Heart on a Wire

Skagway, Alaska Territory
July 8, 1898

I. Say Whiskey

In a private suite in Skagway’s best brothel, Emlee McCampbell stands before a mirror and mimics her lover, Soapy Smith. Her audience consists only of her pet monkey, a tiny creature dressed in a ringmaster’s scarlet coat and cap, embellished with gold braid and gold epaulets. “Here he is,” Emlee says, pressing the tip of her nose toward her lips and beetleing her brows. The monkey rewards her with a silent laugh, its tail jerking through a vent in its costume. “Now this,” and Emlee strikes a pose, arms akimbo, head swinging to and fro: the stance of Soapy Smith overseeing his telegraph office or saloon. The monkey laughs again, gleeful, clever. A gift from Soapy, the monkey spends most of its time on her dressing table amid bottles of cologne and packets of rouge. She combs its face the way it loves, currying the surprisingly stiff fur of its cheeks and forehead. It tilts its head and closes its eyes as if to say, More.

She can’t imagine where the monkey came from: a jungle. But what is a jungle? A hot forest, with vines tangled in the trees, but the river bluffs at home in Raccoon Ford, Culpeper County, Virginia, could be described that way too.

“Keep your hands soft,” Emlee admonishes the monkey. “Put lotion on them and sleep in cotton gloves.”
The monkey slaps a hand onto its head and covers its face with a palm, as if overcome with mirth. Emlee laughs until she collapses on her bed, the cherrywood bed with a brocade coverlet that matches the curtains. When a knock comes at her door, she sits up and adjusts her clothes.

“Just a minute,” she calls out. “I’m not ready yet.”

She looks around her room, the most beautiful she has ever had, she who left Raccoon Ford with vague plans to mine the gold fields and decided on an easier means of making money. She has never been a whore, just a woman smart enough to travel light, unburdened with shovels and picks like the miners carry or with stupid props some of the girls have brought, costumes and underwear to play out games for men. She has not been with many men, and immediately upon arriving in Skagway, she was chosen by Soapy Smith.

This is Soapy’s brothel, his town. He jilted another girl, Maudie, for her. Maudie has been in Skagway for a whole year, longer than any of the other girls. She has a little set of scales for weighing gold, and a doll where she hides the dust and nuggets men have paid her. She puts the gold in a pocket beneath the doll’s skirt. She allows other girls to use the scales, but there is a price—you have to talk to Maudie, or rather listen to her, indulge her in her pouts and boasts. Maudie has been known to speak of what she does as a calling, advising the other girls not to disappoint the men. We’re lucky here, she’ll say. We have hot baths whenever we want, and the doctor visits. And Maudie points out the French Canadian pork dish Madame makes, Maudie’s favorite, ground pork cooked all day with cinnamon, salt, and pepper. Maudie urges the other girls to praise it, teaching them to stay on Madame’s good side.

Maudie has ambitions: a house of her own. The girls she works with, if they’re lucky, might one day work for her.

Maudie does not speak to Emlee, and Emlee never asks to use the scales.

Maudie is fierce about Skagway. Loyal, because it’s Soapy’s place. She puts down Dyea, nine miles away, and teaches the other girls that the towns are in bitter competition.

Maudie got some brooches from Soapy, ugly things, though one does contain a big yellow diamond, but she never got a monkey.

This thought makes Emlee laugh again. What Maudie does have is lots of telegrams. She receives one every few days from family in Idaho and California and from friends she hasn’t heard from in years. Proudly, she brandishes the telegrams at the other girls, showing off. Emlee has never received a telegram in her life or sent one, even though her lover owns the busiest telegraph office in Skagway.

Why not send one today?
Yes, a cable to her mother back in Raccoon Ford. She can imagine her mother in their ramshackle house high on the bluff over the rapids. Her mind is a camera, feeding pictures to her. Click, and there is the rock in the middle of the river. The rule is, if you can see the rock from either side, you can safely ford the river. Click, and there’s the road between Raccoon Ford and True Blue, a road she loved to walk after she finished her chores. The road belonged to her, she felt, and to the critters that lived along it, wild black boars wallowing in a swamp and bare trees full of buzzards. Would anybody else think that was beautiful, wild pigs and a vultures’ roost? Well, it was. If she loved Soapy, she would tell him about all of that.

She would like to love him.

Being Soapy’s girl means she has time to herself. If the other girls and their men are noisy, she can turn on her gramophone to drown out the sounds, but she has learned instead to stuff cotton in her ears and listen to the shell-like quiet of her own head. Soapy is busy all the time, running the telegraph office and saloon, owning the town and getting cuts of the business at every barbershop and laundry and grocery store, a vigorous, short man, with only one night a week for her. All those other nights, in the long hours of sun and light that are the Northwest summer, he’s awake and running Skagway, making money and doing deals, while she slathers lotion on her hands, tugs the cotton gloves on her fingers, and lies down in her lovely room, furnished with a gilt-framed cheval mirror and a flowered rug. Soapy usually sends for her in the morning, dispatching one of the boys or men who work for him. Emlee is expected to dress beautifully and quickly and make her way through the muddy streets to the telegraph office. Soapy will nod to her, and she will take a seat on a high three-legged stool and read a newspaper. Soapy will have coffee brought to her, and a pastry, though he has asked her not to become plump like Maudie, who didn’t know when to stop eating doughnuts. There might be a fruit tart or a feather-light roll with a pat of cold butter.

If Soapy is feeling lucky—and he is superstitious; he credits his superstitions with his success—he might take an hour off for lunch and squire Emlee to his own saloon, the Mascot, or to a restaurant, where they will eat whatever strikes Soapy’s fancy. He likes rabbit and chicken. He hates the salmon that’s a staple of the Alaskan diet: “It don’t taste right fried.” He has plans for a poultry yard, oh, plans for more deals than he has time to put together. Saturday nights he spends with Emlee. Even then, he’s gone by daybreak.

Maudie has spread rumors that Soapy is married, that he has at least two wives, one down in Spokane with a whole bunch of kids, and an Indian girl out in the gold fields.

Again there is a knock on Emlee’s door, louder this time.
“Hold your horses,” Emlee calls out. “Got to put my shoes on.”

She already has her shoes on. She has been dressed and ready for half an hour, for the fun of wearing her new clothes, all presents from Soapy. She just likes to make Soapy wait. In a minute, she will open the door and find some red-cheeked boy, full of glory at being the one to fetch her.

Her shoes are supple leather with spool heels. She’ll have to be careful in the mud outside. She’ll venture out into the daylight and settle inside the telegraph office, dillydallying until Soapy has time for her, and when he does, he will talk about himself, how he’s a somebody now. Anybody who said he’d never amount to anything, well, he has shown ’em all. He’ll go back to the States one day and build a big house and buy a pleasure boat and take up, why, take up golf, and give away millions of dollars to help crippled children. He is having the time of his life. He is in demand. Irons in every damn fire. Toward midnight, after they have had a late supper, a man will tap him on the shoulder, and Soapy will tell Emlee business is calling him, wait for him till he gets back, and she’ll sit at the table alone and order a chocolate frappé, tingling all over with the excitement of being herself.

She has asked him, What is your name, your real name? And he has answered, with a noble dip of his head, Jefferson R. Smith. The R is for Randolph. I’m a Southern boy, born to genteel folk who had fell on hard times. Georgia is my birth state, but it was in the West I made my name, in Colorado. And here in Skagway I became a uncrowned king. The Honorable, the newspapers call him. The Honorable Soapy Smith. He has friends in High Places: Skagway’s bankers and lawyers, merchants and clergymen. He is the proud owner of The Century’s Most Astonishing Exhibit, the Petrified Man, a prehistoric corpse presently on loan for a handsome sum to Mr. P. T. Barnum. The carcass was discovered in a Colorado canyon, yes, a mummy, a most ancient thing, though Soapy has confided to Emlee that the Petrified Man actually consists of cement and plaster, “a inspiration of mine, planted in that there gulch.”

Soapy’s band, his gang, she can recognize for what it is: a bunch of rogues, rounders, and rascals, all hat-tipping polite to Emlee. She saw their like back home in Mr. Beale’s general store, where she worked. Even in Raccoon Ford, there was an occasional no-good, a con artist, trying to pull a flimflam deal, counting money fast, hoping to fool her into giving more change. She caught them every time. These men, Soapy’s cohorts, she would avoid if she could. They’re a flock of smelly birds roosting around the Honorable, keeping up his pomp and might.

There was some bad business in the weeks before Emlee’s arrival, resulting in two deaths and the involvement of a Deputy U.S. Marshall, “a unfortunate incident,” Soapy has said. The town of Skagway, Emlee understands, is at war:
those for Soapy versus those against him. Soapy has spoken of this, saying there is a price on his head. His chief nemesis is named Frank Reid, a surveyor, an engineer who mapped out the town. Soapy has warned Emlee about what to do if his enemies should come for him. She is to hide under the bed or run for her life. On the nights he spends with her, he keeps a bodyguard just outside the door. “My assistants,” Soapy calls his men. Emlee hates to think of a thug so close by, eavesdropping, smug, balancing on his haunches out in the hallway beside her room.

“Miss Emlee,” a boy cries through the door, and she relaxes, recognizing the cracking voice of Wilmer, a sixteen-year-old kid she likes. “Mr. Smith said you was to meet him there in time to go eat. He said he’s powerful hungry.”

“He is?” Emlee replies. “Well, I’m not. I slept late, and I had a big breakfast. I might want to stay in today.” To the monkey, she whispers, A uncrowned king, and the monkey’s lips jerk on its teeth. That’s the way people smile when their photographs are taken. She has had her picture made by a man here in Skagway, a picture of herself in a satin bodice and satin drawers, a portrait commissioned by Soapy. The photographer told her to say, “Whiskey,” and she said it, and that was when he snapped the shutter.

After a pause, the boy asks through the door, “Do I have to tell Mr. Smith you ain’t coming? Please, Miss Emlee, he’ll get mad at me if you don’t come.”

“I’m just teasing.” She rewards the monkey with a flaky slice of a leftover napoleon and opens the door. Wilmer, chunky and awkward, beams at her.

“Well,” she says, smiling back. She steps into the hallway. It’s morning, the quietest time at the house. She was the only one at the breakfast table today, other than the French Canadian couple, Madame and her husband Egide. Egide complimented Emlee on her early rising and her love of scrambled eggs. The praise was all because of Soapy.

Emlee and Wilmer make their way outside to Broadway, the town’s main street. Wilmer has brought a big black umbrella which he unfurls and raises over her head.

“It’s not raining,” she says, startled.

“Mr. Smith said to hold the parasol over you, Miss Emlee, being it’s a bright day,” Wilmer says. “To keep the sun off your face.”

What is it with Soapy and skin? She accepts the shade even though the umbrella knocks into people. Its prongs are perilous. They could take out an eye. At last she reaches up, grabs the umbrella, and shucks it closed.

“We’re almost there,” she says.

“He told me, if anything was to happen to you . . .” Wilmer says.

“It’s hard to hear you, Wilmer,” Emlee says. The street is always too noisy
for conversation, what with reeling drunks, miners and whores and yipping
dogs, and she is busy keeping her feet out of the mud surrounding the planked
sidewalk.

“He said if anything was to befall you on my watch, he’d make sure I was
to regret it,” Wilmer says.

“Nothing’s going to happen to me.”

They reach the telegraph office, the doorway swarming with men and
boys and more dogs. Wilmer holds the door, and she picks her way through
the crowd of employees to a wooden stool in a corner. Here she’ll linger until
Soapy is ready for her, anywhere from a few minutes to hours. When at last
he approaches her, he’ll take her face in his palms and kiss her with a loud
smack, to make the men nearby laugh.

