The Deer in the Mirror
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Coleman Barbour, lamed by a fall as a young man, got married at fifty-two. His bride, Alice, grew up at a Confederate orphanage as the pet of the matrons. She would not tell her age, but Coleman guessed she was a good thirty years younger than he was. They were married in Richmond and spent their wedding night in a hotel. The next day, they traveled eighty miles northwest by train to Rapidan and arrived in the evening. In the house where Coleman had lived all his life, he and Alice took off their coats; rather, Coleman took his off and attempted to help Alice with hers, but she said the house was freezing and she would keep it on.

“This house is huge,” she said, looking around, taking in the entrance hall and the many rooms branching from it. Coleman saw the house through her eyes. The stairway sweeping to the second floor had never seemed so massive.

She said, “I can’t possibly take care of everything here.”

He had looked forward to showing her the house. He had not anticipated complaint.

“You’ll have plenty of help, Alice,” he said. “I don’t expect you to do everything.”

“I don’t intend to.”

He knew he had made a mistake by giving Pearl and Edward, the couple who worked for him, two weeks’ vacation. He had believed he and Alice
would enjoy having the house to themselves at first. He should have consulted her. From now on, he would have to ask her about everything.

“You won’t have to do very much,” he said. “Just tend the children, if we have any.”

She did not blush. “Children, fine. I just don’t want to fool with them all the time.”

Five minutes in the house, and he knew his marriage was folly. Alice was beautiful, but her frown pulled her features together like a drawstring purse.

The cold house was not the first disaster: he had failed to make arrangements to be met at the train depot. Luckily his friend Henry Fenton happened to be there to pick up his brother Joe. Coleman wished he’d known Joe Fenton was aboard the train, only one car away. It would have been good to see Joe’s familiar face, to talk of crops and weather. The Fentons gave Coleman and Alice a ride. Coleman imagined her thinking, I’m surrounded by old men. The Fentons lugged her trunks to the second floor, too. That was beyond what Coleman, with his bad leg and his cane, could do. All he could carry was Alice’s traveling valise. How strange it felt to set the valise on his bed.

He hadn’t really expected it to go this far: marriage. Their courtship was a time of ponds and water lilies, never mind that the ponds were frozen in the back garden of the orphanage and the matrons did most of the talking for Alice. He had noticed her as an adult only last Christmas, when she put presents under the tree for the younger children, pretty boxes wrapped in red paper. It was his duty, he felt, to help the orphans of that terrible war. The orphanage was clean and orderly, yet he could never warm up to the matrons. Steely-eyed, they took his money and pressured him to buy Confederate souvenirs from a dusty little counter in their office. Year after year, he visited. He had cousins in Richmond, and the orphanage was just down the street. At last he realized there weren’t many orphans left. They were growing up or were already grown. Alice was the matrons’ favorite, their prize.

The courtship took a year. This past Christmas, he proposed, and now he’d claimed her.

Here she was, shivering, asking why hadn’t he had the house warm and ready? She was exhausted, she said.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Come into the parlor, and I’ll build a fire.”

The parlor felt even colder than the entrance hall. He stuffed kindling into the fireplace. Even as he held a match to the twigs, he realized that Alice had never asked him about his own life: the fall he took at twenty-two from a railroad bridge, the fall which cost him his chance to serve in the war, years he spent tending the depot and running the post office in the building that
served as both. Anything that needed to be done, Coleman did it. He fixed plows, churns, and wagons. He wrote letters for people who couldn’t write, letters for fathers and mothers to soldier sons. When news of his friends’ deaths reached him, or reports that they were missing or captured, he grieved by working harder than ever.

“I was working before you were born, Alice,” he heard himself say and discovered he’d been lecturing her in his head. “I fell off that railroad bridge before you were on this earth.”

The fire drew a little, then flared. They watched the flames while a mantel clock ticked. Coleman peeked at Alice and saw not a charming bride, but a crotchety stranger.

She bit her gloves at the fingertips, pulled them off, and dropped them on the floor. Out of instinct, he picked them up and offered them to her. She threw them down again.

