not Althea's despairing, brilliantly unresolved chords, but what must be a record, or an FM station: a Mozart quintet. The music stops, and at that moment steps are heard in the hallway.

"Our son Paul." Mrs. Engstrom beams as a tall, somewhat stooped but good-looking, bearded blond young man comes in.

Weak-kneed, Walker rises to be introduced. Smiling, Paul Engstrom says, "I guess I'm sleeping in the room that used to be yours? A sort of ship's galley?"

In a diffident New York way, Walker shakes Paul's hand, and he smiles and says, "Well, actually I guess you are," as, for the second time in his life, in that same room, his whole silly trusting heart rushes out, toward Paul, with love.

To See You Again

Like so many acutely dreaded moments, this one arrived and passed in an unanticipated fashion: the moment after which I would not again see my most brilliant and beautiful student, Seth. I looked up from the group of girl students—ironically, the ones I had least liked—who were asking me silly questions; I looked toward his seat, and was confronted with his absence, his absolute loss.

Considerably older than these kids, and especially, cruelly, older than Seth, I had envisioned quite another scene: I had imagined and feared a moment at which the students would recognize, collectively, that it was over, that this was my last class, the end of my temporary and quite accidental presence in their lives. They would never see me again, any of them. At that instant of recognition, I thought, I would have to smile and say something like "Well, it's been very nice knowing all of you. I've enjoyed this time at Cornford."

(Of course I would look at Seth as I spoke, but could I do it with no break in my voice, no catch?)

And what would they all do, my students, including Seth, I had wondered: would they smile back and maybe

clap? What sort of expression would Seth wear, on that most entrancing face?

But that is not how it went at all. The class—it was in freshman composition—simply ended as it had every day of my time there. Across the campus some clear bells chimed; in the classroom books were gathered from the floor; slowly the kids began to get up and move toward the door. And some of the silliest, noisiest girls gathered at my desk, not to say goodbye or anything so formal, just to be told again what they already knew: that their final papers were to be collected from the English office. And then I looked up to the total absence of Seth.

One of the things I first thought was: If I ever see him again he'll be older. Still handsome, probably, but he won't look quite like *that*.

Seth: red-gold curls, a wild never-combed tangle, curls that shadowed remarkably white unfreckled skin. Narrow green eyes; a small childish nose; and a wide, somehow unformed mouth—a young mouth. And an incongruous, scruffy reddish beard. Just a messy red-haired kid was how someone else might have seen him. Whereas to me: perfect poignant beauty. And what he wrote was extraordinary—weird wild flashes of poetry, flaming through the dullest assignments. At times I considered the possibility that he was in some way crazy, at others the possibility of genius. But how can you tell with anyone so young? He might be, or might become, anything at all. Anything, in his case, except ugly or ordinary.

Not quite anguished—I had had worse losses in my life (I have them still)—but considerably worse than "let down" was how I felt as I began the drive from Cornford west to

San Francisco. To my house, and Gerald, my sad fat husband, a distinguished architect—and my most precariously balanced, laboriously achieved "good life."

Cornford is about forty miles east of San Francisco, near Vallejo, in the tawny, oak-shadowed foothills. It is on Interstate 80, the main east-west thoroughfare; after Vallejo and Cornford, the highway continues past Sacramento to Tahoe, Reno, Salt Lake City, the East. Going anywhere in that direction, and Gerald and I often spend time at Tahoe, we will pass right by Cornford, again and again. Next fall Seth will be there, after a summer of hitchhiking in Spain. How will it feel, I wonder, to drive right past where Seth is, in the fall and following winter?

Or suppose he should move to San Francisco. Kids do, all the time. Just what would I do with him? What, really, do I want of him? I have asked myself that question, repeatedly, at terrible sleepless predawn hours, and have come up with no answer. The obvious ones do not apply.

Meaning that it is nowhere near as simple as sex (Christ! as if sex were ever simple). If my strong feelings in his direction do have an object, it is not the act of love—I find the very idea both terrifying and embarrassing, and oh! how horrified he would be if he knew that I had even, ever, considered that. How old I must seem to him! Revolting, really, although I am in very good shape "for my age." But to him revolting—as I sometimes am to myself; as often I feel that I am to Gerald.

I reread *Death in Venice*, and, with all due respect, I do not think that Aschenbach knew what he wanted of Tadzio, either.

