

What We Don't Know / *Christel Reges*

Marvella pushed her hair back from the earpiece. She propped the telephone between her cheek and shoulder and stared out into the back garden through the filmy green curtains. The weatherman had been right for once: that mid-winter thaw had come through. Yesterday's fringe of shark-tooth icicles had grown into glassy bars today, running from eaves to windowsill, frail stems of light. The air was layered, filled up with the sounds of dripping and running water. Beautiful, beautiful...

"Marva!"

"What? What is it?"

"You were so quiet. I thought we got cut off."

"Yes, I mean—No. I'm here. I was just thinking." Outside the kitchen window, a scrappy-looking gray squirrel descended naked wood head first, in a loose, scrabbling spiral.

"Well, I know you've got a lot to think about; that's the main reason I called. I want us to be square with each other, and I want to know you are peaceful in your mind about this...this whole business."

"I am peaceful. I am as serene as a June morning. I am doing okay."

"I believe you." Penny's voice crackled through the wire, dry as toast. Marvella traced circles with her slippered toe on the kitchen floor.

"There's nothing wrong with Roy."

"Nothing wrong with him? God help me! Of course there's nothing wrong with him. That's exactly what's wrong. What's right with him?"

Marvella shifted the phone from her right ear to her left.

"You're being silly," she said. "Everybody loves Roy. He's a lamb."

"Sure, everybody loves Roy. But you don't. Not you. You're not everybody." Silence. Marvella squirmed, sinking down into a pink-painted chair. Finally, Penny spoke:

"Can't I drop by? Just a moment, on my way? I've got to work today—just stupid Saturday stuff, I'll be done in time for the wedding. I want to see you now, before. I've got a present for you."

Marvella didn't speak, but she smiled into the telephone.

"Well, it's not your real present; this is just sort of a little nothing gift. I'm still looking for your big present. I can't find anything you need."

"I don't need a thing."

"I guess you don't. And I guess that doesn't bother you."

"No."

"Just moving into his mother's house."

"Why not?"

"See? That's what bothers me. Just that. Your attitude."

"What attitude?"

The connection was severed with a click and a faint, echoing ping and then there was silence all around her, and running through it the pale, glassy music of dripping icicles.



"Now, where did you dig this up?"

"Like it?"

"It brings back...so many things." Marvella held the framed photograph in both hands, held it as though it were a baby, a tender thing. "It's kind of a strange wedding present, though. I don't know what Roy will think of it."

"I said it wasn't your real present." Penny was watching Marvella. "This, now, it would have made a nice shower gift." She leaned forward, her chin resting on her clasped hands. "If only you'd have let us throw you one."

"Hate fuss."

"If I was going to marry Roy Stanberry, I'd want to have a little fun first."

"Shut up."

"You're welcome, dear. I've had that picture straight along, only I didn't know it. I found it in one of my old accounting textbooks, imagine."

Marvella traced the figures in the picture with her fingertip. "You and me, and Harris..." She had kept no picture of Harris, had not been prepared for the sight of him. How young he looked. She had forgotten that—what a baby face! Those shy, starved eyes and that sweet starved smile. "Who's the other guy? You were engaged to him, weren't you?"

Penny shrugged. "Only for a few months. That was...oh, you know...Reynard Boone, or, no—it was Booth, that's right. He was called Buddy, remember?"

Marvella did not remember; she was surprised that Penny did. Penny had been engaged, by her own reckoning, "about twelve times." Being engaged was fun, she said—being in love and spending time together. But for the rest, all those "wilt thous," she said, "I never could see how I was going to better my lot in life that way."

"Happy times," Penny said now, leaning against Marvella's shoulder. "You know why I want you to have that? First, to remind you of us. Always." Marvella slipped her arm over Penny's shoulder. "But mostly, when I saw this, I could not believe how happy you looked. I guess I wanted to give—I don't know how to say this so it doesn't sound funny. I mean, though—look at you. Look."

