

TOR'S LAKE

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“For I will plunge deep in the pleasure still
Of summoning the spring-time with my will,
Drawing the sun out of my heart, and there
With burning thoughts making a summer air.”

—Baudelaire

To my anti-Florida editor

“That he’d love her until death.”

—Marguerite Duras

“Here, I’ll show you how it works. You tell me if it’s self adjoint.”

—Richard Feynman



CHAPTER 1

Why I took the call is another matter altogether. Why was I called? Mistress Isis was stuck in Grand Junction. The windshield had cracked in flight over the Rockies. The backup plane from Denver was on the ground. She was on the tarmac loading.

Why I was called? They were desperate. They? The XX Lite Lash Society on the Monday of Pride Week—seven minutes after nine of a night that should have been mine alone till the next nine, the nine in the following morning—they needed a replacement guest Empress in fifty-three minutes. How long was I needed? Till She got there. What else? I'd be filling in two hours max, ballpark estimate: unlimited drinks, two five-minute breaks, honorable working conditions, all contacts verbal and visual. Guaranteed. Wear something interesting. Bring a sharp tongue. Use it. How desperately was I appreciated? They threw in an assistant. She'd pick me up and drop me off.

Isis! We'd met at a themed garden party—Poets and Pinups, as I recall. I was twenty-two—back when we'd put a few years on our teens, suspended belief and disbelief in grown-up answers, and come through making a living, qualified to overstate the case for poetry. What longings and rhythms had been released in the harsh realities of our lives! Say something personal, perhaps false on its face, but keep it brief. Unleash a telling example. In other words, introduce our fundamentally cool selves. I remember she was next to last. The timing itself was the rhythm, the cornerstone of the performance. The rest of the day was a lingering pat on her back. She carried at fifteen a fifty-thousand line of credit slung over a shoulder, the vibrant vital center of a girl intelligentsia. But sure, on those mean streets of Marin who didn't? Who wasn't? Six months before the day she voted, she had that first tussle with her future, no

holds barred. What did she want that she couldn't have was not the right question. The trick was to invent one's ambitions in the crazy rules of fate. Feel the real and the free enterprise chemicals flowed, shuttling a wild presence through her blood, a shrewd, undecipherable throb doing the dream work—a rising pitch. The moment of truth. At seventeen and a half she was on—an image of glorious debauch was thrown out into the school's reflecting pool. She'd be the world's first all-dark corporation, a billionaire dominatrix.

Oh, yes, she said, it is one of those semantic lotto expressions with mucho zeros. You can laugh. And she laughed with us, the Marin hayseed with the hare-brained ambition. What she couldn't be would be her life. To that goal she was the consummate professional. She'd really have to punch a clock. But a billion? What did it mean? It seemed too round a number to aim for. She had an old-fashioned disposition for spreadsheets. To make one B you had to aim for three Bs. She worked out what three billion demanded of each day in the New career. To keep her show on the road, she'd need to reach a plateau in five years where money doubled money every three years thereafter. She'd have to say her farewells to bourgeois convention—she'd have to skip college. She couldn't afford to become a disciple of Peter Drucker. She'd have to be her own best financial adviser—who could she trust in Marin?—and she couldn't put a foot wrong. She traced the origins of the word *ogilopelliptical* for us in comic doggerel. We all smiled. She dedicated a few lines to nature's beauty. But coming at the end, when no one doubted our debt to something or other—we had not woken to a false dawn—it seemed like a paean to wealth, a cheerful fable that money grows on trees. We all clapped.

The Great American Success these days is a branch of learning. Where someone looked deeper and saw further and organized the dust in a frontier air is a Name, a marker in our epic story. Genius. We talk of ourselves. But the Fetish of Solitude that wards off the something that was suffered, that had stamped our past in its humiliation, needed its masks. The sexual industry had long ago converted the eroticism of mixed emotions into a form of knowing. Isis was the name at the high

TOR'S LAKE

3

end of it, but the achievement has never completely matched my picture of what Isis was capable of. On that midsummer sloping lawn the power of voice had demanded our attention. On that stage she had stepped on a scale of opening night legends. It hadn't knocked her witless. She was no Janis Joplin. I didn't see that she needed to be loved, not enough that she'd openly acknowledge it had to come from a human. A life plan, well designed, sufficed. An integrated personality would take care of the soul. So when I heard the name *Isis*, I guess I took the gig to be there when she arrived, curious to get another glimpse of that gift she had, whatever they call it.

