

IN THE HOLE

Lisa Tuttle & Steven Utley

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Lisa has been writing professionally since selling a short story back in 1971. She believes that 'In the Hole' is the 99th short story she's sold to date. Her most recent novels, *The Mysteries* and *The Silver Bough*, are available from Bantam Spectra in the US. Lisa was born and raised in Texas, has also lived in New York and London, but for the past seventeen years she has been settled in a remote and rural part of Scotland with her family. She is currently working on a new novel.

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Sitting up high in the back of the bus, resting his forehead against the cold window, Heath gazed out at the misty landscape and tried to make sense of what he saw. Although he had grown up in this country, it had become alien to him.

There had been rainstorms the night before, and now the late afternoon sunlight filtered through drooping, perspiring greenery and glistened on the boggy ground and the swollen streams. That seemed normal, and yet here and there he also glimpsed a landscape in agony—stands of blighted, shattered trees and the blackened ruins of farm buildings; the swollen carcasses of dead animals; piles of what might have been bodies, or just discarded clothing; burnt-out cars abandoned at roadsides, even something that looked like the wreckage of an airplane scattered over a hillside—all evidence that he traveled through a war zone. But the war was *over*, or so somebody, or almost everybody, insisted, and, anyway, the war, Heath's war, had been a localized conflict on the other side of the world. How could it have reached this far into his peaceful homeland?

He thought then about the conversation he had had with the stranger beside him, who got off at the last stop save one. I'm looking for work, the stranger told him, have been for months now, but there's nothing a man can make his living from—life's tough these days, on account of the war. At first Heath thought he meant that the cost of sustaining a war abroad had crippled the domestic economy, but as he put together other, overheard snatches of talk with the details of the ruined landscape before him, he found himself forced to another conclusion. During his long years of captivity, he decided, when he had known nothing of the world outside, the war must have mutated and spread like a disease until no part of the globe was free of it. Like a monstrous incurable inescapable plague, it had become a reality for everybody, but nobody wanted, nobody dared to talk about it. Thus he found himself wondering, Who are we fighting *now*? Who is the enemy? Who are *we*?

Still, somebody had told him: “*Your* war's over, soldier, you're going home,” and, yes, here he *was*, going home.

He originally dreamed of going home on the train, of arriving for the first time at the railroad station that had loomed so large in his boyhood fantasies of escape. He had spent what seemed in memory an inordinate amount of time hanging around the platform, gazing yearningly down the tracks, envying the grown-ups who had the money and the freedom to buy tickets to go somewhere else, and promising himself that some day he, too, would climb aboard and be gone.

The train no longer went through his town, however, nor anywhere near it. Not for many years had there been an operative line so far out, not for many, many years—and when Heath, shocked, had tried to argue with the woman in the travel agency, she clattered the keys of her computer keyboard and came up with a date that stopped his mouth: the last trains had come through during the year he started high school, they had been long gone even by the time he left to enlist—how could he have forgotten? He had left town on a bus, because there were no longer any trains.

And now he returned by bus. He disliked it. The bus smelled of other people, of unwashed clothes impregnated with sweat and cigarette smoke, of sickening food, tuna fish sandwiches and bananas and apples and potato chips, and coffee turned sour on breath. Bags rustled, people chomped their food noisily and talked, the air conditioner struggled weakly to cope with their exhalations and body heat. Some previous occupant of Heath's hard, lumpy seat had slashed it, and someone else had mended the rents with strips of rough cloth-backed tape. The bus was a bad fit,

almost as bad a fit as the uniform they had given him to wear. Any clothes at all felt wrong, for in the hole his only coverings had been darkness and filth, but the uniform was an abomination, poking, pinching, itching in a dozen places. His captors, the enemy, had worn uniforms, and though he tried, though he knew his uniform was not the same, he sensed no essential difference. He felt as though sewn into the skin of one of the enemy.

But who *were* the enemy? Not the people he fought when his war began, not the people who captured him. They were all dead. “*Your war’s over, soldier, you’re going home,*” his rescuers said, when they pulled him out of the hole, when they finally made him understand. That could only mean that before one war ended another had begun. He assumed it was somewhere else, far away, and no concern of his, because he was going home.

Home. He tried to remember where that was, exactly, and what it meant.

Precisely how long he had been away he did not know. He had asked, and received a reply, but numbers, dates, precise information floated around his head like a cloud of gnats, as impossible to grasp as the incomprehensible names of the countries the enemy controlled. He *felt* as if he had been away forever, “*forever and a day,*” words from an old song Cara had liked to sing. How did it go?

I’ll love you though you stay away, forever and a day.

She had told him on the day he left, though she was furious with him for leaving, that she would wait.