She did look happy in the picture, idiotically happy, collapsed between Penny and Harry in front of a Christmas tree, her face tumbled up against Harry's shabby blue dungaree jacket. Little idiot. Poor, sweet little nitwit.

"I guess what I mean is, I wanted to hand this to you and say, 'See that?'" She pointed to Marvella's image. "'That's the right idea. You hold that thought.'"

"I look like a blooming idiot."

"Shows up Harris's yellow hair real nice, I think."

"He looks so young. We all do. I wonder if he has any hair left, or did he go bald-headed like his daddy? I saw old Mr. Rawlins driving the school bus a few weeks ago. Boy, he looked mean." She was quiet for a minute, looking not at the picture but over it and past it, into space. "Harris didn't have yellow hair, anyway. It was sort of greeny-yellow-white. It was like old piano keys, all streaky. Now, in summer, it was dead-white." Marvella looked at the rug and Penny looked at Marvella. "I suppose when he joined the Air Force they cut it all off."

"They would have." Penny looked at the photograph. "I always thought," she said, "that when you got married it would be to someone you were really cracked about, the way you were about Harry."

Marvella laughed and looked at Penny sideways before returning her gaze to the rug. "You're hopeless."

"Just the opposite."

"I'll never feel like that about anyone again." She didn't like the drift of this conversation. Sometimes, too often lately, the memory of Harry—only it wasn't the memory of Harry, even, so much as the memory of being so intensely tangled up in him. It wasn't exactly like that stuff in books—the taste of his kisses and all that, and lord knows he wasn't handsome, just a skinny little taxi driver...but she had hungered for him, she had hungered for him. Even now, the recollection of the queer malamutish white-blue of his eyes, of the smell of the soap his mother used on his shirts—could rise up before her, overcome her, holding Roy's hand upon her knee in the

close darkness of the Uptown Cinema, with a sharp, paralyzing sweetness.

"I'm not like you," she said. "I don't fall in love so easy. I don't even much like it."

"Not like it!"

"I don't mean that, not that way."

Penelope sniffed and pushed her hair off her face. When she did that, Marvella could see the little strands of grey hair that were beginning to grow all along her hairline. Marva had first noticed them last summer; she had mistaken them for sun streaks, those narrow twisting stripes of white, almost no more than single hairs, winding their way through the harsh blackness of Penny's long hair. They were nice, fetching really, but Marvella never really noticed them now without an almost physical sensation of pain in her heart. Outrageous, that time should dare to lay a cold finger on Penny Koslovic's careless, firecracker vitality! Why, then, no one was immune, certainly not herself. Even sitting still, keeping quiet, doing nothing, time would find you out.

"I mean now, as opposed to then," Marvella said. "I was younger—"

"Seven lousy years. That's nothing."

"The difference between twenty-seven and thirty-four, which is considerable. And then, look at what happened in that time: first Pop dying—he was sick so long!—and then I got promoted to head cashier—"

"Well, I can see how that extra eighty-five cents an hour broadened your point of view!"

"You are so contrary!"

Penny drew her knees up and pressed her forehead down upon them and laughed ruefully. "I don't know, Marva, maybe I'm possessed, maybe I am just a troublemaker, but it seems to me you are making a big mistake, and I don't know who I feel sorrier for—you or Roy. There are enough women in this town," she continued, unwinding herself upon the couch, "that would chop their arms off to marry that good-hearted old stone-face. God help them. And more that would marry him for the little bit of money he's got. And here you don't love him, not what I'd call love, and it's not money, not if I know you. Why do it? It makes me sick; it's wrong. You're going to bring sorrow upon yourself, and on Conroy, too. Roy's a drip, but he'll suffer." She looked hard at Marvella, and Marvella looked hard back. "It isn't sex, is it? You don't feel ashamed about sleeping with him at your age? Lord, even I wouldn't blame you for that; he's cute and all. I'll bet you Agnes

doesn't mind, either. She's so pleased you've got such a big fish on the line..."

For a minute the two sat quietly, Penny looking at her friend, Marvella running a polished fingernail around the edge of the picture frame.