I suppose there's no such thing as what the phrase *in due course* describes, but events did happen to where, well, she made it possible for me to get married.



"No more sweet Mistress Elizabeth. You'll be sorry when She gets here."

I couldn't say that enough. I had the dressage poised in midair when the buzz at the windows meant anything could happen now, and the next thing of any significance was—

She was facing me shoulder high, set down in some immaculate landing like a glorious breeze off the Isle of Capri had blown through the door and fluffed a curl in her hair. She was a dark-complexioned, neatly proportioned hourglass five-five in heels, boyish in a way that didn't mean anything except she might have played golf in a boy's haircut, a silver-tongued stickler for grammatical precision that let her put a lot of just plain folks into a high-sounding kink delivered in quick physical combinations. It all came with the body. You couldn't steal any pointers.

Isis flipped a switch. Nobody looked more like triumph, and I wondered if this cracked windscreen wasn't a well-laid plan from beginning to end. You make your own stardom, though, and she raised her fist and made thunder.

I caught the act a moment. I could bear witness. They each come along once. You couldn't catch their arrests and enchants unmoved.

There was a younger generation out there in the crowd, with all the familiar animation I had known in the past, willfully ignorant of that ecstasy button she used on them. I caught the indulgent, feverish worship in a lazy, quiet awe. Then I left.

I got my whip kissed and used it to sign a few good-byes. It would have been tacky to go home as the number One arrived, so I and a back-up guest empress, a professional of many seasons, Lili, mingled in the mudroom with a man sponging a naked chest with a pair of pants. He remarked it was Tuesday and I conceded it felt like Tuesday. I couldn't think of any better word to describe how the possibilities of the moment were conjoined waiting for the water closet to vacate.

A French maid had not quite stood out as noteworthy in the kitchen, but I'd noticed her. She had been rinsing and inverting glasses in a holding sink. She was exposed in the rear, with a praiseworthy coating of welts. A cane clipped to a belt had a catch with a miniature lock. The sign on her back advertised a ninety-nine-cent blob of buttocks, the going return on a stroke if you bought a turn of the key. A dollar went a long way in her life.

The maid had been removing empties through a door at the end of the counter. Wine boxes were stacked deep into an outdoor patio. Through a gap I'd glimpsed cleaners on steps that went up and a mop and bucket on steps that went down. I'd been sipping consistently but still calculating soberly. I told Lili I was getting all this waiting in line behind me. I wanted to know where those steps went.

A glass and shoes in a thumb and three fingers freed up a hand. I couldn't find the switch, so I waved air around in the dark ahead where I was sticking my nose. A train of thought was already in motion when my foot slid along a landing where the stairs became a pair of stairs in opposite directions. Back from where I had started the Bay was to my left; I had turned to the right, so the stairs that now made a U-turn could end at a door that might be expected to open on an above-it-all appreciation of the City. This was correct. I found a knob that turned and pushed it against faint, powdery color into a loud, clear starlight. At the long end of the room the City sprinkled a thousand bits of itself on

TOR'S LAKE

5

a colossus of double doors as if delivering me to the ultimate destination beyond, a temple of life eternal—

It would have been that if I hadn't seen it a dozen times in the week. But the East Bay from over here on the heights, I still didn't know what to do with that string of pools of soft light that forever caught a new place to prostrate one's thoughts in and imagine why the stuff keeps drawing me back.

The doors to a patio were best sellers in the Etruscan tomb era. They made sure the outside stayed where it belonged.

