still looked out at the world through thick glasses. I hadn't even rescued myself from this, the earliest prison I could recall.

At the end of the top row was a copy of *Ivanhoe*. It had

always been his favourite book and I touched it now with a reluctant reverence. As I lifted it down it opened of its own accord in a flurry of dust and gave up its secrets. They fell past my nose, too quick to be seen, and landed on the carpet at my feet. I stood and looked down for a long while before I was brave enough to bend and pick them up.

I sat at the desk. I unfolded the letter. The paper was wrinkled and old and had been rubbed thin with much reading. It was covered in blue ink. The writing wasn't familiar to me; big and loopy and full of sudden strokes and dots. There was a grace in it, and a kind of anger.

Dear Ivor, it said, I know I promised I wouldn't write, I know you said you wouldn't (couldn't?) write back, but how is it possible for me not to want to speak to you with any voice at all? I thought of phoning you, I have even thought of coming up to Johannesburg to look for you, but I know already that it would be no use. I cannot tell you how I've thought of you since you left ... Only two weeks! How is it possible ...

Here I looked up. The room before me, with its rigid, implacable lines, wavered and went soft. It was a while before I could breathe properly again and focus my eyes on the page:

... Isn't it strange, the lies that we conceive, the lies that we believe ... What three short days have given us! Or is it only me? Have you forgotten me, wasn't I important after all? Will I ever know? ... I know nothing of you, I know where you live, the room you sleep in ... And her ... You did describe her to me, but she was only more difficult to imagine afterward ... You said that you could never leave her, you said it wasn't possible. I didn't understand, but I couldn't ask. Is it your son that makes it so? Is it him? ...

And:

I remember as we walked out on the last night under the trees, there was a smell, a weight, you could say, of honeysuckle on the air. You said the scent reminded you of things. You said, I think, that it was painful to you ... We searched for the flowers, but we couldn't find them in the dark. After you'd gone I walked out along the path and found the flowers there where we'd stood ... I picked this one, I send it to you as a gift, a token, a remembrance perhaps, but I hope not only that ... Can you smell it still?

I looked past her name – scribbled, huge – to the small dry flower, pressed flat between the pages where it had lain so long. How long? It had no colour, no hue ... I didn't take it in my hand again for fear that it might break, but bent down over it and held my nose close to the crushed petals. Though I strained and strained, I could smell nothing at all.

I couldn't imagine her face. I tried to, of course, over the time that followed, but all I could see in my mind's eye was the sheet of paper rubbed thin by touch and covered in electric squiggles of ink. Was she even alive still? The possibility that she was not, that she may have preceded him, filled me with nauseous fear. I thought only of her, faceless though she was, as I moved about the murky passages of the so-silent house. When I looked at my mother I saw – as he must surely have done – her form moving softly at the edge of my sight. And while we stood about the sides of the grave, suitably subdued as he was lowered beneath the grass, I thought of her in her home beside the sea.

It was a small funeral. He didn't have many friends and, of those, many had moved or passed away. There was the expected group of ex-colleagues and a few sad relatives. I stood beside my mother and she leaned on my arm. I could feel all her frail weight pressing into my palm. As the first

spade-fuls of earth began to fall on the coffin I turned to glance at her: I saw her stern profile, composed of downward lines, of strokes of flesh attracted by gravity. Her mouth had no colour and, under the tight black hat, her face seemed shaped from some heavy, thick, wet stone. I turned away.

That night at supper she said to me, 'Will you be moving your things this week?'

'Yes,' I said. 'But not immediately. I have to go away,' I told her, 'for a day or two.'

She looked at me; a direct glare full of angry surprise. But I didn't quail. I swallowed a piece of chicken from the end of my fork. She dropped her eyes.

We, neither of us, said more than that. But it was understood between us that I had failed her in a duty. She did not approve.

And I, for now, didn't care. On the following morning, when the sun was high enough to cast shadows in the garden, I left her alone in the dark two-storeyed house and got into my car and set off in pursuit of the address just legibly written in the top righthand corner of the paper that had fallen from my father's copy of *Ivanhoe*.

I parked the car under some low trees at the end of the dust road. Although the house was visible from here, to the right and up, it wasn't possible to drive any further. No other signs of human presence were to be seen; there were no roofs, no cars. There was only the heavy jungle foliage on every side, dark green in colour but static and black in the last light coming in from the sea.