"It is your mom, though, isn't it?" Penny said suddenly. She looked at her friend.

Marvella's eyes widened. "Agnes? No!"

"Well, I blame her. I see it. She's got you so managed, you don't feel you own your own soul. I know she broke up you and Harry."

"She didn't"

"She did. She made you feel so guilty for having your own happiness—"

"She was in a tough spot. Pop was dying."

"Less trouble sick than he ever was well. She just didn't want to take care of him by herself, and your little paycheck came in handy, too. Harris was inconvenient, so she engineered to ruin your life."

Marvella slapped the arm of the sofa. "She did not ruin my life. Agnes—Agnes only does what she has to do."

"Absolutely. Isn't it funny how it's always what she wants to do?"

Marvella controlled an impulse to bring the photograph, in its carved wooden frame, down hard on Penny's head; she held it gently in both hands. "Pen," she said. "I love you. I love this picture. You are driving me nuts. Can't you see I'm not going into this blind? I'm trying to fix my life, to do something with it; it's a sorry business all around. I'm thirty-four years old. I don't look so bad, but time marches on, and heaven help me, I don't want to go on living with Agnes. By myself, I'd have to take a little room somewhere. I don't make much more than half what you do; I've got no real trade. If I wait for my heart to lead me, who knows how long I'll wait? This makes sense. For me. Starting today, I know what my life will be, tomorrow and the next day, and the next..." She looked out through the ice-barred window. "I'm making you late for work."

"Not late—absent. No matter, I can go in on Sunday for a couple hours. Or I'll take it home. It's payroll stuff. I do need to see dad over at the firehouse, though. I thought he'd come to the wedding with me, but there's some kind of high-powered ambulance visiting the station today, and he's got to drool over it. It belongs to the Prince George's County Hospital; he's thinking shouldn't we have one here. Miracle machine, I guess. Little hospital on wheels. Expensive." She yawned. "Boys just love to

spend money. I've got his lunch in the car. Mar, I think I've spent most of the last few months beating you up and apologizing for it."

"I'm used to you, you know."

"Meaning you don't pay me any mind?"

"Meaning—? Lord, I don't know. I know that you love me. No matter how mad you get."

"You're right." She stood up "And I'm done, I'm through messing with your...arrangements. Marry him. You poor thing. I'll be at the courthouse at two."

She turned to go, and then stopped in the doorway and smiled. "Just don't throw that god-damned bouquet at me."

"I wouldn't dare."

Penny closed the door behind her, then immediately reopened it and poked her head in. "It isn't that I don't admire common sense—"

"Penny, I'm—"

"Because what you're saying is so sensible, but this whole thing just eats at me."

Marvella dropped her face into her hands. "I am going to have to kill you. It's the only way to shut you up."

"Because feelings...they mean something. They must, right? Marvella?"

She raised her face. It was impossible to be really angry with Penny; she was so remorseful. She looked like the dog who knocks over the trash can, who knows it will be whipped, who knocks down the can anyway. Poor Pen, she thought. Her heart is on the tip of her tongue. Haven't I always thought that it was the nicest thing about her?

"Not to rule your life, of course," Penny was saying, "but as a general sort of a...guide? Don't you feel that?"

"Penny, yes. Yes, yes, yes. Now please go give your daddy his lunch.



The whole wedding will not wear me out like Penny does, she thought. Marvella lay upon her narrow lumpy bed. She looked at the photograph. Oh, it was peculiar, it was sweet, it was just like Penny to give her something like this; one of Roy's ancestral photographs on the upright would have to shove over to accommodate it. She imagined sitting in Roy's house—her house, soon—evenings, the tv droning and flickering, the room, all browns and tans and oranges, sunk in shadow. From its perch upon the piano, Penny's picture would shine out like a cold, bright star...

Maybe, instead of on the piano, she would park it in one of the unused upstairs bedrooms, some spot where it would not meet her eyes so often, with its wood-burnt Ben Franklin frame, and its blithe, bold-faced happiness.

