

Praise for
the #1 *New York Times* bestseller

LISEY'S STORY

“In *Lisey's Story*, Stephen King makes bold, brilliant use of his satanic storytelling gift, his angelic ear for language, and, above all, his incomparable ability to find the epic in the ordinary. . . . In his hands, the long, passionate union of Scott and Lisey Landon—of any long-lived marriage, by implication—becomes a fantastic kingdom, with its own geography and language, its dark and stirring chronicle of heroes and monsters, its tragedies, griefs, and glories. King has been getting me to look at the world with terror and wonder since I was fifteen years old, and I have never been more persuaded than by this book of his greatness.”

—Michael Chabon, author of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

“Dazzling . . . Stephen King at his finest and most generous.”

—Nicholas Sparks, author of *The Notebook*

“Stephen King hooked me about three decades ago with that sharply faceted, bloodstained jewel, *The Shining*. Through the years he's bumped my gooses with kiddie vampires, tingled my spine with beloved pets gone rabid, justified my personal fear of clowns, and made me think twice about my cell phone. But with *Lisey's Story*, King has accomplished one more feat. He broke my heart. *Lisey's Story* is, at its core, a love story—heart-wrenching, passionate, terrifying, and tender. It is the multilayered and expertly crafted tale of a twenty-five-year marriage and a widow's journey through grief, through discovery, and—this is King, after all—through a nightmare-scape of the ordinary and extraordinary. *Lisey's Story* is bright and brilliant. It's dark and desperate. It's a treasure box heaped with dazzling gems. A few of them have sharp, hungry teeth.”

—Nora Roberts

“Moving . . . With *Lisey’s Story*, King has crashed the exclusive party of literary fiction, and he’ll be no easier to ignore than Carrie at the prom. . . . An audacious meditation on the creative process and a remarkable intersection of the different strains of his talent. A rich portrait of a marriage and the complicated affection that outlives death.”

—Ron Charles, *The Washington Post*

“Haunting . . . A tender, intimate book that makes an epic interior journey.”

—*The New York Times*

“Intricate . . . Exhilarating . . . King reveals, with subtle precision, the profound strangeness of widowhood when someone who was perfect for so much of a shared life is gone.”

—*The New Yorker*

“Unlike any novel King has written. Its tone and style feel highly personal. You sense that King really, really loves this book.”

—*USA Today*

“The novel soars in its depiction of the marital landscape: the day-to-day rhythms, the slights, the unspoken joys, and, most of all, the elusive glue binding ever-erratic human hearts.”

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

“Rarely has King created a world as compelling, as tear-streaked as the one he has built in *Lisey’s Story*. . . . Possibly King’s best work since *The Stand*.”

—Associated Press

“A passionate, often wrenching account . . . Once King has you in his grasp, you’ll willingly follow him to the end.”

—*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

“An imaginative, emotional book as easily defined by grace as by terror . . . At once heartbreaking and heartwarming.”

—*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

“*Lisey’s Story* is many stories at once: a touching exploration of grief, an honest appraisal of marriage, a salute to resolute women, and a paean to the collective imagination that links and sustains us. . . . There is also a surprising poignancy and deep understanding of what the writer risks and gains through the act of creation.”

—*Hartford Courant*

“After *Lisey’s Story* . . . I’ve come to see that you don’t know the power of the man’s work if you limit yourself to the iconography. . . . What’s still haunting me is that language. . . . King evokes the mesmeric power of words to both maintain and destroy sanity with a clarity that really gets to you.”

—*Newsday*

“Powerful . . . A love story and supernatural suspense tale rolled into one gripping read . . . This is King at his best. As a storyteller, a fantasist, and a chronicler of the human condition, he has no match.”

—*Rocky Mountain News*

“Splendid . . . A wonderfully structured novel . . . with the entirety coming together like a well-planned mosaic.”

—*The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“Disturbing and sorrowful . . . This novel answers the question King posed twenty-five years ago in his tale ‘The Reach’: yes, the dead do love.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“First and last, this is a powerful love story. . . . One of King’s finest works.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

Books by Stephen King

FICTION

Carrie
'Salem's Lot
The Shining
Night Shift
The Stand
The Dead Zone
Firestarter
Cujo
Creepshow
Different Seasons
Rita Hayworth and
Shausbank Redemption
The Body
Cycle of the Werewolf
Christine
Pet Sematary
IT
Skeleton Crew
The Mist
The Eyes of the Dragon
Misery
The Tommyknockers
The Dark Half
Four Past Midnight
The Langoliers
Needful Things
Gerald's Game
Dolores Claiborne
Nightmares & Dreamscapes
Insomnia
Rose Madder
The Green Mile
Desperation
Bag of Bones
The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon
Hearts in Atlantis
Dreamcatcher
Everything's Eventual
From a Buick 8
The Colorado Kid
Cell
Lisey's Story
Duma Key
Just After Sunset
Stephen King Goes to the Movies
Under the Dome
Full Dark, No Stars
1922
11/22/63

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Mr. Mercedes
Revival
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End of Watch
The Outsider
Elevation
The Institute
If It Bleeds
Billy Summers
Fairy Tale
Holly
You Like It Darker
Never Flinch

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BY STEPHEN KING AS RICHARD BACHMAN

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The Long Walk
Roadwork
The Regulators
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WITH PETER STRAUB

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Black House

WITH RICHARD CHIZMAR

Gwendy's Button Box
Gwendy's Final Task

NONFICTION

Danse Macabre
On Writing (A Memoir of the Craft)

LISEY'S
STORY
a novel
STEPHEN
KING

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Under the title "Lisey and the Madman," an excerpt from the opening of *Lisey's Story* appeared in *McSweeney's Enchanted Chamber of Astonishing Stories*, edited by Michael Chabon (Vintage, 2004).

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For Tabby

Where do you go when you're lonely?
Where do you go when you're blue?
Where do you go when you're lonely?
I'll follow you
When the stars go blue.

—RYAN ADAMS

baby

babyluv

PART 1: BOOL HUNT

“If I were the moon, I know where I would fall down.”

—D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*

I. Lisey and Amanda

(Everything the Same)

1

To the public eye, the spouses of well-known writers are all but invisible, and no one knew it better than Lisey Landon. Her husband had won the Pulitzer and the National Book Award, but Lisey had given only one interview in her life. This was for the well-known women's magazine that publishes the column "Yes, I'm Married to *Him!*" She spent roughly half of its five-hundred-word length explaining that her nickname rhymed with "CeeCee." Most of the other half had to do with her recipe for slow-cooked roast beef. Lisey's sister Amanda said that the picture accompanying the interview made Lisey look fat.

None of Lisey's sisters was immune to the pleasures of setting the cat among the pigeons ("stirring up a stink" had been their father's phrase for it), or having a good natter about someone else's dirty laundry, but the only one Lisey had a hard time liking was this same Amanda. Eld-est (and oddest) of the onetime Debusher girls of Lisbon Falls, Amanda currently lived alone, in a house which Lisey had provided, a small, weather-tight place not too far from Castle View where Lisey, Darla, and Cantata could keep an eye on her. Lisey had bought it for her seven years ago, five before Scott died. Died Young. Died Before His Time, as the saying was. Lisey still had trouble believing he'd been gone for two years. It seemed both longer and the blink of an eye.

When Lisey finally got around to making a start at cleaning out his office suite, a long and beautifully lit series of rooms that had once been

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no more than the loft above a country barn, Amanda had shown up on the third day, after Lisey had finished her inventory of all the foreign editions (there were hundreds) but before she could do more than start listing the furniture, with little stars next to the pieces she thought she ought to keep. She waited for Amanda to ask her why she wasn't moving *faster*, for heaven's sake, but Amanda asked no questions. While Lisey moved from the furniture question to a listless (and day-long) consideration of the cardboard boxes of correspondence stacked in the main closet, Amanda's focus seemed to remain on the impressive stacks and piles of memorabilia which ran the length of the study's south wall. She worked her way back and forth along this snakelike accretion, saying little or nothing but jotting frequently in a little notebook she kept near to hand.

What Lisey didn't say was *What are you looking for?* Or *What are you writing down?* As Scott had pointed out on more than one occasion, Lisey had what was surely among the rarest of human talents: she was a business-minder who did not mind too much if you didn't mind yours. As long as you weren't making explosives to throw at someone, that was, and in Amanda's case, explosives were always a possibility. She was the sort of woman who couldn't help prying, the sort of woman who *would* open her mouth sooner or later.

Her husband had headed south from Rumford, where they had been living ("like a couple of wolverines caught in a drainpipe," Scott said after an afternoon visit he vowed never to repeat) in 1985. Her one child, named Intermezzo and called Metzie for short, had gone north to Canada (with a long-haul trucker for a beau) in 1989. "One flew north, one flew south, one couldn't shut her everlasting mouth." That had been their father's rhyme when they were kids, and the one of Dandy Dave Debusher's girls who could never shut her everlasting mouth was surely Manda, dumped first by her husband and then by her own daughter.

Hard to like as Amanda sometimes was, Lisey hadn't wanted her down there in Rumford on her own; didn't trust her on her own, if it came to that, and although they'd never said so aloud, Lisey was sure Darla and Cantata felt the same. So she'd had a talk with Scott, and

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found the little Cape Cod, which could be had for ninety-seven thousand dollars, cash on the nail. Amanda had moved up within easy checking range soon after.