It was dusk; I had driven steadily for many hours with only a single break. As I got out of the car and locked it behind me, I became aware of sharp twinges in the small of

my back. (As a child I was always weak. My bones would ache.) The air smelt strongly of salt. I breathed very deeply and looked about me at the leaves that seemed to be oozing from the fat trunks of trees. From over the rise to the right, on the crest of which lights had begun to burn in the house, I could hear the stony throbbing of the sea. It was a sound as relentless and heavy as the beating of my heart.

I wasn't afraid. I can say with certainty that I was strangely calm, as if I knew with complete assurance just what would take place and how.

I doubted nothing. As if I'd been here many times before, I bent under a hanging creeper and started up the narrow path that moved away faintly beneath the trees. The air parted thickly before me and trailed away over my face, slow and warm. After I had travelled only a few metres I could see nothing at all: my car had vanished behind me and the lights of the house were hidden by the slope. The path began to climb. I followed it fairly easily, though I almost fell on roots that lay underfoot like steps. After a minute or two I was breathing heavily and my legs were hurting.

It was a longer walk than it had first appeared to be. As I climbed, I imagined him moving in just this way on such a night as this. So that he was suddenly there with me, exhaling his breath into the warm dark, stepping over the unseen roots, clambering up through the trees towards the top of the rise.

We emerged at last, and stood for a moment to catch our breath. The house was before us, against the edge of the forest which rose behind it in a clean wall. Where we stood, the path petered out into a neat acre of lawn, trimmed and cropped. There were bushes here and there, but no flowerbeds. To the left the ridge fell away sharply again to

the beach and there seemed to be another path leading downwards. Standing again under the open sky, it was possible to see the last yellow gleams of sun over the horizon. The sea lay utterly still, utterly calm, like a vast grey field.

She was waiting on the front stoep, a single, slender figure with her arms wrapped about her. She wore a white shawl and a dress of dark wool. The lights were behind her so that she was only an outline. Her shadow stretched across the grass.

I took a breath and started down. I must have come into view only when I reached the edge of the light from inside the house; she gave a small start and hugged her arms tighter about herself. But she said nothing as I crossed the last few metres of grass and came to a stop at the foot of the three low stairs going up to the stoep. I was below her, looking up into her face at last. We stood in this way in silence for a minute.

Then she spoke: 'I'm sorry ...' she said in a faint voice. 'I ...' There was a pause before she could talk properly. 'I thought that you were ... someone else ...'

The light over the sea was gone now. The waters were as black and deep as earth. But another glow marked the thin stretched line of the horizon: the moon, below the curve of the world, was about to rise.

'I am his son,' I said. 'And he is dead.'

She was older than me and younger than my father. I looked at her face in the light of the hanging lamp: her skin was breaking into wrinkles and her hair was beginning to turn white. Her body under the woollen dress seemed stiff when she moved. But she didn't carry herself with pain. She didn't gesture with embarrassment, as some old people do, as if

afraid to squander what little motion may be left to them: her hands were big and she used them as she spoke. I had to lean close to hear her voice, though, for it was soft and hesitant – perhaps with grief, or with fear of me, I cannot tell. I don't think she was afraid.

'He was here on business,' she said. 'In town. I met him at the house of a friend. It was a dinner party, he sat next to me at the table. He was uncomfortable, I think, he didn't want to be there. He was biting the end of his thumb.'

'He used to do that,' I said.

'We talked. Rather, I talked at first and he listened. He had a way of listening ...'

'I remember –'

'With his head on one side? I don't know what I spoke about ... Not important things. There were no important things in my life, James ... I don't know if you can understand that ...'

'I can understand.'

'Well. There was something between us immediately, we were both aware that something ... inevitable would take place if we allowed it to ... Can you understand that too?'

'No,' I said. 'But I could, if I tried.'

She smiled. 'I asked him to visit me the next day. Here. I didn't know what he'd say ... He did hesitate, you know ... He looked down at his wedding ring, it was silver, I think ...'

'Gold,' I said.

'But he agreed to come. I woke early the next morning, I waited, I waited ... I was still afraid, you see, that he might change his mind. He was a silent man, your father, he didn't speak. You had to guess his thoughts from other things – the way he looked at you, what his eye fell upon ...'

'I know,' I said. 'I know.'

'He did come, in the end. At noon. I was waiting for him ...'