She had been lying down half an hour when she heard a car slide its wheels into the slushy curb. Not Agnes; she'd call if she was coming home early. No, she was giving the Twitchell girls perms, especially for the wedding. She wouldn't be home yet. The motor sounded familiar. The car's engine died, its door slammed, and then she heard footsteps, muffled in the wet snow. Unmistakable footsteps: Roy's. He was supposed to meet them at the courthouse in two hours. That hound dog!

Marvella skittered into the dark front room, then dropped to her knees and crept to the window by the front door. She raised herself up by degrees until her eyes cleared the sill.

He was leaning down a little to peek in at the door's glass pane. He was smiling. Of course, she thought. Bad luck or no bad luck, why wouldn't he think I'd want to see him?

He knocked. "Marvella, honey? It's Roy!" He knocked again. That "honey" always got her. It sounded so...settled down.

My gosh, she thought, this is a strange place to be in. Down on my hands and knees, hiding from a handsome man I'm going to be married to in about...two hours, now. Isn't it funny, the things life will throw at you. If you'd have told me ten years ago that I'd be doing this, I'd have said it was just as likely I'd be shot out of a cannon."

There was no question that Roy was a gift sent from heaven. Roy had what Agnes referred to as "a real job, not like some of those boys came sniffing around here." "Not even like Pop," Marvella had added, to which Agnes had retorted that "Your pop had a hard life, a real hard life and a short one, and you couldn't go counting him in among regular deadbeats."

She wasn't exactly sure what was so "real" about writing insurance policies. It wasn't like anything you could put your hands on. As near as Marvella could tell, it was the arrangement and rearrangement of pieces of paper. Still, the money was real enough.

He had seemed a gift too rich to scorn. Looking at him now, Marvella thought him a good gift still. For Penny to say that she didn't love Roy, or didn't love him in the right way—wasn't that putting an awfully narrow interpretation on one word? After all, she had loved many things about Roy: she loved his steadiness and his kindness, yes, his success, too. To charge that she didn't "want" Roy enough, that she didn't hunger for him, well, you could say the

same thing about a sensible dark coat, or a sturdy, reliable car. Who was she, at her stage of life, to cry for impossible luxuries? Pine your heart out for that rabbit-fur coat, that powder-blue Cadillac coupe. Meanwhile, winter was still cold, the highway dirty and treacherous. Love, what was that now? Of course she loved Roy, why wouldn't she? Roy was lovable.

Roy had turned away, reluctantly, and was retracing his steps, down the slippery, pink-painted stairway. He started his car and pulled it into the street, but when he passed her house, he slowed down; his eyes, searching the windows, looked dark and puzzled. Of Roy, you nice thing, she thought, you just relax yourself until two o'clock. My gosh, here I am all ready to stand up before a county judge and promise to spend my whole life with you, what more do you want? Can't you leave me in peace for two hours?

Roy drove away. Marvella returned to her bedroom. She laid Penny's present out of sight in the topmost of a small stack of carefully packed cardboard boxes and lay down again. She would not sleep; she was too wrought up to sleep, she knew it. But she closed her eyes, and when she opened them it was past one o'clock, and Agnes was opening the curtains of her room, and alternately and pointlessly fluffing and smoothing her wedding suit on its padded hanger. "My sleeping beauty," Agnes was saying. "All wore out with sheer happiness."

Marvella got up then and said that, yes, she guessed that happiness could wear a person out as surely as grief could, and then she tied her soft, obedient hair up out of the way with a rubber band, and began to dress.



The wedding party was converging outside the courthouse. The early afternoon air was clear and almost spring-like, "a blessing on your union," Agnes chirped, and the guests, a disparate crowd of twenty-five or thirty, were scattered in threes and sixes across the melting lawn.