I shifted my drink to a table and went for the handles, a couple of bruisers. The release mechanism gathered energy and gave it all back at once. A metal click snapped my hand like a punch. The doors took some power and a steady back lean to get underway, but once moving they pulled into the room on their own. I had to put on the brakes to keep from contributing to something stupid. Two vases were on the floor sort of where you'd put a sofa for a doorstep—but not a floral arrangement.

Behind the sofa there was a slippery rustling of fabric, a wisp of satin finding its way into my awareness. The rhythmic shifting sound wasn't my imagination. I turned my head and attempted to sight a vague presence of moving parts giving a restless shape in the dark itself. It wasn't trying to hide or communicate. It just kept disclosing itself.

I twisted an ear, suddenly packing body armor in a predatory attention.

"Who's there?" I demanded. No answer. I got tough. "It's a good time to answer my question."

A woman's voice expressed the opinion my timing was even better. "My glass is down there. Don't turn the light on. You don't need it. Feel the table leg and inch your hand over. Freshen it up if you would, please. My bag is ... just a second ... here ... I think this is a fifty. It's in the glass. Keep it. Scotch. Ice. Please."

The satin got underway again. Then the satin was quiet, and I heard instructions uttered above a whisper but hardly to me. It seemed the woman wasn't alone. A matter-of-fact *yes* set off a string of coordinating

yeses, a precisely tuned feedback used for the purpose of guiding a partner. She exhaled briskly on whatever was successful; in between I heard indications of contact friction. I'm no trained expert on the variability of what you hear during these experiences, but I was getting weak in the knees helping her out with a corkscrew of body English. I tensed a little where the rubber hit the road for me and silently wished her the best, not hearing that *ooohhhh* where it should have been.

I had to sit. I stepped onto a tile deck. It was a cool, rounded footing, bank squares with humped centers. Pewter lanterns dangled on chains. Chains dangled off a cavernous depth that floated in hatched, ribbed beams. It was worth some caution stepping around spots where lanterns would fall when hooks made mistakes. I eased a toe around a massive square seating arrangement. Two wood chairs, not facing each other, were angled for what enough money bought you on the street up here. A decorator had gussied up the sightlines with a geometric tilt that zigged past a tree in a pot. I poked cushions on a green chinchilla lounge and saw a way to kid myself: "Yeah, I could put up with this."

At the corners of the deck were two life-sized Greek athletes bathed in birthday alabaster. They weren't bothering with who put the tree where it wrecked the view. Heads twisted on sinewy necks, they seemed on some vigil, alert to lights descending over where they thought the Oakland airport ought to be.

I was reminded I wasn't alone. A cellophane crinkle preceded a beating on wood, a metallic click, and then a flash of light. She pulled her next breath and spat a bit, tonguing like a trumpet player.

"You look Nordic." It sounded addressed to me. I let it go. She apologized in a voice that carried too much nonchalance not to contain some sincerity.

"It's a fact, sorry. I mean, it's a fact you look Nordic. Maybe you're not. One is entitled to make reasonable assumptions. You look like a server where I grew up. The blondes were poor. We were good tippers."

There was a long drag and a long blow; a muted tinkle on glass sounded like ash dirtying a good fifty.

"Cut it out!" Three tough words, not to me, but somebody could

TOR'S LAKE

7

lighten up. A stifled cough liberated rapid fluctuations of puffing and more ash flicking.

"We're done," she said, not to me.

"Sorry for the lack of consideration." This was to me, as in *some scenes are never intended to be witnessed*. As if you owe the accidental audience.

"I'm going through a change of life episode. I have a business in Newport. I had. I'm in the process of reorganizing in San Francisco. I'm in the market for a name. This fellow I met, the one next to me, he's a CEO in an entertainment agency. He's showing me around during Pride Week. He said he's gay. Makes no difference to him. There's always practice makes perfect. He can make it three times an hour. He saves his grand release for later. He's good. I can send him over to you. I mean, he knows where you live. You know what I mean. Not where you live, you know. So ... there you are ... so I invested in the kindness of strangers. That's my business: *The Kindness of Strangers*. Well. I released my staff in the middle of May. My accountant, I couldn't pay him. He couldn't make it with me anymore. Boom. Finito. I need a new name. What do you call the milieu these days? I don't know. I need some help picking that lock."