He knew she meant it, but he knew also that nobody could wait forever. Not really. He had written to her anyway from the hospital, because the people who rescued him—*our side*, he kept reminding himself—told him, practically ordered him, to get in touch with his family, and though they were not blood-kin and had never married, Cara was the closest thing to family he had left, the only family he really wanted. *My war’s over, he had written to her, I’m coming home.*

He sent the letter to her father’s house, praying the old man still lived and would pass it on to her, wherever she might be, and his prayers were answered. Cara, amazingly, still lived there, in the town where they had both grown up. She had not forgotten. *I love you,* she wrote, again, as in her very

first letter to him. *Come back to me as soon as you can.*

As soon as I can, he thought, and slept slumped in his seat high in the back of the bus, on his way home.

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The bus braked with a noisy exhalation, startling Heath awake. He looked out at the dull concrete and glass box of a small-town bus station, old and dirty. He stared, frowning, at the faded board bearing the name of the town, trying to trace the distant chord the name struck within him. His gaze moved to peeling advertisements for goods he could not imagine that anybody sold, services surely nobody provided. He sat, unmoved and unmoving until the bus driver sang out the name of the stop. Then he stood as though jerked erect by a hook wedged between his ribs and caught in his heart, and pain shot up his left leg, the legacy of a kneecap smashed long ago by a bored, smiling guard. He limped slowly down the aisle and made his way carefully down the steps. He stood for a long time beside the bus, regarding the station's sagging eaves, as the full import sank in. This was Cara's town. This had been his town. This was home. He was home.

"There's a pay-phone inside if you want a taxi," the bus driver called down to him, and Heath nodded agreeably, but though he knew he must be a sorry sight with his curved spine and awkward gait, he *wanted* to walk. If he meant to feel truly at home in this place again, he must start to reclaim it, and the only way he could think to do that was the same way he had done it as a kid, on the ground, mapping it out for himself.

Things had changed; he saw that right away. Although he knew to expect it, the sight of the abandoned, sagging railroad station made his eyes sting. He picked his way over the rusted rails and found himself skirting the commercial center, once bright and bustling, now almost as decrepit in appearance as the station building. The few cars parked along the street had seen better days, and at least half of the storefront properties stood empty, their dusty windows displaying for sale or lease signs if they displayed anything at all. The little Mom & Pop grocery store was posted with warnings about security measures; the drugstore he remembered, the bakery, the card and gift shop, had been displaced by a locked-up tattoo parlor, a charity thrift shop, and a gutted shell of fire-blackened cinder blocks. Grass grew through cracks in the pocked and crumbling pavement underfoot. He glimpsed human figures, close by or far away, he could not be quite sure. Some seemed vaguely familiar, but none looked directly at him or spoke as he hobbled past. This did not surprise or offend him. His imprisonment, those eternities spent alone in a concrete

box, had aged him. He had lost flesh and teeth, and what remained of his hair had turned white. His skin was ashen from so long without sunlight or decent food. He wondered if even Cara would know him.

Nevertheless, walking on as quickly as his injured leg allowed, he took hope from the fact that life went on in this town, wounded as it obviously had been. Heath saw no bomb craters, no corpses in the street, no uniformed men clutching guns, looking for an excuse to shoot. His past—not the recent past, not the slow, painful tedium of physiotherapy, not his confinement in the hole, and not the time before the hole when he had been a young soldier, alternately terrified and bored out of his skull, but that time when he and the world had both been young, when he first loved Cara—fell over him like a comforting blanket.

Cara, he believed, held the key to his life, his survival. Memories of her had kept him alive, kept him from losing his mind in the hole. Squatting on rough concrete in total darkness, he would touch his face, stroke his own body, until his fingers became hers, and he could feel the hard floor beneath him soften into the bed in Cara's light-filled bedroom. Then he would look up into her beautiful face, and, finally, as he saw the pure and utter love shining from her eyes, he had been able, truly, to love her back.

After a time, either long or short, he could not say exactly, of moving through curiously empty streets, he found himself standing before Cara's house in the part of town once called 'new': a section of handsome brick boxes built in neatly tended rows when a new factory had opened. The factory soon closed, however, early victim of the wartime economy, some of the houses had never been sold, and the neighborhood, once desirable, had quickly gone downhill; the house next door was an abandoned wreck. But Cara's father, a proud and careful homeowner even in times of tight money, insisted on mowing the grass once a week, planting flowers and shrubs, keeping the gutters cleared and the trim of the house painted a cheerful yellow. Now, when Heath saw the peeling paint, the sagging gutters and flowerbeds full of weeds, he knew the old man must be dead.

He stood before the house where Cara had lived—where he knew she still lived—his heart racing, his mouth very dry. They had been virgins in those days and, without a car or a place of their own, lacked privacy in which to consummate their love. They walked everywhere together, holding hands, leaning close as they talked—and talked, and talked. They shared everything in words, all the secrets of their hearts, even a few tentative sexual fantasies. They hugged and kissed often, but beyond that, nothing—except once.