“What good is it, if we don’t get along?” he asked. Not that the wedding night was a total disappointment; she had lain there, going along with it.

“What else was I to do but get married?” she said.

“Did other men come see you? They must have.”

“Two or three.”

“Well,” he said, baffled, holding out his hands to the fire. “Well, then.”

Thank goodness they had eaten on the train, so there was no need to worry about supper.

In the morning, a neighbor appeared, stamping her feet on the porch. Coleman hung in the door and stared at her: Mabel Stover, his sweetheart back when they were young, and a widow now.

“Are you going to let me in to meet the bride?” Mabel asked.

She breezed inside and handed him a loaf of bread wrapped in a clean towel. The bread was still warm and smelled wonderful. He leaned close to Mabel’s face and said, “I’ve married a monster. I don’t know what to do.”

“Old fool,” Mabel said. “We tried to tell you, all of us.”

He didn’t remember any such warnings. His head had been too full of Alice’s perfume, of her Christmas self.

Mabel moved to the foot of the staircase and called, “Mrs. Barbour, are you up?”

“Shh,” Coleman said, “don’t wake her.” He held out a finger and pressed it to Mabel’s lips. He used to pine to kiss those lips, and now they were wrinkled.
and white. He tore off a chunk of bread. “I ought not to done it, Mabel,” he said as he chewed. “She’s a spoiled brat.”

Mabel smiled. “You’re all riled up. Tell me anything you want. I won’t repeat it.”

Women were a sea of bobbing bonnets, a league of treacherous flowers, in cahoots with each other even when they fought among themselves. Mabel, though, would keep his secrets.

Why had he not married Mabel? Why at fifty-two did he realize his mistake?

“This house is awful quiet, Coleman,” Mabel said.

“Pearl and Edward went to visit her parents for two weeks.” What if they were gone for good? When he went to their cabin out back, it might be empty, and well, why not, they were young, or anyway not old, and possibly itchy-footed.

Mabel said, “Will she kill you in your sleep?”

“It’s bad, Mabel,” he said, “real bad.”

“I was at that orphanage one time.” She motioned for him to follow her into the dining room, where the table was laid out all pretty with sterling silver and plates. Pearl must have done that before she left. Mabel said, “I remember those matrons selling cheap little gewgaws in their office, bored to evilness.”

“That’s the place,” he said as Mabel urged him to sit down. He did.

“Nothing to do but fix your breakfast, and put back a plate for young miss,” Mabel said.

Coleman laid his head on the table.

He felt a gentle pressure at the back of his neck: Mabel’s fingertips. “I felt right bad at first, too,” she said, “when I married Bob, much as I loved him. I woke up and thought, What have I done? That feeling didn’t last but a day or so. I never told Bob.”

Slippered feet scraped on the stairs. Mabel lifted her hands away, and Coleman raised his head. His skull weighed a thousand pounds. Alice padded into the dining room, her face wrenched into a grimace.

“Mabel,” said Coleman, “meet my wife, Alice.”

“You woke me up,” Alice said.

“I’m sorry, honey,” Mabel said with a laugh that raised goose bumps on Coleman’s skin. “I bet there’s eggs out in the henhouse. Why don’t I go look?” She turned toward the door and stopped, pointing at a window. “It’s snowing, folks, and here we thought it was spring.”
Rapidan had everything, Mabel told Alice, all that was bad and all that was
good—fleas and stray dogs, floods that swelled the river and washed out its
banks. There was quicksand, if you went far back in the woods. Relic hunt-
ers dug around on your land for bullets and such, even if you asked them not
to. Hoboes from the train would snatch your clothes from the line. Gypsies
would steal your child.

“That gypsy business never happened here,” Coleman said, sopping up
eggs with bread.

“Those are all bad things,” Alice said. She was eating, too, and with
appetite.

“Oh, there’s mostly good things,” Mabel said. “Coleman, for example.
He’s kept us going. He built a water pump so our wells don’t run dry.”

“It wasn’t hard,” Coleman said, but Alice cut him off.

“Where do you live?” she asked Mabel.

“Next door, but it’s still right far,” Mabel said. “Close enough you can bor-
row something if you need it, not so close I’ll bother you.”