There was another cigarette routine and a snort of the type one uses on oneself, a nasty laugh as if at a predicament that is apt to be permanent. It's all you can do, laugh at it and quit waiting for something to happen, as it usually doesn't in a change-of-life evening spent renting bits of passion.

I kept my end up sipping.

"You sure are a cool customer," she said. "Then again, a woman who can't keep her mouth shut? Bad impression. I don't know. I guess you're being polite. I like to keep up communication. Is there a happy middle here? I suppose not. What do I care? I got my money out of the bank in time. And I shut my mouth about what I hear. My ex is doing time in Peru. He says it will all shake out."



A knuckle rapped from the direction of the door I'd come through at the top of the stairs. There was more rapping while the knob turned and then slow steps in a silence, twice as much silence as I'd expected. Lili spoke a bad word. She couldn't find the light or, like me, decided to leave be and let the existing light ripen.

She leaned on the forward stone balustrade. It was built for the ages. At the moment it was going on its hundred-year mark. She was gripping all of them. Plenty of time passed, the kind in which simple decisions become plagues that hang fate over some inconsequential decision.

"I smelled smoke," she said.

I thought about swinging a leg over the side to get a look into her eyes. I only thought about it. I moved a hand. "Yes, Doctor."

She whistled at a light in the heavens worth coming up here for. She got her bottom on the edge of a chair and leaned forward, elbows on knees. She pinched her nostrils. "You up to talking? A man followed you."

I sighed. "My night. He didn't find me."

"I stopped him," she went on. "He wanted to know when you'd be available."

"For what? The man-animal act downstairs is on break?"

"He's checking out," she said. The statement was sharp, like she had taken a whack at me with it.

I stuck my hand short of her calf; she caught a fingertip. "What's bothering you?" I took another finger.

She raised her hands defensively. Two thumbs agitated her lower lip. I sat there reading her expression for what she saw in mine.

"What does he want?" I asked simply.

"He's well dressed," she said. I looked at her, eyes wide, asking, *meaning what?*

"He met a woman. He says, a Dominant. She tied him up and called his wife. She told the wife where to find him. He wanted to know if you could talk to her. He would like an apology."

"This is important?" in a clear voice.

"I'm just telling you what's waiting at the door. I told him not to come in. He promises he'll go away if that's your answer."

TOR'S LAKE

9

“What’s wrong with approaching Isis?” It’s the best I can suggest. She’s the one on salary.

“Who’s the Domme?” I asked.

“He said Prescott. No name I know. I asked more than once. At a funeral service a woman sat next to him. They met outside and kept talking.”

“A Domme made him an offer ... after a funeral service?” I added, hardly quizzically.

His father died in March. He found a newspaper clipping of a woman who died in December. It was in his father’s shirt pocket. It gave the date of a service in Marin. A second service would be here in the City—a remembrance of her life. He doesn’t know why he went. He thought his father intended to go.”

Lili looked at the finger stirring my drink and then at the darkness beyond. She ground out a laugh. “They discovered they had a common interest in bondage.”

“Quite a discovery at a service,” I commented. I caught her eye. The eye wandered like it’s after midnight. What to do? Do we jump?

“He has two older sisters and maybe a younger sister,” she said. “He says he can face his family if there is someone on his side. When he saw you it cheered him up.”

I got a nail into my scalp and drilled a little hole, a pointed reminder of what I needed not, like this mission of mercy.

“A few minutes now might go a long way,” she said.

“Ask him if he wouldn’t mind if you joined us. It’s a condition. And tell him ... ahh, skip it.”



Lili was a watery-eyed believer to many do-gooder organizations, an international pain alleviator. A request to meet a stranger off duty wasn’t something I was seeing new in my understanding of us. It was merely new tonight. You impose on a friend for justice and the American Way. She was willing to lose goodwill, respect, and degrees of latitude for the

quality of her judgment. She wasn't fighting for style points. It didn't matter from here on if I didn't return her calls. Judge not lest ye be judged.

