

I TOOK THE CATS and flew up to the island. All the time I was getting ready to go, packing, neatly, like a lady, I felt frozen. As if the trembling had frozen into a single shrieking note, high-pitched on a violin, so high that no one could hear, only the mad dogs of the universe.

And I moved calmly, neatly, precisely, like a lady, a small poised smile on my face, cold with that shriek of terror. I was putting myself in his hands. I was going to his territory. I was going beautiful, a sacrifice.

‘You can’t destroy me,’ he had said. ‘I’ve been destroyed by experts.’

I rounded up the cats and put them, yowling, into the big Mexican basket. I put my typewriter in the case. I took enough paper for the last story.

The big plane flew low over the water and we came in. This was the end of the world but there was still another plane to catch. When the man opened the luggage compartment, Peter spat at him. He had gotten out of the Mexican basket. Sally and Lolly were still inside, huddled, afraid, frozen. But Peter was enormous, puffed out to twice his size with indignation. ‘I’ve got a tiger in my tail,’ said the man and everyone laughed. I laughed too, and gathered Peter up, stroking him, saying, ‘It’s going to be all right.

It's all right, it's going to be all right.'

I found a taxi. He seemed to know all about it. We drove to the sea. I went down the ramp as if it were the most normal thing in the world. There was a man in a hut, at the bottom of the ramp. A little hut with calendars and a telephone. I hired the man to fly me to the island, as if it were something I had done every day of my life. I had just locked the door and walked away, leaving all my things, the fake Sarukhan rugs, the Renoir reproduction, all my stories, the bills that were going to come through the mail slot. I had walked away, as other people did, as Mik had done all his life. A shriek of freedom in my head. So this was what it was, freedom. To walk away and leave everything behind, to go to a man and say, Kill me.

A week before I had phoned him. It was a radio telephone and he had to take the call in the cookhouse. Everyone in the cookhouse could listen in. Everyone on all those lonely islands could listen in.

'It was all sound and fury, signifying nothing,' I said. But he didn't understand.

'What? What?' he said, his voice strange and crackling through the lost northern air.

'I'm not pregnant,' I said. And everyone heard. He was humiliated.

The men went into the forest and the women stayed in the compound. It was forbidden to go into the forest if you were a woman. Once I climbed the road into the forest, the cats leaping in and out of the trees beside me, running ahead and then dashing back, suddenly elemental, or following me, as dogs do, then rushing away again, their tails fluffed absurdly, scuttering back to the forest and leaping at me, the prey, arched-back, stiff-legged, doing the sideways daring dance of Siamese. I walked up into the forest

until I saw them, the men, in their great yellow machines, grunting and roaring, tearing at the earth, ripping and gouging. I hid behind a tree and watched them, men alone in their secret world, and I was afraid. Men engaged in their mysterious rites, tearing great holes in the earth.

The ground shook beneath them. I felt the shudder in the tree I was hiding behind. Like creatures from some fantastic world, the men moved, grunting, laborious, in metal helmets and thick boots. No one human could have such large feet, it was impossible.

But that was later. Now I was going to the island, I was putting myself into his hands, great thick hands, hands that grasped you and brought you down, hands like weapons. Not fists. Nothing that looked like that could be called 'a fist.' A fist is small, with knuckles, the bones shine whitely through the skin. Thin and delicate. Mik's hands were weapons.

'You can't destroy me,' he had said. 'I've been destroyed by experts.'

Sometimes at night I cry God, God, and before my mind can stop it, He comes and holds me. Over each nipple is a tattoo: one says *Cream* and the other says *Coffee*.

Later, that day in the forest, I crept away, unseen. I went back to the compound and had tea with the boss's wife. She made doilies.

'How do you get them to stand like that?' I said. It was all mysterious to me, the world of women. Women who wait in compounds for men. I belonged nowhere.

'You starch them,' she said.