From across the room, she spots him, and he dips his chin toward her as if
he’s at an auction, bidding on her. She smiles at him, saying, “Whiskey.” Her
mother would say, You are playing your cards right, girl. She will send her mother
a telegram today. What would be important enough to say to her mother in
her house above the frothy Rapidan River, thousands of miles away?

Wilmer takes his place at a long counter with other clerks, accepting mes-
sages from the miners, mostly newcomers—tenderfeet, cheechakos, as opposed
to old-timers, seasoned year-rounders, sourdoughs—all of whom are custom-
ers at Soapy’s establishments. Behind the counter on a raised platform sit the
telegraphers, three extremely serious, terribly busy men at a table, a cloud of
tobacco smoke floating above them like a personal thunderhead. Wilmer and
the other clerks hand the messages up to them, supplicants passing letters to
God, and the telegraphers in their enormous dignity accept the papers and
bend to the task of tapping out the words on their machines, clack, clack,
clackety. The telegraphers receive messages, too, and the clerks know better
than to disturb a telegrapher who is receiving. There is no one so fixed of pur-
pose as the telegraphers, so ceremonious and solemn, as if each telegram sent
or received is a clarion call, a judgment, the most important set of words ever
committed to paper.

It is magic, Emlee thinks, to send words from your mouth, your heart, to
another part of the world.

Mining is hard work, and the gold-seekers—argonauts, the newspapers
call them—have come so far, over land and oceans. By the tens of thousands,
they have come. They talk about their journeys. Not many are getting rich.
They spend their money on girls and drink and dance hall tickets, and in the
expensive shops where you can get anything: bananas and grapefruit, jew-
elry and writing paper and gramophone records. With the money Soapy gives
her, Emlee makes many purchases at a candy store, buying marzipan, divinity, pralines, and her favorites, wasps' nests, made with shredded almonds and spun sugar. She knows she will never get fat. One day, she spotted a bushel basket full of unshelled nuts and asked the proprietor if he needed somebody to crack them. "Yes," he said, "but aren't you Mr. Smith's young lady?" "What of it?" she said. "I want to crack nuts." The store owner meant, since she's Soapy's girl, she doesn't have to work. He pays her well, though she enjoys the work so much she would do it for free.

Even as a child, she loved cracking nuts. Used to find herself a mallet and a board and set to work, passing hours that way. Now she keeps the baskets of nuts under her bed and works on them whenever she wants. She's fast and skilled, able to crack the hulls so the meats stay whole. It's satisfying to know the nuts will be used in fudge and toffee, giving crunch to the sweets.

She thinks of a story she read as a child, about a bad man named Rumpelstiltskin and a girl who spun cloth into gold. She's in that story with Soapy Smith, whose first present to her was a sterling silver nutpick.

"You must have read my heart," she said, smiling, tracing the sharp pick over her thumb.

"Don't do that," Soapy said. It was then he instructed her to wear salve on her hands and to sleep in cotton gloves so her skin would stay soft and her nails grow long.

"All right," she said, holding her breath, expecting there would be more rules, more orders to follow in exchange for her suddenly easy life. That very evening, she found a pair of cotton gloves on her pillow. She put them on and held out her hands like soft white stars.

The next present was the monkey. "To keep you company," he said, "when I am gone."

Soapy himself has a pet, or something close to it—an eagle, which he houses in the backyard of his saloon in a huge cage wedged between the boughs of a spruce. Men admire the bird in Soapy's hearing, rave over it, not just drunks but sober careful men, seeking Soapy's favor. Emlee hadn't known eagles could sing, but sometimes that one does, a pretty warble. It should not be caged. She has said so to Soapy.

She hears the eagle's song and the telegraph machines in her dreams. When she cracks nuts, it's to memories of the telegraphers' taps. She doesn't understand how it is that words can travel through wires.

"Whiskey," she says again in Soapy's direction, but he's looking past her, through her. Turning, she glances out the window to see Frank Reid in the street, Frank Reid the famous surveyor, the City Engineer, Soapy's rival, his
enemy, one man among how many others in Skagway who would like him run out of town. Brothel gossip has it that Frank Reid is an upstanding man.

Frank Reid wears a red plaid shirt; he is tall as a pine tree. There’s a woman hanging on his arm. Maudie. They pass by the telegraph office, but Soapy stands rigid as a pointer until a clerk approaches with some question for him.

Lucky she ate that big breakfast. Never mind Wilmer’s claim that Soapy spoke of being hungry. Lunch could be hours away, if Soapy eats at all. He can go for hours on no food. Emlee wishes she’d brought a book to read. Usually she can find a newspaper here. Today, though, there is nothing to do but wait.

She keeps thinking of her mother. Growing up, she was never to say anything to suggest that she or her mother would not live forever. Her mother has such a fear of death. Emlee was not to mention death or ever to reveal that the wave in her mother’s hair was not natural, not to give away the secrets of the pins and rags her mother used to curl it. In her mother’s mind, somehow these things go together, death and straight hair, death and exhaustion so deep you don’t have the energy to curl your hair.

Her mother has told her she does not remember the names of all the men she slept with or how many. There were men before Emlee’s father and men after he died, though Emlee has only known the man her mother lives with, the one they call Big Jim. Emlee’s mother is living the great love of her life with Big Jim. She has said so to Emlee, that she doesn’t believe any woman has ever been as happy as she is. Yet her mother’s face looks more urgent than joyful, as if she is still working toward something. Emlee guesses it is marriage.

It ain’t fair, her mother has said, that we all have to die. I’ll die and Jim’ll die, no matter how much I love him. I could go crazy thinking about that. I don’t know why the whole world ain’t crazy.

For a moment, Emlee is back in Raccoon Ford, her gaze sweeping from the bluff to the rapids the way she imagines God looking down from Heaven, only it’s not the river she sees but the telegraph office in Skagway, with its dirty floors and animated men and odors of sweat and machine oil, and from the street, the reek of dung from horses and dogs, and the smell of mud itself, spongy and foul. From her own skin there’s the scent of lilies of the valley from the perfume and powder she uses, cosmetics back on her dresser where the monkey waits for her in its costume of scarlet and gold, her miniature champion, craving her attention.

She was what, ten years old when she realized her mother was once a whore, that this secret had been in front of her all along, all her life, that her mother was like that and yet was still her mother, her fingers scraping the box of pins every night as she put up her hair. Not till Big Jim was asleep would
she roll it up, and she woke before he did, day after day, to unwind it. *Never let 'em know it ain't your natural curl.* To Emlee, that is too hard, shortening sleep by all those hours to keep a secret. Big Jim must know by now, silent Big Jim who shares her mother's bed in the ramshackle house high over the river, Big Jim going out to hunt and check his traps, to fish in the river, coming home to lean his chin on his hands in front of the fire. As a child, Emlee pestered him with questions until her mother boxed her ears: *Leave him alone.*

Emlee wears her black hair combed back from her forehead and pinned at the nape of her neck. Her mother's curls dance around her shoulders. *Put some curl in it. That bun makes you look older than me,* her mother said. Her mother makes a dark brown dye from walnut hulls to cover the strands of gray.

A newcomer enters the telegraph office. Emlee spots them easily, anybody can, the men fresh to the Territory. She can figure out a lot about their lives back home just from the clothes they wear, the way they speak, not only their accents but the words they choose. The nearest town in the fabled Klondike is Whitehorse, a hundred and ten miles north, but the actual gold fields are five, six hundred miles from Skagway. The *cheechakos* don't know how hard it will be to reach those fields. Hell awaits them on the White Pass Trail leading out of Skagway and over the Coast Range through mountains so high they'll slice the clouds, and down to the Yukon River as far as Lake Lindeman or Lake Bennett.

Nor do the *cheechakos* know that on the shores of those lakes, they will have to build their own boats, chopping trees from the forests along the banks, woods that are receding as more and more miners chop and build. After they fashion the lumber into some lakeworthy craft and make the crossing, they must still hike far, far out into the countryside, where the easy gold is already gone, picked and blasted out of the seams and creek beds. Somehow most of the remaining gold winds up in Soapy's pockets.

So another newcomer has arrived, innocent, knowing nothing at all.

He is tall, past his youth, yet with a back so straight it makes Emlee straighten up her own posture on the miserable three-legged stool. His voice carries: “I would like to send a telegram to Devon, Pennsylvania.”

Young Wilmer names a price. The man reaches in his pocket and takes out money, adding a tip for Wilmer. Emlee knows the man is sending word to his wife that he has arrived safely. She hears the name Ida, and a picture springs to mind: a wealthy, humorless woman with guitar-shaped hips, furious at her husband for leaving her with their half-grown children and a large estate to
manage while he gallivants off to the gold fields. That is Ida—picking dead leaves from prize geraniums in a humid conservatory in her beautiful home, thousands of miles to the East, so far away it’s already tomorrow there. Surely Ida seethes with rage. The conservatory is made of glass, oh, high walls and ceilings of glass, and Ida’s fury fills all of it; her guitar hips sway among potted ferns and bump an orchid from its stand.

Emlee doesn’t realize she is staring at the man until he bows to her. She drops her gaze.

She wishes she were back in her room cracking nuts or holding the monkey, so small she can barely feel its weight in her arms. It uses a potty for its business, announcing its deposits with a chirp. Tonight is bath night. She’ll pour warm water into a basin, take off its clothing, shampoo its fur, and rub it dry with a towel.

She observes the newcomer, whose name, he announces, is Thaddeus Scott. He is flushed with the anticipation of his message being sent from Skagway, Alaska Territory, to Devon, Pennsylvania. Tomorrow there is bound to be a message for him from his wife, Ida of the temper and the guitar hips, begging him to send money immediately. It never fails.

Emlee does not know why that is, that all the newcomers’ relatives plead for money. Cheechakos come in and wire home, and the next day, they get a message in return: the loved ones are poverty-stricken. The man will hand over all he can spare and much that he can’t, with a face full of worry. Even if he left the loved ones in comfortable circumstances, they’re suddenly in dreadful straits, and him so far away. Do they believe their argonaut has become wealthy overnight?

She doesn’t really want to know just how bad Soapy is. She has whispered to her monkey, in the calm morning light, when it is just the two of them, “He robs and kills.” She knows he sends men into the fields to steal from miners and to shoot any who might resist. He is such a little man, her bowlegged Rumpelstiltskin. How does he get people to do what he wants? She is taller than he is and probably heavier, yet here she is waiting for him. An hour has passed. When he gave her the silver nutpick, he said, “You will never love me,” and his eyes filled with tears.

She has been in the Territory only a few weeks, but this is the world. Her own life is just a story, a few sentences that begin with Raccoon Ford and bring her as far as the cotton gloves on her night table and this crowded telegraph office with air so smoky, she could choke. The jilted Maudie adored Soapy and still does. Emlee would give him back to her if she could, would hand over the
little fellow in his black suit. Maudie has told the other girls she'll kill Emlee. Emlee keeps her nutpick in her pocket, just in case.

“Arrived safely,” Thaddeus Scott says and pauses, while Wilmer, his scribe, spits tobacco juice neatly into a can. She should tell the boy not to chew, that it’s bad for his teeth, but her advice would do no good. He wants to belong to the great fraternity of tobacco users. “Safely,” Thaddeus Scott repeats thoughtfully.

“That’s probably just enough, ain’t it, sir?” Wilmer says, man to man. “Nothing more they really need to know back home.”

Emlee slides off her stool and goes closer, and Thaddeus Scott notices her as he concurs with Wilmer.