Once, and once only, they found themselves alone together in Cara's house, her father having driven her mother to the city to see a specialist at a hospital there; they were to have dinner before returning, so were certain to be out until very late.

Without a word about intention, in silent accord, Heath and Cara walked home from school that day and let themselves in, went straight to her sunny bedroom, undressed, lay down on her big, soft bed and then—

Somehow, despite their best hopes and efforts, despite their love, it all went wrong.

He was clumsy, she was frightened, they were both embarrassed and shy with each other, and, finally, virgins still, they clung together, whispering hopeful promises, *It'll be okay, next time, another time* ... not realizing they had missed their one and only chance.

Heath shuddered, ashamed of his ignorant, innocent younger self, wishing he had been bolder. He would never have forced himself on her, of course, but with a little more experience, he might have aroused her, relaxed her enough to make intercourse possible. Only later had he learned from other soldiers in his unit, and from magazines and videos, of the things women supposedly liked, tricks to make them "hot and horny."

He stood before Cara's house, aware of the heat in his cheeks and a crawling in his belly, and he almost turned away. What right did he have to presume? He belonged to the past, whereas she had gone on and grown up. She must have found another, bolder lover by now. Unlike him, she would not still be a virgin.

Then he reminded himself: *Come back to me*, she had written. He had not imagined that, she really wrote those words, and whatever else might be true, *she* remembered, she still wanted *him*.

He walked slowly around the house, into the backyard where he had met her so many times, to the tree where, in the orange light of a long-ago afternoon, he had carefully carved *heath loves cara* into the wood while she sat in the grass at his feet and told him, "Forever. Put *forever*."

The tree still stood there, apparently thriving, and in the overgrown grass beneath it sat a young woman, and she was still Cara. The years had not changed her as they had changed him. She still wore her long fair hair in a braid draped over her shoulder. He wondered how he must look to her,

and he touched his face, recalling the ashen, shrunken features of the old man who stared back at him from a mirror in a hospital bathroom.

But something flared in her eyes at the sight of him, and with a swift, sweet smile she jumped up and threw her arms around him. “Oh, Heath! Finally! I’ve been waiting for days, wondering when you’d get here!”

Her weight knocked him back—she must have outweighed him by twenty pounds—and he might have fallen except that she held him so tightly.

“I—I’ve missed you,” he murmured, a little breathless, but that was wrong, he immediately thought, I shouldn’t have said that. How could he miss her when he was always aware of her presence, keeping him alive?

She let go of him and stepped back with an odd little laugh, and he guessed she sensed the falseness in his words. He felt ashamed, fearful that he had hurt her, especially as she would not meet his gaze. “I’m sorry—”

“Oh, stop! Since when do we need platitudes between us?” Finally her eyes rested on his face. She looked him slowly up and down, and bit her lip. “You look—oh, dear—you haven’t been well, poor darling.”

He nodded, not knowing what to say. In the hole, there had been no need for words. She had come to him when he needed her, and there was never any strangeness or misunderstanding.

She took hold of his hand. “Come inside. Are you hungry? I made cookies and lemonade. It looks to me like you need feeding up.”

His answering smile felt stiff on his face, but he walked up to the house with her, hand in hand as in the past. He sat at the kitchen table and waited as she got a pitcher of lemonade from the refrigerator and a covered plate of oatmeal cookies from the pantry. He remembered that she had made lemonade and oatmeal cookies on the day he went away; they had sat here at the same table, she too sad to eat or drink, he too excited.

Although he felt no hungrier now than then, he bit into a cookie, watching while she did the same. His first impression of her had been wrong; she *had* changed. She had been a girl when he left, and now she was a woman, with a ripe, full figure, and very fine lines around her eyes.

He said, “Your father,” and then stopped, not knowing how to go on.

“Oh, he’s not too bad today,” she said brightly. “I’ll take you in to see him in a little while.”

“You mean he’s—what’s wrong with him?”

She frowned as if he should have known and said shortly, “Daddy had a stroke. Not a major one, thank God, but now he can’t get around so much by himself. I do the best I can, but I don’t—I can’t—” Tears started to gather on her eyelashes.

“No, no, of course not. Cara, I’m sure you’re doing your best.”

She blinked away the tears, but the frown remained. “You thought he was dead.”

