The Deer in the Mirror
Holladay, Cary

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“You’re different,” Bruce told Jennilou. Unlike his previous girlfriends, who were talkative and sarcastic and wanted to marry stockbrokers or be stockbrokers themselves, Jennilou just wanted to read, anything from Shakespeare to cheap love stories.

That was their plan. Jennilou would read, and together they would operate a general store in the river-and-railroad village where Bruce grew up. The store was ancient, and it belonged to a glamorous old lady named Frances Swan, who would rent it to them for practically nothing. Bruce would work on his art. They would not have to depend on the store or the art, because he had a trust fund.

A few weeks after their college graduation, Jennilou and Bruce were married in the campus chapel. Even as they ate wedding cake with Bruce’s parents, who were down from New York where they now lived, and with Jennilou’s family and friends, Jennilou hungered for the store. During a honeymoon in the Napa Valley, she treasured the thought of the store’s potbellied, coal-burning stove and of the fires she and Bruce would build in it.

Back in Virginia, they got right to work. First they threw out debris left by previous tenants—musty clothing and grimy toys. The things filled several heavy-duty plastic bags. Bruce said, “Trash service here is do-it-yourself.” They drove along a rolling country road to the county landfill. To Jenny, it felt like an adventure.
Their living quarters were at the top of a flight of stairs: living room, bedroom, bathroom, and tiny kitchen. It would be wonderful, Jennilou thought, to have Bruce and their child—for she wanted a baby soon, and he didn’t object—all cozy in the trading post where two hundred—or was it three hundred?—years ago, animal pelts were money. In frontier days, Bruce said, you could exchange furs and deerskins for sugar, tobacco, salt, and nails.

Shelves of dusty merchandise lined the walls.

“This is ancient. It should all go to the landfill, too,” said Bruce.

“Let’s keep it for a little while,” Jennilou said. Somehow the boxes of cake mix and cat food appealed to her, like an unexpected inheritance.

“Nobody’ll buy it,” Bruce said, but he didn’t throw it away.

The wooden floors were scuffed but solid. A harsh fluorescent light on the ceiling was a modern touch. The scarcity of customers surprised her. There must have been more patrons back in the early days, when this little store, along with a riverside mill that stood in ruins, was the hub of the community. Now, of course, people zipped over to Charlottesville or D.C. or Richmond or bought anything they wanted on the Internet.

Bruce grew his hair long, and Jennilou found this exciting, his great head of shaggy curls and his smell of linseed oil. In bed, she felt newly acrobatic. When he declared she was wearing him out, she laughed and kissed him.

He set up his easel and painted while she swept coal soot out of corners and arranged the wares on the shelves. It was a convenience store, really, for the last-minute item—the carton of milk, the candy bar for a traveler. Two antique-looking gas pumps sat out front, and occasionally people did buy gas. Jennilou discovered she had ambitions. She installed a coffee maker, an expensive one that was a wedding present. She flavored the coffee with spices and extracts, and it was a hit with Guy, Bruce’s best friend since childhood. Guy was an artist too, a weaver. He had missed their wedding because he’d been in Peru buying fibers.

“Who lives around here?” Jennilou asked Guy.

“Who lives around here?” he said. Jennilou didn’t like his habit of repeating everything she said, as if it were a joke. “Landowners. Laborers. Horse people. Orchardists.”

“Oh,” said Jennilou. How was it that he acted like he was more sophisticated than she was, when she was from Springfield, a nice suburb of D.C.?

“Oh,” Guy echoed. He grinned at Bruce, who was at his easel, wearing a cashmere beret Jennilou had given him. The men laughed. Bruce took off the beret and threw it so it sailed to the counter. Guy caught it and put it on his head. Jennilou felt a flame of fury. She reached over to snatch the beret off Guy’s head, but he grabbed her wrist. The look in his eyes was combat. She
had her first enemy in this funny little place, and how odd, she was ready for a fight.

He released her wrist. “You’ll do fine here,” he said in a voice that made Jennilou think silky, a villain’s voice. “I’ll get the word out for you.”

Whatever he did must have worked, because other artists came to the store: potters and papermakers. They filled the place up. The best seat in the house was a busted armchair beside the pot-bellied stove. People fought over that. An old wooden apple crate served as a footrest.

Jennilou posted a sign over the counter that said Coffee 50 cents.

Local people came in too—farmers, plain-looking women, shy teenagers, and friendly children. Mass culture, pop culture, had reached even this place. Teens’ teeth clinked with tongue piercings, and they wore silver toe rings. When they bought coffee, they paid for it, unlike the artists, who ignored Jennilou’s sign.