Lili got him and followed him onto the patio, picked a path around me, and slipped to a corner without breaking communication. She leaned on two hands in reverse on the balustrade. I was sitting all the way up.

He was dressed for a frumpy funeral and nowhere else. His glasses frames were marbled brown. That was it for not-black. He had lost weight; the suit flopped like a blanket drying out over a railing. He spoke directly to my eyes with a trace of something in his eyes that I had no power to reference. He mentioned his father.

I said to skip the father. He managed to make it look like he had. No sooner was he off the subject than he was right back.

He started in on a bunch of superfluous history that went with the upright man he evidently was in the presence of women. His name was Geoffrey Godwin Dilworth, the first with a soft G, three syllables, all enunciated on rising octaves when his mother spoke his name. Godwin came to him through his mother's side. In several regions of Massachusetts the Godwins persist, the declining center of family branches that still attempt an annual gathering. He had been a tax preparer in Santa Maria. He had retired ahead of schedule to the city of his birth when his father was dying.

I kept from nodding, a habit in interviews: let the framework go up without reinforcements, a tactical hazard currently. He put it up in a breath, a concise self-portrait, nothing unexpected. It was an odd selection, but they're all odd.

"It's a lot to explain meeting someone you might never meet again?" I said. "More than they want to know."

"I'm trained to gather all information, what belongs and what does not."

"Before we go on, I need a guarantee, Mister Dilworth. Can you accept my judgment at face value if I decide I don't want to become involved, regardless of whether I believe I could be of any assistance?"

TOR'S LAKE

11

"If you'd like I'll go now."

"We have an agreement?"

"We have."

"All right." I was trying out a dead calm, exuding an appearance of cogitation. "You put yourself in the hands of a stranger. You ran into trouble. How did the bondage arise?"

"I was bragging. I have a life interest in escape. You could have as much rope as you wanted and one minute to tie me up. I'd be out in a minute."

I felt genial. "You challenged her with this *nobody can hold me line?*"

"I wouldn't say that."

"You said it to me."

"I mean I wouldn't say it to someone ..."

"...except during a funeral service. You said *you*. You don't mean me?"

"Anyone."

I gestured, expressing an inconsistency. "She called your wife. Did she hang around the hotel till your wife arrived?"

"Tor's Lake? No. I know where your question is leading. Why didn't I untie myself?"

"Mister Dilworth ..."

"I fell asleep."

"While you were tied up?"

"When I awoke I was painted. There was no polish in the room. There never is."

I worked the top button of my blouse through a loop and left the hand in contact.

"Mister Dilworth, this Prescott who tied you up and called your wife, you might have pissed her off. Incidentally, I don't know of a Prescott."

"I should level with you."

I looked around for something that might get in his way.

"I would like to be your client."

I zipped an eyeful past Lili suggestive of her jumping in whenever.

Lili ignored the suggestion, exercising the bystander's privilege at full value.

"Where in our discussion did this occur to you?" I asked.

"When I saw you. I knew instantly. I knew if I left tonight without asking you, I never would—or I might not get a second chance to meet you. I wasn't invited to the party. I live over there." He pointed at terraced housing across Union, another stack of bird-watching condos.

"There is no Dominant, then?" I said.

"She said she was."

"I was about to ask you a question." I waved a hand past my lips. "I forget."

I shook my head to reorganize some muttering. "I forget the other question, too."

"It will come to you," he said confidently.

"Did she ask for money?"

"No."

Lili got that look out of me again. Lili might or might not have something to jump in with. She was keeping it out of the way.

"Mister Dilworth ..."

"You won't accept me as a client."

"I do bondage, yes, occasionally, but it's not an interest I advertise. If you were able to escape I would be impressed."

"But you wouldn't be interested?"

"Yes, I would not be interested."



Lili had a shoe loose. She had a finger at an arch as if reproaching a stone with mature consideration. We all needed some sleep. The chat needed a closer, a round-off on the Dilworth saga. I was thinking of a way of asking him to take a step back when I heard the Voice.