They were curved and bowed into elaborate arches and scallops, and they were everywhere, on the backs of the chairs, on the back of the sofa, on the arms, on the radio, on the side tables, everywhere. In their centres were ceramic fish or ashtrays, bowls and figurines. They said 'Campbell River, B.C.' or 'Victoria, B.C.'

But now the little plane is taking off. Inside it is wired. The chair I am sitting on is actually wired to the floor. Peter is yowling in the back. Lolly is mewling plaintively. Sally is stoic, resigned. I think, Held together with baling wire, just as the books have promised. This is 'baling wire,' and I am delighted to meet it at last. You never meet a brickbat, for instance.

'But what is a brickbat?' I said, nineteen and clever, all those years ago.

The old Marxists looked at me with scorn. But they never told me.

The world below us stretches deep and green and blue, miles of forest and sea and mountains. We thud through the great empty sky, and the white and the blue and the dark green ignore us. The man beside me is chewing a match. He drives the plane as if it were a car, as if it were nothing, as if every day he took someone like me to the island to be killed.

The wings go up on one side and down on the other. My stomach lurches, as if my body still cares for itself, as if it can still remember, and I am amused, as one is at a child who cries out in the dark. 'There, there, it's all right,' but the child too will die, one way or another.

Like a swallow, we come down toward the inlet. The forest rises to meet us, alerted now. The sun glints sharply through the glass and the man curses, ducks his head. I am wearing my grandmother's wedding ring. And here we are, an insect of wood and metal, moving calmly through gentle ripples to the dock.

Mik comes down the path to meet us. But he was not waiting. He must have heard the plane circling, but he is not waiting for us. He comes down the path now that I am on the dock. The man with the match hands out the typewriter, the Mexican basket, the suitcase.

Mik is filthy. Unshaven. Dressed in unfamiliar khaki and great

tan boots. Even his face is grimy, streaked with grease. I know. He is so like me. I know everything. He wouldn't clean up, he wouldn't shave, he would not come down to the dock when he heard the plane circling in the sky. How could he? If he shaved, if he cleaned up, if he came running down, it would not be me. It would be someone else. I would not have come.

I don't think he says anything to me. He goes 'Hunh!' and picks up the basket, typewriter, suitcase, managing them all easily. I don't hear the plane leave. The world is deephued with gold from the dying sun, gathering now into navy blue shadows. We go up the dock, up the path. The stones are sharp under my elegant brown shoes. Alligator shoes, very expensive, someone gave them to me. Who? Oh yes. Barney. She said, 'They hurt my feet.' They hurt mine too, but I am so pleased to be wearing size five.

My hair is long now. And I am thin. I am small and thin and elegant in expensive clothes and alligator shoes.

Mik moves silently a little ahead of me, thick and silent, not looking back. It is time for the sun to go down. Now we are passing a large open shed. A man is working there. A Japanese. Caught in the last golden flash like a man on the stage. He straightens up, sees us, does a double-take.

Mik laughs. His great thundering laugh.

The first time I ever saw Mik, he did a double-take too, but then it was on purpose.

It is comical, this double-take, as if the Japanese has meant to do it, as if he saw at a glance the joke about us. But he hasn't meant it, he has just done it.

We have to cross a log bridge to get to the house. And the house itself is on logs, almost in the bed of the stream, only feet away from the lagoon. It is in deep shadow now, the house. I am to learn it is in deep shadow all the time. Morning, noon, and night. From

the mountains and the forest. In the lagoon, jellyfish float lazily. Like blobs of semen slowly disintegrating.

Mik says, 'You can't swim there. They get on you.'

There is tarpaulin on the floor. Bleached white. Mik must have poured gallons of Javex on it, but he says, 'No, Dutch Cleanser.' It is powdery beneath my shoes.

'I chunked the joint out,' he says.

There is a door. I can see the small dark room. But I don't go in.

This room has a large wooden table and a wood stove. Ornate. Glistening blue-black from some special polish he has used. It has taken him every night for a week to get the house ready, and still he didn't believe I would really come.

