PREPARATIONS

My stomach hadn’t given me the least trouble since I’d landed at the zoo. Did I appreciate this peaceful interlude while it was taking place? Did I give a second’s thought to the comforts that come with a quiet belly? Of course not. Good things never get noticed before they’re gone. This particular good thing vanished not long after Don’s departure, when I was visiting the bathroom and got my first eyeful of what Brook would be wearing for this evening’s event. It hung from a hook on the inside of the door. Purple. Satiny. Sleeveless. Cut low in the back and slit high up one side. Before I could fully savor the prospect of Brook’s body liberated from that khaki canopy, her true form finally revealed, on display in this racy dress—before I could be swept up in a wave of delicious anticipation a riptide of dread undercut me. For my eyes, I reflected, were not the only pair invited to this exhibition.

Belly achurn, I left the cottage and trudged up the hill to get my directions for the day. I found Brook busy in the kitchen, whistling once again. She greeted me cheerfully, observing that we had a fine day for the festivities. I followed her to the area near the gate where people would gather, a squarish open space floored with woodchips and roofed with the spreading branches of several of the zoo’s fine oaks. She showed me where the band would set up, where the buffet table would be, where people would dance, and how the lights should be positioned. I gathered I was in charge of lights.

These came from a large chest in the main building. Strings and strings of tiny white bulbs to hang from the shrubs lining
the zoo’s paths, and spotlights to clamp to the branches that hung above the area near the gate.

I ran the strings of lights first, and was up on a ladder working with one of the spots when June and Sadie arrived at the gate. I got the wheelbarrow and helped them haul all the food down the path to the cottage, where they would be in the kitchen all day. I was back working on the overhead spots when June appeared at the foot of my ladder to break the news that Joan, the woman who was supposed to help her and Sadie with the food, was out with a bad back. She wondered if I could give them a hand.

“Glad to,” I said. “Better ask the chief, though.”

“I already spoke with Brook. She said the food’s the number one priority. The lights can wait.”

To my surprise, the prospect of a day in June’s kitchen didn’t strike me as distasteful. But—and here was a sign of how screwy things were getting—I wasn’t all that eager to spend the day in close quarters with Sadie. She had been tight with her greetings when they’d arrived, and hadn’t loosened up any as I was helping haul the food. She didn’t seem distraught or sleep-deprived, just chilly, unwilling to be amused by my wisecracks or warmed by my pleasantries. Her manner didn’t do much to soothe my stomach, which churned like a cement mixer as the morning wore on, as I cut up carrot sticks and celery sticks, broke blossoms of broccoli and cauliflower into bite-sized florets, lopped off radish-ends, plucked mushroom stems, husked shrimps, squeezed lemons, cored cabbage heads, and stripped oranges of their zest.

June’s effect on me was more salutary. She is one of those people who would rather give a party than go to one. When we were together she was always wanting to have people over and I was almost always against it. To me, parties meant the work before and after, which was often less taxing than the work in between, the social work that was not my calling. And yet it’s thanks to June that I remember our parties fondly. Not only because they were fun (they were fun), but because they were the occasions when she managed to be most completely herself. Entertaining people
unlocked parts of her to which I lacked the key. If only for an evening, seeing her satisfied allowed me to forget for a while what I was unable to give her.

I suppose she developed her taste for big events in high school, around the time she and I fell for each other. I do not exaggerate when I say she could have chosen any fellow in the school. I think she liked me because I was the only one her beauty didn’t tongue-tie. Like every other thing that made me nervous, her looks brought out the jokester in me, and she liked the way I made her laugh. That was in the fifties, a time of pageantry. June had grown up in the apartment above her family’s gas station, but for the two years we dated, this Midwest Cinderella was the queen of homecoming, Christmas, spring, and any other occasion you care to name. She liked all the attention, but couldn’t quite believe she deserved it. At how many balls and parades and banquets did I stand and sit beside a begowned and sparkling June in my rented tux, the wisecracks and one-liners and witty asides rolling off my tongue, keeping us both loose. If we could laugh at the fuss everyone was making over her, then the fuss seemed harmless enough.

We married just after graduation and my beautiful and much feted wife followed me to the university. Through my decade of study she typed and filed to help pay the bills. Later I took her to California and made her a member of the middle class. Better than the gas station, better than the secretary’s desk. But even on a white collar budget, housewifing is housewifing. It lacked the glamour of June’s glorious coming of age. Not that she chafed or complained. It was nothing I noticed on normal days. What I did notice was the way her parties brought back the old shine, how the hostess was a close cousin to the belle of the ball. It didn’t seem to matter that she was working harder than anybody.

In normal times June could be scatterbrained, she would forget to pick up Sadie from the skating rink or show up at the dentist’s two hours late. She lost her keys all the time and couldn’t keep track of the checks she wrote. She was brittle too, couldn’t argue with me for more than a minute without quailing and faltering
and going all to pieces. But let her get going on an event and she was like some blurry image snapped suddenly and sharply into focus. She wrote no lists but had every detail in her head. She was orderly, cheerful, calm, equal to any crisis or catastrophe. Her priorities were always right, her timing perfect. She knew what people would mix, she could predict how much everyone would eat and drink, where they would gather, what they would want to do, and when. She wasn’t the sort of hostess who rearranges and decorates for a party. She didn’t need to, probably because she had arranged our house to absorb large numbers of revelers at any season and for any occasion. She liked to work large. Twenty was intimate to her, forty began to be fun. An hour’s notice was as good as a month’s. One morning I called from the lab to tell her a biologist from the coast had brought in a big load of fresh crab. Should I bring a few pounds home for dinner? That evening we and fifty friends smashed claws and legs on picnic tables covered with butcher paper and drank beer from kegs. It was a chilly February night and we ate outside, the tables set up around the pool, big fires burning in barrels to keep people warm.