Mabel’s mention of floods jogged a memory in Coleman’s mind. He
turned to her and said, “What was it we did, first time we went walking out?
Seems to me there was high water.”

Mabel’s smile shone like candles. “Looked for turtles, that’s what we did,
turtles washed out of creeks and into the fields. We found a big one stranded
in the grass, and you let me have him, Coleman. He probably went for stew.
My mother’s turtle stew, now that was fine.”

“Ugh,” said Alice.

Coleman wondered if the other men who visited her were scared off by
her, if the courting was no more than a glance and a word and a swift retreat.

Alice declared, “I don’t like turtle soup, nor turtle stew,” as if he and Mabel
were the matrons at the orphans’ home, who would do her bidding. She had
told Coleman she was raised on white sugar and fried chicken livers. The
matrons squabbled over who would get to tie ribbons in her hair. “I got good
at making them fight,” she’d said on the train.

He wished he could pack her off to a nanny. Mabel saw him wish it. He
knew she saw, even as he dropped his gaze to his plate.

“Next door,” Alice said. “You live next door. Hmm.”

Mabel was country. A hick, Coleman’s mother used to say, while Coleman
writhed with chagrin on sweet Mabel’s part. Before Mabel married Bob Stover
and rose up in the world, she had lived out in the woods. Coleman’s family
had people to wash the clothes, clean the house, and tend the crops. Mabel’s mother had only Mabel. As a girl, she was even prettier than Alice.

Had he been asleep all these years, as if the young Mabel who had spied the turtle in the flooded field had cast a spell on him and made him a wanderer in his own life? Again he remembered that terrible fall he took. It made him an old man when he was young, and now it didn’t matter anymore, for what old man didn’t limp? What mattered was he had married the wrong woman, and now it was too late. Could have had his old beloved, right next door all these years, could have merged his farm with her big pastures, but no, he had to go trotting off to an orphans’ home to pick out the strangest woman in Virginia. Alice was a turtle, washed out of her stream. She had waited for him to find her. Better watch out, for her bite was sharp, her latching-on a fearsome thing.

Yet she must have wanted him. He wondered why.

The women cleared the table. Mabel told Alice she was lucky: Pearl and Edward would take care of things. “That’s just what I was saying to him.” Alice nodded toward Coleman. “I don’t intend to work myself to the bone.”

“You won’t be able to sit idle all day,” Mabel said, “but who would want to? Of course, it’s more work to manage a place like this than you might think.” Mabel stacked the plates, and Coleman realized with fresh admiration that she had all the skills necessary to operate a large, profitable farm. So graciously she did it, you would think her place ran itself.

Alice asked Mabel, “What would you be doing right now, if you weren’t here?”

Coleman decided he had never known anybody ruder.

“I’d be out among my hens,” Mabel said. “They don’t like anybody but me to feed them. Bob used to say when they clucked, they were calling my name.”

Out among hens, and Mabel a rich woman. Yet light of heart and sweeter than Alice would ever be. And him just beginning a new life with Alice, with wedding anniversaries ahead of them and quarrels he could feel already like storms in his chest, him losing his temper and her cool and superior, ever bitting her gloves at the fingertips and drawing them off.

“Let’s go up to the roof,” Mabel suggested, her voice as merry as Christmas. “Come on, Coleman, we’ll show Alice everything she needs to know about Rapidan.”

“All right,” he said, though what he really wanted was another cup of coffee and to go back to bed with a stack of newspapers, never mind if they were weeks old.
“We’ll need our coats.” Mabel slouched into hers and pulled on a warm hat.

Alice and Coleman followed her up the stairs, tugging on their coats and
scarves. Mabel said, “I haven’t been up here since, oh, when was that party
your mother gave, Coleman? When we all sat out on the roof and looked at
the stars?”

“Right after the war,” he said, catching his breath, keeping a hand on the
banister.