Soapy Smith approaches, holding out his hand. Thaddeus Scott greets him with dignity and pleasure. Soapy takes the time to make a number of inquiries. Emlee learns that Thaddeus Scott is a Philadelphia lawyer, a bishop’s son, married and the father of three boys and a daughter, and yes, he misses them. He divulges this information graciously.

Soapy personally takes over from Wilmer and says he will send the message to Mrs. Scott himself. “Think how glad your lovely wife will be,” and a tear gleams in Soapy’s eye. “She will save the telegram, a heirloom, and pass it down to the grandkids. This’ll be well worth crossing them mountains of ice,” and he squeezes Thaddeus Scott’s shoulder with a hand as small as a child’s. “Some don’t make it back home again. And some of us decides to stay. To stay and serve the public. I do my best,” Soapy says and thumps his chest. “Weak lungs. I dare not remain out in the elements. I would die in a day.”

“Ah,” says Thaddeus Scott.

“I will live out my old age in Florida,” Soapy says, “but till then, I strive to convey these messages, sacred-like, to the loved ones back home.”

“You do us a kindness,” says Thaddeus Scott.

Soapy gestures to a jar labeled Sled Dog Fund. Thaddeus Scott complies by dropping a silver dollar into it, then another.

“It’ll come out someday,” Soapy says, and Emlee sees him through the eyes of Thaddeus Scott: Soapy Smith, a short, great creature who is rumored never to sleep, whose telegraphs connect this world inside to the other one, outside. “It’ll come out someday that the dogs . . .” and Soapy’s face contorts as he delivers a gigantic sneeze. Emlee and Wilmer hold their breath.

“Bless you,” Thaddeus Scott says, and Soapy sneezes again.

“That the dogs,” Soapy says, and his voice breaks.

“Are the real saviors,” offers Thaddeus Scott, and Soapy nods, overcome.
Emlee is on the verge of something now, something in front of her and all around her. There is something here so close at hand that is wrong, a secret she senses, a secret known by those who work here, not by Wilmer who is all trust and fat red cheeks, but by the older clerks with narrow eyes and lines down their jaws; and known by the telegraphers, those skilled regal presences at their raised table with the machines that speak in clicks, a whole language of code traveling through wire. There are wires attached to the machines, a coil of black wires that disappear behind the table where the telegraphers preside.

And where do the wires go?

She moves away from the wooden stool and eases toward the door, feeling Soapy’s eyes upon her. Even as she slips outside, she knows what she will find when she looks up toward the edges of the building and its cheap roof, with the sun in her eyes, the sun that will shine all day and most of the night. Nobody in this place can get beyond the reach of the sun.

No wires.

There are wires that come into this town and connect with other telegraph operations, two others which Soapy does not own, but there are no wires that serve this building.

She stands in the street knowing now what the men know, Soapy's confederates, their secret like diamonds hidden in a chandelier. It’s all a ruse: the telegraph machines and the operators, the serious faces and the bent attentive postures. The men probably slap hands together, laughing behind closed doors, laughing till they grip their middles and gasp for breath. Damnation, ol’ Soap has fooled a town, a whole Territory, and his friends are in on the joke. They’re the cast of a play that affords them endless pleasure, their audience the ones who give them money, who believe their words go out to Dear Wife I am here stop I am safe.

So that is why a miner new to town receives a telegram the day after he sends one, a message from home asking funds be wired immediately, directly, for I am hungry, I must have money please. Signed by the one to whom he sent the missive only the day before: Arrived safely. Never mind if the adventurer left behind a fat bank account or a wife with a fortune of her own. Send money now. The telegrams have reached men at the house where Emlee lives. She has seen the shock on their faces. Send money right away, and there is the name of the wife or the sweetheart or perhaps Mother or Father or Sister, I must have
money, the daughter or the son. And on the flat crumpled yellow sheet, there is the address of home, and the man will pull on his britches and shirt and tear out of a girl’s room, down the steps, and into the street, panting by the time he reaches the telegraph office, which is open night and day. They are all losing track of time, night and day, and he slides bank notes from his wallet or shakes gold dust and nuggets from his pockets, or he rushes to pawn his valuables, anything to get the money needed by Wife or Father or Sister back home.

Emlee wants to run.

But she can’t. She has to push open the door, go back inside, and climb again onto the high stool, arranging her beautiful dress around her legs. Soapy whirls to face her from across the room, as if she has called his name and aimed a gun at his head, and she sees in his face that he knows. She looks away, thinking he can’t possibly. He can’t know, but he’s striding toward her. She hops off the stool on rubbery legs, but he’s there before she can take a step, he’s gripping her arm and saying, “We’ll go to Mort’s,” and she’s scared to look him in the eye. She puts her mind on the fried chicken at Mort’s, a restaurant formerly owned by a man Soapy is rumored to have had killed. It’s managed by a Soapy ally, and she can’t remember if Mort is the dead victim or the living henchman. Fried chicken and a plate of sliced tomatoes—Soapy will season his tomatoes with sugar and salt, for he is a Georgia boy.

“We’ll go to the barber first, then Mort’s. We’ll go in just a minute,” he says as Wilmer approaches him on some matter of commerce that makes the boy feel important, for this is real to him. “Sit down, honey,” Soapy tells Emlee, and she does.

She’ll say that to the monkey while they face her mirror: Sit down, honey, as she loops a strand of pearls around its neck, lustrous pearls Soapy gave her, though whether or not they are real, she doesn’t know or care. No wires, so why should the pearls be real? Sit down, honey, and the monkey will gather the necklace in its little hand and slip a pearl between its teeth.

II. Games of Chance

“Can’t he talk?” she asked her mother, about Big Jim. Oh, he could talk, he just didn’t say much. “Can he hear?” She knew he could hear. She would clap her hands behind his head to make him jump.

He was always there, Big Jim, all her life, his chin on his hands in front of the fire, the fire stoked with wood he chopped. They ate the fish he caught.
He trapped animals with pretty fur and sold the pelts. She used to cry about the animals. But he was not cruel. His face resting on his hands showed he was working something out, something hard and troubling.

So couldn’t he talk? Her mother said, “Plenty, just not to you, Miss Nosey. He’ll talk when he’s ready. You’ll learn to appreciate a man who don’t talk your ear off. Beware of them with ready tongues.”

Such thick hair he had, Big Jim, but there was an empty patch on the back of his head where no hair grew, the skull showing pale and rocky. She put his story together from what she heard at the mill and at the store. A Yankee soldier. Shot in the head at Cedar Mountain, August of ’62. He don’t know who he is. Don’t remember nothing, not even his own name. Was a young boy then in a blue uniform. Head half gone, you could see his brains. Shouldn’t have lived, but he did. Just no memory, no more.

“Your mama got him at the poorhouse,” an old man at the store told her in front of others. She was ten years old, and the man was awful. He handed her a gumdrop. “Your mama likes men. Time she met Big Jim, she’d had herself every kind but a Yankee without a name.”

She threw the gumdrop at the old man’s face, and it bounced off his nose. He cursed her, and she flung herself out of the store and ran home. There was her mother, washing clothes in a pot in the backyard. Big Jim was down on the riverbank, fishing. From where she stood, she could see the wind lifting his black hair off his head. It had some gray in it.

She asked her mother was it true what people said about Big Jim?

Her mother cried. Yes, it was true. Big Jim had fought for the North, been give up for dead, had woke up in a ditch just before gravediggers covered him over with dirt, and been brought to the poorhouse in Culpeper, where he’d lived for nigh onto eighteen years, till 1880. That was when Emlee’s mother, who’d heard of the no-name, no-memory Yankee, gave in to curiosity and went to see him, taking for kindness’s sake a pan of cornbread and a jar of jam. Wiping her eyes, Emlee’s mother told the story with pride. Blackberry jam, that’s what it was, and real good except for big seeds she hadn’t took the time to strain out. And some roasted okra kernels, which to her mind make better coffee than coffee does, though there’s many would disagree. She blew her nose, recollecting.

So she gave the cornbread to the poorhouse matron who was mean as a snake, and the woman said this didn’t rise right, don’t you know how to make cornbread? And of the okra seeds: what’s this mess in this little bag here? Emlee’s mother had almost left right then, but this big good-looking man stepped onto the porch and took the cornbread from the matron’s hand
and said, “Thank you, ma’am,” like she, Emlee’s mother, was a fine lady and not just a woman with a baby that everybody acted like wasn’t no good.

Right away, she fell in love.

It was August, eighteen years after his head got shot partly off. He’d been living at the poorhouse all that time, paying his way by fixing things not just there but at people’s houses, to earn money, and paying rent at the poorhouse, only person ever to pay, none of the others paid for their keep, the others was too looney or too pitiful to ever have the notion. So Emlee’s mother took to visiting him. She could not stay away. She was already regarded as, if not disgraced, as a wayward woman though she had not done nothing to deserve that, she had only had too many men interested in her, and the one who was Emlee’s father had not made a honest woman of her but turned tail and ran when he learned he was to be a father.

Big Jim was the staying kind. She could tell. She could not believe he had not gotten married in all those years.

The worst part was the many women who came to see him, never mind it was years after the war. Northern women were still finding out about a Yankee soldier who did not remember his name or nothing else. These Northern women came to Culpeper and made their way to the poorhouse to see if he was their missing, assumed dead, husband or brother or sweetheart. She would be in his room—she blushed a little—well, reading or something, and these women would just barge in; the poorhouse matron didn’t like her and wouldn’t give her no privacy. Emlee’s mother bristled, remembering. He was real polite to the women and answered their questions best he could. Sometimes there was two or three together, a woman and her daughter and her mother, or a woman and her sister, out searching for their lost beloved. A woman from Illinois came back three times, said it was almost her Luke but not quite. Asked him all kinds of questions. Did he remember their dairy farm and their little boy twins and the birthmark on her back? “I about fainted at that, Emlee. She pulled her dress off her shoulder and showed him.”

Finally the Illinois woman decided he wasn’t hers. “He didn’t belong to none of them. Thank God,” said Emlee’s mother. “You were just a baby then, Em. I used to leave you downstairs with the poorhouse cook while I visited with him. Jim’s the best man I ever knowed, better than your father. Maybe you don’t want to hear that but it’s true.”

“Why don’t you marry him?” Emlee asked.

“Oh, truth is, he just won’t. He’s afraid he’s already married even though he can’t remember. Times I think he remembers more than he’s tellin’. Nothing like a war to give a man a chance to get away from things he don’t like.
Some of the women came to see him, was rich. One from Massachusetts, she had rings on her hands and a picture of her husband in a gold locket around her neck. She opened it and showed it to me. It wasn’t him, and she said so. She sat and visited like we was friends, and Jim sat there whittling. School children used to come look at him, the man without no memory, like he was a show. Oh Emlee, if it was him in the locket around that stranger’s neck, I’d a-had to run her off.”

“Don’t he remember anything at all?” Emlee asked.

“He remembers soldiers hanging their clothes out the highest window in the Culpeper courthouse after the battle was over. Soldiers hanging out clothes after washing out the dirt and blood.”

Her mother was quiet for a long time, stirring the family’s clothes in the wash pot. A couple of geese came pecking around. “Way I figure it, he was an officer,” she said. “Fine looking man like that, he’d get ahead fast. They could still come after him, the people in his family, whoever they are. Or the government. To claim a Yankee officer and take him home. Well, he is home.”

“Mama,” said Emlee and hugged her mother.

“You don’t know how awful that was, the war and the years right after,” her mother said. “You wasn’t born till 1877. The age you are now, I was that age the year the war started. Look at him down there.” She laid her stirring stick aside and put her hands on Emlee’s shoulders. “Now what do you suppose he’s thinkin’?”