One wall is lined with open shelves. On the shelves are cans of food. Pork and beans. Meat balls. Spaghetti. Salmon. Cabbage rolls in tomato sauce. Ravioli. Whole hams. Whole chickens. Hundreds of cans. I don't see French beans or even peas. No asparagus. No soup.

A kerosene lamp stands on the table.

Mik opens the Mexican basket.

The cats leap out. Lolly still kitten soft and white, tips of brown on her ears and her paws, the end of her tail. Peter crouches beneath the stove, massive, black, snarling. Sally looks for something to eat.

Mik takes me outside to show me how to get wood for the stove. He is establishing how it will be. He will make the fire up this time, but from now on I will make it up, as women in this world do. It is not my world anymore and he is letting me know. It is not my world where men politely make up unnecessary fires in unnecessary fireplaces. He shows me the round block of wood. He shows me the axe. He lets me try.

'Not like that!' He is disgusted. 'You'll cut your hand off.'

He makes up the fire, showing me how to bunch the newspapers first, how to lay the kindling, little fresh white slivers of wood, so clean and new.

And all the time he is silent, brusque and silent, as if this were nothing. As if his woman came everyday to his house, to his world, as if I were just like the others.

He shows me how to light the wick in the lamp. You have to be careful or it will become sooty and then you must start all over again. And you can't just wash the lamp right away. It will be too hot and it will break.

Now we are out on the little porch at the back. Here is the toilet. 'Watch out for the octopus,' says Mik, grinning. Grinning now because it is dark and no one can see him grin at me.

'Are there octopuses?' I say. Not risking 'octopi' right now. Afraid of him.

'Come up and zonk right in there.' He laughs.

The world is very still. The sky has fallen, now there is only a great black hole.

There is a hole in the toilet too. You sit there and everything goes down into the stream. Toilet paper and excrement. Sanitary pads. Mik holds up the kerosene lamp and I can see it all below. Cans. A broken chair. An old mattress. Papers.

'Oh!'

'Well, I had to chunk the joint out,' says Mik. I have made him angry. 'There ain't no garbage collectors here.' Yes, he is angry with me. I can tell because he is pretending to be stupid. Double negatives. I know he is going to punish me.

We come back into the house. Mik shuts the door. He laughs.

It is hard to remember sex. It is hard to remember in words. You only remember the words and the lighted places, and yet everything real goes on in the dark. You do not use words in the

dark and so it goes. You do not say, as with baling wire, or brickbats, so this is fellatio. So this is cunnilingus. They are probably not spelled right, those words. I have just looked them up and the *Webster's* doesn't have them. Nor the *O.E.D.* Historical principles indeed.

With Ben, of course, I knew all about sex. Ben would know how to spell fellatio and cunnilingus. We had a good sex life, Ben and I. When we were to be married, Ben bought two books: *The Rhythm Method*, approved by the Pope, and *Married Love*, by an Anglican minister in Toronto. Beside our bed for years, on all the rented tables or shelves. The circular chart that was in a pocket in *Rhythm Method*, a darling envelope in the back of the cover. I mean, inside the cover. You turned the chart around until you got the proper slot. It was very complicated at first. Safe days were green for Go; unsafe days were red for Stop. Ben also practiced three other methods of birth control: French safes, norforms, and coitus interruptus. Simultaneously. Years later, when Edna said, 'But why didn't you trick him? Why didn't you just go ahead and get pregnant if you wanted to?' I didn't know what she meant. How could you trick a man into letting you get pregnant? How was it possible? Even if it were not morally indefensible, which of course it was, how?

We were all so free, so intellectual, so satisfied, we university girls. We never thought of asking real questions of each other. Do you have orgasms? Yes. So do I. Aren't we lucky.

I knew all about sex with Ben. Only with Mik, now, in the little dark room, do I know nothing.

There is a bed here. Low. On blocks of some kind. It is very damp. Musty. The flannelette sheets are damp, musty. The blankets are coarse. How did he get sheets? Mothballs. Smell of. He has my clothes off. The first time is just the punishment. It doesn't matter

that I came to the island after all. For a week he thought I might not, and therefore he must punish me. Mik doesn't rely on facts; he knows what is real.