Now Scott was dead and Lisey had finally gotten around to the business of cleaning out his writing quarters. Halfway through the fourth day, the foreign editions were boxed up, the correspondence was marked and in some sort of order, and she had a good idea of what furniture was going and what was staying. So why did it feel that she had done so little? She'd known from the outset that this was a job which couldn't be hurried. Never mind all the importuning letters and phone calls she'd gotten since Scott's death (and more than a few visits, too). She supposed that in the end, the people who were interested in Scott's unpublished writing would get what they wanted, but not until she was ready to give it to them. They hadn't been clear on that at first; they weren't *down with it*, as the saying was. Now she thought most of them were.

There were lots of words for the stuff Scott had left behind. The only one she completely understood was *memorabilia*, but there was another one, a funny one, that sounded like *incuncabilla*. That was what the impatient people wanted, the wheedlers, and the angry ones—Scott's *incuncabilla*. Lisey began to think of them as Incunks.

2

What she felt most of all, especially after Amanda showed up, was discouraged, as if she'd either underestimated the task itself or overestimated (wildly) her ability to see it through to its inevitable conclusion—the saved furniture stored in the barn below, the rugs rolled up and taped shut, the yellow Ryder van in the driveway, throwing its shadow on the board fence between her yard and the Galloways' next door.

Oh, and don't forget the sad heart of this place, the three desktop computers (there had been four, but the one in the memory nook was now gone, thanks to Lisey herself). Each was newer and lighter than the last, but even the newest was a big desktop model and all of them still

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worked. They were password-protected, too, and she didn't know what the passwords were. She'd never asked, and had no idea what kind of electro-litter might be sleeping on the computers' hard drives. Grocery lists? Poems? Erotica? She was sure he'd been connected to the internet, but had no idea where he visited when he was there. Amazon? Drudge? Hank Williams Lives? Madam Cruella's Golden Showers & Tower of Power? She tended to think not anything like that last, to think she would have seen the bills (or at least divots in the monthly house-money account), except of course that was really bullshit. If Scott had wanted to hide a thousand a month from her, he could have done so. And the passwords? The joke was, he might have told her. She forgot stuff like that, that was all. She reminded herself to try her own name. Maybe after Amanda had taken herself home for the day. Which didn't look like happening anytime soon.

Lisey sat back and blew hair off her forehead. *I won't get to the manuscripts until July, at this rate*, she thought. *The Incunks would go nuts if they saw the way I'm crawling along. Especially that last one.*

The last one—five months ago, this had been—had managed not to blow up, had managed to keep a very civil tongue about him until she'd begun to think he might be different. Lisey told him that Scott's writing suite had been sitting empty for almost a year and a half at that time, but she'd almost mustered the energy and resolve to go up there and start the work of cleaning the rooms and setting the place to rights.

Her visitor's name had been Professor Joseph Woodbody, of the University of Pittsburgh English Department. Pitt was Scott's alma mater, and Woodbody's Scott Landon and the American Myth lecture class was extremely popular and extremely large. He also had four graduate students doing Scott Landon theses this year, and so it was probably inevitable that the Incunk warrior should come to the fore when Lisey spoke in such vague terms as *sooner rather than later* and *almost certainly sometime this summer*. But it wasn't until she assured him that she would give him a call "when the dust settles" that Woodbody really began to give way.

He said the fact that she had shared a great American writer's bed did not qualify her to serve as his literary executor. That, he said, was a job

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for an expert, and he understood that Mrs. Landon had no college degree at all. He reminded her of the time already gone since Scott Landon's death, and of the rumors that continued to grow. Supposedly there were piles of unpublished Landon fiction—short stories, even novels. Could she not let him into the study for even a little while? Let him prospect a bit in the file cabinets and desk drawers, if only to set the most outrageous rumors to rest? She could stay with him the whole time, of course—that went without saying.

"No," she'd said, showing Professor Woodbody to the door. "I'm not ready just yet." Overlooking the man's lower blows—trying to, at least—because he was obviously as crazy as the rest of them. He'd just hidden it better, and for a little longer. "And when I am, I'll want to look at everything, not just the manuscripts."

"But—"

She had nodded seriously to him. "Everything the same."

"I don't understand what you mean by that."

Of course he didn't. It had been a part of her marriage's inner language. How many times had Scott come breezing in, calling "Hey, Lisey, I'm home—everything the same?" Meaning *is everything all right, is everything cool*. But like most phrases of power (Scott had explained this once to her, but Lisey had already known it), it had an inside meaning. A man like Woodbody could never grasp the inside meaning of *everything the same*. Lisey could explain it all day and he still wouldn't get it. Why? Because he was an Incunk, and when it came to Scott Landon only one thing interested the Incunks.

"It doesn't matter," was what she'd said to Professor Woodbody on that day five months ago. "*Scott* would have understood."

3

If Amanda had asked Lisey where Scott's "memory nook" things had been stored—the awards and plaques, stuff like that—Lisey would have lied (a thing she did tolerably well for one who did it seldom) and said "a U-Store-It in Mechanic Falls." Amanda did not ask, however. She just

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paged ever more ostentatiously through her little notebook, surely trying to get her younger sister to broach the subject with the proper question, but Lisey did not ask. She was thinking of how empty this corner was, how empty and *uninteresting*, with so many of Scott's mementos gone. Either destroyed (like the computer monitor) or too badly scratched and dented to be shown; such an exhibit would raise more questions than it could ever answer.

At last Amanda gave in and opened her notebook. "Look at this," she said. "Just look."

Manda was holding out the first page. Written on the blue lines, crammed in from the little wire loops on the left to the edge of the sheet on the right (*like a coded message from one of those street-crazies you're always running into in New York because there's not enough money for the publicly funded mental institutions anymore*, Lisey thought wearily), were numbers. Most had been circled. A very few had been enclosed in squares. Manda turned the page and now here were *two* pages filled with more of the same. On the following page, the numbers stopped halfway down. The final one appeared to be 846.

Amanda gave her the sidelong, red-cheeked, and somehow hilarious expression of hauteur that had meant, when she was twelve and little Lisey only two, that Manda had gone and Taken Something On Herself; tears for someone would follow. Amanda herself, more often than not. Lisey found herself waiting with some interest (and a touch of dread) to see what that expression might mean this time. Amanda had been acting nutty ever since turning up. Maybe it was just the sullen, sultry weather. More likely it had to do with the sudden absence of her longtime boyfriend. If Manda was headed for another spell of stormy emotional weather because Charlie Corriveau had jilted her, then Lisey supposed she had better buckle up herself. She had never liked or trusted Corriveau, banker or not. How could you trust a man after overhearing, at the spring library bake sale, that the guys down at The Mellow Tiger called him Shootin' Beans? What kind of nickname was that for a banker? What did it even *mean*? And surely he had to know that Manda had had mental problems in the past—

"Lisey?" Amanda asked. Her brow was deeply furrowed.

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"I'm sorry," Lisey said, "I just kind of . . . went off there for a second."

"You often do," Amanda said. "I think you got it from Scott. Pay attention, Lisey. I made a little number on each of his magazines and journals and scholarly *things*. The ones piled over there against the wall."

Lisey nodded as if she understood where this was going.

"I made the numbers in pencil, just light," Amanda went on. "Always when your back was turned or you were somewhere else, because I thought if you saw, you might have told me to stop."

"I wouldn't've." She took the little notebook, which was limp with its owner's sweat. "Eight hundred and forty-six! That many!" And she knew the publications running along the wall weren't the sort she herself might read and have in the house, ones like *O* and *Good Housekeeping* and *Ms.*, but rather *Little Sewanee Review* and *Glimmer Train* and *Open City* and things with incomprehensible names like *Piskya*.

"Quite a few more than that," Amanda said, and cocked a thumb at the piles of books and journals. When Lisey really looked at them, she saw that her sister was right. Many more than eight hundred and forty-some. Had to be. "Almost three thousand in all, and where you'll put them or who'd want them I'm sure I can't say. No, eight hundred and forty-six is just the number that have pictures of you."

This was so awkwardly stated that Lisey at first didn't understand it. When she did, she was delighted. The idea that there might be such an unexpected photo-resource—such a hidden record of her time with Scott—had never crossed her mind. But when she thought about it, it made perfect sense. They had been married over twenty-five years at the time of his death, and Scott had been an inveterate, restless traveler during those years, reading, lecturing, crisscrossing the country with hardly a pause when he was between books, visiting as many as ninety campuses a year and never losing a beat in his seemingly endless stream of short stories. And on most of those rambles she was with him. In how many motels had she taken the little Swedish steamer to one of his suits while the TV muttered talk-show psalms on her side of the room and on his the portable typewriter clacked (early in the marriage) or the laptop clicked quietly (late) as he sat looking down at it with a comma of hair falling on his brow?

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Manda was looking at her sourly, clearly not liking her reaction so far. “The ones that are circled—over six hundred of them—are ones where you’ve been treated discourteously in the photo caption.”

“Is that so?” Lisey was mystified.

“I’ll show you.” Amanda studied the notebook, went over to the slumbering, wall-length stack, consulted again, and selected two items. One was an expensive-looking hardcover biannual from the University of Kentucky at Bowling Green. The other, a digest-sized magazine that looked like a student effort, was called *Push-Pelt*: one of those names designed by English majors to be charming and mean absolutely nothing.

“Open them, open them!” Amanda commanded, and as she shoved them into her hands, Lisey smelled the wild and acrid bouquet of her sister’s sweat. “The pages are marked with little scrids of paper, see?”