Mother and daughter gazed down from the steep bluff to the riverbank where Big Jim was fishing. It was too far for him to hear them even if they shouted.

“I love just watching him,” her mother said.

Big Jim drew the fishing line out of the water and cast it in again.

“I been with him so long,” her mother said. “Look how he reaches that line so high out the water and throws it in again. He could do that with my heart if he wanted to. I used to read him lists of names trying to get him to hear his own. I’d go through the Bible and pick ’em out from Amos to Zacharias. He listened, but didn’t none of ’em ring a bell. They’d been calling him Mike at the poorhouse, but that’s a Yankee name, and besides, he don’t look like a Mike. ’You look like a Jim to me,’ I said.”

For a long time, Emlee and her mother observed him while he fished.

“I don’t want to stay here forever, Mama,” Emlee said.

“What do you know about what you want? You’re ten years old,” her mother said and ruffled Emlee’s hair. The breeze from the river fanned their faces.
Emlee lived in fear of a flood. People talked about floods that had already happened, how they washed away the stores and mills and houses. But their house was up so high.

Her mother read her mind. “We’re safe,” she said. “Nothing bad’ll happen to us.”

Lost in thought, she’s unaware of Soapy approaching until he squeezes her arm. She jumps, hoping he has not read No wires in her eyes, after all.

She swallows. “I want to send a message to my mother.”

He bobs his head solemnly, as if she has instructed him to telegraph the president. With a sweep of his arm, he summons Wilmer, who hurries across the room, tripping, stumbling, and sprawling at Soapy’s feet. Soapy helps the boy off the floor.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Smith?” Wilmer dusts off his trousers.

“Miss Emlee would like to send word to her mother in Raccoon Ford, Virginia, a lady by the name of . . ..?” Soapy prompts her.

“Zada McCampbell,” Emlee says, and the sweetness of her mother’s name catches in her throat.

Will she ever get back to the Ford? Some of the girls in the house where she lives have gone crazy, it is said, from homesickness. They have left in the middle of the night with strangers or on their own, striking out, taking nothing, last seen running out of town.

“Zada McCampbell,” Soapy says. Wilmer writes the name down as Emlee spells it out for him. Soapy puts out a finger and touches a tear on Emlee’s cheek. She hadn’t known she was crying. Just one tear, and Soapy caught it. “Pretty girl,” he says.

Crack the whip: a game she played as a child. It left her breathless. Why remember that now? She remembers it as Soapy and Wilmer wait, Wilmer scratching a pimple on his face.

“What do you want to say to your mother?” Soapy asks, his voice gentle.

Frank Reid appears at the window behind him, and Emlee observes Reid and Maudie loom close. They must have recognized Soapy from the back. Emlee freezes. With his fingers, Frank Reid pulls out his nostrils and the sides of his mouth, pushing out his tongue and pressing it against the glass, rocking his head to and fro, inches from the unknowing Soapy. Maudie crinkles her eyes, her laughter lost to the sounds of the street, the barking of dogs wild with summer. Doesn’t Wilmer see them? No, he’s busy writing Raccoon Ford
on his tablet, in big block letters learned from some schoolmistress back in, where is he from, he told her one time: Oregon.

“No charge for this, Emlee,” Soapy whispers, “long as you keep it to ten words or less. It’s on the house.”

Now it’s Maudie close to the window, crowding Frank Reid away from his spot, Maudie shooting Emlee a rude gesture with her fingers.

Soapy whirls: eyes in the back of his head. Frank and Maudie are gone, vanished.

“Who was there, Emlee?” Soapy says.

His face is quiet, his eyes level. He could pull his gun as fast as he snaps his fingers, and shoot her through the heart. He is said to know if one of his men has turned on him, knows it the instant it happens.

“Frank Reid was there,” she says, “and Maudie.”

Soapy frowns, and Wilmer claws his blemish.

Who were the other children back at Raccoon Ford who played crack the whip with her? Do they remember how it felt to spin away from the others? Where are they now? The day her mother cried about Big Jim and stirred the wash pot, the day she threw a gumdrop at the old man, why, that very day, she played crack the whip. It comes back to her now. That was the only thing to do after the old man’s meanness and her mother’s tears. She rounded up the neighbor children, and they joined hands while her mother hung clothes on the line and geese flurried in the grass. Big Jim fished till sunset.

“Tell my mother,” Emlee says and pauses. “Tell her I’m fine.”

Wilmer writes on his tablet.

“Tell her I love her. That’s all. That’s all I have to say.”

“She will be so glad. Zada McCampbell,” Soapy says as if he has tasted something fine, a sip of wine or a savory. “Off with you,” he tells Wilmer, who races across the room to the telegraphers’ platform. Wilmer hands Emlee’s words up to them, reaching high, and the chief telegrapher, the most solemn one, bends to take the message, as if he is God.

“My lovely girl,” Soapy says.

Someday maybe she can tell her mother: I remembered to thank him, like it was real. And he said, “My lovely,” in a way that, if I hadn’t known about the wires, it might have made me feel something.

“You’re my girl for the next century,” Soapy says. He speaks not infrequently of 1900, the year that will come roaring in like a tide. He is already planning a party for New Year’s Day, 1900. “I can see it,” he says now, “the dress I’ll have made for you. Cranberry red. It’ll match the punch.”
“I should put Big Jim’s name on there,” she says, thinking of Big Jim’s hair, black with gray in it, lifting as he cast his line into the river. Never mind that no telegram will go out, that God the telegrapher looks skeptical on His platform when Soapy snaps into action, shouting at him, striding toward him, leaving Emlee to climb back on the stool by the window with the sun streaming in, hot on her neck.

“Put the name Jim on there too,” Soapy bellows to God. “Jay. Eye. Em.”

God nods: it’s done.

There’s no easy way to get to the gold fields. Of all the stories the miners tell, that is the one that makes their voices rise to a pitch—how it was, getting there and getting back, over the mountains, cliffs of ice, packing their supplies on mules and horses and their own backs. The Canadian Mounties patrol the Yukon border, and they’re strict. You’ve got to have a year’s supply of food or they won’t let you in. That’s more food than Emlee can imagine.

Miners tell their stories at the house, where the women drink with them and invite them to their beds. How it was when the horse slipped and fell over the edge, so far down. Of course he died, good old Paint, ol’ Pardner. How it was when a blizzard wiped out the world for two days and two nights, and men nearly died in camp. Your very fire would freeze in that weather. How it was to be set upon and robbed by a gang you’d believed friendly when they hailed you, when they accepted your bacon and coffee and asked the name of your dogs; you were just saying, Lijah and Ben, and Minnie’s my lead dog, when they jumped you and was like to cut your throat.

Emlee knows most of the tales will be forgotten, as will the roll and tumble, the slap and tickle of the afternoons and nights in the house. The girls who listen to the men’s big talk have themselves to think of. The stories only go so far with them. They will not have to struggle through snow or climb peaks or race down the other side on sleds with runners so razor-sharp you dare not touch them for fear of cutting your hand. It is a rare man who does not have a story of a dog, the heroism and courage of a Husky or a Newfoundland or even a mutt standing by him, braving avalanches, frostbite, wounds and death. Men weep about the selflessness of these creatures, whom they abandon in summertime. Now the streets are thronged with canines, thin and wretched, mating and fighting, scratching their ears, rife with fleas, mange, worms, distemper. Puppies are born in gutters. Soapy makes a show of his crusade. If he commands a man to give a critter a home or donate money to the Sled Dog Fund, the man obeys, as did Thaddeus Scott.
The girls make pets of the dogs, feed them scraps, harbor them in their rooms though it’s against the rules. You can get kicked out if a dog pees on the carpet. “Filthy, to keep a dog inside,” says Madame, who has a reputation to uphold. French Canucks, she tells the girls, know how to keep a house clean. “Animals aren’t meant to live inside, they’re dirty,” she hisses, “durrty,” and the ugliness of her anger at the animals makes Emlee furious and ashamed as nothing else has done, this whole time. “Dirty,” Madame declares, chasing a wolfish pup out the door with a broom. Madame’s husband, Egide, is short and squat like herself. Their arguments are fierce, driving the girls to stifled mirth. Egide wants to go to the gold fields. Madame says no: “You will die out there, you stupid man.” Husband reels off the names of places he wants to see: Tagish, the Chilkoot Trail. “Why come so far to run a house of sin?” he asks his wife and spits tobacco. Spits so loud, you can hear him through the walls.

Emlee and other girls listen from hiding places. Emlee can pantomime the pause and the spit so perfectly that the girls clutch their middles and rock with laughter.

“You a priest?” Madame will say, and that shuts Egide up, for he is known to take a girl now and then. “You a priest, Egide?”

Pause and spit.

“I want to see Tagish,” Egide insists. “You know they got a post office there? I seen a picture. They put all the letters on the ground and you go through and pay fifty cents for any that belong to you.”

“Who’d write to you?” Madame screeches. “Not me. Go on then, Dummy.”

On the other side of the kitchen wall, the girls can’t hold their laughter any more. A Filipina lets out a long howl, “Eeeeyah,” and a colored girl, choking, says, “Bless Jesus.”

It can’t go on much longer, this life. Any of it. Emlee, her back aching from hours on the three-legged stool, beckons to Wilmer. She gives him a coin, sends him out for a sandwich, and watches through the window as he hurries down Broadway, trailed by hungry, leaping dogs. Soapy could do more for them. Of course he could. How much would it take to build a kennel and staff it with loving hearts to tend the sick ones and pamper the well ones? Does Soapy steal even the Sled Dog Fund?

Wilmer returns with corned beef on rye bread, wrapped in waxed paper. Emlee devours it, the mayonnaise spurting from her mouth. She wipes her lips with a handkerchief given to her by a girl who left town last week, saying
she was going home. The handkerchief was made from a pillowcase, Emlee guesses. That’s the only way it could have grown so soft, from all the washings, all the dreams. “I’ve had enough, I’m a-going,” the girl said, throwing her clothes out in the hallway for others to pick over and fight about. She shoved the handkerchief into Emlee’s hands and departed at night, as if it mattered. The sun shines all the time.

What would the retreating girl take with her? Names. Dyea, Dawson City, Juneau. Her children and grandchildren will grow up hearing those dazzling names. “I was there,” the girl can say. “I had me a lunch room.” Or a laundry. Uh-huh. Won’t tell about whoring. And leaving in the night? She’ll forget that part, though it would be pretty to tell, would go with the names of the rough towns sprawling in the valleys of bones and ice.

The corned beef sandwich settles in Emlee’s stomach, and the sun stops overhead. She is in the land where messages halt, in this office where all is a sham, where the wires go nowhere. Her mother will never get those words unless Emlee writes them in a letter. Soapy is there beside her, behind her, his hands on her shoulders, moving her body back and forth as if they are dancing. I never see him come up. “Are there raccoons at Raccoon Ford?” he asks. “Lots of ’em?”

“Oh yes,” she says, “and there’s a mill and a store.”

Embracing her, Soapy rocks her so gently she might be in the river at home, not the rapids but the wide smooth run above the millrace. “Tell me about it,” he says, and she knows he has forgotten about lunch. There will be no trip to Mort’s today, no fried chicken, but that’s all right; she had the sandwich. He’s a whippet, going all day long on a crust, a crumb, whereas she needs her three squares a day. “Tell me,” he says, leaning down to kiss her cheek. She closes her eyes.

“It’s up on a hill,” she says, “a bluff, with the river down below. The mill and the store belong to Mr. Beale. I worked at the store. It was how I made a little money. Not many people, really, live at the Ford. It’s not a place that grows. There’s bigger towns a few miles away, like Rapidan, where there’s a bigger mill.”