They went into the second-floor room his mother had used for sewing.
Pearl worked in this room now. The sewing machine was closed, the basket
with its needles and scissors tucked into a corner. The room smelled of light
oil and clean cloth. Coleman imagined his mother’s surprise at his bringing
this new woman into the house. Well, sometimes she took a shine to unlikely
people—a grim tinker, a lazy farmhand, a grubby woman who showed up year
after year to can tomatoes. In those overlooked folks, his mother saw some
spark to fan. Not that Alice was grubby or itinerant. Was it possible his mother
would have liked her?

Mabel unfastened the French doors that gave onto the flat roof of the
porch. When she pushed them open, frigid air and snowflakes poured in, and
she laughed.

“Maybe this is a bad idea,” Alice said, but Mabel took her arm and pro-
pelled her outside, with Coleman following.

“It’s not snowing all that hard. You can still see a lot,” Mabel said. She led
Alice to the edge of the roof, where only the balustrade kept them from pitch-
ing forward.

Rapidan was a map of itself. There was the familiar configuration of river
and road. The river cut into its northward bank, reminding Coleman of a
mouth of uneven teeth chewing harder on one side.

“There’s Henry Fenton’s mill,” Coleman said to Alice, pointing, “and Joe
Fenton’s ice and lock shop. Browning’s store, and the post office and depot.”

“Oh, don’t get Coleman started about the post office and depot,” said
Mabel. “Thirty years you worked there, right?”

“But I got tired of it and wanted to concentrate on farming,” he said.

A train was stopped at the station. It looked like a toy, its cars colorful
amid the landscape of bare trees. As they watched, it moved down the tracks,
heading south.

Gesturing through the falling snow, Mabel told Alice, “See that little
cabin? Bonnie Hazlitt lives there and raises canary birds. Coleman’ll get you
one if you want. The Ulshes live over yonder. See the smoke rising from the
hollow? Leonora Ulsh was a Nalle, marrying down.”
“Chapman Ulsh is a good man,” said Coleman, some egalitarian protest rising in him.

“Oh, there’s still the truth of marrying up and down,” Mabel said. “I married up, and I’m proud of it. I used to tease Bob Stover about marrying me. Oh, and Alice? This hill, where we live, is Gospel Hill. Baptist, Presbyterian, colored—there’s churches all over it. The Episcopal church is down at the river. They get flooded and keep rebuilding. Too stubborn to move.”

“On clear days, there’s no better view of the mountains,” Coleman said, “than from any western window in my house, Alice. Our house, I mean.”

Mabel and Coleman stood silently, like parents giving their daughter a chance to absorb her lessons. Snowflakes peppered Coleman’s face and caught in the women’s hair. Alice moved away from Coleman and Mabel, gazing at the scene stretched all around her, river and train tracks, store and mill and houses and barns, and the patchwork fields dusted white. Alice leaned over the balustrade as if she had forgotten Coleman and Mabel were there.

Coleman wondered if she might be homesick, yet there was nobody at the orphanage that she ever mentioned with particular affection. The thought was troubling. Had her heart failed to develop in some way? Yet he had seen her give presents to the children at the orphanage and hug them too.

“She has a pretty profile,” Mabel murmured, then raised her voice and called, “Be careful, Alice. Don’t lean too far.”

What if she fell, Coleman thought, fell and died, and it was over, that fast? Mabel said softly, “She’s older than you think. You didn’t marry a girl, Coleman, you got yourself a spinster. She’s thirty if she’s a day.”

In the snowy light, he noticed fine lines on Alice’s skin and a sag under her eyes, signs of age he never saw in courtship or even yesterday on the train, while she dozed beside him, awash in the light and shadows shuttling through the windows.

“You sure, Mabel?” he said.

A blackbird winged through the powdery air, and Alice tilted her head to follow it, showing the sandy hollow of her throat.

“I’m sure,” Mabel whispered. “It doesn’t make any difference, does it?”

“It’s a relief,” he said and meant it.

A train sounded from way off. He could just make out the steam from its engine as it puffed around Clark’s Mountain and snaked toward the Rappidan station. The whistle blew again, and the wheels gathered speed. This one wouldn’t stop. It was a freight train, loaded.

Alice covered her ears as it passed. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that,” she said.
“But you will. We all do,” Mabel said. “You still hear it loud and clear, right, Coleman?”