Scrids. Their mother’s word for scraps. Lisey opened the biannual first, turning to the marked page. The picture of her and Scott in that one was very good, very smoothly printed. Scott was approaching a podium while she stood behind him, clapping. The audience stood below, also clapping. The picture of them in *Push-Pelt* was nowhere near as smooth; the dots in the dot-matrix looked as big as the points of pencils with mooshed leads and there were hunks of wood floating in the pulp paper, but she looked at it and felt like crying. Scott was entering some dark cellarful of noise. There was a big old Scott grin on his face that said oh yeah, this be the place. She was a step or two behind him, her own smile visible in the back-kick of what must have been a mighty flash. She could even make out the blouse she was wearing, that blue Anne Klein with the funny single red stripe down the left side. What she had on below was lost in shadow, and she couldn’t remember this particular evening at all, but she knew it had been jeans. When she went out late, she always put on a pair of faded jeans. The caption read: *Living Legend Scott Landon (Accompanied By Gal Pal) Makes An Appearance At The University Of Vermont Stalag 17 Club Last Month. Landon Stayed Until Last Call, Reading, Dancing, Partying. Man Knows How To Get Down.*

Yes. Man had known how to get down. She could testify.

She looked at all the other periodicals, was suddenly overwhelmed by the riches she might find in them, and realized Amanda had hurt her

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after all, had gored her a wound that might bleed a long time. Was he the only one who had known about the dark places? The dirty dark ones where you were so alone and wretchedly voiceless? Maybe she didn't know all that he had, but she knew enough. Certainly she knew he had been haunted, and would never look into a mirror—any reflective surface, if he could help it—after the sun went down. And she had loved him in spite of all that. Because the man had known how to get down.

But no more. Now the man *was* down. The man had *passed on*, as the saying was; her life had moved on to a new phase, a solo phase, and it was too late to turn back now.

The phrase gave her a shudder and made her think of things

(the purple, the thing with the piebald side)

best not thought of, and so she turned her mind away from them.

"I'm glad you found these pictures," she told Amanda warmly. "You're a pretty good big sister, you know it?"

And, as Lisey had hoped (but not really dared expect), Manda was startled right out of her haughty, skittish little dance. She looked uncertainly at Lisey, seeming to hunt for insincerity and finding none. Little by little, she relaxed into a biddable, easier-to-cope-with Amanda. She took back the notebook and looked at it with a frown, as if not entirely sure where it had come from. Lisey thought, considering the obsessive nature of the numbers, that this might be a big step in a good direction.

Then Manda nodded as people do when they recall something that should not have been lost to mind in the first place. "In the ones not circled, you're at least *named*—Lisa Landon, an actual person. Last of all, but hardly least—considering what we've always called you, that's almost a pun, isn't it?—you'll see that a few of the numbers have squares around them. Those are pictures of you *alone*!" She gave Lisey an impressive, almost forbidding look. "You'll want to have a look at *them*."

"I'm sure." Trying to sound thrilled out of her underpants when she was unable to think why she'd have any slightest interest in pictures of herself alone during those all-too-brief years when she'd had a man—a good man, a non-Incunk who knew how to *strap it on*—with whom to

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share her days and nights. She raised her eyes to the untidy heaps and foothills of periodicals, which came in every size and shape, imagining what it would be like to go through them stack by stack and one by one, sitting cross-legged on the floor of the memory nook (where else), hunting out those images of her and Scott. And in the ones that had made Amanda so angry she would always find herself walking a little behind him, looking up at him. If others were applauding, she would be applauding, too. Her face would be smooth, giving away little, showing nothing but polite attention. Her face said *He does not bore me*. Her face said *He does not exalt me*. Her face said *I do not set myself on fire for him, nor be for me* (the lie, the lie, the lie). Her face said *Everything the same*.

Amanda hated these pictures. She looked and saw her sister playing salt for the sirloin, setting for the stone. She saw her sister sometimes identified as *Mrs. Landon*, sometimes as *Mrs. Scott Landon*, and sometimes—oh, this was bitter—not identified at all. Demoted all the way to *Gal Pal*. To Amanda it must seem like a kind of murder.

“Mandy-oh?”

Amanda looked at her. The light was cruel, and Lisey remembered with a real and total sense of shock that Manda would be sixty in the fall. Sixty! In that moment Lisey found herself thinking about the thing that had haunted her husband on so many sleepless nights—the thing the Woodbodys of the world would never know about, not if she had her way. Something with an endless mottled side, something seen best by cancer patients looking into tumblers from which all the painkiller had been emptied; there will be no more until morning.

It's very close, honey. I can't see it, but I hear it taking its meal.

Shut up, Scott, I don't know what you're talking about.

“Lisey?” Amanda asked. “Did you say something?”

“Just muttering under my breath.” She tried to smile.

“Were you talking to Scott?”

Lisey gave up trying to smile. “Yes, I guess I was. Sometimes I still do. Crazy, huh?”

“I don't think so. Not if it works. I think crazy is what doesn't work. And I ought to know. I've had some experience. Right?”

“Manda—”

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But Amanda had turned to look at the heaps of journals and annu-als and student magazines. When she returned her gaze to Lisey, she was smiling uncertainly. "Did I do right, Lisey? I only wanted to do my part . . ."

Lisey took one of Amanda's hands and squeezed it lightly. "You did. What do you say we get out of here? I'll flip you for the first shower."

4

I was lost in the dark and you found me. I was hot—so hot—and you gave me ice.

Scott's voice.

Lisey opened her eyes, thinking she had drifted away from some day-time task or moment and had had a brief but amazingly detailed dream in which Scott was dead and she was engaged in the Herculean job of cleaning out his writing stables. With them open she immediately understood that Scott indeed *was* dead; she was asleep in her own bed after delivering Manda home, and this was her dream.

She seemed to be floating in moonlight. She could smell exotic flowers. A fine-grained summer wind combed her hair back from her temples, the kind of wind that blows long after midnight in some secret place far from home. Yet it *was* home, *bad* to be home, because ahead of her was the barn which housed Scott's writing suite, object of so much Incunk interest. And now, thanks to Amanda, she knew it held all those pictures of her and her late husband. All that buried treasure, that emotional loot.

It might be better not to look at those pictures, the wind whispered in her ears.

Oh, of that she had no doubt. But she *would* look. Was helpless not to, now that she knew they were there.

She was delighted to see she was floating on a vast, moon-gilded piece of cloth with the words PILLSBURY'S BEST FLOUR printed across it again and again; the corners had been knotted like hankies. She was charmed by the whimsy of it; it was like floating on a cloud.

Scott. She tried to say his name aloud and could not. The dream

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wouldn't let her. The driveway leading to the barn was gone, she saw. So was the yard between it and the house. Where they had been was a vast field of purple flowers, dreaming in haunted moonlight. *Scott, I loved you, I saved you, I*

5

Then she was awake and could hear herself in the dark, saying it over and over like a mantra: "I loved you, I saved you, I got you ice. I loved you, I saved you, I got you ice. I loved you, I saved you, I got you ice."

She lay there a long time, remembering a hot August day in Nashville and thinking—not for the first time—that being single after being double so long was strange shite, indeed. She would have thought two years was enough time for the strangeness to rub off, but it wasn't; time apparently did nothing but blunt grief's sharpest edge so that it hacked rather than sliced. Because everything was *not* the same. Not outside, not inside, not for her. Lying in the bed that had once held two, Lisey thought alone never felt more lonely than when you woke up and discovered you still had the house to yourself. That you and the mice in the walls were the only ones still breathing.

II. Lisey and The Madman (Darkness Loves Him)

1

The next morning Lisey sat tailor-fashion on the floor of Scott's memory nook, looking across at the heaps and stacks and piles of magazines, alumni reports, English Department bulletins, and University "journals" that ran along the study's south wall. It had occurred to her that maybe looking would be enough to dispel the stealthy hold all those as-yet-unseen pictures had taken on her imagination. Now that she was actually here, she knew that had been a vain hope. Nor would she need Manda's limp little notebook with all the numbers in it. That was lying discarded on the floor nearby, and Lisey put it in the back pocket of her jeans. She didn't like the look of it, the treasured artifact of a not-quite-right mind.

She once again measured that long stack of books and magazines against the south wall, a dusty booksnake four feet high and easily thirty feet long. If not for Amanda, she probably would have packed every last one of them away in liquor-store boxes without ever looking at them or wondering what Scott meant by keeping so many of them.

My mind just doesn't run that way, she told herself. *I'm really not much of a thinker at all.*

Maybe not, but you always remembered like a champ.

That was Scott at his most teasing, charming, and hard to resist, but the truth was she'd been better at forgetting. As had he, and both of them had had their reasons. And yet, as if to prove his point, she

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heard a ghostly snatch of conversation. One speaker—Scott—was familiar. The other voice had a little southern glide to it. A *pretentious* little southern glide, maybe.

—*Tony here will be writing it up for the [thingummy, rum-tum-tummy, whatever]. Would you like to see a copy, Mr. Landon?*

—*Hmmmm? Sure, you bet!*

Muttering voices all around them. Scott barely hearing the thing about Tony writing it up, he'd had what was almost a politician's knack for turning himself outward to those who'd come to see him when he was in public, Scott was listening to the voices of the swelling crowd and already thinking about finding the plug-in point, that pleasurable moment when the electricity flowed from him to them and then back to him again doubled or even tripled, he loved the current but Lisey was convinced he had loved that instant of plugging in even more. Still, he'd taken time to respond.