At this she became quiet and I raised my eyes to the house about us. We sat inside in two cane chairs in front of the fireplace; but there was no fire. The windows and curtains were open to admit the distant noise of the surf. The light in this room – and in all the others – came from lamps which were hung from hooks in the walls and roof. Their glow was yellow and shivery, and fell on bare tiled floors, on simple furniture that was solid and cheap. The house was not very large, but was still too big for what it contained: emptiness quavered around us in rings. Apart from the sound of our voices and the sea, there was only silence here: no noise of engines or children or dogs. It was eerie and sad, and I could not bear to live in it.

'He stayed for three days. He lived with me. At first it was a game – you know the sort of game that people play when there is something that they want from each other, but there are things they cannot tell each other ... It was painful for me, but lovely too, to see him in the house, here ... Not a day goes by without me remembering him standing in a certain place with the light falling on him in a certain way ... This doorway, that stair ...' She became weak and seemed to flatten in her chair like a shadow. She tried to speak but couldn't.

'Still?' I asked, incredulous in spite of myself. 'Surely you cannot *still* ... after all this time.'

'What if I do?' she said, and her voice was hard again. She leaned quickly forward out of her chair. 'He loved me too, you know. He told me so. He said it to me so often that I was tired of hearing it.'

Though I said nothing to her, I reflected that I had never heard him speak those words. For a moment my home and

everything in it ballooned in me. I saw my mother as she must surely be sitting, in the wooden straight-backed chair in the lounge, staring out at the garden with her hands folded in her lap. I choked on this image; I tried to vent it from me with speech:

‘And?’ I said. ‘More! Tell me more!’

‘We ate together at night. During the day he was out, doing the business he’d come down here to do ... He was supposed to be staying in a hotel in town. He’d go back to his room there in the late afternoon to change and to phone home. He phoned home every day, he had to, you see ... She expected it of him. It wouldn’t have done to arouse her suspicions.’

‘No,’ I said.

‘Then he would come to me, at evening time, the time of day when you arrived ... I’d be waiting for him as I was, on the stoep, the lamps all lit ...’

‘Yes ...’

‘We walked together every night along the beach. There are some rocks about a kilometre down the sand, he liked to sit there. I don’t know why ... he liked that place ...’

‘And you?’ I said. ‘What did you do while he was out? How did the time pass for you?’

‘Slowly. I waited, of course, for him. There were things to occupy my mind ...’

‘But didn’t you work? Wasn’t there –’

‘I have never worked,’ she said shortly. ‘I have indulged in ... pursuits to busy myself now and then. I have been a painter. I have written stories. But I have not worked.’

‘How did you –’

‘I was married,’ she murmured, almost as if the thought had nothing to do with our conversation, ‘once. But he died and left me what he owned.’

'Did you,' I had to know, 'did you love him too?'

She paused and then smiled in the liquid light. 'I did,' she said. 'I suppose I did. Yes ... There have been one or two, besides him ... before him ...' Her smile hadn't faded yet, but bent her lips gently like a taste she couldn't share with me. I knew better than to speak. I waited while she remembered – alone in the bare, cold yellow room, I suppose, purged of my presence for a brief time. I wondered if this was the way she spent her nights; without company or consolation, growing mildly mad in her house on the hill. Then she said, in that same soft tone, 'He is dead now, you say?'

'Yes,' I said. My voice did not emerge properly at first, so I tried again: 'Yes.'

'He's gone then?'

'Yes. Yes.'

There was another pause.

'He left,' she said suddenly, 'after three days. He went away when his business trip was over. I never saw him again. He went back to his wife and to you. He told me about you, you weren't very old then ...'

'How old was I? How long ago was this?'

'I don't know ... Long ago ... Or not so long ...'

Her voice trailed away, and she stared at me, clutching a fistful of her dress. Then she spoke, but her voice was harsh now, with a screech in it like wire. 'Why have you come?' she said. 'What do you want from me?'

'I thought that you would want to know,' I said. 'I thought –'

'Why should I want to know? He was nothing to me.' She brought her face closer to mine, so that a drop of spittle hit my forehead as she spoke. 'Did he tell you about me? Did you and your mother hear it all, were you laughing at

me all the years and years I ...' She paused, and said with difficulty, 'Were you?'

'No,' I said. My voice was faint now. 'You have my word. We knew nothing at all.'

'How is it then - '

'I found a letter,' I said. 'You wrote a letter.'

There was another pause. She breathed. 'Ah,' she said. 'A letter. Yes.' And fell back into her chair, panting for air as if she had been climbing the steep path up to her house.