“The Ford.” His hands slide down her back. His affection makes her nervous.

“That’s the nickname of the place,” she says. “Big Jim says in fifty years, won’t be much left of it. Floods washed away the houses in the low places already.”
Soapy’s not listening. His attention wanders back to the office floor. He waves his hand like a showman. “Business is what it’s all about, Emlee. Look what I done. I built this telegraph office. Built the Mascot Saloon. Got my pockets full of nuggets and dust, got money in the bank. Come on,” he says, tugging her from the stool. He steers her toward the door, calling over his shoulder, “Mr. Prentiss, you’re in charge,” and Mr. Prentiss, a heavy old fellow, wags his dewlaps in assent.

Soapy did not list Emlee as part of his pride, she realizes. He spoke of the office and the saloon and the bank accounts.

The last time they slept together, he woke in the night with a gasp and said, “I can’t get enough air.” She had to rub his head until he fell asleep again.

“What kind of people do you think he’s from?” her mother asked her once about Big Jim, and Emlee said, “I don’t know.”

“I think he’s Scotch-Irish and English, like me,” her mother said, “with his black hair and green eyes. I learn stuff about him in my dreams. Things come to me. I seen his mother, in my mind, and his daddy. And that gunshot or whatever it was that hurt his head? You know what I decided, Emlee?”

“What?” Emlee asked.

“I think it was something he needed. I think he might a-been sick before, with fits. That come to me in a dream. Sick with the fits, with trembles and such that kept people away from him. The shot to his head knocked the fits out of him.”

“You got nothing to base that on, Mama,” Emlee said.

“Don’t matter,” her mother said. “I saw in a dream, him and his parents by a fire, and his feet a-twitching and his mama and daddy not knowing what to do.”

“But you made all that up, Mama. Dreams aren’t real.”

“Oh, they are,” her mother said. “You’re too young to know that,” but Emlee was grown by then. Her mother had a flag of color on each cheek and crow’s foot wrinkles by her eyes. She cried every day, out of Big Jim’s sight, for joy.

How is it nobody knows about no wires? Emlee has never believed men are better than women at keeping secrets, but now she knows they are. The secret binds Soapy and his men together in a brotherhood. No wires. Didn’t boys back at the Ford have a cave where they held meetings, where girls were not
allowed? In that way, they made the world their own, keeping the yonder world at bay.

“What's in the cave?” she asked a boy once, and he said, “Indian bones. Bears.” He raised his arms at her, growling. She wasn’t scared.

Only Soapy scares her. If she were a miner, crouching by a fire, he would set his men upon her and seize her gold, her horse, and her dogs. The men would take off their boots, toast their feet by the fire, and drink the coffee in the pot, paying no attention to her, just another miner with bloody throat growing cold where they’d tossed her in a ravine. Soapy does that. He sends men into the snowy lands beyond the settlements, and woe to the loner in a lonely camp or the drunken braggart who flashes his gold in a tavern.

Soapy smells of pencil lead, of clean bullets, of speed itself. Every day, he is groomed at a barbershop. He leads Emlee there, where she will wait again, only in a more comfortable seat than the stool at the office, a high-backed sofa.

“Queen of hearts,” the barber says to her as a greeting. Soapy folds himself into a luxurious chair, and the barber works up a bowl of lather with a badger-hair brush.

Soapy closes his eyes and says, “Sing to me.”

The barber, an Irishman, takes a deep breath and launches into a song about a blackbird. Industriously, he brushes suds high on Soapy’s cheeks.

Soapy has a full beard; the barber shaves only those few stray hairs above it.

Emlee should be feeling some excitement, she knows, at being with him. That must be love, but she has something else instead: her hands soft on demand; these long waits; her youth passing as slowly as the sun outside; the angle of sun on the barbershop floor; and the spicy smell of shaving lotion.

She sneezes.

“Bless you,” says the barber, but Soapy doesn’t stir.

She will hold out a finger to the monkey, who will take it in a leathery clasp, and she will turn her arm slowly so the creature revolves on the top of her dresser, its ringmaster’s scarlet cape and tail sweeping in a waltz. Surely Soapy will tire of her in a few weeks, a few months, and she won’t be sorry if he moves on to a new girl. At the house, girls want him, put their hands on him. She would gladly advise a new girl about the need for sleeping in gloves. She would not fight to keep the uncrowned king for herself. Soapy has cut his eyes at the Negress from Florida with her pretty face and lush lips, and at the Filipina whose braided hair is long enough to wrap around her body and who asks the men, “Want see my bosom?” Emlee has flashed her consent to these other girls, though they see themselves as her rivals.
Of the monkey, Soapy will say, “You love that thing more than me,” and she doesn’t deny it.

Emlee would kill anybody who would take the monkey or harm it. Sometimes when she is with Soapy at a dance hall, when a line of girls is high-kicking, when Soapy’s arm lies across her shoulders and he lifts a glass of beer to his lips, her heart goes tight with terror, and she pats his cheek and says, “I’ll be right back,” loudly so he hears her over the stomping of girls’ high heels and men’s applause. He barely nods, as if she is going to the privy. She’ll race to the house, to her room, and turn her key in the lock, so afraid the little creature will not be there, so relieved to find it asleep on her pillow or regarding itself balefully in the mirror that she cries out and enfolds it, her tears splashing on its cap. Beneath the red fabric of the elaborate costume, within the tiny ribcage, lies its beating heart.

Just for a little while, she will stay with the monkey and hold it. As long as she knows she can come back to her room, to the monkey and the basket of nuts to be cracked, she can bear to return to the dance hall, to Soapy, to her own glass of beer with its melting foam and to Soapy’s hand exploring her neck as if mapping out her bones.

Maudie has claimed that the anonymous Indian woman out in the gold fields has a child by Soapy. Two children. “She’s ugly as shit, I betcha,” Maudie has said, mocking the face of a woman she admits she has never met, hooding her eyes and dropping her jaw open.

There they go again, out in the street, past the barbershop, Maudie and Frank Reid, Frank in a green checked shirt, Maudie hanging onto his arm, blowing bubbles with a wad of gum in her mouth, the jest among the girls being that’s how Maudie stays in practice. Maudie’s face twists in the sun; a purple balloon swells from her lips, and she snaps her teeth into it. Frank Reid embraces her. She does not seem steady on her feet. They are mad dogs, hyenas, stumbling down Broadway as if following the sun from one end of the muddy road to the other. Maudie holds something in her hand, a piece of paper. They vanish behind a knot of Indians selling moccasins and buckskin coats.

Emlee has heard of Indians who perish when they are locked away, who pine in their jail cells until they die, but they are Indians of Mexico, Aztecs she believes, not these people of far North and snow. She knows how that yearning would be, for she longs for her room when she is away from it, those times when Soapy keeps her by his side for a day and a night and part of the next day, at the saloon or the dance hall or the telegraph office. She’s not allowed to leave him except for a little while. That is the bargain she has struck with him. She is glad such marathons are rare.
Heart on a Wire

The barber wants to be her friend. As Soapy relaxes under the lather, the barber winks at her, meaning, I’ll take good care of him; we want him to be happy, don’t we, you and me?

She settles back in her chair while the barber trims Soapy’s beard with sharp scissors. What happened to the Aztecs? They were conquered, and didn’t they die? She is waiting, once more; that is her role, to loiter in this sunlit shop that smells of bay rum.

Soapy looks dead in the barber’s chair, laid out for waking, cheeks hollow, eyes closed. She can’t imagine him ever as a child. He was born thirty-seven, tough-skinned and crafty.

“Ah,” says the barber, his face shining. “Hard as Mr. Smith works, he needs his rest.”

She has not come to this place to find love. She did not expect to fall in love in Alaska. She wants to, though. She wishes she loved Soapy. His face looks bloodless, his lips a dark pulp amid the beard. She thinks of bees, of how they fly into dark spaces; that’s why you have to keep your mouth shut around a hive.

She laughs, and the barber’s head jerks up, his eyes full of terror, as if she’d fired a gun. He can’t shush her, Soapy’s girl. She might ask for anything here, and her wish would be granted: fresh strawberries, a dish of ice cream, her hair washed and arranged by the barber’s expert hands. When the barber sees that she’s content, he launches into another song.

Soapy, eyes still shut, says at the end, “You’re right good, Ted. Come sing some night at my place.”

Speechless, the barber gazes at Emlee and says at last, “I’d be honored.”

Soapy’s nickname comes from a gambling game. You wrap bars of soap with paper and hide a dollar in one or two of them. People pay to guess which bar’s got the money. You clue in a friend so it looks easy to pick the right bar. Shuffle them around, play the rube. They’ll be throwing their money at you, to play. A shell game, Soapy says, making two syllables of it: shay-ull. Emlee has made him play it with her, spreading bars of wrapped soap on the sheets of her bed when they are naked and Soapy is spent, though their exertions are never enough to tire Emlee. She always gets the right bar.

“It ain’t hard,” Soapy will say, and she wants to say, “You didn’t fool me.”

He boasts of winning a glass eye from a man in a poker game when he was twelve years old. He’s been a whiz at faro ever since his boyhood in Noonan, Georgia. Bucking the Tiger, he calls the game. Went on cattle drives in Texas, Soapy did, and learned trick riding stunts which he used in a circus.
“When I was little,” Emlee has said, propped on pillows in her beautiful bed, “I taught a goose to ride on a dog’s back,” but Soapy at her side didn’t answer; he was far away on a cattle drive, charging through crimson dust with a thousand longhorn.

Somehow, she thinks he listened to Maudie, every word Maudie said.

“There’s something else that might’ve happened to Jim,” Emlee’s mother once said, “and that is, God just sent him to me, so he fell right down from Heaven and hit his head.”

“But so much time went by, from that battle till you met him,” Emlee said.

“Don’t make no difference,” Zada said. “Time is God’s, not ours. And that bad wound to his head, it ought not to healed, but it did. Whoever heard of brains showing, and the skull closing over again?”

Emlee was seventeen, and she’d been lying all morning in the woods with a boy she liked, their clothes peeled off, inventing glorious new things with their bodies. That was the first time she was ever with a man.

That afternoon, she helped her mother in the shed behind the house, putting eggs in water glass for storage. Her mother wiped six dozen eggs with clean flannel, placed them small-end down in a stone crock, and poured the water glass over them. The solution of soda and potash smelled sharp and clean. The eggs settled slowly, sending up a bubble or two.

“They’ll stay good for months. It’s like stopping time,” Zada said. She put a board over the crock and directed Emlee to set a heavy stone on it. “There,” she said. “That’ll keep the weasels and varmints away.” She wiped her hands on her apron.

“Mama,” Emlee said, “what if I want to leave here?”

“You can go.” Zada stepped out of the shed into the sunlight, and Emlee followed her. It was May, with bees in the linden trees, the sweetest time. “Don’t you see what I’m saying, girl,” Zada said, going back as always to her own life, her great love. “Jim don’t have no past life. All those women hoping he was theirs, well, he wasn’t even on this Earth till Cedar Mountain. God put him in a blue uniform and dumped him into battle.”

“That’s crazy talk, Mama,” Emlee said, hoping her period would come soon, that she would not have to worry about a baby.

“You don’t know what I been through,” Zada said, “taking up with a Yankee soldier. There’s people around here that want me shot.”
“Nobody wants that, Mama,” Emlee said, but into her mind flashed the face of the old man who’d insulted her at the store, the way he flinched when the gumdrop hit his nose. He was still among them, ancient by then, gimpy on the store of the porch, fussing at children.

“I used to lie awake trying to divine it,” Zada said, “where Jim was from. For years, I did that. Now I’ve quit. He don’t remember no childhood. Got no idea how old he is. Oh, someday I hope you’re as happy as I am.”