“Oh, why are there so many artists around here?” she asked Bruce.

“They’re getting away from the rat race,” he answered from the armchair, taking a break from painting. “I saved you from that.”

Jennilou thought she might have enjoyed the rat race for a little while, to prove she could survive in it, to show Bruce he underestimated her. She pulled the lever on the coffee machine and went steely-eyed as she made cappuccino.

When Bruce’s friends weren’t talking about art, they talked about real estate and the inevitability of development, of the Metro line reaching out this far within a few years.

Bruce said, “The locals will fight it. They already are.”

The others turned toward him. Guy said, “I’m local, but nobody seems to remember that.”

“You’re a citizen of the world,” said Trista, a potter with a purple streak in her hair. To Bruce, she said, “Do you mean you’ll fight it? Don’t you want us outsiders here?”

Jennilou hoped Bruce would take a stand, but he answered the way he often did, by side-stepping. “Hey, my folks retired early from the sale of their farm. They’ve got a pretty nice brownstone in New York.”

Jennilou knew her in-laws had never really been farmers. Bruce’s father was a venture capitalist.

“Well,” said Guy, “it’s an old, old story. We’re players in a drama that’s played out before. What’s a little more sewage? More traffic? So what if the wildlife disappears?”

Perched on the apple crate, a vintner growled, “I could do with less deer. Damn things love grapes.”
A train went by, and they all paused. They had to, because the tracks were only a hundred feet from the store. When the train was gone, Guy said, “Notice how every car says Han Jin? The Chinese own us now. They make everything we use.”

“We’re making our own stuff,” Trista said. “You’ve got to develop wisely. That’s the key. These people made a big mistake not letting Disneyland build a park over in Manassas. That cost the state of Virginia a billion dollars.”

“It’s a Commonwealth, actually,” said Guy, “and we’ve got something better than Disneyland. The state prison. It used to be a county work farm. Now the inmates raise corn and cattle, and they even have a marching band.”

Trista socked Guy on the shoulder, flirting. “I’ve heard a band and thought I was imagining it.”

The vintner said, “I hear the old mill’s been bought and will be turned into luxury condos with a destination restaurant. That’s more like it.”

Some of the others clapped. Guy shrugged.

The vintner said, “That train is a drawback. Maybe the developers can move the tracks.”

“I like the train,” Jennilou said, but they didn’t seem to hear her.

In the moments when they had all listened to the train, she had fallen in love. She put her hand to her heart: she was that surprised. She was in love with the store, the village, the sense of being out of time. The train belonged here more than these people did, more than she did. She had thought the only passion she would ever feel was for Bruce.

“What’s the point of a marching band at a prison?” Trista said. Together she and Guy went out of the store. Jennilou heard her say, “I can never tell when you’re joking.”

Jennilou started hearing it too—the music of the marching band. Why hadn’t she noticed it before? The sounds floated on the wind, faint yet cheerful, red-white-and-blue tunes that made her think of high school football games. The band was one of the voices of this place, along with the artists’ voices, noisy and hip; and the locals’ peculiar speech, the way even white people said num-bah for number, and old people said oot for out. Wind and animals’ sounds made yet another voice, one that called to her as she went about her chores. She would stop and listen, and there was a birdcall or the low rush of the river.

When she had a moment alone, she closed her eyes and imagined it was 1950 or 1900 or 1850 or even longer ago. She loved the wavy glass panes in the store windows and the steeped aroma of fire, cooking, and weather.
One evening, she took trash out to the garbage can and found a fox in the back yard. It raced away, its red furry body low to the ground, while her heart skipped at the sight of something so beautiful and wild.

Where did her own voice fit in? She tried to listen to herself, but words bumped around in her head. It was better to stay quiet, alert for sounds she didn’t even know she was waiting for.

The store had seen so much change. It was here when rebels and Yankees fought on this very road and burned the mill. All that time, people had lived here and sold goods. They ate meals and made love in the rooms upstairs. Jennilou wondered how long she would live here and who would come after her. She didn’t like knowing that one day, her voice would not be heard in the store any longer. She wouldn’t leave a mark.

She read books on the lives of renowned artists. When she tried to talk with Bruce about the personalities and the craft, he said, “You don’t get it.”

She took the books back to the county library and didn’t try to talk about famous artists again.