—*You can send photos, campus newspaper articles or reviews, departmental write-ups, anything like that. Please. I like to see everything. The Study, RFD #2, Sugar Top Hill Road, Castle Rock, Maine. Lisey knows the zip. I always forget.*

Nothing else about her, just *Lisey knows the zip*. How Manda would have howled to hear it! But she had *wanted* to be forgotten on those trips, both there and not there. She liked to watch.

Like the fellow in the porno movie? Scott had asked her once, and she'd returned the thin moon-smile that told him he was treading near the edge. *If you say so, dear*, she had replied.

He always introduced her when they arrived and again here and there, to other people, when it became necessary, but it rarely did. Outside of their own fields, academics were oddly lacking in curiosity. Most of them were just delighted to have the author of *The Coaster's Daughter* (National Book Award) and *Relics* (the Pulitzer) among them. Also, there had been a period of about ten years when Scott had somehow gotten larger than life—to others, and sometimes to himself. (Not to Lisey; she was the one who had to fetch him a fresh roll of toilet paper if he ran out while he was on the john.) Nobody exactly charged the stage when he stood there with the microphone in his hand, but even Lisey felt the connection he made with his audience. Those volts. It was hardwired, and it had little

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to do with his work as a writer. Maybe nothing. It had to do with the *Scottness* of him, somehow. That sounded crazy, but it was true. And it never seemed to change him much, or hurt him, at least until—

Her eyes stopped moving, fixed on a hardcover spine and gold leaf letters reading *U-Tenn Nashville 1988 Review*.

1988, the year of the rockabilly novel. The one he'd never written.

1988, the year of the madman.

—*Tony here will be writing it up*

"No," Lisey said. "Wrong. He didn't say Tony, he said—"

—*Toneb*

Yes, that was right, he said *Toneb*, he said

—*Toneb beah well be rabtin it up*

"—writin it up for the *U-Tenn '88 Year in Review*," Lisey said. "He said . . ."

—*Ab could Express Mail it*

Only she was damned if the little Tennessee Williams wannabe hadn't almost said *Spress* Mail it. That was the voice, all right, that was the southern-fried chickenshit. Dashmore? Dashman? The man had *dashed*, all right, had dashed like a smucking track-star, but that wasn't it. It had been—

"Dashmiel!" Lisey murmured to the empty rooms, and clenched her fists. She stared at the book with the gold-stamped spine as if it might disappear the second she took her eyes away. "Little prig-southerner's name was Dashmiel, and *HE RAN LIKE A RABBIT!*"

Scott would have turned down the offer of Express Mail or Federal Express; believed such things to be a needless expense. About correspondence there was never any hurry—when it came floating downstream, he plucked it out. When it came to reviews of his novels he had been a lot less Come Back To De Raft, Huck Honey and a lot more What Makes Scotty Run, but for write-ups following public appearances, regular mail did him just fine. Since The Study had its own address, Lisey realized she would have been very unlikely to see these things when they came in. And once they were here . . . well, these airy, well-lighted rooms had been Scott's creative playground, not hers, a mostly benign one-boy clubhouse where he'd written his stories and listened to his music as loud as he

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wanted in the soundproofed area he called My Padded Cell. There'd never been a KEEP OUT sign on the door, she'd been up here lots of times when he was alive and Scott was always glad to see her, but it had taken Amanda to see what was in the belly of the booksnake sleeping against the south wall. Quick-to-offense Amanda, suspicious Amanda, OCD Amanda who had somehow become convinced that her house would burn flat if she didn't load the kitchen stove with exactly three maple chunks at a time, no more or less. Amanda whose unalterable habit was to turn around three times on her stoop if she had to go back into the house for something she'd forgotten. Look at stuff like that (or listen to her counting strokes as she brushed her teeth) and you could easily write Manda off as just another gonzo-bonkie old maid, somebody write that lady a prescription for Zoloft or Prozac. But without Manda, does little Lisey ever realize there are hundreds of pictures of her dead husband up here, just waiting for her to look at them? Hundreds of memories waiting to be called forth? And most of them surely more pleasant than the memory of Dashmiel, that southern-fried chickenshit coward . . .

"Stop it," she murmured. "Just stop it now. Lisa Debusher Landon, you open your hand and let that go."

But she was apparently not ready to do that, because she got up, crossed the room, and knelt before the books. Her right hand floated out ahead of her like a magician's trick and grasped the volume marked *U-Tenn Nashville 1988 Review*. Her heart was pounding hard, not with excitement but with fear. The head could tell the heart all that was eighteen years over, but in matters of emotion the heart had its own brilliant vocabulary. The madman's hair had been so blond it was almost white. He had been a *graduate student* madman, spouting what was not quite gibberish. A day after the shooting—when Scott's condition was upgraded from critical to fair—she had asked Scott if the madman grad student had had it *strapped on*, and Scott had whispered that he didn't know if a crazy person could strap *anything* on. *Strapping it on* was a heroic act, an act of will, and crazy people didn't have much in the way of will . . . or did she think otherwise?

—*I don't know, Scott. I'll think about it.*

Not meaning to. Wanting to never think about it again, if she

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could help it. As far as Lisey was concerned, the smucking looneytune with the little gun could join the other things she'd successfully forgotten since meeting Scott.

—*Hot, wasn't it?*

Lying in bed. Still pale, far *too* pale, but starting to get a little of his color back. Casual, no special look, just making conversation. And Lisey Now, Lisey Alone, the widow Landon, shivered.

"He didn't remember," she murmured.

She was almost positive he didn't. Nothing about when he'd been down on the pavement and they'd both been sure he would never get back up. That he was dying and whatever passed between them then was all there would ever be, they who had found so much to say to each other. The neurologist she plucked up courage enough to speak to said that forgetting around the time of a traumatic event was par for the course, that people recovering from such events often discovered that a spot had been burned black in the film of their memories. That spot might stretch over five minutes, five hours, or five days. Sometimes disconnected fragments and images would surface years or even decades later. The neurologist called it a defense mechanism.

It made sense to Lisey.

From the hospital she'd gone back to the motel where she was staying. It wasn't a very good room—in back, with nothing to look at but a board fence and nothing to listen to except a hundred or so barking dogs—but she was far past caring about such things. Certainly she wanted nothing to do with the campus where her husband had been shot. And as she kicked off her shoes and lay down on the hard double bed, she thought: *Darkness loves him.*

Was that true?

How could she say, when she didn't even know what it meant?

You know. Daddy's prize was a kiss.

Lisey had turned her head so swiftly on the pillow she might have been slapped by an invisible hand. *Shut up about that!*

No answer . . . no answer . . . and then, slyly: *Darkness loves him. He dances with it like a lover and the moon comes up over the purple hill and what was sweet smells sour. Smells like poison.*

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She had turned her head back the other way. And outside the motel room the dogs—every smucking dog in Nashville, it sounded like—had barked as the sun went down in orange August smoke, making a hole for the night. As a child she had been told by her mother there was nothing to fear in the dark, and she had believed it to be true. She had been downright gleeful in the dark, even when it was lit by lightning and ripped by thunder. While her years-older sister Manda cowered under her covers, little Lisey sat atop her own bed, sucking her thumb and demanding that someone bring the flashlight and read her a story. She had told this to Scott once and he had taken her hands and said, “You be *my* light, then. Be *my* light, Lisey.” And she had tried, but—

“I was in a dark place,” Lisey murmured as she sat in his deserted study with the *U-Tenn Nashville Review* in her hands. “Did you say that, Scott? You did, didn’t you?”

—*I was in a dark place and you found me. You saved me.*

Maybe in Nashville that had been true. Not in the end.

—*You were always saving me, Lisey. Do you remember the first night I stayed at your apartment?*

Sitting here now with the book in her lap, Lisey smiled. Of course she did. Her strongest memory was of too much peppermint *schnapps*, it had given her an acidic stomach. And he’d had trouble first getting and then maintaining an erection, although in the end everything went all right. She’d assumed then it was the booze. It wasn’t until later that he’d told her he’d *never* been successful until her: she’d been his first, she’d been his only, and every story he’d ever told her or anyone else about his crazy life of adolescent sex, both gay and straight, had been a lie. And Lisey? Lisey had seen him as an unfinished project, a thing to do before going to sleep. Coax the dishwasher through the noisy part of her cycle; set the Pyrex casserole dish to soak; blow the hotshot young writer until he gets some decent wood.

—*When it was done and you went to sleep, I lay awake and listened to the clock on your nightstand and the wind outside and understood that I was really home, that in bed with you was home, and something that had been getting close in the dark was suddenly gone. It could not stay. It had been banished. It knew*

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how to come back, I was sure of that, but it could not stay, and I could really go to sleep. My heart cracked with gratitude. I think it was the first gratitude I've ever really known. I lay there beside you and the tears rolled down the sides of my face and onto the pillow. I loved you then and I love you now and I have loved you every second in between. I don't care if you understand me. Understanding is vastly overrated, but nobody ever gets enough safety. I've never forgotten how safe I felt with that thing gone out of the darkness.

"Daddy's prize was a kiss."