The Voice bellowed: "He's a schmuck! I'll tell you that!"

I didn't look at Mister Dilworth. If he'd quacked or crowed rooster-like perhaps I would have—as a response to his person, something in

TOR'S LAKE

13

it I'd acquired from the impact of his nature. The remark hadn't come from the other room; it hadn't conceivably come from anywhere.

Lili and I had forty-odd years of experience of cues that hint ever so suddenly of the nightmare, kill or be killed. In our glance was an exchange of *what the fuck* now, as if every reaction we had prepared for the unexpected in the business of greeting the unexpected was now rushed into the service of our claws. She got off her hands real speedo and crouched as if meeting Dilworth in a dark alley.

The Voice was otherworldly, as if the plant had spoken. A fantastic evolutionary capacity for words had been transferred from a carnivorous plant through him. I looked at the plant. I looked at Dilworth. Where the looks intersected was the Voice.

"Who?" Lili hooted.

"Geoff," the Voice said, puffing the name into an insult in itself. He leaned into his own voice, making sure of the line he was drawing. "Who else are we talking about?"

"Who are you?" Lili mobilized a karate posture, entertaining whoever it was.

"Who am I?" He placed his hand on his chest. "Who have you been talking to?"

Hiyo, Silver. Every client throws you a chance to earn your pay once in a while.

Yeah, but Dilworth wasn't a client. This Dilworth wasn't exactly Dilworth either. The suit wasn't a new suit, but I looked it over again. The life in it an instant earlier had been no more no less than limbs pinned under a ton of sackcloth. Dilworth hadn't even wiggled. This guy was popping his buttons.

"If you don't mind?" Lili shouted.

"I didn't say? That's a new one. Lance Beall. I'll wager I said."

"Every other hour you change your name?" Lili demanded.

"Nobody's changing names." Some baffled wrinkles jumped up and down in his forehead. What had gone wrong in him was running deep.

He lifted a chair, swiveled a three-sixty for exercise, and said, "This

looks good.” He planted the chair where it looked tough, sat in it sideways, and stuck his nose over my glass.

“Who was drinking this? Moi?” A foot was doing a windshield wiper while he sloshed liquor. He swallowed big and mimicked some fire breathing—the throat fighting back. He looked at the glass like it was going over the balcony but considered all in all, “It’s nothing to discard.”

He patted the lounge. “Rest ’em here, young lady,” he said to me and incidentally to the other lady. “You too.” He breathed some more fire and caught us up.

“Lance! Didn’t I say? I’m out here for a week from Boston. End of June I say to myself, pay a little money, take a break. Give the ladies a treat. Treat myself. I’m hardly unpacked when a cloud goes over. I meet Geoff. To these meetings with my brother there is no end. What I’m thinking is too obvious to detain us. Summarizing, nobody talks to him. If not me, who? I’ll invite him to a party. Let him tag along. Get him out of his rut. So we arrive, and I see Elizabeth here, a nice-looking pro—keeps herself up, nice headlights—and I tell him, introduce yourself. Talk to her. Not that he will. He’s a drip. I can’t do everything for him. So I turn him loose. I’m surprised he got up the nerve.”

“Where is he now?” Lili asked, a waste of snotty.

“It’s not my turn to watch him. I’m on vacation. I’ve carried that weak sister on my back forever. It gets old. I have a life. Did he mention that? No. Well, if you see him, let him know I have a life. Do I care where he is?”

He turned to me abruptly. “For the record, what does he do for you?”

A dry crawling established a home under my hair. “Let me take care of that,” I said abruptly.

“I’ll tell you what he’s doing. He’s painting his nails. Then he puts the bottle up his ass and turns the house upside down looking for it. Imagine, walking around searching for a bottle up your butt. I would stop and say, hey, my ass feels funny. Not Geoff. He was always that way. He’s not a bad guy, but he treats dirt better than his own life. From here on I have no time for him—”

He looked around.

