HAUNTS

After Don left to gather the information he’d come for things were fairly quiet. I tinkered with the resignation letter a bit and started looking forward to having lunch with my daughter Sadie. This was a Friday ritual with us. Around eleven she called to find out how I planned to get to her place.

“I heard on the radio they closed the bike trail where that woman got attacked,” she said. “That’s just up from where you are, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, good thing I’m not riding that way.”

A pleading tone crept into her voice as she suggested that I drive over.

“Now that could be dangerous,” I said.
“What do you mean?”

“Just that I have a much better chance of getting into a wreck on the road than I do of getting attacked by a mountain lion on the bike trail.”

“Still,” she said.
“Still what?”

She was quiet a minute, debating whether to fight me or not. “Just be careful, okay?”

What I’d said about the odds of a lion attack was true. And yet as I headed out along the bike trail I noticed I was riding a little harder than usual. The morning chill was gone by now and I had my sweater off. The trail follows the course of the river, threading through dense patches of oak and cottonwood and underbrush, all of it strung with vines. Each time I passed through one of these clumps of cover I half-expected to go down in a snarling blur of
fang and claw. It didn’t help that the trail was deserted, as if every one of the bikers and joggers and walkers I usually saw on my noon rides had already been killed and dragged off into the weeds.

I stayed surprisingly calm. Or seemed to. I kept my sails full of stubbornness and my eye on the horizon, refusing to look down at the jagged reefs of fear as they passed just below my thin and vulnerable hull. The most startling thing that happened on that three mile ride was the pang of elation that stung me the moment my front wheel touched the wooden planks of the old iron bridge that was my link back to more homey threats.

When the bridge ended I adjusted my gears and settled into the long gradual climb up from the river-bank. This part of Bridge Street is canopied by tall oaks and walled with vine-embroidered brush. The natural tunnel goes on for half a mile, so there was plenty of time for the unreasonable relief that had carried me across the bridge to evaporate. That left me to draw off the deep tank of disdain that usually fueled my passage through Old Olives, the neighborhood at the top of the hill.

Old Olives is set on the site of the area’s original agricultural village. The ranchers and growers who settled the region used to go there to get provisions and exchange news. What Old Olives supplies now is a feeling of history and character, an oasis of quaint tastefulness in the midst of a vast desert of housing tracts, condo complexes, parking lots, and malls. The houses I passed were aged, individual, refurbished with an eye for charm. From their prim porcheaves hung windchimes, colorful flags, ferns.

In one front yard I spied a pair of the chickens that have always nested in Old Olives and run free on the sidewalks and streets. A couple of healthy Rhode Island Reds, the rooster scratching and strutting under an orange tree by the front lawn, the hen searching the edge of the grass for seed. The rooster took a few jogging steps toward me as I approached, looking for a handout or a fight, but I aimed my front tire right for him and sent him clucking back the way he’d come. These chickens had always bothered me. Sure, I understood that they helped connect Old Olives to its rural
beginnings. But I failed to see the charm in a neighborhood where feral poultry ran amuck.

Bridge Street took me to Old Olives Park, the heart and center of the neighborhood. The park is more or less rectangular, ringed all around by river-rock walls. Between its two broad lawns sit the Olives Community Center and an open-air theater where summer Shakespeare plays. Back in the seventies, when I still lived nearby, they never showed any plays in the theater, but movies—every Friday night in summer, for free initially, later for a quarter a head. In those days Old Olives was a wilder place. At the Friday night films I would sit with my former wife June and our two kids on one of the theater benches, the four of us squeezed cozily in among other families, while twenty yards behind us, up on the grassy bank outside the fence, joints glowed like a hundred orange eyes in air sharpened and thickened by their smoke. We were welcome to visit, but the people passing joints ruled Old Olives in those days. All the houses were more tumbledown then. Most of their lawns were left to nature, though some had been tilled into hippie gardens. Their porches were crowded with castoff furniture and long-haired kids.