Lisey said it out loud this time, and although it was warm in the empty study, she shivered. She still didn't know what it meant, but she was pretty sure she remembered when Scott had told her that Daddy's prize was a kiss, that she had been his first, and nobody ever got enough safety: just before they were married. She had given him all the safety she knew how to give, but it hadn't been enough. In the end Scott's thing had come back for him, anyway—that thing he had sometimes glimpsed in mirrors and waterglasses, the thing with the vast piebald side. The long boy.

Lisey looked around the study fearfully for just a moment, and wondered if it was watching her now.

2

She opened the *U-Tenn Nashville 1988 Review*. The spine's crack was like a pistol-shot. It made her cry out in surprise and drop the book. Then she laughed (a little shakily, it was true). "Lisey, you nit."

This time a folded piece of newsprint fell out, yellowing and brittle to the touch. What she unfolded was a grainy photograph, caption included, starring a fellow of perhaps twenty-three who looked much younger thanks to his expression of dazed shock. In his right hand he held a short-handled shovel with a silver scoop. Said scoop had been engraved with words that were unreadable in the photo, but Lisey remembered what they were: *COMMENCEMENT, SHIP-MAN LIBRARY*.

The young man was sort of . . . well . . . *peering* at this shovel, and Lisey

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knew not just by his face but by the whole awkward this-way-n-that jut of his lanky body that he didn't have any idea what he was seeing. It could have been an artillery shell, a bonsai tree, a radiation detector, or a china pig with a slot in its back for spare silver; it could have been a whang-dang-doodle, a phylactery testifying to the pompetus of love, or a cloche hat made out of coyote skin. It could have been the penis of the poet Pindar. This guy was too far gone to know. Nor, she was willing to bet, was he aware that grasping his left hand, also frozen forever in swarms of black photodots, was a man in what looked like a costume-ball Motor Highway Patrolman's uniform: no gun, but a Sam Browne belt running across the chest and what Scott, laughing and making big eyes, might have called "a puffickly *hub-yooge* batch of orifice." He also had a puffickly huh-yooge grin on his face, the kind of relieved oh-thank-you-God grin that said *Son, you'll never have to buy yourself another drink in another bar where I happen to be, as long as I've got one dollar to rub against another 'un*. In the background she could see Dashmiel, the little prigsoutherner who had run away. Roger C. Dashmiel, it came to her, the big C stands for chickenshit.

Had she, little Lisey Landon, seen the happy campus security cop shaking the dazed young man's hand? No, but . . . say . . .

Saa-aaaay, chillums . . . looky-here . . . do you want a true-life image to equal such fairy-tale visions as Alice falling down her rabbit-hole or a toad in a top-hat driving a motor-car? Then check *this* out, over on the right side of the picture.

Lisey bent down until her nose was almost touching the yellowed photo from the Nashville *American*. There was a magnifying glass in the wide center drawer of Scott's main desk. She had seen it on many occasions, its place preserved between the world's oldest unopened package of Herbert Tareyton cigarettes and the world's oldest book of unredeemed S&H Green Stamps. She could have gotten it but didn't bother. Didn't need any magnification to confirm what she was seeing: half a brown loafer. Half a *cordovan* loafer, actually, with a slightly built-up heel. She remembered those loafers very well. How comfortable they'd been. And she'd certainly moved in them that day, hadn't she? She hadn't seen the happy cop, or the dazed young man (Tony, she was

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sure, of *Toneh beah well be rabtin it up fame*), nor had she noticed Dashmiel, the southern-fried chickenshit, once the cheese hit the grater. All of them had ceased to matter to her, the whole smucking bunch of them. By then she had only one thing on her mind, and that had been Scott. He was surely no more than ten feet away, but she had known that if she didn't get to him at once, the crowd around him would keep her out . . . and if she were kept out, the crowd might kill him. Kill him with its dangerous love and voracious concern. And what the smuck, Violet, he might have been dying, anyway. If he was, she'd meant to be there when he stepped out. When he Went, as the folks of her mother and father's generation would have said.

"I was *sure* he'd die," Lisey said to the silent sunwashed room, to the dusty winding bulk of the booksnake.

So she'd run to her fallen husband, and the news photographer—who'd been there only to snap the obligatory picture of college dignitaries and a famous visiting author gathered for the groundbreaking with the silver spade, the ritual First Shovelful of Earth where the new library would eventually stand—had ended up snapping a much more dynamic photograph, hadn't he? This was a *front-page* photo, maybe even a *ball of fame* photo, the kind that made you pause with a spoonful of breakfast cereal halfway between the bowl and your mouth, dripping on the classifieds, like the photo of Oswald with his hands to his belly and his mouth open in a final dying yawp, the kind of frozen image you never forgot. Only Lisey herself would ever realize that the writer's wife was also in the photo. Exactly one built-up heel of her.

The caption running along the bottom of the photo read:



Captain **S. Heffernan** of U-Tenn Campus Security congratulates **Tony Eddington**, who saved the life of famous visiting author **Scott Landon** only seconds before this photo was taken. "He's an authentic hero," said **Capt. Heffernan**. "No one else was close enough to take a hand." (Additional coverage p. 4, p. 9)

Running up the lefthand side was a fairly lengthy message in handwriting she didn't recognize. Running up the righthand side were two

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lines of Scott's sprawly handwriting, the first line slightly larger than the second . . . and a little arrow, by God, pointing to the shoe! She knew what the arrow meant; he had recognized it for what it was. Coupled with his wife's story—call it *Lisey and the Madman*, a thrilling tale of true adventure—he had understood everything. And was he furious? No. Because he had known his wife would not be furious. He had known she'd think it was funny, and it *was* funny, a smucking riot, so why was she on the verge of crying? Never in her whole *life* had she been so surprised, tricked, and overtrumped by her emotions as in these last few days.

Lisey dropped the news clipping on top of the book, afraid a sudden flood of tears might actually dissolve it the way saliva dissolves a mouthful of cotton candy. She cupped her palms over her eyes and waited. When she was sure the tears weren't going to overflow, she picked up the clipping and read what Scott had written:

Must show to Lisey! How she will LAUGH 
But will she understand? (Our survey says YES) 

He had turned the big exclamation point into a sunny seventies-style smiley-face, as if telling her to have a nice day. And Lisey did understand. Eighteen years late, but so what? Memory was relative.

Very zen, grasshoppah, Scott might have said.

"Zen, schmen. I wonder how Tony's doing these days, that's what I wonder. Savior of the famous Scott Landon." She laughed, and the tears that had still been standing in her eyes spilled down her cheeks.

Now she turned the photo widdershins and read the other, longer note.

8-18-88

Dear Scott (If I may): I thought you would want this photograph of C. Anthony ("Tony") Eddington III, the young grad student who saved your life. U-Tenn will be honoring him, of course; we felt you might also want to be

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*in touch. His address is 748 Coldview Avenue,
Nashville North, Nashville, Tennessee 37235. Mr.
Eddington, "Poor but Proud," comes from a fine
Southern Tennessee family and is an excellent
student poet. You will of course want to thank
(and perhaps reward) him in your own way.
Respectfully, sir, I remain, Roger C. Dashmiel
Assoc. Prof., English Dept.
University of Tennessee, Nashville*

Lisey read this over once, twice ("three times a laaaa-dy," Scott would have sung at this point), still smiling, but now with a sour combination of amazement and final comprehension. Roger Dashmiel was probably as ignorant of what had actually happened as the campus cop. Which meant there were only two people in the whole round world who knew the truth about that afternoon: Lisey Landon and Tony Eddington, the fellow who would be *rabtin it up* for the year-end review. It was possible that even "Toneh" himself didn't realize what had happened after the ceremonial first spadeful of earth had been turned. Maybe he'd been in a fear-injected blackout. Dig it: *he might really believe he had saved Scott Landon from death.*

No. She didn't think so. What she thought was that this clipping and the jotted, fulsome note were Dashmiel's petty revenge on Scott for . . . for what?

For just being polite?

For looking at *Monsieur de Littérature* Dashmiel and not seeing him?

For being a rich creative snotbucket who was going to make a fifteen-thousand-dollar payday for saying a few uplifting words and turning a single spadeful of earth? *Pre-loosened* earth at that?

All those things. And more. Lisey thought Dashmiel had somehow believed their positions would have been reversed in a truer, fairer world; that he, Roger Dashmiel, would have been the focus of the intellectual interest and student adulation, while Scott Landon—not to mention his mousy little wouldn't-fart-if-her-life-depended-on-it wife—would be the ones toiling in the campus vineyards, always cur-

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rying favor, testing the winds of departmental politics, and scurrying to make that next pay-grade.

"Whatever it was, he didn't like Scott and this was his revenge," she marveled to the empty, sunny rooms above the long barn. "This . . . poison-pen clipping."

She considered the idea for a moment, then burst out into gales of merry laughter, clapping her hands on the flat part of her chest above her breasts.

When she recovered a little, she paged through the *Review* until she found the article she was looking for: **AMERICA'S MOST FAMOUS NOVELIST INAUGURATES LONG-HELD LIBRARY DREAM.** The byline was **Anthony Eddington**, sometimes known as Toneh. And, as Lisey skimmed it, she found she was capable of anger, after all. Even rage. For there was no mention of how that day's festivities had ended, or the *Review* author's own putative heroism, for that matter. The only suggestion that something had gone crazily wrong was in the concluding lines: "Mr. Landon's speech following the groundbreaking and his reading in the student lounge that evening were cancelled due to unexpected developments, but we hope to see this giant of American literature back on our campus soon. Perhaps for the ceremonial ribbon-cutting when the Shipman opens its doors in 1991!"