In an earnest way I have tried to see Seth as objectively as possible—to catalogue him, as it were. I began, for what-

ever reason, with his voice, and right away I was balked. I could not decide whether the sound was high or deep, and I concluded that it is simply young, a little rough. Some softness in the lines of his face might suggest a plump body, but the actual body that I saw in his daily, worn, taut jeans is thin, a thin boy's body; maybe in middle age he will be heavy? I wistfully considered that. His facial expressions, too, are elusive, escaping definition—a shade of defiance, sometimes a slow smile; he is far less ready than the rest of the class to show amusement. A wary, waiting look, perhaps—is that it?

And so I was left with nothing clear, no definitions, only the weight of my own meticulous observations. And his face in my heart.

Spring and summer at Cornford, so near the Sacramento Valley, are hot and dry—a heat and dryness inversely proportional to the cold gray wet San Francisco fog, one set of weather pushing out the other. And the transition from one climate to another struck me as symbolic as I drove back and forth, in May and then in June, between the two areas. The heat of Cornford was like an adolescent summer—urgent, flushed—and San Francisco's cold like middle age. Resignation. Disappointment. Grief.

Approaching the hill where the fog always began, on my last drive home from Cornford, when everything was over, I shivered, thinking of my own, known, familiar life: Gerald, our cold clean flat. And no Seth. Ridiculously, I thought, I can't live without seeing him—what shall I do?

Gerald and I know an older man—considerably older than ourselves, that is: Larry Montgomery. As I crested that hill, for no reason that I could immediately understand Larry

came into my mind. And in the next instant I saw that he had arrived there for a very clear reason: Larry is exactly as much older than I am as I am older than Seth. He has what Gerald describes as a crush on me. Larry looks at least ten years younger than he is, trim and tan, with lively blue eyes and fine silver-white hair. A Forties dandy, he hums snatches from Gershwin, Rodgers and Hart, Cole Porter; he wears gold-buttoned navy blazers. His blue eyes widen and deepen, always, when I come into a room. He makes excuses to stand very near me; sometimes he touches me, but in a serious, respectful way.

Once, though, finding ourselves alone at a party, instead of beginning a romantic or even an affectionate conversation, we got into a silly argument—or, rather, he led me into it, baiting me, really. Which, as I thought back to times when I was curt with Seth, almost pushing him out of my office, I now understood: Larry was terrified that whatever he felt would show.

Once I even asked Gerald, though very idly, "What do you think Larry would do if I propositioned him?"

Surprisingly—I had supposed he would laugh—Gerald gave me a serious, considered answer. He said, "I think he would be scared to death, but very polite about how he put you off." I thought Gerald was right; whatever Larry wanted was not an affair with me; a stray motel afternoon with Larry was as unimaginable as it would be with Seth. Larry just likes to see me, to be near me, sometimes—and very likely that is what I feel for Seth, pretty much?

The accident of my teaching at Cornford came about because my friend Amy, who teaches there regularly, was suddenly, between terms, summoned to the side of her ailing mother, in New Hampshire.

"But, Amy, I've never taught," I said.

"It's easy, there're just a few tricks to it. I'll teach you."

"But credentials—"

"Private junior colleges don't much care. They'll be so impressed that you've got a master's—"

"But that was just to stay on in Cambridge another year." To stay on and be with Gerald, as Amy already knew.

"How would they know that? And you got it, didn't you? Besides, Laura, it'll be a good change for you. You need . . ." For a moment Amy faltered at prescribing for my needs, then finished, lamely, "You need to get out more."

However, getting out more was surely among the things that I did need, and partly for that reason I began the twice-a-week drive, back and forth to Cornford College. I began to teach, and there was Seth, in the second row, nearest the door. Red curls, green eyes.

At first, despite the handsomeness that I noted in passing, Seth was simply one among fifteen surprisingly nice, clean young California kids—much nicer and more civil, all of them, than the Cornford faculty, none of whom ever bothered to speak to me, the substitute teacher. However, I had been warned by Amy that this might be the case. "They're incredibly rude," she had said, knowing how thin-skinned I tended to be. I managed not to mind; I told myself that I wouldn't be there for long, and that the kids were what mattered.

The first assignment I gave was a physical description of something encountered outdoors. "You want very simple, specific assignments," Amy had cautioned. "Anything else only confuses them." The papers ranged from the outrageously illiterate to the adequate; they were mostly misspelled descriptions of lakes and mountains, mountain streams and sunsets. But Seth wrote about an abandoned truck, come

upon, surprisingly, in a small eucalyptus grove: the heavily stained windshield, the drifts of leaves all over, and their smell. Rotted tires, rust. A dead truck. His style was flat, specific, and yet the total effect was haunting. I, who have almost no feeling for cars, and surely none for trucks, was haunted by this mechanical death, this abandonment. I began to look closely, even wonderingly, at Seth. And I saw that he was more beautiful than I had seen at first, as well as possibly, probably, brilliant.