To figure out who’s in charge of Old Olives now you only have to look at the dolled-up houses or check out the businesses that face the park. These used to cater to the people living within walking distance. There was a corner grocery, a pharmacy, a hardware store, a liquor store, a tavern, a Mexican restaurant, a vet. Today’s locals don’t walk to get anything but exercise. They drive elsewhere for basic supplies. Businesses here don’t deal much in basics, and they don’t cater to the locals only. For in a strange kind of way, things have come full circle. Old Olives is a destination once again. People come in for gourmet meals and manicures, for facials, massages, all kinds of pamperings and therapies. They buy handmade objects and clothes, art and rugs and antiques. Or they come to scheme with the lawyers and realtors who have bought houses just off the park and converted them discreetly into offices.
But on this day I’d only come because it was on my way. I didn’t intend to stop. I tried to get past it all swiftly because there was a chance I’d be accosted by June, whose shop faces the park. I pedaled past a café called Sufficient Grounds, past Wax Poetic, a book and candle store, and when I came even with the bakery called Muffin Fancy I saw June waving at me from the doorway of Whole Grain Antiques.

I’ve never been much of a golfer, but I’ve played enough to know that the prettiest things on the course—the lakes, the sandy bunkers, the big old trees and the long grass—are the things to avoid. In the dozen years since our divorce I’d learned to treat June like one of those hazardous beauties. But there she was waving at me, fresh and beaming, impossible to miss. I pulled up to the curb and let her walk out to me. She came over uttering the usual pleasantries, piling them on as if she believed she could kill me with kindness. Sometimes I wondered if June’s therapist wasn’t behind this endless onslaught of good cheer. As if she’d mapped out for June a journey on the high road to mental health, telling her that each smile, each gracious remark would help her pay the tolls. Whatever the program, June was nice to me every chance she got, like she won points that way. First, the smiling wave. Next, the greetings. And this loaf of bread she was handing me? Sadie had forgotten to get bread for our lunch. She’d called June minutes ago, asking her to buy a loaf from next door and hand it off to me when I passed. Bonus points, for sure.

I took the bagged bread and read the words Muffin Fancy aloud, asking who the hell made the law requiring every business in the neighborhood to have a name that punned. If I thought I could offend her that easily I was grossly mistaken. She just beamed at me, saying I was right about the shop names, and she’d never even noticed.

The end of that encounter was good for a little breath of relief. But like the relief I’d felt when I hit the bridge earlier, this cool draft got swept away before long by the prevailing wind, which
was hot, steady, and strong. For I was crossing now from Old Olives into the part of Olives proper where June and I toiled to make the home we’d dreamed about, and then failed to keep it from coming apart.

She was five or six months pregnant with our boy Edward when we first drove out here to look at the house. Sadie was just a little thing, light enough to carry on my shoulders all day. I’d been working for the department for a year or so, and I’d decided I liked it well enough that we ought to leave the bungalow we were renting closer to the city and find ourselves a permanent place to nest. It was an afternoon in early March, the tail end of a good wet winter, and all the pastures out here were full of fresh grass, the almond trees and fruit trees were heavy with blossoms, and the air smelled sweet. The area won us over before we ever saw the house. We were charmed by the two, five, and ten acre parcels that held all the homes around here. People didn’t lawn this land, they gardened it, they tended orchards, grew grapes, and cleared hillsides for horses to graze. By the time we drove off that first day, Sadie was asking for a horse of her own, June was mentally redecorating the old hilltop house we’d toured, and I was laying out my future garden row by row.

Our first phase in Olives went pretty much according to script. June and I scraped and painted the outside of the old house and we gutted everything inside, replaced rotten boards, patched leaky ceilings, put down new carpets and tile, hung fresh paper, installed good cabinets and appliances. I had sheep keeping the weeds down on the hillside, I had a pony for Sadie, I had chickens giving us eggs. I was growing enough vegetables and fruit for five families. What we didn’t eat ourselves or give away June would put up in jars. I harvested almonds and olives by the bushel. I took honey from six hives. Every couple of weeks June would haul some monstrosity home from a flea market or estate sale. She’d assure me that under all the ugly paint were panels of pure wood begging to be uncovered, and she’d set to work bringing the beauty out. Our rooms steadily filled.
We did our best to turn the clock back those first years, while all around us time was running on. It started when the ranchers in the area began selling off vast swaths of their rangeland to the builders and pavers. As they sold out the area grew, and as it grew property values shot up. Our neighbors started to carve up their parcels. The new buyers built, and built, and built some more. So that now, whenever I rode over here I imagined myself in a low-flying plane, peering down on my former stomping grounds and seeing something that looked like a Scrabble board late in the game, at the point when you can’t get a word in edgewise.