Reminding herself this was the school *Review*, for God's sake, a glossy, expensive hardcover book mailed out to presumably loaded alumni, went some distance toward defusing her anger; did she really think the *U-Tenn Review* was going to let their hired hack rehash that day's bloody bit of slapstick? How many alumni dollars would *that* add to the coffers? Reminding herself that Scott would also have found this amusing helped . . . but not all that much. Scott, after all, wasn't here to put his arm around her, to kiss her cheek, to distract her by gently tweaking the tip of one breast and telling her that to everything there was a season—a time to sow, a time to reap, a time to strap and likewise one to unstrap, yea, verily.

Scott, damn him, was gone. And—

"And he *bled* for you people," she murmured in a resentful voice that

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sounded spookily like Manda's. "He almost *died* for you people. It's sort of a blue-eyed miracle he didn't."

And Scott spoke to her again, as he had a way of doing. She knew it was only the ventriloquist inside her, making his voice—who had loved it more or remembered it better?—but it didn't *feel* that way. It felt like *him*.

You were my miracle, Scott said. *You were my blue-eyed miracle. Not just that day, but always. You were the one who kept the dark away, Lisey. You shone.*

"I suppose there were times when you thought so," she said absently. —*Hot, wasn't it?*

Yes. It had been hot. But not *just* hot. It was—

"Humid," Lisey said. "*Muggy*. And I had a bad feeling about it from the get-go."

Sitting in front of the booksnake, with the *U-Tenn Nashville 1988 Review* lying open in her lap, Lisey had a momentary but brilliant glimpse of Granny D, feeding the chickens way back when, on the home place. "It was in the bathroom that I started to feel really bad. Because I broke

3

She keeps thinking about the glass, that smucking broken glass. When, that is, she's not thinking of how much she'd like to get out of this heat.

Lisey stands behind and slightly to Scott's right with her hands clasped demurely before her, watching him balance on one foot, the other on the shoulder of the silly little shovel half-buried in loose earth that has clearly been brought in for the occasion. The day is maddeningly hot, maddeningly humid, maddeningly muggy, and the considerable crowd that has gathered only makes it worse. Unlike the dignitaries, the lookie-loos aren't dressed in anything approaching their best, and while their jeans and shorts and pedal-pushers may not exactly make them comfortable in the wet-blanket air, Lisey envies them just the same as she stands here at the crowd's forefront, basting in the suck-oven heat

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of the Tennessee afternoon. Just standing pat, dressed up in her hot-weather best, is stressful, worrying that she'll soon be sweating dark circles in the light brown linen top she's wearing over the blue rayon shell beneath. She's got on a great bra for hot weather, and still it's biting into the undersides of her boobs like nobody's business. Happy days, babyluv.

Scott, meanwhile, continues balancing on one foot while his hair, too long in back—he needs it cut badly, she knows he looks in the mirror and sees a rock star but she looks at him and sees a smucking hobo out of a Woody Guthrie song—blows in the occasional puff of hot breeze. He's being a good sport while the photographer circles. *Damn* good sport. He's flanked on the left by a guy named Tony Eddington, who's going to write up all this happy crappy for some campus outlet or another, and on the right by their stand-in host, an English Department stalwart named Roger Dashmiel. Dashmiel is one of those men who seem older than they are not only because they have lost so much hair and gained so much belly but because they insist upon drawing an almost stifling gravitas around themselves. Even their witticisms felt to Lisey like oral readings of insurance policy clauses. Making matters worse is the fact that Dashmiel doesn't like her husband. Lisey has sensed this at once (it's easy, because most men *do* like him), and it has given her something upon which to focus her unease. For she *is* uneasy, profoundly so. She has tried to tell herself that it's no more than the humidity and the gathering clouds in the west presaging strong afternoon thunderstorms or maybe even tornadoes: a low-barometer kind of thing. But the barometer wasn't low in Maine when she got out of bed this morning at quarter to seven; it had been a beautiful summer morning already, with the newly risen sun sparkling on a trillion points of dew in the grass between the house and Scott's study. Not a cloud in the sky, what old Dandy Dave Debusher would have called "a real ham-n-egger of a day." Yet the instant her feet touched the oak boards of the bedroom floor and her thoughts turned to the trip to Nashville—leave for the Portland Jetport at eight, fly out on Delta at nine-forty—her heart dipped with dread and her morning-empty stomach, usually sweet, foamed with unmotivated fear. She had greeted these sensations with surprised dis-

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may, because she ordinarily *liked* to travel, especially with Scott: the two of them sitting companionably side by side, he with his book open, she with hers. Sometimes he'd read her a bit of his and sometimes she'd vice him a little versa. Sometimes she'd feel him and look up and find his eyes. His solemn regard. As though she were a mystery to him still. Yes, and sometimes there would be turbulence, and she liked that, too. It was like the rides at the Topsham Fair when she and her sisters had been young, the Krazy Kups and the Wild Mouse. Scott never minded the turbulent interludes, either. She remembered one particularly mad approach into Denver—strong winds, thunderheads, little prop-job commuter plane from Death's Head Airlines all over the smucking sky—and how she'd seen him actually pogo-ing in his seat like a little kid who needs to go to the bathroom, this crazy grin on his face. No, the rides that scared Scott were the smooth downbound ones he sometimes took in the middle of the night. Once in a while he talked—lucidly; smiling, even—about the things you could see in the screen of a dead TV set. Or a shot-glass, if you held it tilted just the right way. It scared her badly to hear him talk like that. Because it was crazy, and because she sort of knew what he meant, even if she didn't want to.

So it isn't low barometer that's bothering her and it certainly hadn't been the prospect of getting on one more airplane. But in the bathroom, reaching for the light over the sink, something she had done without incident or accident day in and day out for the entire eight years they'd lived on Sugar Top Hill—which came to approximately three thousand days, less time spent on the road—the back of her hand whacked the waterglass with their toothbrushes in it and sent it tumbling to the tiles where it shattered into approximately three thousand stupid pieces.

"Shit fire, save the smuckin *matches!*" she cried, frightened and irritated to find herself so . . . for she did not believe in omens, not Lisey Landon the writer's wife, not little Lisey Debusher from the Sabbatus Road in Lisbon Falls, either. Omens were for the shanty Irish.

Scott, who had just come back into the bedroom with two cups of coffee and a plate of buttered toast, stopped dead. "Whadja break, babyluv?"

"Nothing that came out of the dog's ass," Lisey said savagely, and was

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then sort of astonished. That was one of Granny Debusher's sayings, and Granny D certainly *had* believed in omens, but that old colleen had been on the cooling board when Lisey was barely four. Was it possible Lisey could even remember her? It seemed so, for as she stood there, looking down at the shards of toothglass, the actual *articulation* of that omen came to her, came in Granny D's tobacco-broken voice . . . and returns now, as she stands watching her husband be a good sport in his lightest-weight summer sportcoat (which he'll soon be sweating through under the arms nevertheless).

—*Broken glass in the morning, broken hearts at night.*

That was Granny D's scripture, all right, remembered by at least one little girl, stored up before the day Granny D pitched over dying in the chickenyard with a snarl in her throat, an apron filled with Blue Bird feed tied around her waist, and a sack of Beechnut scrap slid up her sleeve.

So.

Not the heat, the trip, or that fellow Dashmiel, who only ended up doing the meet-and-greet because the head of the English Department is in the hospital following an emergency gall-bladder removal the day before. It's a broken . . . smucking . . . *toothglass* combined with the saying of a long-dead Irish granny. And the joke of it is (as Scott will later point out), that is just enough to put her on edge. Just enough to get her at least semi-strapped.

Sometimes, he will tell her not long hence, speaking from a hospital bed (ah, but he could so easily have been on a cooling board himself, all his wakeful, thoughtful nights over), speaking in his new whispering, effortful voice, *sometimes just enough is just enough. As the saying is.*

And she will know exactly what he's talking about.

4

Roger Dashmiel has his share of headaches today, Lisey knows that, though it doesn't make her like him any better. If there was ever an actual script for the ceremony, Professor Hegstrom (he of the emergency

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gall-bladder attack) was too post-op muddled to tell Dashmiel or anyone else what or where it is. Dashmiel has consequently been left with little more than a time of day and a cast of characters featuring a writer to whom he has taken an instant dislike. When the little party of dignitaries left Inman Hall for the short but exceedingly warm walk to the site of the forthcoming Shipman Library, Dashmiel told Scott they'd have to more or less play it by ear. Scott had shrugged good-naturedly. He was absolutely comfortable with that. For Scott Landon, ear was a way of life.

"Ah'll introduce you," said the man Lisey would in later years come to think of as the southern-fried chickenshit. This as they walked toward the baked and shimmering plot of land where the new library would stand (the word is pronounced *LAH-bree* in Dashmiel-ese). The photographer in charge of immortalizing all this danced restlessly back and forth, snapping and snapping, busy as a gnat. Lisey could see a rectangle of fresh brown earth not far ahead, about nine by five, she judged, and trucked in that morning, by the just-starting-to-fade look of it. No one had thought to put up an awning, and already the surface of the fresh dirt had acquired a grayish glaze.

"*Somebody* better do it," Scott said.

He spoke cheerfully, but Dashmiel had frowned as if wounded by some undeserved canard. Then, with a meaty sigh, he'd pressed on. "Applause follows introduction—"

"As day follows night," Scott murmured.