The magazines on the store’s racks screamed about sex. Celebrities, as always, were leading lives of tremendous passion. Gradually, she and Bruce drifted outside of the great sphere of sensuality. Yet they’d been married only six months. It was way too soon for him to be bored. She lay awake beside him, planning and reflecting.

Her sorority sisters had called him “a big ol’ teddy bear.” They meant he was a fuddy-duddy. Still she’d been bowled over when he asked her out. He was prep schools and old money; he spoke with weary authority about world affairs. She understood from the expensive restaurants where they ate that he was serious about her, though she was plain except for her good skin and long hair. He informed her he was a breast man and a leg man; she was to wear push-up bras and short skirts. Senior year, he announced that instead of joining his father in finance, he would paint instead. He had never studied art, but Jennilou told herself that he possessed abundant talent.

She had never felt like his equal, yet weren’t they partners now in marriage, in everything? She reached out to him in the dark, and he swatted her away for the third time in two weeks. He was hardly a teddy bear, more like a grizzly.

Giving up was unthinkable. She wanted a baby. She went downstairs, got a magazine, read “Men’s Secret Cravings,” and woke Bruce again. This time, she persisted until he gave in.
One of the artists created custom leather goods, shoes and handbags that reminded Jennilou of burritos.

“Oh, pocketbooks,” Jennilou exclaimed.

“I didn’t know anybody said pocketbooks anymore,” the woman said, and something in her tone made Jennilou flinch.

A grower of artisanal tobacco produced a box of hand-rolled cigarettes. Guy flicked a lighter, and others bent toward the flame.

Guy said, “Jennilou, don’t you want one?”

“I’m pregnant, I shouldn’t smoke.” She hadn’t been to a doctor or taken a test. There was one pregnancy kit for sale, but she didn’t want to use her own stock. She just knew.

“Pregnant,” said Guy, exhaling smoke, tilting his head toward Bruce.

Jennilou let them all stare at her, Bruce included. She said, “From now on, everybody, please pay for your coffee.” She pointed to the sign above the counter: Coffee 50 cents.

Bruce stepped out from behind his easel. “She’s kidding. You’re our friends.”

“It’s not free,” Jennilou said.

The coffee drinkers set down their mugs, murmured excuses, and left together in a clump. Jennilou faced Bruce. How loud the fluorescent light buzzed now that they were alone.

“Why did you do that?” he asked. “Tell everybody before you told me?”

“I wanted to get your attention,” she said. “You give so much attention to the others. Here we are, newlyweds, and we should be getting to know each other.” It was the first time she’d tried to put into words the loneliness she felt.

“For gosh sakes, we know each other. You act like you’re competing with them.”

“Oh,” she said, feeling stupid, hearing Guy echo her: Oh. She couldn’t believe he was talking about those people when she had just said she was pregnant. “But why shouldn’t they pay for the coffee?”

“Why were you so rude?”

She’d never seen him look so angry, and she was scared and a little bit thrilled. “Doesn’t it bother you the way they hang around and never buy anything?”

Bruce’s broad face made her think of a pie. He gestured and said, “They don’t need any of this stuff.” The things looked worn and pitiful: cans of tuna and ravioli with faded labels, garish packages of Santa Claus cookies now stale in January. He came toward her, and she stiffened, but he was only trying to
put his arms around her, and she let him. “It’s hormones,” he said. “It’s not really about my friends.”

After a moment, she said, “Why don’t you design a website for the store?”

He laughed. “So people can buy out-of-date cans of soup?”

“Can’t we try?” she begged. “I want this to be a real store, like in the old days when people made a living from it.” She was thinking she would like him better if he had to work.

He held her at arm’s length. “You mean we should sell nails and cheese? You’ll have to ease up on everybody, including yourself.”

She didn’t say any more about charging the artists for coffee, but she put out a jar labeled “Tips” and drew a smiley face on it. Bruce threw it away.

Photographers came to the store, and a woman whom the others introduced as a joke polisher, meaning she fine-tuned the lines delivered by a late-night TV comic. Their cell phones rang with calls from Bangkok and London and Sydney. Jennilou tried to look disinterested, though her heart was in turmoil. She wasn’t quite sure why, except nobody in Bangkok would ever be calling her.

Frances Swan, the landlady, paid a visit, mingling with the younger people. Frances went to the refrigerator, lifted out a carton of cream, and told Jennilou, “Make sure you keep fresh cream on hand for me.” Jennilou promised she would. She would have to order just enough for Frances, but not so much as to lose money.