In fact, as my short time at Cornford passed, my feelings in regard to all my students polarized—as I might have known they would, given my propensity for extremes of feeling. Some fairly silly girls who at first I thought were just that, fairly silly, after three weeks and then four I found intolerably fatuous—the very ones who were to block out my last view of Seth. About one student other than Seth I became enthusiastic: a dark shy girl, who seemed to have read everything, discerningly, with real intelligence. And always there was Seth, about whom my feelings were strongest—were inexplicable, and impossible.

But when I was midway across the Bay Bridge, suddenly the perfect solution to those unruly feelings came to me; in effect I would domesticate them, just as, years back, I had tamed my wild mania for Gerald. Quite simply, I would make him a friend of our family: I will write him a note next fall, inviting him for dinner. With some other friends, of course, maybe people with kids of Seth's own age. In that setting, my own home ground, Seth will seem a kid like any other, perhaps slightly handsomer, a touch more brilliant,

but not noticeably so to anyone else, and surely not remarkable to Gerald, my sad, successful husband. And Gerald and I will present one of our best, our most convincing surfaces to the group at large, and especially to Seth: we will portray a very adult couple, stringently amusing: Gerald and generous-to-guests Laura. I'll cook something wonderful. The two of us mildly, fondly bantering with each other.

And after dinner Gerald will say, a little chillingly, "Well, my dear Laura, I do congratulate you on your springtime of patience with the young." And then, "When would you imagine that boy last combed his hair—care to place a bet?"

And slowly, gradually, Seth will disappear from my mind—or Seth as the author of violent feelings will go, to be replaced by the messy kid I first saw, of whom I will never think.

In that good mood, having even begun to plan the menu, I drove into the city and arrived at our house on Edgewood, Gerald's and mine. And I saw Gerald's car parked in front of the house, although it was much too early for him to be at home.

My stomach and heart seemed simultaneously to clench tight. Not out of fear. I did not wonder what was wrong; I knew. One and only one condition would have brought Gerald home so early—a new depression. His depressions are as severe and as invariably recurrent as they are apparently incurable. "My sweet old Melancholia, my maiden aunt, my child, my baby Melancholia," I once heard him say, babbling his way out of the shock treatment that didn't help.

I knew what was wrong, but not why, never why, or why now—and one problem about living with someone who is depressed is that inevitably you think it has to do with you, your fault, although you are told that it is not. And I

knew exactly what I would find on entering the house: heavy Gerald immobilized, immobile, on the wicker settee in the entrance hall, unable to go comfortably into the living room, or upstairs to bed. Unable to leave the house, or the marriage, as I have thought that he must, sometimes, want to do.

He has explained to me how he feels, depressed. "As heavy as boulders," he has said. "I can't open my mouth, it's so heavy. Much less move." I can feel what Gerald feels—and can do nothing about it.

And there he was, slumped down, gray-faced, barely looking up as I opened the door and then closed it behind me. I went over and placed a light kiss on his forehead—the lightest kiss—but he flinched, a little.

"I'll call," I told him.

Something crossed his face; some shadow of relief, perhaps. Not hope.

The phone is in the kitchen. As I dialed, I thought, How immaculate it is, this room. How sterile. Could I paint it red? Would that help?

"Dr. Abrams, please," I said to the voice on the other end. "Right now, if I can." And then, "Hi, Ed. It's Laura. I'm bringing him over, okay?"

Passing Gerald in the hall, I prevented myself from touching his shoulder.

Upstairs, I packed his small bag: pajamas, toiletries, a sweater, one change of clothes.

I got him up and through the front door, and out to my car. I drove north this time, toward the Golden Gate Bridge. Marin. The small hospital in Larkspur. Yellow fog lights lined the approach to the bridge, and it was fogged in al-

ready—summer fog, gray and billowing between the dim masses of the headlands, and swirling below the bridge, obscuring the dangerous black water. Beside me, as far from me as possible, Gerald sat, heavy as cement and as unmoving.

I turned off the highway, past developments, shopping centers, schools, playing fields, jogging courses and a few small untouched areas of land—rough, with scattered small shabby houses.

Larkspur. The hospital is one-story, white, ranch style. It could be a motel, and there is even a swimming pool in back, for the more mobile, less desperate patients.