He comes in me, bellowing like a bull, gripping my waist in his hands. Lifting me up to him, throwing back his head and hollering. We are deep in the forest. There is no one for miles, to the circle of the Arctic and beyond that, to the moon, to the great dark empty hole of the sky, like a wound in a dead man. A wound that doesn't bleed, dark and empty. That won't heal.

Over his right nipple, *Cream*; over his left nipple, *Coffee*.

Years later, I realize what the joke was. The joke was, must have been, if you asked for sugar. 'I've got another tattoo, baby,' or, 'I've another spigot?' Would he have said *spigot*? No. Mik never told me the rest of the joke. I never led into it. It seemed strange to me, a tattoo over each nipple. I didn't understand. I was embarrassed for Mik when we went swimming. It seemed terrible, to have signs, indelible, forever on your body, where everyone could see. Worse than varicose veins or even false teeth.

But of course we are not in the forest now. I only think that. We are in a house on logs, almost in the bed of a stream. A cluttered stream. A few feet away is the lagoon. Jellyfish float in the lagoon, dreamily, like fairy umbrellas, pale, translucent, deadly.

The mattress is on concrete blocks. It is damp in the little room but not so damp as our skins. I have always kept one part of my mind aware. With Ben, I mean. One part of me watched when I made love to Ben. I was in love with the way I looked. I was always on camera. With Mik it

With Mik it is

I am caught in the eye of a hurricane. All around the winds rage, in here it is still, calm, not a leaf stirs. It is terrible.

Was I subjugated? Yes, I suppose that is one word for it.

I am subjugated. Mik subjugates me. Dominates me. Makes me
Makes me

Yes. For him, the second time, there is victory in my coming. I don't come the first time. That is just the punishment. When I come he licks his finger and chalks up an imaginary mark on an imaginary wall. That's one. That's two. That's three. He is pleased, yes, but disappointed too, as if somehow this only proves me to be a slut after all. Not a lady.

I come without dignity, noisily, moaning on a damp mattress.

Ben licking his fingers. Lick lick, all the fingers of his right hand. Not the thumb? Yes, also the thumb. It was terrible to see him do it, before he started to draw. Before he picked up a scalpel. Because he would do it, too, before he began to 'make love.' Before he followed steps one, two, and three of *Married Love* by the Anglican minister from Toronto. Moisten the lips of the vulva with your fingers. Use Vaseline or prepare your fingers by moistening them with your saliva. By the time he entered me, I was finished. Boom. Shudder. Sigh.

'Did you come?'

'I'm sorry.' I used to say that at first. Later I didn't bother.

And he would withdraw and finish, his hand moving busily up and down beneath the covers, finish alone, his back to me, by himself. He didn't want to bother me, he said. 'I don't like to bother you, Vicky.'

Sometimes he teased me about being trigger-happy. That's what he called it. 'You're trigger-happy,' he would say. Men gain power over you in many ways. I would come as soon as he entered me, and then he could do it to himself, not bothering me. He was so considerate. I shall never forgive him.

Now, in the dark little room, Mik thumping me down, his great body tearing at me, gouging at the roots of my forest, the

great yellow machines, ripping and tearing in the sacred world of men. But of course this happens later. I don't think of the yellow machines now.

And now, now that he has determined my guilt, my defection, the innate capacity for betrayal in women, he gathers me to him, to his great thick strong chest. He says, 'I'm gonna pull you on like an overcoat. I'm gonna fuck you to death. You're gonna beg for mercy.' And laughter, subterranean, rumbles in his belly. I feel it rather than hear it.

I don't want to tell this.

I got asthma.

I hate it. Asthma is what they all get, silly, squalid, ridiculous people in novels. 'The middle-aged woman wheezed asthmatically up the tenement steps.' 'The asthmatic old man looked helplessly in the alley for returnable bottles.' Even elevators wheeze asthmatically. And lap dogs. 'Without makeup, she looked seventy. With makeup, and her asthmatic Pekinese under her arm, ninety.' 'Are you wheezy, Vicky?' the aunts would say. 'Do you feel wheezy?'