Bruce exhibited his paintings in the store. Jennilou liked his landscapes but not his newest works, abstracts which resembled smashed spiders. Frances Swan glanced at the paintings and said, “Very cute,” and after she left, Bruce fumed, “My work is not cute!”

“You should start an artists’ co-op, Bruce,” said Trista, the purple-haired potter. “We’ll all bring our things to sell.”

“That is a great idea,” Bruce said, with a wide-eyed earnestness Jennilou was learning to distrust.

In bed that night, she said, “The art and stuff, it’ll be on consignment, right? I mean, we’ll keep part of the money?”

Bruce was silent. There was no deeper silence, she thought, than the silence of your own husband in a wooden building two centuries old.

“They’re my friends,” he said. “I won’t keep any money they earn.”

He hadn’t said our friends, or we’ll keep. She bit her lip. She had stopped her attempts to be a sexy celebrity, and Bruce hadn’t seemed to notice. She
couldn’t believe how fast their physical life had evaporated. Maybe every couple went through this, and after the baby came, things would get better. The train rumbled by with its sweet harmonica sound, and she was asleep before the caboose rattled past.

So she stocked shelves and worried about money and whether she ought to be worrying about it. She spent too much time staring at a nest in a tree by an upstairs window. The nest contained tufts of fur woven among the twigs, straw, and bark. She never saw any birds using it and wondered if the fur smelled of a predator such as a cat or a skunk.

One day she returned from a doctor’s appointment and found Bruce had made space for his friends to display their creations. Much of the store's merchandise was gone.

She asked him, “Where’s all the food?”

“That old stuff. I gave it to my friends.”

“You could have given it to people who really need it.” She remembered things they had discarded when they cleaned out the store—sad-looking garments hanging on pegs; soiled stuffed animals; musty outdated calendars. “What happened to the last people who lived here?”

He laughed. “Frances Swan can tell you about them. She had one bunch of deadbeats after another, always with a lot of kids. She was about to close the place when my dad got in touch with her about us.” He paused and said, “Be nice to my friends. Can’t you do that?”

The artists brought in their goods. Jennilou examined them when she was alone. The products were attractive but priced very high, she thought. The artists were the only ones who bought them, bargaining hard and giving money directly to each other. Local people picked up the weavings, the asymmetrical clay pots, and the burrito-like shoes and set them down again.

The stock market took a dive, and Bruce’s trust fund wasn’t yielding much interest, yet he bought a new car and a new computer. Unexpectedly, money was tight, and he admitted it. He went to Walmart, bought hunting gear, and announced they would resell it at a profit. Jennilou tried to feel encouraged. The community, the store, his art—they shared that vision after all, didn’t they, the romance of it?

She couldn’t believe how hungry she was now that she was pregnant. At night she lay awake thinking about pizza. She would get up and navigate the wooden steps, feeling as if the whole village were watching, the people now and the people back when this was a trading post. She yanked open the freezer and took out a Supreme Deluxe. She heated it and ate the whole thing, her mind so full of hope and worry that sometimes she had to have a few
candy bars washed down with Pepsi. Upstairs, Bruce snored. Wide awake, she organized the hunting supplies in the front window.

People exclaimed over the hunting equipment, but nothing sold except one pair of socks. Jennilou and Bruce were hard pressed to come up with the rent, and there she was, eating up the inventory and hating herself for it. In the morning, Bruce held up the cardboard circles and said, “Did a mouse eat the pizza?” They had mice in the building; they’d always known that. Frances Swan offered to let them buy poison and take it off the rent, but Jennilou wouldn’t. When the baby came, he might get into it. Or—the thought hit her out of nowhere—she might take some notion to eat the poison herself.

Why would she even think that?
Guy mused, “You could turn this place into an Internet café. In most places, they’re passé, but not out here.”
“That’s for sure. My dial-up takes forever,” said Trista.
“How about an antique store or a rare book shop?” Guy said.
“Not that,” said Trista. “We need a place to hang out.”
What Jennilou really wanted, still, was to make the store a success, as much like an old trading post as possible. She said so to Bruce, when they were alone.
“This was never about the damn store,” he said. “It’s about art.”
“What if we turned the coffee counter into a bar? We’d make money.”
“Are you crazy?” he said. “A roadhouse. The riffraff we’d get.”
“At least people would pay for liquor.”
“Forget about it.”

Summer passed, with the air smelling of fertilizer and Jennilou feeling heavy and hot. When she had to cool off, Bruce took her for a drive in his new car. As they passed fields of crops, he would say, “Soybeans,” or “Alfalfa,” hesitantly, as if guessing.