TOR'S LAKE

15

“—did I mention he paints his privates?”

Then a quick witticism from the other side of the sofa: “Ask him for an ID!”

Lance lost control of his Boston rhythms. His syntax experienced its first jolt: “Humping fuck?”

I liked the construction, a second-order logic of more in the sentence than intended.

Up till now the transformation had been a flip-flop—a man starving to a man gluttoned. His duality had been a whole confusion, a solid thing but broken, just barely not dead. The question jerked him. It took him to a place he couldn't recognize, a man with more than some real difficulties. The bit-of-an-ass act was chipped. For an instant he had an actual face.

Another bit of cogitation from the dark: “Is this for real?”

Lance banged my drink on the glass, demanding clarification. “You're holding out on me.” A dirty accusation. “I thought there was the three of us. Is that a live woman?”

“I throw my voice,” Lili snapped.

Lance looked in the right direction. His face suddenly could do a conventional confusion. “How many people are here?”

“I hesitate to count just yet,” I said. The force of the remark had no force to start with. I didn't try to bring it back.

Little Miss Wisdom yelled to the nub of the scene, “Ask him how many times he votes?”

Conversation from nowhere didn't faze Lance now. He had found his gear with faraway voices. “Don't worry your booty, lady.” To me, “Let's you and me ignore her.”

“She's nobody,” I said. Lance glowed.

“I like your tweet. Up front. Don't let the cheap seats get in your ear. I'm at the Fairmont. I'm easy to like. Everyone likes me. Both of you are cordially invited.”

He jerked a thumb at the other room. “Not her. We'll order up room service. Wear ourselves out. Sleep late. Roll around getting ready for dinner. I'm ready already, Betty.”

If I relaxed my shoulders and said yes, I wondered who next would appear. Would I get Geoff back?

"Hold on," I said, for the instant interested in just why Geoff had given up his right to exist. "You and Geoff go way back?"

Lance licked a lip at that one. "I get depressed thinking about it."

"So let's not think about it," I said. "He said his father died."

"It's too depressing."

I hadn't moved a muscle. It was a plus in my favor that I had a run-of-the-mill nod going now, like standard social grease in the presence of a well person.

"Geoff was at a service for a woman?" I asked.

"Sally Alice Somebody," he said as if an innocuous distraction.

"She died in December. Where?"

"No clue."

"But you know her name."

His leg had reached the lounge. He recrossed his legs, taking an informational posture that struck up an intention to cut me in on something. It felt like a yearning.

"I guess I do. Geoff must have mentioned it."

"He met a woman at the service? She lived in Boston?"

"I haven't gotten around to committing the phone book to memory."

That bit of whimsy gave him a laugh. He ran a finger over an eyebrow, intimating a gesture in a man who might, let us say, be a bit too fussily precise for us. "It's possible."

"He said Prescott." In his expression of contempt I heard a yes. I let it alone, but the question was running loose in my look.

His fingers curled. The hand had lost patience. We were dying in captivity, shredding an all-too-short life. The horrors of details.

"Let me tell you something about Geoff, since you're so interested. I've done everything for him you could ever ask of a human to do for another human. I covered up for him ...I took the blame."

His middle finger located a bone in the center of his chest. He got a hollow sound out of it. Between thumps he got a gripe out of it.

TOR'S LAKE

17

"He got off scot-free. I got the beatings. He never once lifted his finger for me."

He paused. It seemed to have come to a subtle distinction I could never understand and he could never explain. One tries nevertheless.

"You want to learn the hard way he's a damn liar, go ahead."

He had assembled in the invisible shed of hidden parts the urbanity of a Boston man about town in a voice old in Bible-thumping minister years. Then the suit experienced a snap and shake, and Lance recovered his medium:

"Let's get you and me over to the Fairmont hot and lathered. I'll start remembering things better."

"Lili." I left it at that. I was calling it quits.

To my right was the Bay Bridge, a hinged structure that was being examined for where a hinge might slip a mooring. The taxpayers were getting soaked. I set my face for understanding something that was holding the land together.