Roy saw Agnes's car as soon as it turned onto River Street, and he sprinted across the slushy grass to meet it; the great bare maples and oaks were dripping melting snow and ice. The air glittered with falling water, and the thin grey snow that glazed the grass was pock-marked by its impact. Water fell on Roy Stanberry's clean black raincoat, and upon his carefully combed hair. Agnes, her sister Lois, and her twin brothers—heavy, serious-looking men in ill-fitting suits—found each other right away: they drew together like magnetic filings, to one side of the arched front door, and

began to gossip somberly. "That suit looks...she looks...you both look..."

Roy kissed Marvella and told her he'd been by her house just after lunchtime. "I knocked and knocked, darling. I was worried about you." He rubbed the end of her nose with his thumb. "I thought maybe you'd decided to run out on me. I stopped by the salon after, though. Agnes told me you were probably sleeping."

"I was flat out," Marvella said. She brushed beads of water from his coat. She rested her face a moment against his shoulder, inhaled the cedar-closet scent that clung to all of his coats, the familiar lemony tang of his aftershave. Her head was beginning to ache.

"You're still tired."

"I'm okay. I wish we could go inside. It's so wet out here!"

Roy scanned the huddled celebrants. "As far as I can tell," he said, "everyone's here except your own Penelope. Feel like starting without her?"

"She'd have me strung up. There's her car now, I think. She is late. Maybe she brought her daddy after all." Marvella squinted, trying to pierce the glare of the car's windshield. "No. No, she's alone. Hey! Penny!"

Penny didn't park her car; she didn't even turn the engine off. She leapt out of the idling machine, leaving the door open and her purse, in full view, lying on the passenger seat, and she ran towards Roy and Marvella with all the speed that high heels and slushy pavement would allow.

"Whew!" She slid a little as she reached them, and Roy steadied her with his arm. "Boy, I'm glad I'm not late."

"You are late. I told Roy we had to wait for you."

"Then I'm glad you waited." Penny laughed, and gasped for air.

"Penelope," Roy said. "Aren't you going to park your car and stay awhile?"

"Whoa—" Penny looked back over her shoulder. "Hmm, stay awhile, yeah..." Penny's cheeks were blazing, cotton candy pink. Her eyes glittered over-bright, and she laughed again for no reason that Marvella could discern. She looked at her friend closely: had Penny been drinking?

"Did you come over straight from the firehouse, Pen?"

"I did. In fact, I was going to ask you if you all couldn't run back with me and see that super-ambulance that's come visiting."

Roy looked at Marvella. Marvella looked at Penny. She must have been drinking. "Penny!"

"Oh, but Marvella!" She turned to Roy, beaming him a radiant smile. "I just got carried right out of my head. It is the most interesting machine." She turned to Marvella. "Remember I told you? Daddy wants the council to fund one in the worst way. Of course," she rushed on, "it's not only the expense of the machine itself, but training the crew to run it. I talked to the fellows who drove this one over from Prince George's. They're practically qualified to perform surgery, you know. A couple of them"—she looked hard at Marvella—"are ex-military."

"No kidding," said Marvella. "Park, Penny. For the love of God. I want to get married. Now. My shoes are wet."

Roy put his arm around her. "Want me to carry you, honey?"

"Later, Tarzan," Penny said. "Settle down."

Roy smiled. "How about we swing by quick on our way to the reception?"

Penny sighed and bit her lip. "Okay," she said. She sighed again. "Hey, Roy? I think my turn signal's out. Check it for me while I park? Your last act of gallantry as a single man."

"No problem." He squeezed Marvella's arm and then followed Penny. "You're cold, sweet," he said. "I wouldn't blame you if you went on inside without me."

"Oh! Marvella!" Penny stopped for a moment in the grey and white tundra of the parking lot. She put both hands up to subdue her blown hair. "I found out what I want to get you for your wedding. It's super. A super-present. It's going to cost me, but it has your name on, sugar!"

"I can't wait."

"Neither can I."

She turned away and took Roy's arm to steady her gait. Marvella watched impatiently. She wanted to hurry up, get married and have some dinner. She felt chilled to the very marrow of her bones, as though she'd been standing in this parking lot in wet shoes for ten years.