The baby arrived in September, a healthy boy. Jennilou’s labor was easier than she’d expected, and she felt proud. Bruce wanted to name him Guy; she lobbied for Walter, a name from her mother’s family. They fought about that. She won, yet her victory was hollow. Walter seemed ponderous for an infant. Couldn’t she get anything right?

When customers did come by, she tried too hard. Travelers, driving out to see horse country, might stop in for a sandwich and a cold drink. She’d offer to fix them something special and end up using too much of the best food, not charging enough, and somehow scaring them off. If she got to talking about
books, she’d say, “I’ll go get the book and show it to you.” And in the instant it took her to fly up the steps and find it, the customer would leave.

Sticks of beef jerky sold, and packages of cupcakes. She sent off for corn shuck dolls and put them on display. A woman from D.C. bought two of the dolls, and her husband bought a hunting knife, and Jennilou rejoiced as she rang up the sale. But that was all. She made rock candy from a recipe in an old cookbook, but ants collected on it overnight, so she had to throw the whole mess away.

If travelers asked to use a restroom, she let them use her own bathroom upstairs. It was too hard to say no. Sometimes people thanked her, sometimes they didn’t, and after they left, she ran up and sprayed with Lysol. She asked Bruce if they could have a bathroom built downstairs for customers, but he waved her away. He neglected his painting and seemed annoyed, carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, ignoring her in bed. The only safe topic of conversation was the baby.

She loved baby Walter more than she loved Bruce. Did all new mothers feel that way? It wasn’t fair to Bruce. Yet why didn’t he help more? He resented having to change the baby or give him a bottle.

The store had a pay phone out front, but nobody used it. She held the rusty receiver to her ear, plunked coins into a slot, and got a dial tone. Who did she want to call? What did she want to say? She whispered, “Help.” The receiver grew warm in her hand. She said, “Bruce, what’s wrong?” and listened to the dial tone go on and on.

That night, she said, “Please tell me what’s the matter.”
“I’m trying to do what you want,” he said, “living here.”
“Where would you rather be?”
“New York,” he said. “I bet you wouldn’t want to go.”

Not so long ago, when he was planning a career in finance with his father, they had intended to make their home in New York, and that was perfectly all right with her. She thoroughly enjoyed visiting his parents and riding the subway, holding Bruce’s hand. She enjoyed shows at theatres. Now she couldn’t imagine leaving this place. She burst into tears.

He gave a bitter laugh and said, “I guess that’s your answer.”
She sputtered and reached for him. “Of course we can go to New York.” Uneasily, she rested in his arms. “Would you work for your father?”
“Does it occur to you I might be serious about my art?”
“I don’t know what you’re serious about.” The truth erupted from her mouth: “Your pictures look like dead spiders.”
He set her aside as if she were an empty plate. “I knew you didn’t believe in me,” he said, silkily, she thought.

Bruce started wearing the hunting clothes himself, pricey garments by Woolrich and Levi Strauss. He was gone a lot, “to see about a commission.” Jennilou took on extra chores, including hauling their trash to the landfill. Bruce would do it if she nagged him, but he acted so put-upon, it was easier to do it herself. She packed the garbage bags into her hatchback—Bruce didn’t want to get his new car dirty—put Walter into his car seat, and drove to the dump after the store closed for the day. In a funny way, she didn’t mind. Walter was good company, cooing as they jolted along. The road was as good as a rollercoaster. It led to a graveled clearing with big metal hoppers. She tossed the bags into the trash bins hard, as if throwing troubles away, and drove back home with the windows down. The air smelled of wood smoke. Could she imagine her son on these roads, growing up, learning to drive? Yes, she could.

She apologized to Bruce for her remark about his work. He nodded. No more was said about moving to New York. For their second Christmas together, they economized, giving presents to the baby but not to each other. By February, they owed two months’ rent.

“We’ve got to come up with something,” she said.

“Any ideas?” Bruce said.

An inspiration came to her. “A hayride. How about it?”

She called up a farmer she had met at the post office and asked if she could rent a horse, a wagon, and hay. He said he would send a man who worked for him, and for her not to worry about paying. The farmer’s name was Fenton, and Jennilou knew that family had lived here for a long time.


She put out a sign to advertise the hayride, writing the date and time in big numbers. The coffee-drinkers joked, making a punch line of it: “Let’s have a hayride!”

Meanwhile, Jennilou’s parents drove out from Springfield, bringing play-suits and Pampers. Her father touched Walter’s nose and said he was cute as a button.