I looked at her again, this extraordinary woman whose body had begun to shrink and fade on her in preparation for bringing itself to an end. Even then, when she had sat beside my father at the dinner table however many years before, she could not have been remarkably beautiful. Her face was too round, her chin too large. But I could only imagine what beauty had moved in my father when he'd looked at her. The lies that we conceive, the lies that we believe ... I took her hand in mine. Her skin was as dry and rough as that of a sow.

'You were lovers,' I said. 'Isn't that consolation enough?'

'You don't understand,' she said. 'Your mother - '

'My mother is a wicked woman. She crushed him. He lived no life at all because of her. How he must have thought of you, how he must have loved you all the more because of her.'

'He was with me for three days,' she cried. Her voice was trembling. 'He told me that he loved me more than anything in his life. But she ... she would have known. He said it was no use. He said she was too strong. Three days,' she repeated, and I felt she would have cried if her body was not so dry. 'For three days only, and we were never lovers ...'

'Never?' I whispered through my tiny throat.

'Never.'

By now the moon was up.

The moon was up as we walked beside the sea. It was just clear of the water and, by some trick of refraction or mirage, was huger than it should have been: it hung in the sky like a round, silent, yellow lamp. In its glow we could see the fine debris washed up by the water: tiny shells, sticks, weed, and the transparent bodies of crabs. There were rocks here and there, pushing up out of the sand. To the right the dense wall of vegetation rose in a clear ridge against the sky. If we had turned to look behind us, we might have been able to see the light of her house a little way behind, but before us, other than the swollen moon, there were no lights at all. There was only the dim strip of sand, like a narrow white highway, caught between the land and the sea.

We were walking along the curve of a bay. I could make out, not too far ahead, the jumble of rocks towards which we were headed. She'd pointed them out as we got down to the sand. 'He loved it there.' I was as eager as she to reach this site that had so appealed to him, but even I found it difficult to walk in the heavy sand. Beside me, holding my arm with a hard, sore grasp, she staggered and stumbled in her haste. Her breath streamed out on the still air like the note of a whistle.

'Wouldn't you like to sit?' I said. 'Wouldn't you like a rest?'

'No,' she gasped, and didn't pause. 'When I was young this was an easy, an easy walk to do.'

And on we walked. We didn't talk, partly because we were moving and partly because there truly was no more to say. I felt great pity for the thin pale woman at my side, and

even greater pity for my quiet father who had loved her all his life and yet had never had the courage to love her properly. The rocks came closer. And, once again, he was with me there: I saw them in my mind's eye, walking in this way on such a night as this. They were side by side, she clutching to his arm as she was to mine, but for very different reasons. Now and then he would bend his head to hers and they would exchange a few words:

'I love you,' said my poor dead father. 'I wish I could marry you.'

'Do,' said the woman, young and bright. 'Why don't you do it?'

'I can't,' said he. 'You don't understand. There is a force in my life that is stronger than I. I am not brave enough to give up everything for you. She would not, would not let me go. If I had only met you first, before, before ...'

So they walked on towards the cool grey rocks through the dark.

We came upon them almost unexpectedly after such a long haul. I raised my eyes to see them in front of me, close, rising from the sand like a crypt. I came to a stop. She had already halted beside me and was looking with tired and frightened eyes at the luminous mass of stone. There was a smell in the air, such as is given off by water that stands still too long. I breathed through my mouth.

'Is this where - ?' I began, but fell silent when I saw her face.

'Let's sit,' she said. 'Shall we watch the moon?'

She took my hand and led me to a small knoll at the edge of the water. We sat down. She was next to me and had not let go of my hand. I looked out over the ploughed surface of the sea. The moon was high now and had shrunk to a more acceptable size.

She was speaking. 'I remember,' she said, 'when I was a girl, I used to hope for nights like these. I didn't know that they were possible then.'

I listened, but did not reply.

'Is my house too much for you?' she said. 'Is there too much in it? There are people who say it is an overwhelming house. I love the pictures on the walls, the puppets hanging behind the door, the masks in the cupboard, the mess ... If you do not like it, I will throw it all away. Do you hear? If you ever leave me I shall empty my house of everything I do not need.'

Her hand, which had been stroking mine through all this, grew more urgent and insistent in its touch. I could think of little other than this soft, appalling caress.

'I should miss you if you went away,' she said. 'I should miss you more than anything. I miss you now. I miss you when I am with you. Can you understand that?'