"—and yew'll say a woid or tieu," Dashmiel finished. Beyond the baked wasteland awaiting the library, a freshly paved parking lot shimmered in the sunlight, all smooth tar and staring yellow lines. Lisey saw fantastic ripples of nonexistent water on its far side.

"It will be my pleasure," Scott said.

The unvarying good nature of his responses seemed to worry Dashmiel. "Ah hope you won't want to say *tieu* much at the groun'breakin," he told Scott as they approached the roped-off area. This had been kept clear, but there was a crowd big enough to stretch almost to the parking lot waiting beyond it. An even larger one had trailed Dashmiel and the Landons from Inman Hall. Soon the two would merge, and Lisey—

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who ordinarily didn't mind crowds any more than she minded turbulence at twenty thousand feet—didn't like this, either. It occurred to her that so many people on a day this hot might suck all the air out of the air. Stupid idea, but—

"It's mighty hot, even fo' Nashville in August, wouldn't you say so, Toneh?"

Tony Eddington nodded obligingly but said nothing. His only comment so far had been to identify the tirelessly dancing photographer as Stefan Queensland of the Nashville *American*—also of U-Tenn Nashville, class of '85. "Hope y'all will help him out if y'can," Tony Eddington had said to Scott as they began their walk over here.

"Yew'll finish yoah remarks," Dashmiel said, "and there'll be anothuh round of applause. *Then*, Mistuh Landon—"

"Scott."

Dashmiel had flashed a rictus grin, there for just a moment. "Then, *Scott*, yew'll go on and toin that all impawtant foist shovelful of oith." *Toin? Foist? Oith?* Lisey mused, and it came to her that Dashmiel was very likely saying *turn that all-important first shovelful of earth* in his only semi-believable Louisiana drawl.

"All that sounds fine to me," Scott replied, and that was all he had time for, because they had arrived.

5

Perhaps it's a holdover from the broken toothglass—that *omenish* feeling—but the plot of trucked-in dirt looks like a grave to Lisey: XL size, as if for a giant. The two crowds collapse into one around it and create that breathless suck-oven feel at the center. A campus security guard now stands at each corner of the ornamental velvet-rope barrier, beneath which Dashmiel, Scott, and "Toneh" Eddington have ducked. Queensland, the photographer, dances relentlessly with his big Nikon held up in front of his face. *Paging Weegee*, Lisey thinks, and realizes she envies him. He is so free, flitting gnatlike in the heat; he is twenty-five and all his shit still works. Dashmiel, however, is looking at him with

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growing impatience which Queensland affects not to see until he has exactly the shot he wants. Lisey has an idea it's the one of Scott alone, his foot on the silly silver spade, his hair blowing back in the breeze. In any case, Weegee Junior at last lowers his big camera and steps back to the edge of the crowd. And it's while following Queensland's progress with her somewhat wistful regard that Lisey first sees the madman. He has the look, one local reporter will later write, "of John Lennon in the last days of his romance with heroin—hollow, watchful eyes at odd and disquieting contrast to his otherwise childishly wistful face."

At the moment, Lisey notes little more than the guy's tumbled blond hair. She has little interest in people-watching today. She just wants this to be over so she can find a bathroom in the English Department over there across the parking lot and pull her rebellious underwear out of the crack of her ass. She has to make water, too, but right now that's pretty much secondary.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Dashmiel says in a carrying voice. "It is mah distinct pleasure to introduce Mr. Scott Landon, author of the Pulitzer Prize—winnin *Relics* and the National Book Award—winnin *The Coster's Daughter*. He's come all the way from Maine with his lovely wife Lisa to inaugurate construction—that's right, it's finally happ'nin—on our very own Shipman LAH-bree. Scott Landon, folks, let's hear y'all give him a good Nashveel welcome!"

The crowd applauds at once, *con brio*. The lovely wife joins in, patting her palms together, looking at Dashmiel and thinking, *He won the NBA for The Coaster's Daughter. That's Coaster, not Coster. And I think you know it. I think you smucked it up on purpose. Why don't you like him, you petty man?*

Then she happens to glance beyond him and this time she really *does* notice Gerd Allen Cole, just standing there with all that fabulous blond hair tumbled down to his eyebrows and the sleeves of a white shirt far too big for him rolled up to his substandard biceps. The tail of his shirt is out and dangles almost to the whitened knees of his jeans. On his feet are engineer boots with side-buckles. To Lisey they look dreadfully hot. Instead of applauding, Blondie has clasped his hands rather prissily and there's a spooky-sweet smile on his lips, which are moving slightly, as if in silent prayer. His eyes are fixed on Scott and they never

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waver. Lisey pegs Blondie at once. There are guys—they are almost always guys—she thinks of as Scott's Deep Space Cowboys. Deep Space Cowboys have a lot to say. They want to grab Scott by the arm and tell him they understand the secret messages in his books; they understand that the books are really guides to God, Satan, or possibly the Gnostic Gospels. Deep Space Cowboys might be on about Scientology or numerology or (in one case) The Cosmic Lies of Brigham Young. Sometimes they want to talk about other worlds. Two years ago a Deep Space Cowboy hitchhiked all the way from Texas to Maine in order to talk to Scott about what he called *leavings*. These were most commonly found, he said, on uninhabited islands in the southern hemisphere. He knew they were what Scott had been writing about in *Relics*. He showed Scott the underlined words that proved it. The guy made Lisey very nervous—there was a certain wall-eyed look of *absence* about him—but Scott talked to him, gave him a beer, discussed the Easter Island monoliths with him for a bit, took a couple of his pamphlets, signed the kid a fresh copy of *Relics*, and sent him on his way, happy. Happy? Dancing on the smucking atmosphere. When Scott's got it strapped on tight, he's amazing. No other word will do.

The thought of actual violence—that Blondie means to pull a Mark David Chapman on her husband—does not occur to Lisey. *My mind doesn't run that way*, she might have said. *I just didn't like the way his lips were moving.*

Scott acknowledges the applause—and a few raucous rebel yells—with the Scott Landon grin that has appeared on millions of book-jackets, all the time resting one foot on the shoulder of the silly shovel while the blade sinks slowly into the imported earth. He lets the applause run for ten or fifteen seconds, guided by his intuition (and his intuition is rarely wrong), then waves it off. And it goes. At once. *Foom*. Pretty cool, in a slightly scary way.

When he speaks, his voice seems nowhere near as loud as Dashmiel's, but Lisey knows that even with no mike or battery-powered bullhorn (the lack of either here this afternoon is probably someone's oversight), it will carry all the way to the back of the crowd. And the crowd is straining to hear every word. A Famous Man has come among them. A Thinker and a Writer. He will now scatter pearls of wisdom.

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Pearls before swine, Lisey thinks. *Sweaty swine*, at that. But didn't her father tell her once that pigs don't sweat?

Across from her, Blondie carefully pushes his tumbled hair back from his fine white brow. His hands are as white as his forehead and Lisey thinks, *There's one piggy who keeps to the house a lot. A stay-at-home swine, and why not? He's got all sorts of strange ideas to catch up on.*

She shifts from one foot to the other, and the silk of her underwear all but *squeaks* in the crack of her ass. Oh, maddening! She forgets Blondie again in trying to calculate if she might not . . . while Scott's making his remarks . . . very surreptitiously, mind you . . .

Good Ma speaks up. Dour. Three words. Brooking no argument. *No, Lisey. Wait.*

"Ain't gonna sermonize, me," Scott says, and she recognizes the patois of Gully Foyle, the main character of Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*. His favorite novel. "Too hot for sermons."

"*Beam us up, Scotty!*" someone in the fifth or sixth row on the parking-lot side of the crowd yells exuberantly. The crowd laughs and cheers.

"Can't do it, brother," Scott says. "Transporters are broken and we're all out of lithium crystals."

The crowd, being new to the riposte as well as the sally (Lisey has heard both at least fifty times), roars its approval and applauds. Across the way Blondie smiles thinly, sweatlessly, and grips his delicate left wrist with his long-fingered right hand. Scott takes his foot off the spade, not as if he's grown impatient with it but as if he has—for the moment, at least—found another use for it. And it seems he has. She watches, not without fascination, for this is Scott at his best, just winging it.

"It's nineteen-eighty-eight and the world has grown dark," he says. He slips the ceremonial spade's short wooden handle easily through his loosely curled fist. The scoop winks sun in Lisey's eyes once, then is mostly hidden by the sleeve of Scott's lightweight jacket. With the scoop and blade hidden, he uses the slim wooden handle as a pointer, ticking off trouble and tragedy in the air in front of him.

"In March, Oliver North and Vice Admiral John Poindexter are indicted on conspiracy charges—it's the wonderful world of Iran-Contra, where guns rule politics and money rules the world.

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“On Gibraltar, members of Britain’s Special Air Service kill three unarmed IRA members. Maybe they should change the SAS motto from ‘Who dares, wins’ to ‘Shoot first, ask questions later.’”

There’s a ripple of laughter from the crowd. Roger Dashmiel looks hot and put out with this unexpected current-events lesson, but Tony Eddington is finally taking notes.

“Or make it ours. In July we goof and shoot down an Iranian airliner with two hundred and ninety civilians on board. Sixty-six of them are children.

“The AIDS epidemic kills thousands, sickens . . . well, we don’t know, do we? Hundreds of thousands? Millions?”

“The world grows dark. Mr. Yeats’s blood-tide is at the flood. It rises. It rises.”