“Come visit us,” her mother said. “We don’t get to see you enough. Bring this precious little person.”

“All that traffic,” Jennilou said. Couldn’t her mother see how desperate she was? Bruce was conspicuously absent that day, and so were his friends. Bruce and Jennilou had not recovered from their argument or from whatever
was wrong before that. She wanted to tell her mother how she would hear 
him laughing with his pals, probably making fun of her. Was she paranoid? If 
she started talking, it would be impossible to stop.

Finally her mother hugged her and said, “Nobody knows where you are, 
Jennilou. Call your friends and let them know. Send out baby announce-
ments.”

Somehow she was too proud to do that. Or too lazy. She wanted her 
friends to seek her out the way Bruce’s friends sought him, but they didn’t.

On the day of the hayride, the weather turned fiercely cold. At dusk, a man, 
two horses, and a wagon approached. “Whoa,” the man called out, and they 
stopped in front of the store. The man jumped down from the wagon and 
hitched the horses to a post. Jennilou realized it was an actual hitching post. 
The wagon was piled high with hay. It smelled like summertime.

The man said, “Mr. Fenton sent me.”

“See the horseys?” Jennilou asked Walter, holding him up to the huge, 
nodding heads. The baby beamed.

The man said, “I’m afraid something’s wrong with the wagon.” He 
inspected the wheels.

Bruce appeared on the steps, his breath a cloud of steam. “What’s going 
on?”

“One of these wheels is about to give out,” the man said. He stood up and 
shook Bruce's hand. “I’m Dean. Hey, I think I remember you.”

Bruce said, “I finished middle school here, then I went away to high 
school.”

“Yup,” said Dean. Jennilou interpreted that to mean Bruce was a pie-face 
even as a kid. Bruce kept an uneasy distance from the horses, whereas Dean 
looked like he could rope steers.

Bruce said, “Why didn’t you check the wheels before you started out?”

Dean said, “It’s a real old wagon. If you’ve got a spare wheel, I’ll fix it right 
now.”

“We don’t have any wagon wheels,” Bruce said.

Jennilou realized that although people had asked about the hayride, 
nobody had said for sure they would come.

“Come on in and get warm, Dean,” she said, wanting to make peace.

She made hot cocoa for the three of them. Dean stretched out his boots 
toward the potbellied stove. Nobody showed up for the hayride, and finally 
Bruce said he was going to bed.

“Can you give Walter his bottle and put him to bed?” Jennilou said.

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Bruce looked annoyed as he picked up the baby and headed upstairs.

“I thought there would be a moon tonight,” Jennilou said to Dean.

“It’s a new moon,” Dean said, “the kind you can’t see.”

“What good is a moon if you can’t see it?”

Dean laughed, and the sound pleased her. She heated up more cocoa.

“What kind of farm work do you do?” she asked.

“Depends on the season,” he said. “Right now, we’re rotating cattle from one pasture to the next. And it’s a good time of year to fix fences.”

“Oh. It sounds fun.” She wondered where Dean slept. She pictured him in a log cabin, under a sheepskin.

He finished his cocoa. “I better go.”

“Is it too dark to be on the road?” she asked.

“Nah,” he said. “I’ve got a big lantern, and I know the way by heart.”

She followed him outside. The lantern was battery-powered, of course, not the candle-lit device she had pictured. Dean said, “If it’s all right with you, I’ll leave the wagon here till I can come back and fix it.” He hoisted himself up on the seat. “Would you unhitch it?”

As Jennilou untied the rope from the post, she felt she had stepped into a rugged pioneer life. He moved the wagon into the side yard and parked it, then untied the horses from the wagon, threw a blanket across the back of one animal, and sprang up on it.

“I could drive you home,” Jennilou said, knowing Bruce would be furious.

“I’ve got my ride. So long.”

“Okay, goodnight,” she said, amazed at having a man on horseback so close to her.

He rode easily, with the other horse following. She watched until his lantern beam disappeared.

All around was cold, silent stillness. She went to the wagon, grasped the side, and hoisted herself up and over. The wagon must have been used by Mr. Fenton or his parents and grandparents. It might even have been made on their property. The hay smelled glorious, and she wriggled down in it, delighted. She pulled up the hood of her parka and was warm, never mind the frigid air. Stars burned, tiny and old. She had never gone camping, but now she knew why people liked it. When a train came by, its thrumming and rattling shook the wagon.

If only Dean were there. It had been exciting to be alone with him.