“Loud as ever.” He and Mabel were at the age where deafness could set in. He welcomed the enveloping sound of the train. He had missed it during the days spent fetching Alice down in Richmond, missed it so bad he could cry, even now.

Alice pointed to a big white house half hidden behind a stand of oaks and asked, “Is that your place, Mabel?”

“It is,” Mabel said. Her sheep and cattle dotted the pastures, motionless in the spinning snow. A Bible verse edged into Coleman’s mind, something from Ezekiel: *My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill; yea, my flock was scattered . . .* He didn’t know why, but the words made him sad.

“Somebody’s coming up the driveway,” Alice announced.

Coleman recognized a familiar buggy, then another and another. Old friends: Carter and Delia Lyne, Henry and Fannie Fenton, and Gertrude Nalle. Their horses’ bells jingled. Glad as he would be to see them, why did his heart feel so heavy?

“The news is getting around,” Mabel said, as if she had planned this whole day. “I’ll fix coffee.”

The Lynes brought a beautiful blue and white platter. “It was my aunt’s,” said Delia Lyne proudly. “It’s very old.”

“Thank you,” said Alice, running her finger along the edges as if checking for chips, then setting the platter aside. Coleman wished she had acted a little more excited about it.

The Lynes had brought a coconut, too. Coleman cracked it open with a mallet and an awl, and Delia Lyne sliced the sweet white meat for all of them to enjoy. Henry and Fannie Fenton gave Alice a silver serving spoon, a ham, and a fruitcake. Gertrude Nalle had brought her cousin, Marjorie Coad, and together they presented Alice with a set of linen sheets.

“They’re not embroidered yet,” Marjorie apologized. “I want to embroider a B on them.”

“I don’t care about that,” said Alice, and again Coleman flinched at her rudeness, though Marjorie Coad kept smiling.

“When you start having children, I have a nice pram I’ll give you,” Gertrude Nalle said.

“Well,” said Alice, as if thoughts of prams were not appealing.
Mabel served coffee on a silver tray, along with the fruitcake. Coleman found a bottle of wine in the gun closet, poured it into small glasses, and passed it around.

“To the bride,” said Henry Fenton. “To your long and happy life together,” and everyone toasted.

“We kept telling Coleman he ought to get married, Alice,” said Marjorie Coad, who like Mabel was a longtime widow, her husband dead of fits the doctors couldn’t cure. “All the time Coleman was courting you, we couldn’t wait to meet you.”

“And here I am,” said Alice.

Coleman’s heart sank to his toes. He pictured his heart there on the floor, something to be kicked under a chair. His courtship was madness, a neglect of his crops and stock, a single-minded chase that had as much to do with Alice being far away as it did with his being lonely, when he was perfectly all right by himself.

Yet there was something he’d glimpsed in her that attracted him, a proud shy way of standing still when the matrons praised her. Once she’d caught his eye and smiled right playful, and in that smile he saw a future. Was that a trap, set for him? He’d imagined a big family, his and Alice’s children, with Christmas trees he would cut from his own fields.

“Are you tired, Coleman? Alice?” Mabel asked. “You-all had a long trip yesterday. We should be going, all of us.”

He wanted to cry out, Don’t.

“Come see us,” said Fannie Fenton to Alice. “I’ll give a little party for you.” Fannie’s face glowed; she pressed her hands together.

“Well,” Alice said.

“Stay a while,” Coleman begged his neighbors, but the Lynes, the Fentons, Gertrude Nalle, and Marjorie Coad disappeared in a flurry of handshakes and hugs, until only Coleman and Alice and Mabel remained, with Mabel moving toward the door.

He would rather face the Yankees again than be alone with his bride.

“Mabel, could you help my wife unpack?”

She stopped in her tracks. “Why, of course. I should have thought of that myself.”

The Yankees had come like a whirlwind, on such fine horses. They fired the town, burning the mill, the railroad bridge, and the store. Coleman hunkered down in the building that was both post office and depot. He had never seen
a better throwing arm than belonged to the officer who hurled torches and pranced backwards on his gray horse while the fire took. Coleman ran out of the depot. Panicked, he tripped and fell.