I have made it out to the tarpaulin in the big room. Away from the must and the damp and the mothballs. My mouth gaping like a mongoloid's, I rock back and forth, back and forth. Mik hears me, comes out, takes a look at me, and goes out the door. Thump crash bang. Over the log bridge. I can hear him. I feel shame. Oh god. But he has only gone to 'phone the doctor at Campbell River.' He tells him, 'Move your ass.'

He doesn't say, 'Are you all right?' He doesn't say, 'Do you want me to call the doctor?' He just does it. And the doctor comes, his sea plane thrumming through the cold misty air. Forty-five dollars. The precious vial of adrenalin. But it doesn't work. I am too far gone for adrenalin. Epinephrine. He is well equipped, this doctor. Ties my upper arm with rubber and shoots it in the vein. Whee. Leaves me a

syringe and a pack of needles. A bottle of adrenalin. In case.

'You should carry an emergency kit,' he says sternly. But I have thrown mine away. The little black plastic box. The note from Dr Munston saying: 'Mrs Ferris is under doctor's care and requires a hypodermic syringe for her asthma.' To prove I'm not a dope addict in public washrooms. I threw it all away, my needles, my syringe, my rubber-tipped vials, the day of the divorce.

Because that's when my marriage really ended. When I said to Ben, 'I'd rather do it myself.' Like the woman on the television ad: 'Mother, I'd rather do it myself!'

Ben boiling the syringe, the needles, bubble bubble in the poached egg pan. Drawing up my nightgown. Slowly, oh slowly, pushing it in. So many needles, so many holes, suppurating, festering, turning gold and green with pus. So that once, by accident, arranging me in the oxygen tent, the nurse sees my hips and says: 'My goodness. What's that?' Thinking I have some loathsome disease. And Dr Soronski coming, cross with me, saying, 'The nurse says you've something wrong with the hips.'

Pulling up my nightie, saying, 'Mrs Ferris!' Disgusted. As if I had done it on purpose. As if I did the asthma on purpose.

But now the sores are almost gone. Deep craters of the moon when they healed. The red sores, the black holes, the ones that won't heal, the green and gold, all gone.

I don't hear the doctor go. The world stands still. I am paralytic with ecstasy. White all over, frozen, still, in a deep wide river of pure oxygen. Still and deep and frozen. Blissful. Forgiven.

Ben, in Mexico, sits by my bed and watches me die with typhus. After, when the landlady has got the doctor, he says to me: 'But I didn't know what to do. You were lying there, you were just lying there. And you know I can't speak Spanish. I didn't know what to do.' The landlady tells me what you were doing.

'He is sitting there, like this,' and she imitates you, hands flopped helplessly down, palms up. 'And ...' She raises an imaginary glass to her mouth. She shakes her head. 'It is fortunate I arrive,' she says.

You sat there watching me spew puke and shit and you couldn't think what to do. 'I was frightened,' you say.

But Mik just radios Campbell River and tells the doctor to get his ass moving.

He goes off to the forest about ten o'clock, leaving me alone in my wide white world, cold and pure. He gathers on his great bulky windbreaker and he says, 'Well, I got to hump it. See ya.'

That night we make love again.

And every night, all those nights, the first weeks, with the stars so multitudinous in the deep black hole of the sky. I leave the door of the toilet open so I can look up. Of course, there are no octopi. But there are heron, grey-blue, like statues, in the mornings. And a loon, maniac with misery, calling across the lagoon. And the jellyfish.

I used them later, in a story. Festooned like garlands on the pale white body of a woman, drowned. Drowned on purpose. Pushed in. Because she is paralyzed. The jellyfish cover her like gardenias.

One morning, after Mik had gone, I took the typewriter out of its case.

Mik had grumbled about my cooking.

'It's worse than the cook's!'