Roy and Penny made their way over to Penny's car. For a moment, they paused at the rear of the idling machine. Exhaust fumes coiled around their feet. Roy hunched over, looking intently at the lights, while Penny pointed to the left side of the car and made little explosive motions with her hands, as though describing sparks. Then she got into the car, and Roy stepped back a little. Penny's brake lights went on; Roy raised his hand and nodded. Penny's right turn signal went on, and Roy shouted, "It's fine!" Then, abruptly, Penny's motor gunned, and in a slurry of thrown snow the vehicle lurched backwards hard, knocking Roy to the

pavement. It happened so fast that at first Marvella could feel only dim surprise, noting that Roy's body skidded, like a flung doll, some ten feet and that from where she stood she could hear the hollow thud when his head hit the pavement. She took three steps forward and found that her legs would not obey her; she almost fell.

Roy was conscious. He raised himself up on one elbow as Penny came catapulting out of her car crying, "Roy! Roy! Roy!" He tried to get up when he saw her, then sank back with an awful cry: "My leg!" He fell back, panting.

Oh, it wasn't a dream. Marvella found her legs and her breath. She ran across the lot, was kneeling beside him. Her first look at him was reassuring: his face was scraped, and there was blood in his hair, but his eyes, crazed and unsteady, were able to meet hers. He even tried, pitifully, to smile.

"My leg feels awful bad," he said. His forehead was jeweled with sweat despite the chill. "I think it's—"

"Don't! Don't move it! Penny! Penny!"

Penny came running out of the ring of would-be celebrants that had gathered close around them. She had a man's big overcoat in her arms, and she spread it over Roy. She took off her own plaid wool coat and, barely lifting his head, slid it beneath his bloodied scalp and the pavement. Roy sank back with a sound that was half sigh, half groan, but he kept his eyes faithfully upon Marvella.

"Don't move," Penny said. She looked at Marvella. "Agnes is calling the firehouse. Aren't we lucky, in a bad sort of way? That deluxe lifesaving unit will still be there."

In the back of the group, someone was saying, over and over again, "Get back, get back!" Marvella looked at Penny mutely.

"Two minutes," Penny said. "They'll be here. He'll be all right."

Marvella looked down at Roy. She placed her hand over his, and he grasped it tightly. He was breathing quickly and shallowly; Marvella raked her mind for the symptoms of shock. "You rest, Roy," she said. "Help's coming."

Roy tightened his grip on her fingers. "Hurts," he said. "Christ, what happened?"

"I wouldn't blame you if you sued me to the gates of hell," Penny said. "I thought I put it in drive. I could have swore I put it in drive. I wanted to pull forward and park, and then I felt it go back and I—oh!" Penny covered her face for a moment, apparently overcome. Her eyes, though, when they met her friend's a moment later, were calm and full of quiet meaning.

"Here comes the ambulance!" Agnes yelled.

It swung into the parking lot like a dragon: lime yellow, lights flashing. The small crowd of onlookers swerved toward this new attraction.

"There it is." Penny clasped her hands to her throat. "Oooh, and a police car! That's for me, I guess. Marvella." Her voice was quiet. "A word." She tugged at Marvella's shoulder, and Marvella reluctantly let go of Roy's hand.

"Well?"

Penny looked at her. When she spoke, it was quietly, just above a whisper. "It was an accident," she said.

Marvella folded her arms.

"I mean," Penny said, "it was an accident that I broke his leg. I didn't want to do that. Really! Shhh!" she cautioned, as Marvella opened her mouth to speak. "Please, shhh! I only wanted to shake him up a little, honestly—" She looked over her shoulder. A policeman with black sideburns was talking to Agnes, who was chattering a mile a minute, and gesticulating energetically as she pointed out Penelope. The policeman was writing in his notebook. Penny shook her head. "And now it looks like I might be going to jail, so I just want to—"

"God almighty. You might have killed him."