They caught him, collared him, and dragged him to his feet.

“Looky, he’s lame,” one said. “You get shot, Rebel?”

“No.” He recalled he’d sold a ticket for the next train to a woman who wanted to go to Warrenton. “There’s a lady asleep in there,” he blurted.

“Well, get her out,” said the officer, tall as a thundercloud on the gray horse.

Coleman ran pell-mell back inside. “Go, Gimpy!” the Yankees yelled and laughed. His shame rose faster than the flames, shame that he forgot this stranger, this female. Gasping, he crawled through smoke to find her asleep on a bench. He lifted her onto his back. She woke up and fought him all the way out the door, a furious, flailing burden. Outside, he dumped her on the grass. She got up and shambled off. The word hinney came to his mind, offspring of a male horse and a female donkey. He never knew who she was or if she knew he had saved her life. Yet he used to dream about her, swapping the reality of her greasy hair and sharp elbows for beauty and kindness. Oh, it would have been fun if she’d been pretty, if she’d fallen in love with him.

By the time he hauled her to safety, the Yankees were gone, so he never got to tell them how he hurt his leg. At least they’d asked. They were dots in the distance, gone to wreak mayhem elsewhere.

He had a devil of a time getting the building repaired, with nearly every man in Rapidan gone to war. Bob Stover and Henry Fenton helped on furloughs, but Coleman did most of the work himself. A bad leg didn’t mean he couldn’t hammer, saw, and paint. He could even climb a ladder when he had to. The new counter, where he sold train tickets and stamps and took in mail, was never quite right. He missed the one that burned, with its long shine of elbow-worn oak.

His mother used to say, “Well, Coleman, it’s up to you.” Did he learn to do more, lame, than he would have with two good legs? As a child he used to get these surges of happiness for no reason except he was alive on a beautiful morning. Even during the war he sometimes had those happiness surges.

Mabel’s first child was born in August of ’62, the day the Battle of Cedar Mountain began. Cannon boomed and blasted seven miles away. Coleman carved a spinning top for Mabel’s baby. Gleefully he tried it out on the ticket counter. He closed up at midday to ride over to Mabel’s house, never mind that the cannon fire spooked his horse. He thought the reason for his cheer-
fulness was the toy turning out so cute. Why didn’t he realize it was because he was going to see Mabel? He smelled burnt powder in the wind, yet there he was at the Stovers’ door, with a top in his pocket.

So he was an old man and a new groom, trapped in his own house, wondering what to do. He climbed halfway up the stairs and paused. He would leave well enough alone. If the women were getting Alice’s things unpacked, he would stay out of their way. His hand resting on the banister brought back the times he slid down it as a boy. You’d smack your behind on the newel post, but wasn’t speed the whole point?

He went back down the steps, his mind still on Mabel’s first baby. She died when she was only a few months old. She had a marker in the Presbyterian churchyard, a little bitty stone with a lamb carved on it.

“She loves the toy you gave her,” Mabel had said, all those years ago, when she stopped by the post office. “See?” She unwrapped the blanket from the infant, and there was the top clutched in the baby’s hands. “Would you like to hold her?” Mabel asked. He balanced his weight on his good leg while he reached for the baby. She weighed no more than a cat. Oh, Mabel went on to have other children, and now she was a grandmother, but he could picture the baby and Mabel as clearly as if they were right there in front of him. And to think there’d been nothing to come of Mabel’s love for the baby, nothing at all.

He was crying. He sank to the bottom of the staircase and covered his face with his hands. Sobs rose up and broke in his throat with sounds he couldn’t stifle.

“What’s this? What?” The women’s voices reached him, high chitters and running feet hurrying down the steps. There was a gentle hand on his shoulder, a firm arm around his neck, and a warm cheek against his face. It was Alice. He shook, blind from tears.

“There, there,” Alice said. “Coleman, it’ll be all right.”

She sat and rocked with him on the bottom step. He was aware of Mabel heading in the direction of the kitchen. He blew his nose on his handkerchief and took a deep involuntary breath, as if he had been underwater and was rising to air.