Sayers’ Law states that if irony can find you, it will. How’s this for irony: my family had fallen apart, but our lot was one of the few that remained intact. June and Sadie were behind this. After the divorce, June got busy and bought my half of the place as quickly as she could. She held onto it until just a few years ago, when she moved into the apartment above her shop and sold the house to Sadie and her husband Boyd.

The private road leading up there was getting tougher for me to conquer every year. Turning onto it, I shifted into my easiest gear. Even so my thighs were burning at the halfway point and I was seriously considering getting off to walk. But I thought of Sadie up ahead, of how impressed she was on the days when she happened to see her graybeard dad ride up. That gave me the burst of energy I needed.

When I reached the flat gravel parking area I found it empty of cars. I wheeled my bike across the gravel and leaned it against a tree. I was still breathing hard, the blood was knocking behind my knees and in my neck. I walked around the end of Boyd’s fastidious woodpile, reached out to knock a couple of logs off, and turned onto the flat half-acre rectangle of space that used to be my own garden plot. Boyd had turned it into a giant lawn. Where I used to raise tomatoes and beans, melons and peppers, squash and eggplant and corn, people now played frisbee and volleyball, and dogs now crapped. I walked to the edge of the grass, to a sunny place at the foot of the pool fence, planning to check the progress
of my young rosemary plants. But the plants were gone. In their place was a sterile patch of decorative bark. Good old Boyd. A while back I’d noticed that this spot at the foot of the fence seemed empty. I thought some rosemary would look good there, would do well with all the sun, and one day I brought the young plants over and put them in while Sadie fixed lunch. She was delighted with them, but evidently Boyd wasn’t. He preferred his bark. His miserable lawn.

I heard a motor and went back out to the parking area just as Sadie pulled in. She shed her baby fat when she was ten or eleven, and she’s been thin ever since—too thin, I thought as she approached. Maybe it was the shorts she had on, the sleeveless shirt. She seemed to be all limb.

She motioned toward my bike with one of those tan slender arms. “You rode, then.”

“And lived to tell about it.” I tipped my head toward her car. “Out making deliveries this morning?”

“Yeah, I helped Claire out with one.”

“Anything exciting?”

One of her dark brows dipped. “Isn’t birth always exciting?”

“I guess so. But I was thinking about that kid that was born in the closet. Or how about the one who came out on the kitchen table? Anything like that?”

Six months back Sadie had given up her nursing job and started apprenticing with Claire, a seasoned midwife. The week before, she’d told me about some of the weird places she’d helped Claire deliver babies. Claire’s attitude was there were no weird places to deliver, every mother must feel free to choose where, when, and how she wants to foal. I confess I hadn’t quite gotten used to the idea. I was no fan of hospitals. Still, birth is one of those events that can get complicated in a hurry. Why not save the kitchen table for meals, and have babies someplace where modern medicine is handy if you need it? This was my point of view.

“You’re the one who had the exciting morning,” Sadie said, passing up the bait I’d dangled.
“You mean the mountain lion?”

She nodded. “I’m supposed to get the skinny from you on that. Sylvia wants to know what you do if you’re riding on the bike trail and one jumps out in front of you.”

“That’s unlikely,” I said. “Not typical behavior.”

“Well, you know what I mean. What do you do if you encounter one out there?”

“It all depends on how you act.”

“Well what are you supposed to act like?”

“Whatever you do,” I said, “don’t act like prey.”