"Listen to me—Listen." Penny put her hands on Marvella's shoulders. "This is my present to you, baby. It's a chance. I had to give you a chance!" she added plaintively, as Marvella remained silent. "Now, I can't do any more. You've got to help yourself. Please, promise me—I've got to go now," she said. The policeman, trailed by Agnes, was walking towards them. "Please promise me you'll consider. Just...consider, okay? At that, composing her face once more into lines of anguish, she turned to face the approaching officer.

The back of the ambulance had swung open, and three men were jogging across the lot towards Roy. In front was a short red-haired man carrying a large white satchel. Behind him, bearing a long, streamlined steel stretcher with wheels, were a light-skinned black man with a mustache, and...Harris.

Marvella told herself that she had not been surprised, that she had known, or suspected, even before Penny had run Roy down. That Harry was completely surprised was obvious: when his eyes lit upon her, huddled over Roy in her mussed blue wedding suit and her ridiculous pink corsage, he stopped, he actually dropped his end of the stretcher. He just let it fall, and the man in front, the man with the mustache, wheeled about, shocked, and said, "Harry? You all right, man?"

He had lost weight, or maybe he had lost teeth. His cheeks were fallen in, and there were new lines set into the thin skin around his eyes and mouth. His hair was the same, though, the same odd young greeny-platinum that she remembered, and it grew low down on his forehead and curled in bright, limp wisps down into his collar. Too long, she thought. He needs a haircut.

"He was conscious at first." She tried to speak to the red-haired man, but her eyes kept flying to Harry. "His leg is bad and, I don't know, he's kind of loopy." Roy clung to Marvella with both hands and muttered incoherently.

The red-headed man bent over Roy and examined his face closely. "What's his name?" he asked Marvella. "Roy? Can you look at me, Roy?"

Roy opened his eyes. "Marvella."

"I'm here, right here."

"Shock," said the red-headed man. "Contusions. Laceration to the skull, possible—" He leaned down, held his hand, three fingers extended, before Roy's face. "Roy? Can you see my hand? How many fingers, Roy?"

The black man lifted the overcoat. Dislocation," he said. "Possible fracture. We've got to immobilize this."

"Harry," said the red-headed man, "we've got to get this guy on a backboard."

Harry and the other men worked with a precision that would have impressed Marvella as dance-like had she been capable, in her state of stunned misery, of any significant impression at all.

Roy was in a lot of pain. He seemed only half conscious, but when they transferred him to the stretcher he cried out loudly, and gripped Marvella's hand so hard she thought her own bones would break.

How can he bear to touch me, she thought. This is all my fault, all of his pain.

"It hurts," said the red-haired man reassuringly, almost cheerfully. "Nice job. We'll get you fixed up. Steady, now."

Smoothly, the stretcher was lifted into the ambulance. She scrambled in after him unbidden. What have I done, she thought. What will I do? Harry was beside the driver, in the front seat. He was talking on a radio set, and making notes on a clipboard. Every few seconds he looked in the rear-view mirror at Marvella.

Outside, the blues and greys and whites of the landscape poured by in long, bleary ribbons to the weird, cartoonish whooping of the siren. Roy tried to sit up again, and again he cried out. "Please," Marvella said to the red-headed man, even as she devoured, with

her eyes, every visible line of the back of Harris's head. "He's in a lot of pain, see? He's hurting so much. Can't you do something about the pain?"

"If it was just the leg, I could, Ma'am." His freckled face was kind. He leaned towards Marvella and lowered his voice. "It's the head injury we've got to watch. He's got a severe concussion at the very least; we can't risk giving him anything that would obscure his symptoms. He's stable now, but..." He adjusted a cuff on Roy's wrist, examined a gauge, nodded. "We know a lot about the human body," he continued. "But about the brain? It's amazing how much we don't know, considering—" The ambulance wall behind him was a solid bank of machinery: dials, instruments and metered tanks. "We can watch him. It's hard to predict what's going to happen, though. Where this is involved"—he tapped his forehead—"things can change so quickly."