“Mama,” Emlee said, squeezing her mother’s hands.

“When you’re ready to go, Emlee, go. I don’t expect you to be a old woman, still living with Jim and me.”

Zada’s hands were rough as the pads on a cat’s paws.

She gestured to the trees and said, “Listen,” meaning the bees. “Ain’t that pretty,” she said. “Did you know Lafayette came through here, back in the Revolution? He crossed the river right here at the Ford. His men camped. Washed their clothes and cleaned their guns. Women and children that lived here, they knew the British was coming, the redcoats, so they hid in the swamp, lay down in the alder bushes.”

“You talk like you saw it, Mama.”

“I heard the old people tell it, when I was a child,” her mother said.

Emlee cannot know that Zada will be overtaken late in life by the desire for adventure. The wanderlust Emlee feels will come to her mother too, the longing that occasionally strikes women of limited education and means, so that they leave their men at home (“Goodbye, I am off to the Nile”) and set out for Israel and Australia, for Japan and Argentina, returning with souvenirs: dolls in the exotic costumes of a dozen countries. The house on the bluff at Raccoon Ford will fill up with Zada’s dolls, blank and silent, with eyes of cross-stitch and buttons.

Zada McCampbell will live a long time, longer than her daughter. Zada will live to be a hundred in the house above the river bluffs, until the family name, borne by cousins, appears on a big sign in Culpeper: McCampbell’s Harley-Davidson. If Emlee at twenty-one, in the sunlit Skagway barber shop, could know that, she would nod and say: Oh. McCampbell’s Harley. Of course, she would say, if she could see the silver motorbikes stretching out in rows beneath the Virginia sun, with rippling plastic pennants to lure customers in.

Emlee is the link, or her mother is, from the French general Lafayette to the motorcycles that hug the curves on what becomes known as the Marquis Road.
III. Waterfall

Maudie bursts through the barbershop door with Frank Reid at her heels. Their arrival is a crash, a thunderclap. Soapy’s eyes fly open; he leaps to his feet, hand on his gun. He has hurtled back from a far-off dream, Emlee sees, some boyhood picnic table in Georgia with sugared tomatoes on his plate. The barber freezes where he stands, arms in an arc. Emlee holds her breath.

Maudie is drunk, Frank Reid cold sober. Tears and bits of purple gum cling to Maudie’s cheek. Her boast, a legend at the house, is that she once took on a whole party of miners at a camp and it didn’t make her half as sore as riding horseback or chewing gum for too long.

Frank Reid raises empty hands. “You don’t need a gun for this, Soap,” he says. “The lady just wants to ask you a question.” He shoots tobacco juice on the floor. The barber sets down the razor, reaches for a spittoon, and slides it toward him.

“Maudie,” says Soapy softly, as if they are alone. “What has happened to you? Is he treating you bad?”

Maudie shakes a piece of paper in her hand, and Emlee recognizes it as a telegram. A war is going on in Maudie’s face. Her purple lips work before words get out. At last, she says, “You tell me somethin’, Soapy. This is from my brother who is dead. How d’you explain that? You playin’ tricks on me, you sunna bitch?”

“We’re wondering,” says Frank Reid, “how her brother sent a message from Hell. She says that’s where he is.”

Maudie punches Frank. “Shut up.”

Ignoring Frank Reid, Soapy extends his hand to Maudie. “May I read it?”

Maudie throws the telegram on the floor, and Soapy, all decorum, scoops it up and smoothes it out. Maudie says, “I think you know somethin’ about this, Soapy. My brother died in the wintertime. My maw wrote me he got a fever and died. I got Maw’s letter after you dumped me. Then today—today—I get this howdy-do from him.”

“Would anybody like some sarsaparilla?” the barber asks with a winning smile. “I have some, nice and cold.”

Emlee casts him a warning glance. Men have been shot for lesser sins than interrupting a conversation.

“You sent this, Soap. It’s some gimmick, like your Petrified Man,” Maudie says. She whirls on Emlee. “You put him up to it, dincha? You musta knowed my brother died. You and him cooked this up together.”
“Maudie, listen to me,” says Soapy, and Maudie’s wet face fixes on his. “Sometimes messages get delayed. By accident. You been in Alaska for how long now?”

“A year,” Maudie says in a whisper.

“Your brother Nathan,” and Soapy’s voice caresses the name. “Nathan might of sent this a full year ago, and it got stuck you might say in transit, the words not sped on their way till some telegraph operator in your brother’s Idaho abode found the message he had took down on paper and forgot to send.”

“Oh,” says Maudie. “Well, shit.” The fight goes out of her; she’s a bitten bubble.

“I’m sorry to learn of Nathan’s demise,” Soapy says. “I remember you held him in right high esteem.”

Maudie collapses against Frank Reid, tucking her head into his shoulder. Soapy’s words make her brother’s death a new catastrophe, and she wails until her gaze falls again on Emlee. She shakes herself away from Frank Reid, her eyes flashing like beetles’ wings. “You,” she says. “You’ll never last here. Expecting everything done for you, like you’re a queen.” She advances toward Emlee.

Soapy steps between them and signals the barber. “We’d like that sarsaparilla after all.”

“We don’t need anything,” Frank Reid says and drags Maudie out the door.

Soapy pauses before sinking again into the barber’s chair and casting the telegram to the floor. He looks worn out, beat.

Emlee feels sweat on her cheeks. She lets her breath out slowly.

Soapy must know Maudie took it hard, his leaving her. So the telegrams are his way of softening it. Yes, he paid attention to all of Maudie’s talk while he was with her, so he learned the names of her family and friends. That is why she gets a telegram every few days, even now.

Emlee reaches for a bottle of sarsaparilla on the tray the barber offers her. Very soon, maybe even tomorrow, she too can expect telegrams. Hers will be signed by her mother and Big Jim, though the messages will have been created, of course, by Soapy. Is there any harm in that, since he does it to cheer the women he loves?

Humming, the barber resumes his attentions to Soapy. “Haircut, Mr. Smith?”

“Just a little off the top,” Soapy says. “You married?”

“No, sir. It always kinda scared me.”
"Aww. It ain't so bad," Soapy says, and Emlee wants to ask: The Indian woman? The one in Spokane? "Look at my beauty here." Soapy gestures toward Emlee. "She'll make your eyes roll back in your head."

The barber's scissors snap over Soapy's temples.


"Of course. Pardon me. I forgot," the barber says.

"Hey, you. How would you describe my face?" Maudie asked Emlee during the first hour Emlee spent at the house, when Maudie was still Soapy's girl. Maudie was rouging her cheeks and penciling her eyes at a mirror on the landing. She kept the eye pencil and the paint in her pockets. Emlee regarded Maudie's face.

"All mouth and stubbornness," said Emlee.

From the kitchen came the sound of drumbeats: Egidé beating a tambourine made of caribou hide, the closest he'd ever get to camp and wilderness.

"Stubborn, yeah, that's me," said Maudie, rubbing lipstick off her crooked teeth. Emlee hoped she'd made a friend. "I'll never give him up, my guy."

That night, Maudie had a birthday party. She was always having birthday parties, always turning twenty-one. She loved cake. There were twenty-one different flavors of cake, with colored candles guttering on the tops, spilling drops of wax on the icing, and candles in holders on the mantelpiece and on the piano, because Maudie loved candles too. She could have birthday parties any time she wanted, because she was Soapy's girl. She was dressed as a shepherdess in a gown that showed off her breasts. She held a crook in her hand.

Drumbeats and a mournful harmonica: the sounds from the kitchen of a brothel in a town that clings to its fleeting summers. Emlee hears the drumbeats in her head while she waits in the barbershop. How many hours till she cracks nuts in her own room, till she pets the monkey, till she lies down to sleep with her hands in gloves? Maudie has bragged that Soapy once kept her busy for two whole days in bed.

Emlee can't imagine that, not for Soapy and herself. She felt more passion for the boy under the tree at home, whose name and face she can't remember.

Out in the street, Maudie as she hangs onto Frank Reid's arm must still have her rouge and eye pencil in her pocket. "Beard burn," she said that first day to Emlee, as they stood at the mirror. "That'll put the blood in your cheeks." One tooth crossed another, in Maudie's mouth, reminding Emlee of some wild critter that used its teeth for weapons. Maudie's purple lips looked rough enough
to strike matches on, but never mind. Maudie was Soapy’s girl, riding high. Twenty-one cakes, just because she wanted them, cakes on the mantel, on the piano, the house packed with men and girls. Egide in the kitchen, rapping on that drum: a French-Canadian, disconsolate and far from home, and the whorehouse was not his dream. Working at the shoe factory back home would have been good enough for him. That’s what he used to do, Maudie explained: he sewed soles on boots, him and Madame both, working in a factory. It was Madame who had the itch to come out here, and now Egide had the gold-mining bug, only Madame wouldn’t go no further. Maudie complained of the calluses on the heels of Egide’s hands, from the drum. She liked to brag about her sensitive skin, showing off, letting the others know Madame’s husband wanted her, “but I belong to Jeff now,” she said, as if his real name were a plum in her mouth, “and no other man gets his hands on me.” The days of drum and calluses were in the past, she proclaimed. She would marry Soapy, she declared to the other girls, with her mouth full of cake. “I understand him,” she said. “He knows I got a head for business, just like him.”

The girls and their guests ran out of forks and ate the frosted cakes with their fingers. Maudie got drunk and played the piano. Her breasts fell out of her white gauze shepherdess dress. She climbed on the piano bench, waved her crook, and hooked it in her bodice for laughs. She drew a nimble big toe up and down the piano keys, dark thunder to high twinkling tremolos, until she slipped. Soapy caught her in his arms as she fell, but gazing over her head, he found Emlee.

Emlee was full of her journey. She’d come so far. Her legs were a sailor’s, bucking and quivering from the sway and pull of trains and ferries. Her bags were upstairs, not yet unpacked. She’d come here because Egide met the boats and offered rides to new girls. She’d marked Egide for what he was even as he called out to her from his wagon. She’d told herself she could stay at the house without doing what was expected of her.

Soapy set Maudie firmly on the piano bench. She passed out face-down with her nose on middle C.

Coconut icing, that’s what was sticky on Emlee’s hands and sweet in her mouth when Soapy approached with Egide’s drumbeats in his steps and bowed to her. She still wore the brown suit she’d crossed the country in, her travel clothes. All the way over, on the train, she’d been asked was she a schoolteacher, and sometimes she said yes because it was what people wanted to hear. She had three marriage proposals and five offers of teaching jobs. She could be firing up a stove in some man’s cabin or in a one-room school, and that would not feel any stranger than being at this house, amid this merry-making.
And there was Soapy, bowing to her.

The whole room went dead quiet. Maudie’s reign was over. She was out cold at the piano, would wake up jilted, her cheeks creased from sharps and flats. Soapy’s eyes were dark as tunnels, all conquest and claim, and Emlee’s stomach flickered with a deep, slim pain.

And Soapy dropped Maudie that fast. “Like ol’ Maud was a toad, peeing in his hand,” sniggered the other girls, but they cleaved to her, because she’d been scorned.

Who could say what had made Emlee want to come here? For her, it started with a list in a newspaper back in Virginia, a list of the food you should take with you to the Yukon or to Alaska: beef jerky, oats, powdered eggs. Emlee hadn’t known there were such things as powdered eggs. She’d read the list aloud to her mother, and her mother said, “Makes my mouth water.” Even Big Jim spoke up: “Keep readin’.” So Emlee went on: beans, ketchup, dried potatoes, chocolate powder, tea and coffee. Condensed milk. Dried fruit. Pemmican, what was pemmican? Her mother and Big Jim didn’t know. “Sounds like some kinda bird,” Big Jim said.