June delegated masterfully, asking the right people for the right contributions and then staying out of their hair, trusting them to do their jobs well. Her unflappable confidence seemed to infect everyone involved in these endeavors, even me, so that I often failed to find the preparations as onerous as I’d feared they would be, and usually had fun at our parties in spite of myself. I was reminded of all this now as June stood in Brook’s cramped, inadequate kitchen giving off an exuberant glow, as though the flawed facilities were not a nuisance but the kind of added challenge that made the job worth doing. Her pace was wonderful to watch. She didn’t have to hurry because she didn’t waste a single movement. She was mellow, efficient, and talkative, working on four things at once as she recalled last year’s event and reviewed what various businesses and individuals had donated for the auction. She wanted Sadie and me to taste everything, to see the lovely color of the Japanese eggplants, the size of the peppers, some of the biggest she’d run across in a long time. Now and
then she would come by to see what we were up to and she never failed to be impressed—by my technique for slicing celery sticks, by Sadie’s garlicky hummus. She was a charming woman. And I confess that as I toiled away in that kitchen, chilled by the shadow of my daughter’s disapproval, pricked abdominally by my lust for Brook, I grew gradually more susceptible to June’s ways—I relaxed the old defenses a little and let her good rhythm carry me.

What a beauty she was—still! Her looks were never just a matter of surfaces. They’re the kind that last and last. Excellent bone structure. Rich skin. Also bearing, the way she has of holding herself, back straight, chin slightly lifted, her eyes and her whole face open, as if she accepts that the beautiful have a responsibility to be seen. Today she wore jeans and clogs and a soft brown sweater with a blue denim apron tied at the waist. Her sleeves were pushed up off her forearms. Her sand-gray hair was brushed back, her back was straight as ever, and even when she was looking down at the work in front of her she seemed to have her head tipped back slightly, at her characteristic, elegant angle.

One after another bowls and platters filled with what we made. Soon Brook’s fridge was taxed beyond its modest capacity. I began making wheelbarrow trips up to the zoo kitchen and opening spaces on the walk-in’s metal shelves. That cold capacious room couldn’t be walked in after I finished sandwiching the last dips and salads and finger foods in among the chunks of horsemeat and sacks of roadkill that pleased the palates of Brook’s carnivores.

By now the afternoon sun was filtering through the oak branches. Sadie and June bagged all the fruit and vegetable clippings and wiped off the counters, then went off home to rest and shower and spiff themselves for later. I returned to the lights.

I worked swiftly, the sense of urgency growing with the late-day shadows. I had gotten several spots clamped into place by the time I heard my name rising up from the bottom of the hollow. Once. Then again. Brook’s voice. I descended the ladder and hurried down to the cottage, my heart thumping eagerly.
And there she was waiting for me on the front step, wearing ratty thick socks and her purple dress. I’m not qualified to judge such things, but the moment I saw her in it I could tell the dress was not a very nice one—not a dress-lover’s dress. A zookeeper’s dress, rather, a dress for one who doesn’t wear and doesn’t know dresses. The purple was about as subtle as Roy the peacock’s tail, and the cut of the dress was trashy in the harmless and comical way of certain adolescent girls who must make propaganda of their new curves. I trust my judgment because it was so instinctive. Along with excitement, the first thing I felt when I saw Brook was pity. That fond, protective pity you feel for one of your children when they unknowingly do something dumb. This didn’t dilute my attraction to her but made us more intimate in my eyes, made me a party to her flaw.

Brook’s body was thicker below than above, with strong round calves, athlete’s thighs and dancer’s shoulders, delicate collarbones, modest shapely breasts. And strong back, I soon learned, circling to oblige her when she asked if I would zip her up. That was why she’d called me down off the ladder. I began fumbling with the little zipper, breathing the scent of her freshly shampooed head, and she told me she regretted buying this dress whenever she put it on.

“Why’s that?”

“The zipper. Not practical when you live alone.”

“Is that an invitation?” I ventured.

“You don’t need an invitation, Charlie.”

Sometimes the meaning of a remark lives entirely in its tone. If hers had been less chummy, more flirtatious and encouraging, I might not have felt the need to file my first spy report.

“Had an interesting talk with Mackey this morning,” I said when we were face to face again.

“What did you find out?”

I told her about the sabotage on the lion trap, and she said she couldn’t think who did it. She hadn’t heard of anything like that being planned. I mentioned Cory and she showed me both rows of her little teeth.
“Ballsy kid,” she said.

Next I told her about the little boy who had disappeared near the river. “Mackey was heading over to see what he could find out. I told him to keep me posted.”

She slapped me on the shoulder and told me good work, not in a grateful way, more like a coach who praises you for doing as you were taught. “How’s it coming with those lights?”

“Almost done,” I said.

“Great.” She glanced upward and took a deep breath.

“Hey, Charlie,” she said when I turned to go. “You think Kyle’s still planning to come?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

She shrugged her bare shoulders. “Thought he might have been in touch.”

As I trudged back up the hill it felt like falling, each step driving me deeper down on the freshly sharpened spike of pain that rose from the pit of my stomach.