He looks down at nil but graying earth, and Lisey is suddenly terrified that he’s seeing it, the thing with the endless patchy piebald side, that he is going to go off, perhaps even come to the break she knows he is afraid of (in truth she’s as afraid of it as he is). Before her heart can do more than begin to speed up, he raises his head, grins like a kid at a county fair, and shoots the handle of the spade through his fist to the halfway point. It’s a showy poolshark move, and the folks at the front of the crowd go *oooh*. But Scott’s not done. Holding the spade out before him, he rotates the handle nimbly between his fingers, accelerating it into an unlikely spin. It’s as dazzling as a baton-twirler’s maneuver—because of the silver scoop swinging in the sun—and sweetly unexpected. She’s been married to him since 1979 and had no *idea* he had such a sublimely cool move in his repertoire. (How many years does it take, she’ll wonder two nights later, lying in bed alone in her substandard motel room and listening to dogs bark beneath a hot orange moon, before the simple stupid weight of accumulating days finally sucks all the wow out of a marriage? How lucky do you have to be for your love to outrace your time?) The silver bowl of the rapidly swinging spade sends a *Wake up! Wake up!* sunflash across the heat-dazed, sweat-sticky surface of the crowd. Lisey’s husband is suddenly Scott the Pitchman, and she has never been so relieved to see that totally untrustworthy *honey, I’m hip* huckster’s grin on his face. He has bummed them out; now he will try to sell them a throat-

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ful of dubious get-well medicine, the stuff with which he hopes to send them home. And she thinks they will buy, hot August afternoon or not. When he's like this, Scott could sell Frigidaires to Inuits, as the saying is . . . and God bless the language pool where we all go down to drink, as Scott himself would no doubt add (and has).

"But if every book is a little light in that darkness—and so I believe, so I must believe, corny or not, for I write the damned things, don't I?—then every library is a grand old ever-burning bonfire around which ten thousand people come to stand and warm themselves every day and night. Fahrenheit four-fifty-one ain't in it. Try Fahrenheit four *thousand*, folks, because we're not talking kitchen ovens here, we're talking big old blast-furnaces of the brain, red-hot smelters of the intellect. We celebrate the laying of such a grand fire this afternoon, and I'm honored to be a part of it. Here is where we spit in the eye of forgetfulness and kick ignorance in his wrinkled old *cojones*. *Hey photographer!*"

Stefan Queensland snaps to, smiling.

Scott, also smiling, says: "Get one of this. The top brass may not want to use it, but you'll like it in your portfolio, I'll bet."

Scott holds the ornamental tool out as if he intends to twirl it again. The crowd gives a hopeful little gasp, but this time he's only teasing. He slides his left hand down to the spade's collar, digs in, and drives the spade-blade deep, dousing its hot glitter in earth. He tosses its load of dirt aside and cries: "*I declare the Shipman Library construction site OPEN FOR BUSINESS!*"

The applause that greets this makes the previous bursts sound like the sort of polite patter you might hear at a prep-school tennis match. Lisey doesn't know if young Mr. Queensland caught the ceremonial first scoop, but when Scott pumps the silly little silver spade at the sky like an Olympic hero, Queensland documents that one for sure, laughing behind his camera as he snaps it. Scott holds the pose for a moment (Lisey happens to glance at Dashmiel and catches that gentleman in the act of rolling his eyes at Mr. Eddington—Toneh). Then he lowers the spade to port arms and holds it that way, grinning. Sweat has popped on his cheeks and forehead in fine beads. The applause begins to taper off. The crowd thinks he's done. Lisey thinks he's only hit second gear.

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When he knows they can hear him again, Scott digs in for an encore scoop. “This one’s for Wild Bill Yeats!” he calls. “The bull-goose loony! And this one’s for Poe, also known as Baltimore Eddie! This one’s for Alfie Bester, and if you haven’t read him, you ought to be ashamed!” He’s sounding out of breath, and Lisey is starting to feel a bit alarmed. It’s so *hot*. She’s trying to remember what he had for lunch—was it something heavy or light?

“And this one . . .” He dives the spade into what’s now a respectable little divot and holds up the final dip of earth. The front of his shirt has darkened with sweat. “Tell you what, why don’t you think of whoever wrote your first good book? I’m talking about the one that got under you like a magic carpet and lifted you right off the ground. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

They know. It’s on every face that faces his.

“The one that, in a perfect world, you’d check out first when the Shipman Library finally opens its doors. This one’s for the one who wrote that.” He gives the spade a final valedictory shake, then turns to Dashmiel, who should be pleased with Scott’s showmanship—asked to play by ear, Scott has played brilliantly—and who instead only looks hot and pissed off. “I think we’re done here,” he says, and tries to hand Dashmiel the spade.

“No, that’s yoahs,” Dashmiel says. “As a keepsake, and a token of ouah thanks. Along with yoah check, of co’se.” His rictus smile comes and goes in a fitful cramp. “Shall we go and grab ourse’fs a little air-conditionin?”

“By all means,” Scott says, looking bemused, and then hands the spade to Lisey, as he has handed her so many unwanted mementos over the past twelve years of his celebrity: everything from ceremonial oars and Boston Red Sox hats encased in Lucite cubes to the masks of Comedy and Tragedy . . . but mostly pen-and-pencil sets. So many pen-and-pencil sets. Waterman, Scripto, Schaeffer, Mont Blanc, you name it. She looks at the spade’s glittering silver scoop, as bemused as her beloved (he is still her beloved). There are a few flecks of dirt in the incised letters reading *COMMENCEMENT, SHIPMAN LIBRARY*, and Lisey blows them off. Where will such an unlikely artifact end up?

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In this summer of 1988 Scott's study is still under construction, although the address works and he's already begun storing stuff in the stalls and cubbies of the barn below. Across many of the cardboard boxes he's scrawled **SCOTT! THE EARLY YEARS!** in big strokes of a black felt-tip pen. Most likely the silver spade will wind up with this stuff, wasting its gleams in the gloom. Maybe she'll put it there herself, then tag it **SCOTT! THE MIDDLE YEARS!** as a kind of joke . . . or a prize. The kind of goofy, unexpected gift Scott calls a—

But Dashmiel is on the move. Without another word—as if he's disgusted with this whole business and determined to put paid to it as soon as possible—he tromps across the rectangle of fresh earth, detouring around the divot which Scott's last big shovelful of earth has almost succeeded in promoting to a hole. The heels of Dashmiel's shiny black I'm-an-assistant-professor-on-my-way-up-and-don't-you-forget-it shoes sink deep into the earth with each heavy step. Dashmiel has to fight for balance, and Lisey guesses this does nothing to improve his mood. Tony Eddington falls in beside him, looking thoughtful. Scott pauses a moment, as if not quite sure what's up, then also starts to move, slipping between his host and his temporary biographer. Lisey follows, as is her wont. He delighted her into forgetting her *omenish* feeling

(broken glass in the morning)

for a little while, but now it's back

(broken hearts at night)

and *hard*. She thinks it must be why all these details look so big to her. She's sure the world will come back into more normal focus once she reaches the air-conditioning. And once she's gotten that pesty swatch of cloth out of her butt.

This is almost over, she reminds herself, and—how funny life can be—it is at this precise moment when the day begins to derail.

A campus security cop who is older than the others on this detail (eighteen years later she'll identify him from Queensland's news photo as Captain S. Heffernan) holds up the rope barrier on the far side of the ceremonial rectangle of earth. All she notices about him is that he's wearing what her husband might have called a *puffickly bub-yooge batch of ori-*

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fice on his khaki shirt. Her husband and his flanking escorts duck beneath the rope in a move so synchronized it could have been choreographed.

The crowd is moving toward the parking lot with the principals . . . with one exception. *Blondie* isn't moving toward the parking lot. Blondie is standing still on the parking lot side of the commencement patch. A few people bump him and he's *forced* backward after all, back onto the baked dead earth where the Shipman Library will stand come 1991 (if the chief contractor's promises can be believed, that is). Then he's actually moving forward against the tide, his hands coming unclasped so he can push a girl out of his way to his left and then a guy out of his way on the right. His mouth is still moving. At first Lisey again thinks he's mouthing a silent prayer, and then she hears the broken gibberish—like something a bad James Joyce imitator might write—and for the first time she becomes actively alarmed. Blondie's somehow weird blue eyes are fixed on her husband, there and nowhere else, but Lisey understands that he doesn't want to discuss *leavings* or the hidden religious subtexts of Scott's novels. This is no mere Deep Space Cowboy.

"The churchbells came down Angel Street," says Blondie—says Gerd Allen Cole—who, it will turn out, spent most of his seventeenth year in an expensive Virginia mental institution and was released as cured and good to go. Lisey gets every word. They cut through the rising chatter of the crowd, that hum of conversation, like a knife through some light, sweet cake. "That rungut sound, like rain on a tin roof! Dirty flowers, dirty and sweet, that's how the churchbells sound in my basement *as if you didn't know!*"

A hand that seems all long pale fingers goes to the tails of the white shirt and Lisey understands exactly what's going on here. It comes to her in shorthand TV images

(*George Wallace Arthur Bremmer*)

from her childhood. She looks toward Scott but Scott is talking to Dashmiel. Dashmiel is looking at Stefan Queensland, the irritated frown on Dashmiel's face saying he's had *Quite! Enough! Photographs! For One Day! Thank You!* Queensland is looking down at his camera, mak-