“Dear, dear,” Alice said, lacing her fingers through his. “I’ve been mean, and I’m sorry.”

Moments later he smelled chocolate, opened his eyes, and found Mabel
holding a cup of cocoa before him. He took it, and it warmed his hands. Stunned by giving way to feelings, this welter was the phrase that came to mind, he sipped and swallowed.

Mabel and Alice exchanged murmurs. The door opened with a sweep of cold air and closed with a thump. Coleman raised his head. He felt he had just waked up. He had stood on his roof in a snowstorm not five minutes ago, yet already it was night.

Mabel had departed. He saw a light bobbing out the window.

“I should drive her,” he said, stirring.

“She wanted to walk,” said Alice. “I made her take a lantern. I’ll go check on her in the morning.” She took the empty cup and saucer from him and set them on a table. “We can be happy together, Coleman. I wouldn’t have married you if I didn’t think so.”

Her face held a still, serious expression, as if the sullen girl had vanished and a grown woman had taken her place. It seemed to Coleman that his life changed in that moment, turning in some great and permanent direction which he recognized, from the tiny buzz of hope in his heart, as inevitable. The hope would have to be enough, that and the fact Mabel still lived next door, where he could watch out for her as a neighbor and a friend.

“All right?” Alice asked.

“All right.” It shouldn’t be this easy, he thought—to cry like a child and have a shrewish wife turn sweet—but he would gladly accept it.

He was still sitting on the bottom step. Alice stood in front of him. “Well, one more thing, Coleman,” she said. “You wish you were married to Mabel, don’t you?”

He felt the nakedness of his face. “I never asked her, and she married somebody else.”

“You could have asked her anytime since her husband died. Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I never thought about it, until today.”

“And now you wish you had,” Alice said. “How was it you didn’t know already?”

“I loved her when I was young, and then . . .” He couldn’t explain. It was as if the love he felt for Mabel when they were young had gone to sleep and had awakened this morning when she stood at his door with a loaf of bread in her hands. Now he hardly knew what he felt for Mabel or Alice, either one.

For a long time they regarded each other, and he saw the intelligence in Alice’s face and a sheen of hurt in her eyes. She was an orphan after all and accustomed to what that meant.
She said, “Mabel and I talked about you, about all of this, while we were upstairs. I told her I didn’t think I could stay here. I didn’t unpack a thing.”

He shook his head, confused. A moment ago, she had said they could be happy together.

“You didn’t unpack?” he said, trying to understand.

“As soon as I came downstairs this morning, I saw how you felt.”

“I had to invite her in,” he fumbled. “She came to wish us well.”

“I want her to visit us often,” Alice said. “I like her.”

It was disrespectful to be seated while a woman stood. He pulled himself to his feet. The bottom of the staircase seemed an oddly suitable place for this negotiation. “When you talked with her, what did she say?”

“She likes things the way they are. She said if she ever wants to get married again, she’s the one who’ll do the asking.”

The silence stretched out. He felt he was again reviving from that long fall off the railroad bridge, hardly knowing where he was.

Alice said, “You and I both have doubts. Do you want me to leave?”

Her face told him she would go quietly. It would be as if the marriage had never taken place. There was no blame in her gaze, only an orphan’s stoicism. If he asked her to go, she would put on her coat, and he need never see her again. If he asked her to stay, then her face and form would become part of his life. Her footsteps, voice, opinions, her need for warmth and meals and sleep: he had sought those things. Had he been right or wrong? She was giving him a chance to decide all over again. As strange as it felt to be married, nothing compared to his astonishment at a woman who could offer a man that choice and mean it.

He thought about it, and he found he didn’t have to think very long.

“We should have supper,” he said, “and then I’d like to show you the house properly.”

“Well,” said Alice. She put out her hand and touched his cheek. “That’s what I think, too.”

She went into the kitchen, and soon he heard her working at the stove.

“Coleman,” she called, “could you bring me that blue and white plate? I want to use it.”

He fetched the platter the Lynes had given them. He paused, balancing it in his hands. This much felt familiar, something recalled from long ago—the turtle in the flooded field? He could manage. This was light enough.