At this I tried to protest, but my voice was too thick in my mouth. I grabbed her hand in mine to stop her stroking, but she shook it free as if it had no strength. I could only watch her, lame and dumb, as she continued to launch her appeal:

'Why do you speak so little? You are either too stupid or too wise. I think you are wise, I think you have secrets you know you must not share. You are a silent man. You give no clues. But you have told me that you love me, what bigger secrets can you have? Tell me. I demand to know. Tell me now.' She tugged my hand.

I shook my head. The tide was coming in; a wavelet hissed across the sand and sank away, leaving only bubbles. I shook my head again.

A silence fell. It was cold out here. The air had lost its warmth and a small breeze was coming in off the sea. Also

the smell of stagnant water, trapped somewhere in the rocks, was stronger than ever. 'Why do you like it here,' she said, 'Ivor?'

I cleared my throat. 'I don't know. It must be the view.'

'Do you mind if we go back now? I'm tired.'

'No,' I said. 'Let us go back.'

I helped her to her feet. We walked back towards the house in a night that had suddenly grown old. Above the line of the horizon, safe from the bleaching light of the moon, a few scattered stars were burning. I thought of their light, and the distance it had travelled, the time that it had crossed. As we walked without speaking back down the beach, my head was full of visions of her and him and things that had taken place before my life. I saw, once again, my mother as she sat in the wooden straight-backed chair and stared out at the garden.

But that was ridiculous, for it was late and she would have been in bed.

We came to the pathway that led up to her house. I had to help her climb, as she was very tired and the ground was slippery. I wondered how she managed to get up here alone, if she did. She seemed to my eyes far older than when I'd arrived, as if the cells of her body were ageing at terrible speed. Her skin was without colour; it covered her bones like pulp. But I was not repulsed by her. Quite the opposite, in fact: there was in her numb, ancient face a kind of gentleness that made me tender. I touched her with care.

'Thank you,' she said as we came out of the trees and onto the grass below her house. 'You are very kind.'

'No,' I said. 'It is you who are kind.'

We went in. The hanging lamps continued to burn, flickering now and then, but never going out. She lifted one of them from its hook and held it up. The room was

swirling with shadows now, like my mind. I took the lamp from her.

'Let me do that,' I said.

I led her by the hand. Holding the lamp above, we moved with slow steps down the long bare corridor, passing the rooms on either side in which she had expended her life. They were empty as vaults. As we went, we came to the other lamps that she had lit and hung before I came. Here I would stop very briefly, just to put out the flame. They gave off a scent of sweet oil and smoke. Darkness followed behind us, lapping through the house. We walked on without fear, following the trail of yellow light to the room at the end.

In it there was a mirror and a large white bed. There was a cupboard. The window had no curtains and gave onto the forest that grew so close about. I turned away from the sight of tangled trees, of twisted leaves, to her. She was waiting for me, hesitant and uncertain. She seemed about to speak, but her lips were trembling too much.

'Hush,' I said. 'There is nothing to say.'

She nodded at that. But her mouth went on trembling, as if she were cold.

I kissed that mouth to still its fear, and mine. It felt and tasted of nothing, like the lips of a ghost. When I raised my face to look at her, I saw that her eyes were closed, or else they were blank and cold like the eyes of a fish. I stroked her hair.

'I love you,' I said.

'Yes,' she said.

'Let me take you to bed.'

'Yes,' she said.

Then I put out the last lamp there was, which I held in my hand. A faint moonlight came through the window like

water. It cast the shadow of bars across the bed. I took her hand. In the smell of extinguished fire, I undressed her. Her body did not seem old in the blue dark. Only when she moved, as she did when I helped her onto the bed, could I hear the age of her creaking bones and painful sighs. She lay and waited for me.

She didn't wait long. But I did pause a moment to think before I performed this final act – perhaps the only act of kindness allowed me in my life. But it was more than that. There was a kind of love in it, and a passion too. It gave her peace, and him. Perhaps it also gave me peace. I cannot say for sure.

Afterwards, as she lay sleeping, I dressed beside the bed. I looked at her one final time. Then I left the room, closing the door behind me. I walked back through the darkened house, passing the lamps that hung like steel fruit from the ceiling. The front door was open and I went through, out onto the cold grass. I stood there for a minute, just to tuck in my shirt and to look for the moon which had already gone. The sky in the east was beginning to go pale, for the world had turned once and the sun had returned. I walked across the grass, leaving footprints in the dew. I reached the path and started down to my car.

I stopped only once on the way down. There was a smell, a weight, you could say, of honeysuckle on the air. It lasted only a moment and I could have been mistaken. I pressed on.