'But the cook makes marvellous meals,' I said. He had taken me there one night, perhaps the first day, when I was sick. 'Really, I'd much rather eat there. Is it some sort of tradition, to bitch about the cook? Because, really, the food is fantastic.' So it was. She showed me one day how she did it. How she prepared the vegetables in the mornings, and the pies. How she set the dough to rise. Her

refrigerator was a large walk-in room, hung with great carcasses of pig and cow. She used real butter in everything. When I went up to the shower house I could smell that day's meals, glorious in the cool air. Great roasts and Yorkshire pudding. Bread stuffing for turkeys. She made breakfast, a huge dinner at noon, another huge dinner at night, and was expected to have pies, buns, cakes on hand for evening snacks. Her pastry could have won prizes. And yet she was spoken of in the most disparaging way. Not only was her cooking not fit for dogs, but she herself was reputed to be sexually insatiable. It was well-established that she spent every night draining the loggers dry in her room behind the kitchen. Yet, when I said, but who? Mik couldn't say. I was not allowed to speak to the men, except for Noddy, the Japanese; but he too seemed to regard the cook with loathing. She was dirty (her kitchen was the cleanest I have ever seen); she was a whore (through the open door to her room, I glimpsed books, a child's sweater on needles, a narrow bed); she was a disgusting old bag (she was about forty-five and her hair was dyed a rather impossible colour).

I'm not sure why Noddy was allowed to speak to me, or I to him. There had been a terrible scene the first week. I had been taking a shower when the men came back into camp. Mik had stormed and raged. I said, 'But no one could see me.'

'They know you're there,' Mik said. I was forbidden to take my showers between the hours of eleven-thirty and one-thirty. And not after four in the afternoon. In general, I never saw any of the men, except at a distance. Noddy was the exception. He was allowed to come to the house and drink my instant coffee and eat my pathetic biscuits, which he pronounced 'Great!' He treated me with such deference, such courtesy, that I was tempted now and then to do something outrageous. In that context, something outrageous would have been the utterance of 'damn,' or, of course,

the statement that Mik and I were not married. When I did finally tell Noddy, he was so shocked he couldn't speak for a minute. I suppose I was a lady in the same way the cook was a slut.

I was allowed to see the women. They came over in the mornings, across the bridge, and we had tea. They told me their stories.

'Bent right back he was, bent right back. When they did the autopsy, they said it was spinal meningitis.' Her five-year-old son.

'But didn't you take him into hospital? Didn't you take him to Vancouver?'

The woman looked at me, not understanding. It was beyond her, that act of faith. Her child had grown hot, had screamed, had bent slowly backwards like a bow, the crown of his head touching his toes, and she had suffered this to happen. 'They had to break his bones to put him in the coffin,' she said. She said it without tears, with a kind of awe, a sort of wonder. It was what life did to you, that was all.

One woman said, 'I had a baby, you know, before.' She waved her hand in the direction of the forest. 'But he was real good about it. He never said a word. He made me give it up though. Like, I met him when I was in the family way. So you can't blame him. It was a girl. I never saw it. They take them away, like, if you're going to give them up. They don't let you see them. But they told me it was a girl.' She was quiet for a while, drinking her tea from the terrible old mug. 'It's better that way, not to see them. He never throws it up to me.'

Another woman, big, with a large red face and house dresses starched so thickly she sounded like a nurse, said, 'Like, on *Love of Life*, is that all written down?' She was looking at the pages on the table. Not reading them, just looking at them, as though they were artifacts of some strange world.

I didn't understand at first.

‘I mean, is it all written down for them, like this, all these words, so they know what to say?’

‘Oh, yes, they have a script.’

‘You mean, they have to learn all those words by heart?’ I could see she didn’t believe me. No one could learn all those words by heart.

‘I mean, I guess I just thought that was the way they were, in real life. You know. Like that Vivian Carlson. I mean, I bet you anything that’s the way she is, I’ve seen her type before.’

And, ‘Like they pay you for writing it up, eh?’

‘Well, if I’m lucky. I mean, I don’t know if ...’