While we ate the soup she’d made I satisfied her curiosity about what prey act like. Then I filled her in on the department’s response to the lion attack. But I admitted I was a little tired of the subject since everyone at work this morning was buzzing about it. I mentioned I’d finished reading the book about reincarnation that she’d given me and told her I’d gotten a real rise out of Jean the other night, talking about it like it was real.

“Does that mean you think it’s not real?”

“Science,” I said, “that’s been my religion for as long as I can remember. You know, the Church of Natural Selection.”

She looked down at her bowl and I saw I’d disappointed her by being honest. She’d hoped that book would turn me on the way it had her. She was riding a wave of inner change, after all, one of those waves that feels so good and so powerful you can’t believe it doesn’t sweep everyone else up the way it’s sweeping you.

“How about yourself?” I said. “Seems like that stuff has struck a chord.”

“I’ve found it really valuable,” she said.

“In what sense?”

“Well, not to be critical of you Dad, or of Mom, but I reached adulthood without ever getting to know my spirit-self. I think that’s just the way of our society right now. It’s all focused on the worldly self.”

“The day to day, you mean?”
“Yeah, that. And always on the surface. Never looking into the fire, you know.”

I didn’t know, not exactly, but I nodded anyway. Then I got heavily involved with my soup. It was mushroom soup, very good. The morning’s banter with Jean had stirred my stomach to the point where I’d had to skip breakfast, so I was hungry. I ate as much as I could get with my spoon, then mopped the bowl with bread. When I finished I pushed the bowl away and looked up. Sadie’s dark eyes awaited me.

She said, “The best part of knowing my spirit-self is that I have a relationship with Eddie again.”

It was as if she’d pressed some hidden button and set my stomach churning. I tried to look natural as I changed positions in the chair.

“I’ve been thinking about him a lot,” Sadie said. “Especially this week.”

This week. As in the week Edward died. I hadn’t realized.

“You didn’t know?” she said.

“I don’t keep track of these things.”

“At least not with your worldly self.”

“My dear,” I said, folding my hands on the table, “don’t be too disappointed in me, but I think that’s the only self I’ve got.”

She gave me a tolerant smile. “Dad, you’ve got a spirit-self whether you acknowledge it or not. All of us do. In that self you’ve known very well what week is coming.”

“Oh I have. How can you tell?”

“When did your stomach start acting up?”

“What makes you think my stomach’s acting up?”

Her look told me it was no use pretending.

“What,” I said, raising my hands, “am I wearing a sign or something?”

“When?”

“I don’t know, a while ago. Jean’s on my case to see a doctor about it.”
She glanced away. “That’s an option.”
“Sounds like you know of others.”
She reached over and grabbed a pen and paper from the stool near the phone. “You know my migraines?” she said while writing something down. “Until last year I had one of those things every week. Now I never have them.”
“Is that right?”
“No doctor could make them stop. The pills they gave me helped with the headache, but they didn’t get to the root of the problem. The headaches kept coming back.”
“So what happened?”
“I met Val,” she said, sliding the slip of paper toward me. “Maybe you should pay him a visit.”
I glanced at the paper and saw an address in Old Olives. “Why, what does he do?”
“He does a lot of things, and he’s really wise. In this case he took me on a kind of healing journey.”
“That’s not like a trip to the pharmacy, is it?”
She blinked my jest away. “Dad, try to be open, would you?”
“I don’t know, I doubt this Val would be keen on journeying anywhere with an old guy like me.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?”
“Nothing. I’m just guessing you’re the kind of companion he likes.”
There was pity in her smile. “That’s just your worldly self talking.”
“That’s right,” I said. “And this Val, I’ll bet he never even noticed what a cute vessel your spirit-self travels around in.”
She closed her eyes. “Think what you want, but he helped me find the way back to where the migraines originated. No doctor could have helped me get there. That’s not what doctors do, you know.”
I said your checkbook was the only thing doctors could help you find the way to, and that made her giggle. During her nursing career I’d ruffled her feathers a few times by badmouthing
physicians, but now it looked like doctor-bashing was an activity we might share.