And there was Dr. Abrams, Ed, waiting, having recognized our car. Kind Ed, kind enough not to be hearty, or to pretend that this was a social occasion. He knows, too, not to touch Gerald. Gerald allowed me to help him from the car, and then for an instant Ed touched my hair; he must know that I love touching, any gesture of affection.

Although, driving over, I had not been aware of it, had not thought of weather, I now noticed that the day was still clear in Larkspur, a blue summer day, just fading.

The checking-in process was of course familiar, and minimal. We left Gerald in his room, and Ed Abrams and I walked toward my car, and although in a way we like each other, and surely wish each other well, we had little to say.

"Well, let's hope it won't be for very long this time," he said.

"Yes."

Then, remembering some prior conversation, he asked, "How was the teaching? You liked it okay?"

"It went pretty well. A couple of the students were terrific."

"Oh, good. Well, all done with that now?"

"Yes. Done. Today was my last day."

"Well, good."

I backed out of the driveway and headed back toward the almost invisible bridge, and the darkened, fog-shrouded city.

In Cambridge, a long time ago, I thought Gerald was so beautiful, so dark and thin, so elegant, so elusive that I used to trail him around the Yard: me, a silly undergraduate with a crush on a future architect who was studying at the School of Design. We had met a couple of times—I had seen to that, quizzing everyone I knew who might know him, and finally coming up with a girl with a brother who knew Gerald. But Gerald hardly had time to speak to me.

But there I always was, in St. Clair's, out of breath from following him on my bike but saying hello; and in Hayes-Bickford, or the Wursthaus. Late one afternoon I found him alone, on the steps of Widener, and with my heart in my mouth I asked him to a dance at Whitman Hall, where I lived. He came late, stayed a very short time and left, with an abstracted frown. But the next time he saw me, standing in his way, again on the steps of Widener, he asked me up for tea, in his room, at Dunster House, and instead of tea we drank a lot of gin, and fell into bed together—for me, the consummation of a major passion; for Gerald, the onset of a habit. I stayed on in Cambridge for a master's in English literature while Gerald finished his degree, and we married; we moved out to San Francisco and we bought and remodeled the house near Twin Peaks, and we had no children. Gerald began to be a considerable success. And sometimes to be sad, then seriously depressed. Recurrently. Ed Abrams says that with age the cycle may well lengthen, and the se-

verity of each attack will decrease. A sort of flattening out of the curve. But age could take forever; I'm not sure I have that much time.

Driving back to the city, across the bridge, I did not think in symbolic terms about my re-entry into dark and fog; I hardly had to, having made that trip from Marin so many times before. I thought about supper, a glass of wine and getting into bed to watch TV, which I don't do with Gerald at home. And in a cautious way I wondered how long it would be this time.

As always, I made it home perfectly all right. But once I was inside, the idea of cooking anything in the impeccable kitchen was so discouraging that I just nibbled on a piece of cheese—a halfhearted graying mouse.

I even thought, in a lonely way, of calling Larry Montgomery, for a friendly conversation, God knows, not meaning to proposition him. But I am not really sure that we are friends.

I washed and got into bed. I turned on the TV, and I watched one foolish thing after another—until, at about ten, a play was announced, with an actress I liked, and so I propped myself up for that.

And then, Seth, there you were. A great deal older, of course, even older than I am now, curls all gone gray but the same narrow, unmistakable green eyes. It was absolutely extraordinary. In the play, Seth, you were a workman, a sort of handyman, which I suppose is one of the things you could become. The actress, funnily enough, was a schoolteacher. After a tremendous, wrenching love affair, you gave each other up, you and she, because you were married, and responsible. But, Seth, the resemblance was so striking that I thought, Oh, so that is how he will look: gray, slightly overweight but *strong*, with a brilliant smile, and those eyes.

I waited for the credits at the end of the play; for all I knew, your father could be an actor, that actor—I know so little about you—but he had another name, and besides, he looked more like you than like a possible father.

In any case, that sight of you was strangely cheering to me. I turned off the TV and contented myself with visions of my own.

I imagined a time when you will really be as old as that man, and as gray—when, much older still than you, I can say to you, "Ah, Seth, at last you begin to lose your looks. Now you are merely handsome, whereas before you were so beautiful that I could hardly look at you." We both will laugh.

And at that time, your prime and our old age, Gerald's and mine, Gerald will be completely well, the cycle flat, no more sequences of pain. And maybe thin again. And interested, and content.

It's almost worth waiting for.