The whole time on the train, rolling across the big land, she’d thought of that list and it made a song in her head. Made her hungry every time she thought of it, not that she’d packed any such provisions. It was enough to know what she would need if she were a miner herself. Vaguely she pictured herself cracking rocks, extracting gold like nutmeats.

As Soapy bowed to her, as she stood beside the piano in her brown suit, she thought of the list, of reading it out loud in Raccoon Ford by firelight, her mother and Big Jim hungry from the words. She was hungry too. She would have it all, everything on the list.

The other girls whispered, Maudie’ll kill you, even as Soapy took Emlee’s hand and led her up the stairs. They wanted Soapy to hear. It was too exciting, him with the new girl and Maud passed out. The girls stayed up all night making popcorn and having a party among themselves, and never mind the men.

Emlee went with him because he was the biggest name in town. She’d heard of him even on the train and on the boat.

“You talk funny,” Soapy said the first night to her, in bed. “Say house.”
She said it. She was worn out, and the smell of popcorn made her hungry.


“Oh, I do not,” she said, but even then he was checking his pocket watch, for he had business to tend to, checking the time and reaching for his pants.

It seems to her she has heard the ticking of Soapy’s watch ever since reaching Alaska. Maybe it takes longer than a few weeks to fall in love, though not
for her mother. Soon as her mother climbed onto the poorhouse porch and saw Big Jim, that was it.

Soapy and the barber are talking about railroads: *There'll be one right through here soon. The aerial tramways that tote the miners and their outfits over the cliffs, why, that just ain't enough these days. Men will blast through rocks with dynamite to lay tracks and build tunnels.*

Emlee sips her sarsaparilla and leans her head back on the comfortable sofa. Soapy'll own the rail line and control everything about it, even the kind of food served in the dining cars.

“It’s in the works,” Soapy says as the barber dusts his neck with a chamois towel. “A buddy o’ mine’s getting a gang of Chinks together. They’ll do the blasting.”

“Really,” the barber says. “That’s wonderful, Mr. Smith. Why, everybody in town, in the whole Territory, will be in your debt. We want that railroad. Yes, sir.”

Soapy examines his hands, holding them out for the nails to be buffed.

“Chinks, huh? Little yellow-skinned fellows, wearing pointy hats and eating rats?” the barber says, but Soapy's done talking, and the barber knows enough to shut up.

“Oh my tab,” Soapy says when he's through. Rising from the chair, he presents his arm to Emlee.

Out on the street, he pauses, blinking as if he can’t quite remember where he is. Emlee squeezes his elbow. A tremor runs through his arm. At last he announces they’ll go to his saloon. Something's worrying him. She knows what it is: Maudie. He walks slowly, and she matches her pace to his.

She has heard that in springtime, Broadway runs like a river with urine, as great boulders of frozen waste, created all winter by peeing drunks, melt in the alleys. The Ford was so clean. When will she see her home again, and how will she ever get the monkey to Virginia? She might close her eyes and be back at Mr. Beale's store, weighing coffee and salt, measuring cloth for farmers' wives, slicing cheese, taking money and making change. Mr. Beale trusted her to do trades, too—fresh butter bartered for nails, a chicken for a jar of boot polish.

As Soapy nears his saloon, he walks faster. Emlee has been in this town mere weeks, yet she could walk its paths in her sleep. It’s three in the afternoon by the big tavern clock when they make their entrance, king and queen. The smoke is dense, the air gummy with breath and liquor.

The piano is plunking, and men bow to her. Two pool tables are going; balls crack and rumble into pockets. The mirror behind the bar reflects Soapy and his men, and Emlee catches her breath for how handsome he looks. He’s
in his element. Her heart soars with the hope she can love him. She blinks, and the heads and faces in the mirror are eggs in a crock of water glass.

Men are singing:

Oh, what was your name in the States?
Was it Thompson or Johnson or Bates?
Did you murder your wife, and fly for your life?
Oh, what was your name in the States?

One of Soapy's men gives a sign. The man tugs on his ear and tilts his head toward a stranger. The music's too loud for talking, but the tug is enough. It means gold.

A few days ago, astride his white horse, Soapy led Skagway's Fourth of July parade. Emlee wanted to ride alongside him, but Soapy wouldn't allow it. “A lady don't make herself a public spectacle,” he said as if hearing some voice in his head, a mother's instruction to some long-ago sister of his, and meekly Emlee said, “All right.” She could look on, he said, from the balcony of the Mascot Saloon.

It was chilly and cloudy. She wore a new dress Soapy had given her, of light voile printed with violets. She shivered and wished she'd brought a shawl. Goose bumps rose on her arms. She could see all of Skagway. Broadway began at City Hall and ended at the foot of a mountain. Beyond the town stretched a forest, and a cemetery where the dead lay among stumps and fallen logs. The parade would begin at the wharf and proceed down the street. It wouldn't take long.

Bunting sagged humidly from the railings of the balcony and from the cupola of the Skagway National Bank. Emlee had her period; she felt hunted and shy.

A photographer sprinted alongside the parade, taking pictures of Soapy and the assorted buggies and wagons that comprised the show. A man on a bicycle claimed he'd pedaled all the way from New York City. Egide trudged along, beating his tambourine, accompanied by a makeshift band. Emlee recognized Wilmer playing a cornet and Mr. Prentiss, of the dewlaps, blowing a tuba.

Dressed as Cleopatra, Maudie rode in a dogcart pulled by Frank Reid. Maudie's dress was a draped sheet painted gold. Her eyes were heavily accented with a sooty mixture of her own concoction—lampblack and elderberry juice.
Her neck and shoulders were bare. Even from a distance, Emlee could see deep wrinkles on her chest, caused by the corsets she wore to push up her breasts. Light rain fell, and Maudie’s gold paper headgear melted to paste. She lifted a bottle to her mouth till it was empty, then tossed it aside. Since Soapy left her, Maudie had lost weight, Emlee noticed. Her face looked haggard. She must be thirty, maybe older. Frank Reid’s legs pumped until he pulled Maudie’s dog-cart alongside Soapy’s white horse. Maudie reached down, scooped a handful of mud from the street, and hurled it. The clod struck the white horse on the flank.

The photographer snapped a picture. Soapy looked straight ahead, but the horse turned and stumbled a little. The picture would not show the splotch of mud, for that was on the other side.

Later, at the saloon, Soapy said, “I knew Maudie done that. I just didn’t let on.”

A fine drizzle stung the cheap tables on the balcony and puddled on the canvas floor mats. Emlee was getting wet, but she couldn’t go inside unless Soapy said so. She didn’t dare ask.

“You oughta teach ol’ Maud a lesson,” said Soapy’s men.

Soapy ignored them. To Emlee he said, “I don’t hold it against her.”

Emlee lowered her chin.

“But that horse,” Soapy said, and Emlee saw with astonishment that he was on the verge of tears. “Betrayed me. Distracted by a dadgum ball of mud. Got less mind on him than a mule.”

“He’s a fine horse,” Emlee said.

“I ain’t gonna ride him no more,” Soapy said. “Bad luck if I do.”

“That horse coulda rared,” said a man at the next table. “Riz up and killed you, Soap, ya know it? You had a narrow excape, and it’s all that whore’s fault.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Soapy snarled. He stood and shoved the man. Beer glasses went flying, and the man fell off his spindly stool against the flimsy railing.

Gasping, the man cried, “Your days of running this town is over. We-uns have had it with you.” He crawled away.

The others scrambled inside. As the bunting flapped in the rain, Soapy sighed and put his feet up on a chair. Emlee dashed mist from her brow. Down in the street, Soapy’s white charger nipped a roan mare tied beside him. Rain pelted his sides, washing away the stain of mud. Cleopatra, in tears, stumbled from her phaeton and pummeled Frank Reid, her shouts lost in the rain.

Emlee hunkered down in her chair, tugging her voile sleeves to her
elbows. Cold and wet, yet skeeters hovered. One landed on her arm, and she slapped it, leaving a burst of blood.

Soapy looked at the mess grimly and said, “It is not unknown for people to get malaria up here. Don’t think, because you’re this far north, you can’t get it. It’s a dread thing.”

Emlee swabbed at the blood with her handkerchief. Down below, Wilmer untied the white horse and led him around back to the stable. The roan mare stood dejectedly in the rain.

“You have got to stick with me, Emlee,” Soapy said. “You do, and I might marry you. You don’t, and you could end up in one of them cribs.”

She took his hand. It was his pride and sorrow talking. The depraved women in the narrow cribs—just stalls where rutting went on, located on the town’s outskirts and in alleys—were the most pathetic creatures she’d ever seen, opium users, scarred bruised throwaways unwelcome at even the lowest brothel.

“They’re worse off than dogs,” Soapy said.

She stroked his arm and laid her head against his shoulder. The comforts of cracking nuts and petting the monkey were hours away.

“Listen good,” Soapy said. “I am married to a woman named Anna. Anna Nielsen, she was, a actress when I met her. We wed in Denver, and we have us three children. Been years, though, since we was together as man and wife. Differences sprung up between us. Anna’s back with her folks in St. Louis, but I been good to her and the kids. She got her share of diamonds. For you, I would divorce her.”

“What about Maudie?” Emlee said.

“I never told Maudie I’d marry her.”

“But do you still love her?” Emlee pressed. “Seems to me you might.”

“You think I’d have a woman who throws mud at me?” Soapy said. “You’re prettier. I always get the prettiest one. Don’t worry about her.”

She didn’t attempt to explain that she wasn’t jealous of Maudie. She wanted to right something, to make him see how he felt, but the words weren’t there.

When she didn’t answer, he said, “You don’t never say my name.”

After a while, when Emlee was numb with chill, Wilmer brought a beaver robe and tucked it around her. She took it gratefully. Nothing had ever felt so warm and soft.

Back in her room, the monkey would eat the nuts she’d set out for it, gaze at itself in the mirror, and rearrange jars of cosmetics in ways it found pleas-
ing. There were things it would do in its natural state, in the jungle, but Emlee could not imagine what those things were. She has checked its teeth, wondering how old it is. Because it’s small, she thinks of it as young, but maybe it isn’t.

The rain kept falling. She gazed over Skagway, thinking, *It’s summer. It’s the Fourth of July.* She wondered why the roofs of buildings were flat, not pitched, given all the snow that must fall in the winter. By September, certainly October, snow would be deep, if what she’d heard was true.

“My last horse died of the staggers,” was all Soapy said, the whole afternoon.

She’d left the Ford in early March, on the first warm day. Young frogs sang in the swamp, their cries high and sweet. *Breath of spring,* she thought as she said goodbye to her mother in the yard, their feet crushing the purple crocuses and white snowdrops and yellow aconites that were the first flowers to bloom. The trees were still bare. Winter would come and go for a few weeks, before it was really spring.

Zada McCampbell couldn’t say goodbye. She toed the blossoms and said to Emlee, “Aconite’s good for toothache.” And, “Warm weather brings cat scratch fever.”

*Breath of spring,* Emlee thought as Big Jim drove her to the Culpeper train depot. Past the Female Institute they went. Past the beautiful Main Street home of Extra Billy Smith, the governor who had dominated the stage lines and railroads. In the side yard of the mansion, rugs hung on a line, and two colored women beat the dust out of them.

At the station, Big Jim unloaded her bags while she bought a ticket with money she’d made at Beale’s store. When she reached the platform, he took some bills from his pocket and handed them to her.

“Thank you,” she said, surprised, hugging him, careful not to touch the back of his head, which she imagined must still be sore. How could the brains be blasted out of a man, and he survive? In her embrace, he stood as still as a tree.