She fell asleep and drowsed awake to snowflakes on her face and a low intermittent hoot that could only be owls calling. She sensed it was almost morning; the owls had been telling each other goodnight. She climbed down
from the wagon and went inside and upstairs. The baby was asleep. Bruce did not move when she slipped into bed, though she suspected he was awake. If she were with a man who could ride a horse on a dark road, what would life be like?

In the morning, the snow was thin, but the temperature hovered in the twenties. She woke up feeling terrible. Had she gotten sick from sleeping outside? No, she just felt tired, exhausted in fact, with the familiar loneliness. She fed Walter and ate cheese doodles for breakfast. Bruce was out, and she realized she didn’t believe his talk of commissions. She said to Walter, “I don’t believe it.”

The landscape out the windows looked bleak. Garbage overflowed from the metal cans behind the store, but she couldn’t bear the thought of going to the landfill. No customers came. She ran hot water in the tub, remembered a jar of bubble bath in the store, and went down and got it. As she poured the pink gel into the water, she sighed, but the sigh came out as a sob, and the baby in his crib set up a wail. She screamed, “Walter, shut up,” and raised her arm.

She caught herself, horrified. He kept on crying. She sat on the closed toilet and cried too. What was the matter with her? What good was one more bath? She pulled the plug and watched the suds swirl down the drain. She couldn’t stand her life one more minute. She would get away, baby or no baby.

She grabbed her coat, sped downstairs, and found Frances Swan digging around in the refrigerator.

“I asked you to keep fresh cream,” said Frances. “These are all past the expiration date.”

“It can’t be,” Jennilou heard herself say. “At least, not very far past it. It should be all right.”

“I’m not going to risk it.” Frances Swan stood frowning. “Speaking of dates, what about the rent?”

“We don’t have the money right now. I’m sorry,” Jennilou said. “I’ll talk to Bruce.”

“Please don’t expect me to pay for cream when you’re in arrears.”

“Take all the cream you want.”

She walked out the door and headed west. Steep ditch banks rose on both sides of the narrow road. By the time a pickup truck pulled over, she had walked two hard miles.

The driver rolled down his window. “Are you all right? Need a ride?”
It was Dean. He wore an orange vest, a hunter's vest. Her heart leaped. Maybe he had come looking for her.

“Are you okay?” He leaned across the seat and opened the passenger door. She climbed in. “It’s Jenny, right?” he said. “Cold day to be out walking. Where are you headed?”

“Jennilou,” she said. “Could I just sit in here for a minute?”

“Sure.” He pulled the truck further to the side of the road and kept it running. The heat felt wonderful on her legs. She was glad the road was empty.

“What about your baby?” he asked. “Is somebody with him?”

Surprised, she said, “Yes,” thinking maybe Frances Swan was still in the store. She swallowed hard. “There’s nothing to do here, is there, other than go to the landfill or plan hayrides that don’t work out?”

He rested his hands on the steering wheel. “It’s great here. I don’t want it to be like everywhere else. Have you seen the eastern part of the county? Big box stores and cookie-cutter houses.”

He could have said, If you don’t like it, you should go. She was glad he hadn’t.

He said, “There’s people you can hire to haul trash. Want some names?”

“The trash situation doesn’t bother me all that much,” she said.

“So what is bothering you?”

She said, “People say the Metro will be out here soon. What do you think about that?”

“I hate it. What do you think about it?”

She hoped he didn’t see her as part of the sweeping tide of development.

“People say you can’t stop change.”

“Depends on who you elect to the county board of supervisors.”

She took a deep breath. “Give me your opinion about something, and don’t act like I’m weird for asking.” She paused. “Would a bird line its nest with the enemy’s fur?”

Dean glanced at her. “What kind of bird?”

“I’ve never seen it. The nest is always empty.”

“What kind of fur?”

“Probably cat fur, but I don’t know.”

Dean’s high cheekbones were sunburned even in winter. “Is your husband being bad to you?”

“I slept in the wagon last night,” she said, “and it was wonderful.” She faced him and blurted, “I wondered what it would be like to be with you. Do you think about that? About me?”

He chuckled. “I think about it with every woman I meet. But you’re . . .”
“Married? But I’m not happy,” she said, “and yes, I have my baby, but I can manage him by myself.” She could hardly believe her ears, but she went on. “What about you? You and me?”

“You ought to have a talk with your husband, even if he’s being a jerk.”