“Hey,” she said, “I’ve started going in the living room to sit after lunch. It’s kind of odd. Like I only just realized I’m allowed to use it if I want to. It’s nice in there. Kind of apart, you know. You want to try it out?”

When we got to the living room Sadie sat down on the floor with her legs crossed and I went over and sat on the couch. The way she’d said the word sit before, the weight she gave it, I’d gotten the feeling it meant something different to her than it did to me. I didn’t know if this sitting she was doing was the same as meditation, but it looked like that to my untrained eye. She had her eyes closed. Her back was straight, her hands rested on her knees. She was breathing deeply, rhythmically. Meanwhile my stomach was still rumbling. Talking about Edward had stirred things up in there, and being in here wasn’t settling them down any. It was spooky how little the room had changed since my early years on the hill. All around me was the pecky cedar paneling June and I had nailed onto the walls almost thirty years before. Sadie was sitting in the middle of one of the two big kilims June had found for the vast wooden floor. The chairs and tables and settees that loomed around the edges of the room were treasures she’d exhumed.

Back then we did most of our basic lounging in the family room next door. This had always been our special room, where we put the Christmas tree, where we entertained our guests and where Sadie and Edward sometimes entertained June and me. In one of the closets upstairs June used to keep costume jewelry and scraps of exotic fabric for the kids to use in their dress-up games. Sadie would dress herself and Edward and June would paint Oriental eyes on both of them, and darken their lips and color their cheeks and do strange things to their hair. Usually all of this was timed for my return from work, so that I would walk in, pop open a beer, and be led to the living room to see the show. These theatrics never pleased me that much. It was more June’s idea of fun than mine.
Usually I did my best to appear entertained. But now, as I sat there across from Sadie, I was remembering the time when my true feelings got out. I think I’d had a bad day at work. I was grouchy. I sat down in the living room with my beer and waited for the show to start. As usual, Sadie came out first. She was done up in lots of silky fabrics, looking exotic and queenly, with the Oriental eyes painted on and lots of bangles and fake pearls around her neck and arms. Our job while she pranced and preened in front of us was to ooh and ahh a little, and generally be thrilled by her queenly beauty. When Edward came out the show turned a bit burlesque. He had this curly blond hair that June trimmed now and then but refused to cut. It was teased up in some girlish do, with glitter in it, and his face was girlishly painted. He was wrapped in a bunch of pastel scarves, wearing a pair of big fake boobs, with all kinds of bangles and beads hanging off him, and when Sadie announced him she put some feminine spin on his name, calling him Edwina or Edith or something like that. This wasn’t the first time they’d done this to him, but as soon as I saw him I decided it would be the last. June and Sadie laughed as he took a couple of passes in front of us, shaking his hips and batting his eyes, but I stayed silent. That threw a wet blanket on the fun. Before long nobody was making any noise, and then I noticed all three of them were looking at me. But then we were all looking at Edward again because he’d wet himself and started bawling. That was when I got up and started doing a little dance of my own, with a lot of stomping and flailing in it. While I danced I was barking orders at June, telling her to get Edward cleaned up and put him back in his regular clothes. When I was doing that dance she usually gave me what I wanted. But I didn’t just want the kid out of those foolish clothes, I told her. I also wanted him to have a real barbershop haircut. I didn’t expect her to take care of that. When she had him ready I took care of it myself.

It’s events like this, a handful of them, that make up my entire memory of Edward. My memory of Sadie has always come in stages, she lives in my mind as a continuum, a work in progress. But after
we lost Edward my mind held onto him as a series of things that happened, each of them a point that was as precise and indelible as the points on a map. If you connected these points with a mental line you could trace his movement away from me. Your line would begin on the day I'd been remembering, not in the barber shop, when I had them cut off his curls, but right there in our living room, when I infuriated and embarrassed him. It would meander along for awhile, this line, making a stop on a baseball field, another in a boat, another on the porch of a beach house, and after a few more stops it would end abruptly high in the Sierras beneath a surprise October snow. He was eighteen when he froze to death at the timberline. He'd gone up there to survive for a month on his own, to convince us he was a man.