‘Like, what’s this show?’

‘It’s called *Festival*. They do different plays. Different stories. It doesn’t carry on.’

‘Oh yeah.’ She nodded. ‘CBC. My husband, he won’t watch the CBC.’

I didn’t know what to say. ‘Sometimes they have good things on,’ lamely.

‘He says they don’t ever finish. He gets so mad. So you just make it up out of your head, like. I guess you get a lot of ideas from books.’

‘Well, you’re not supposed to.’

‘I don’t know how you do it.’

‘Well, it’s not really just out of your head. I mean, that one I did, I really know people like that. I mean, that did actually happen. They did break up, and she did go away with the best friend.’

‘You mean, like, people tell you stories and you just write it up in good grammar?’

‘Well, not ...’

‘I could tell you some stories. Boy. If I ever wrote my life story, I’d make a mint. It’d be a best seller.’ She laughed, slapping her

thigh. ‘My old man’d kill me though,’ sobering. ‘I don’t know, though, nobody’d believe it. I mean, the things that happened to me! I should tell you and you can write it up, like in good grammar and good spelling. We could split it, we’d make millions. I’m not kidding. The things that happened to me.’

I think they pitied me, the women. I think they pitied the drabness of my house, the lack of doilies and leaping fish with ‘Campbell River, B.C.’ on them. And my mugs, they pitied my mugs. They all had thin tea cups, in different patterns and shapes. And they pitied Mik, too, for the dinners I probably fed him. When they came, I wasn’t baking bread. I would hear the horn go and I would rush around opening cans, getting the stove going.

‘Hey. I’m sorry. I forgot the time.’

‘Jesus Christ!’ But at first it was a joke.

When I was working, it was Ben who cooked. Ben who cleaned. A plate would appear on my desk. Tea. Coffee. I would eat, drink. The plate would disappear. The telephone would ring. ‘She’s working right now.’

That first morning, up in the forest, Mik endured much levity on the subject of my ill health. ‘They gave me a hard time,’ said Mik, but he was pleased, he was grinning. ‘Bastards,’ he said, but he was proud of himself. He’d screwed me so hard he’d had to call the doctor.

‘Oh bunk,’ I said. ‘It was the damp and the mothballs.’

So we moved the bed into the big room, and we made love before dinner that night. Was that the night we ate in the cookhouse? Just Mik and I and the cook. Probably. When we came back down the path he says, ‘Did ya see them give you the eye?’

‘Who?’

‘The guys.’

‘But there wasn’t anyone there. I didn’t see anybody.’

‘They saw you,’ he says and laughs.

TRYING TO SAY what Mik was like, I cannot use the ways of the world I live in. I cannot tell you what Mik believed in, or what he thought. I know he liked John Wayne movies.

If you asked me, What was Ben’s approach to Viet Nam, I would know. Ben did not approve. I always knew what Ben thought. He explained everything to me. We got married in church because it isn’t right to hurt other people. My mother. But there is no sanction in the legal tie. Two honourable people (Ben and I) do not require the force of law to do the correct thing. ‘We’ll have the part where you say ‘and obey’ taken out,’ Ben says. But he doesn’t. If either of us wishes to leave, for any reason, the other must not attempt to stop him/her. We are not going to be possessive. ‘Jealousy is a manifestation of the private property ethic.’ We were going to have the perfect marriage. It was a surprise to us, the way it turned out.

AND LAST NIGHT, at the reception, Carla is shouting: ‘That bastard! That ingrate! I shall put the curse of the Slav upon him! I am furious. He could let Elton do one small bit from *Hamlet*.’

‘But what happened?’

Carla is hanging onto Elton protectively. ‘He won’t let Elton do one small scene from *Hamlet* for the Congress!’

‘But has he that much power?’

‘Oh Vicky won’t believe anything bad of Griffith,’ she says to Linda, who is sitting languidly beside them.

Elton leans toward me and says, ‘I’ve told you. Griffith is not an honourable man.’

‘He has always seemed an ethical man.’