“Goodbye, Emlee, and good luck,” he said. A long speech, for him.

“Marry my mama,” she said. “Please marry her.”

From the window of the train, she waved to him, but he’d already turned the horses around. The wagon flew up Davis Street, away.

On the long ride west, whenever she spotted a stampeding herd—of wild horses or elk, the buffalo being almost gone—it was Big Jim she saw instead,
faster in his wagon than any prairie critters. Once she spied a lone, clumsy bear racing alongside the tracks, a comical sight. Passengers pointed and exclaimed. Wild horses running were beautiful. You could spot them from way off. You had to get your eyeful before the train spun past them. At night, she saw them in her dreams. She was too young to get stiff from sitting up to sleep.

In Seattle she bought a steamer ticket. It was the first time she’d seen water other than a river or lake or pond. The first time she’d seen the ocean.

“Coffee and brandy,” Soapy says, “and two bowls of turtle soup.”

The bartender says, “Coming up.”

“And biscuits,” Soapy says. “Put some ham in ’em.”

“We got good venison pie today, Mr. Smith. You want some of that too?”

“I told you what I want.”

“Yes, sir,” the bartender says.

Soapy leads Emlee to a small table in a corner. When the meal arrives, she dips her spoon into the soup and lifts it to her lips. It’s delicious, the squares of turtle meat tender, the broth rich. As is Soapy’s habit, he takes out his pocket watch and lays it on the table.

At the bar, men are whooping and passing something among themselves—a burlap sack. One voice swells above the din, a stranger’s, calling, “Hey. Give it back. I want that back now.” Emlee has seen this trick before. It starts with a tug on the ear and ends with a newcomer losing his gold, and in between there’s the handing around of a wallet or a sack.

Across from her, Soapy sips his brandy but leaves his food untouched. “’Scuse me,” he says and rises from his chair.

It’s like watching a play. The stranger’s monotone sharpens with agitation: “Give that back now. It’s mine. Give it here.” Soapy approaches him, speaks, and shakes his hand. Then, to a man, the drinkers, card players, pool players, and revelers troop outside, Soapy leading his new chum by the arm. Emlee can see them through a window. They’ve gone out to look at the eagle suspended in its cage in the tree. Beneath the great bird, the men jostle in a way that does not look entirely friendly. Boys and dogs scurry around the edges of the crowd.

How silent the barroom is. The music has stopped. The piano player is outside with the others. She and the bartender are alone, with smoke lifting between them like a rising curtain.

“How’s the soup, Miss Emlee?” the bartender asks.

“It’s wonderful,” she says, but she can’t eat any more. She sets the spoon
down. How must all of this look to the eagle with its rounded shoulders, leaning its proud head between the bars? She should be the one to free it, to make her way up into its tree at some dead hour when no one’s around to see. She’ll take an axe and hack through the cage, and the eagle will squeeze through the splintered boards, sluggish and cold, the memory of flight coming back to it. It will lift, soar, and disappear.

The bartender says, “A fool and his money.” He wipes a rag down the counter. “Twenty-seven hundred dollars worth of gold in that poke. I seen it with my own eyes.”

A man speaks from the shadows, startling them both. “It’s time for the joke to be over,” says Thaddeus Scott of Devon, Pennsylvania, rising from a bench beside the door, “and a poor joke it is.” He’s got a glass in his hand, and Emlee bets it’s ginger ale.

“Oh, they’ll give it back,” the bartender says hastily. “It’s all in fun. He oughta be a good sport.”

Frank Reid strolls in. By himself, without Maudie, the city engineer in his green checked shirt is a dignified man. He nods to Thaddeus Scott, to Emlee. “Quiet in here,” he says. “I hear a friend of mine’s in town, back from the fields. Name of Stewart. You seen him?”

The bartender raises his hand and points to the window. “Out back,” he says. “They’re all out there looking at Mr. Smith’s eagle. And you know what? It’s feeding time. Here, Mr. Reid, take the eagle some of this sausage.” The bartender offers a bowl of meat, but Frank Reid’s hustling out the back door as fast as if somebody shouted Fire.

The bartender sets down the dish. For a long while, he and Emlee and Thaddeus Scott look at each other. From the backyard come shouts, and then shots ring out, high echoing blasts as if guns were fired skyward. Every man out there has a weapon or several. The bartender unties his apron, folds it, and stows it beneath the counter. “I’m a-take me a little break,” he says, stepping from behind the bar. He goes out the front door and into the street.

Thaddeus Scott sets his glass on the counter and places some coins beside it.

“If you get a telegram tomorrow asking for money, don’t pay it,” Emlee says.

Another shot resounds. A billiard ball drops from the edge of a table, hits the floor, and rolls toward Emlee. She stops it with her foot.

“It looks as if you have the afternoon to yourself,” says Thaddeus Scott. “Is there somewhere you would like to go? May I walk you there?”
He’s faithful to his Ida, back home in Devon, Pennsylvania, and Emlee’s glad. His face shows he’ll escort her, and that’s all. She could say, *Take me to the house where I stay, so I can pack*, and he would. She could say, *Take me to the steamer office. I want to buy a ticket.*

Soapy’s watch ticks on the table. The hands show it’s 3:28. She stands up. It is dangerous to linger here. She has never felt death so close at hand.

Men have sobbed in this room from exhaustion, from disappointment, as Soapy consoles them: “Fortune’s a elusive thing.” Men and women, drunk and sober, have wept at the beauty of piano music, for Soapy hires only the best. Emlee goes to the piano and presses a few keys.

She shed tears only once during her journey, and that was on the train, when she saw horses galloping, a small fierce herd hurtling, flying. For a long thunderous moment, they outran the locomotive. A woman across the aisle leaned over and said, “What’s the matter, dear? They’re all right. See, there they go.” Only then did Emlee realize she was crying. The horses veered away from the train, and the woman reached up to close a window, saying, “This dust.”

If that wasn’t heartbreak, what was?

Thaddeus Scott is holding the door for her.

Later it seems that even as she moved past him into the street, she saw the photographs that would run in the papers: Soapy being autopsied on a bloody sheet; Soapy in the morgue, eyes peeled wide open, the lids held with bits of wax; Frank Reid feverish, dying for twelve days in his hospital bed, attended by a nurse in a striped shirtwaist and a doctor who blinked the instant the shutter snapped.

“The public has a right to know,” Thaddeus Scott says as he maneuvers Emlee past a man sleeping open-mouthed on the street. “To know if there are thieves among us.”

“Have you changed your mind?” she asks. “About going to the gold fields?”

She can’t hear his reply. The street’s too noisy, but she believes he is saying no.

It’s over: Soapy’s rule, his very life. She senses it, knows it in her heart, though it’s hours until the men meet each other down at the wharf, Frank Reid and Soapy. They’ll shoot each other at close range in the lungs and in the hip, with motions like a dance. The sound she hears as she hurries along
Broadway with Thaddeus Scott is the sound of men closing in, of vigilantes gathering to plan revenge.

She has always known it would end fast.

Soapy has said he wants dogs at his funeral, in the cortege, all the dogs in town. It's Frank Reid who'll get the grand rites. Soapy Smith will be buried quick, dumped among the stumps in the graveyard by the angry and righteous, many of them his former friends, the same citizens who will erect an obelisk for Reid and will name the loveliest local site in his honor. Stewart, the newcomer, will even get his poke of gold back, minus six hundred dollars' worth, the sack being found in the vault of the Mascot Saloon.

“So where are we going?” Thaddeus Scott asks.

The day has turned warm and fine. There's a spot she has heard about ever since she came here, a place she wants to see. “The waterfall.”

Reid Falls, it'll be called in future times.

“Do we need to hire a carriage?” he says.

“It’s just up there.” She points to the mountain at the end of the street.

“We can walk.”

She stops by the house for a hat and finds Egide alone in the parlor. The room is more silent and still than she has ever seen it before, stale and unkempt, as if Madame has stopped taking care of it entirely. The ottoman where Egide sits is tattered, with clots of stuffing erupting from the seams. Cigar butts litter the rug. The mantelpiece and the top of the piano bear globs of candle wax, spilled the night Emlee and Soapy met.

“Where is everybody?” Emlee asks Egide.

“Those crazy girls, they went swimming. They’ll freeze their butts off.” He holds a stack of postcards, thumbing them with thick, soiled fingers. The cards show photographs that must have been taken from high above, probably from the tramways: hundreds of packhorses trekking across the glaciers like a line of ants. “You think I can sell these?” he asks.

“I don’t see why not.” Emlee imagines Egide and Madame as shopkeepers in this very house, the two of them grown old, surrounded by racks of dusty postcards and dishes of flyspecked candy.

“Business is falling off,” Egide says. “My wife and I got to branch out. So I got this idea. We’ll sell stuff to tourists. As for you,” he says as if seeing her for the first time in a long while. “You gonna marry Mr. Smith, drag him back to the States, be respectable? A little bird told me,” and he waggles his finger at her. “Grab your chance. This’ll be a ghost town one day. Boom, then bust.”

“I’m going to stay a while,” she says. “I don’t think it’s over yet.”

“You don’t know nothing,” Egide says as if disagreeing with a child, “but
I hope you’re right. I might go stake a claim. Just up and leave. My wife don’t think I’d do it, but I will.”

Emlee hurries up to her room, her heart pounding as always with fear the monkey will be gone or hurt. She unlocks her door, and there’s the little creature asleep on the bed, its tail wrapped around its body.

“Fortune is a elusive thing,” she whispers, and it stirs and yawns.

For a time she lies beside it, her head pillowed on her hands, knowing Thaddeus Scott, a solid man, a good man, is waiting outside the house. A sense of comfort, almost well-being, washes over her, never mind how temporary. Yet always there’s that pain in her heart.

Big Jim, racing away from the Culpeper depot in the wagon: going where? She wants to believe he hurried home to marry her mother, but he might have gone anywhere.

She may never know.

Reaching the cascade involves a hike around the mountainside. Moving from shadow to brilliant light, Emlee and Thaddeus Scott navigate paths and ledges. Fronds and ferns brush the hem of her dress. He insists on leading the way. After a time, she hears shouts and recognizes the voices of girls she knows.

At the waterfall, the girls are laughing and screaming. Like dragonflies, they dart into the radiant water. The force of it, splashing down the mountain and striking the rocks below, is powerful enough to knock a person over, Emlee sees. Thaddeus Scott’s face shows astonishment and pleasure at the height and power of the spill, and she feels a jolt of pride in having brought him here.

Yelling, the girls run about in scantes, hair plastered to their heads and down their backs. Dresses and shoes lie in careless heaps. Girls hover in the luminous spray that surrounds the cascade and gather the courage to dive into the torrent. Maudie’s the boldest. With arms raised like a ballerina’s, she hurls herself into the deluge, then prances out into sunshine. Children are playing too, Indians and whites, chasing each other and clamoring. Dogs yap and skirmish, shaking droplets from their coats. The cold is nothing to them.

The Filipina, wringing her long braid, cries out to Emlee, “Hey, where’s all the men?”

“They’re at the Mascot,” Emlee calls back as if all is well. To Thaddeus Scott, she says, “There’s a good place,” and points at a grassy, level spot.

He wavers as if he might sit down and linger, but his loyalty to Ida wins out. “I must be going,” he says. “Be careful. You don’t really belong here.”
“I’ll be all right,” she says.

After he departs, she removes her hat and kicks off her shoes. Remember this. She unfastens her jacket and skirt. She’ll wait her turn, then leap into the water. The sun will shine forever, into those hours that should be night. She can stay here as long as she likes. She can be the last to leave.