She was betraying Bruce, but she didn’t care. “I heard an owl last night, and snowflakes fell on my face. It was so nice. It seemed like the kind of thing you’d like too.”

He was silent.

“I don’t do things that way,” he said. “I might, if I liked you enough, but I don’t.”

She rubbed her hands together, wondering if she felt relieved or hurt. She didn’t really feel anything, except desperate.

“Can’t sit here in the road all morning.” Dean’s voice was kind.

He turned the truck around and took her back to the store. She sprang out of the truck, wondering how much time had passed since she left Walter. She raced upstairs and found him asleep. Her hands shook as she heated a bottle in the microwave. Frances Swan would tell everybody how she ranted about cream. Frances might kick them all out, or just Jennilou, sweep her out like dirt.

And Dean. He must regard her as clingy and frantic, maybe even crazy. When—if—he came to fix the broken wagon wheel, she wouldn’t bother him. She hoped she wouldn’t even see him. The microwave beeped. She took out the bottle and tested a drop of milk on her wrist. Walter wrapped his hands around the bottle and sucked hungrily as she held him. Would he remember that his own mother deserted him?

Downstairs, the door jangled open with a rush of air. Bruce clumped up the stairs.

“It’s freezing out there,” he said. Still in his coat, he flopped down on the bed.

Jennilou set Walter in the crib, then leaned down so her face was level with Bruce’s, which was flattened on his pillow. Even with her pounding heart, she thought how funny they must look. She said, “Frances Swan came by.”

Bruce groaned. “She’s a pain. Call her and say we can pay by the middle of the month. I’ll try to get some money together.”

“Do you have any commissions?”

“A few. What’s wrong with you? I feel like I’m being interrogated.” His face was pale. “I think I’m coming down with the flu,” he said.
She straightened up. “Are you having an affair?”

“I could ask you the same thing, the way you carried on with that bumpkin last night.”

“I’m sorry about that.” She was sorrier than he knew, given what had happened just that morning. “Is it one of the artists? Some farmer’s daughter? Is it Guy?”

“Do you want a divorce, Jennilou? Because I’m thinking that’s a pretty good idea.”

“Tell me who it is.”

At last he said, “Trista. We’ve been wondering if you would figure it out.”

She couldn’t picture the woman’s face, only her sprouting purple hair. Everything was changing faster than she had thought possible. “Do you love her?”

“No, but she loves me. She keeps saying so.”

Jennilou started to say, “Oh,” but caught herself. She found a can of soup in a cupboard and poured it into a pan. He was still her husband, and he was sick.

“You seem old, Jennilou,” he said. “You want a boring life.”

Somehow she welcomed the insult. “Walter is a baby. A quiet life is what we need right now.” She ladled the hot soup into a bowl, handed it to him with a spoon, and said, “You don’t feel good. It’s not the time to make decisions,” but the words came automatically, as if she knew she had to be polite and careful.

“I’ll be okay in a few days, and then I’m going to New York,” he said. “I bet you still don’t want to go.”

She shook her head, and the gesture felt as if he had handed her an eraser and she was wiping out every moment they had spent together. Something terrifying was lurking; she could hardly put it into words. “You won’t take Walter away, will you?”

“I guess we can share custody,” he said. “What will you do? Go live with your parents?”

“You’re the one who’s going to live with your parents,” she said, so relieved about the baby that nothing else mattered. “I’ll stay and run the store.”

His face darkened. “This store will never make any money. You ought to look for a real job. My parents told me it was a mistake to marry you. No career skills.”

“I can borrow money and do things different,” she said, knowing he was right and she was being stubborn. “People will buy good, fresh food. I can bake bread and sell local vegetables. I’ll advertise.”
It would be so easy to go back to Springfield and depend on her parents. They would welcome her and Walter, but she wouldn’t do that unless she absolutely had to, unless debts and failure piled up and swallowed her. The detritus of earlier tenants came to mind, the discarded playthings and ragged clothes.

Walter, in his crib, locked his eyes on hers, and she took heart. Without Bruce criticizing her, she could make the store succeed. She imagined it newly painted, with bushels of corn and pots of geraniums on the porch. People would say, *She was married when she came here, but he left.* After a while, Bruce would be forgotten, and it would be as if she and Walter had always lived here, a mother and son tending the store as families had done for generations.

“I’m going to do it,” she said.

Bruce grunted, eating his soup. “Be my guest.”

Had she known all along it would end this way? She went to check on Walter. The surprise of it all ran down her body, head to toe, so she stumbled. Then her feet steadied on the familiar floor.