“When I saw the flower-beds all overgrown, and the paintwork peeling—”

She cut him off with an anguished look. “I haven’t got time to do all that, too! I cook and clean and look after him—*that’s* a full-time job! I wanted to hire a nurse, but the expense—and besides—”

“Hey, hey, hey!” He caught and held her hands in both of his. “I’m not criticizing you, Cara! I think you’re the most wonderful...” He faltered again, lost for words. Had this been one of his dreams, by this time she would have been on his lap, stopping his mouth with her kisses, unbuttoning his shirt with her small, deft fingers, but he was not in the hole now, he was sitting in Cara’s kitchen, and she was gazing at him, hurt and hungry for his praise.

“Wonderful woman,” he finished rather weakly, dropping her hands to pick up another cookie, which he quickly stuffed into his mouth. “Mmm!”

She smiled rather sadly and a small sigh escaped her. “I guess ... I guess you missed my cookies?”

He nodded, eager to please, swallowed, and an idea struck him. “Look, I could do the chores—yard work, repairs, sort of thing your dad used to do...”

She nodded cautiously. “That would be wonderful, Heath. If you can spare the time, I mean. While you’re here.” She looked down at the table, pushed a crumb around with one fingertip and went on hesitantly, “I don’t

know what you want to do, or how long you can stay—”

At last he managed to say the right thing: “Forever. Forever, Cara.” She looked into his eyes, and her face broke into the most beautiful smile he had ever seen on a human face.

“I do love you, Heath. I always have.”

“I know. I’ve always loved you, too. I always will. Forever.”

They said no more. The better part of a minute passed. Then, still without speaking, without even touching, they both rose from the table and went to her bedroom.

The room was as he remembered it, only not so bright. The filmy curtains were closed, and the late sunlight filtered through them, thin and strange. The same prints of paintings by Monet and Cezanne hung on the yellow walls, however, and the same china figurines shared space with what seemed to be the same books and recordings on the shelves. He recognized the flowered bedspread and fluffy white rug. He saw nothing indicative of new interests acquired during the years of their separation, and he wondered if she had really been here all that time, like the sleeping princess in the fairytale, awaiting the reviving kiss of her prince. Or had she returned only recently to look after her father? Had she left her real life somewhere else, merely fitted herself back into the bedroom of her childhood, too busy, or too depressed, to bother to redecorate, putting off the major step of moving in all her stuff because to do so would be to admit that *this* was her real life now?

He did not ask; he dared not risk this moment of intimacy.

Cara pulled back the bedspread, and they undressed clumsily, scarcely looking at each other. Horribly aware of his wasted, scarred flesh, pallid, shrivelled, and aged from years of semi-starvation spent crouching in the dark, he was grateful for the maidenly reserve that kept her eyes downcast as she fumbled with her clothes. When she turned away to pile them neatly onto a chair, he crawled beneath the sheet. Moments later, she slipped in beside him, and as they moved closer together he smelled the clean fresh citrus tang of her shampoo, a powdery, perfumed waft of deodorant, and the more subtle, personal scent of herself beneath. He put his arms around her. She shivered at his touch and then lay still, waiting.

He waited, too.

He thought of how she had come to him countless times in the hole, of how he would squat and stare and see nothing in that utter blackness until, after a time, he caught glimmers of light, and a faint hint of motion. Then he would hear her voice humming a sad, wordless tune, and the sadness of it would bring hot tears to his eyes. She would murmur his name, tell him that she loved him, tell him what she had done that day, all the simple, ordinary things: how she had gone on her bicycle to the store and then worked in the garden with her father, the music she heard on the radio while preparing supper, what book she read at bedtime.

Gradually, as he listened to her familiar phrases, the darkness would lessen until finally he saw her, just her outline and a hint of her face. When he opened his arms, she would melt into them, kiss him passionately and explore his body with her hands and mouth while he gasped and shuddered with pleasure. To his wondering amazement, the girl who came to him in the hole was not the shy virgin he remembered, but a lover every bit as practiced, skilled, and uninhibited as the stars of the pornographic videos he had watched with the other guys before his capture. She could do anything, and would do everything he had ever dared to imagine. She knew just what would please him, what would excite and sustain him, and thousands of times she had brought him release.

And when she left, he would touch his face in the darkness, just to make sure he was still there.

Now, as he lay in Cara's soft bed, in the dim light, aware of her real, solid body pressed so close against his, he longed for her to make the first move, as she had always done in his fantasies. He was too fearful of spoiling the moment with his clumsiness and ignorance to touch her first. He was still a virgin, just as when they had said goodbye, but then he had been young, strong, responsive to the desires of the girl he loved. Now, he was old and weak as well as inexperienced, and he did not know the woman beside him.

He heard her sigh, felt her shift a little beside him, and he stopped breathing in the intensity of his hope that it was about to begin at last, for real, that the love that had kept him alive in the hole would bring him back to life. He would be reborn at her hands; it was the only way.

Nothing happened. He did not feel her hands on him, he felt nothing, only, as he began to breathe again, he thought he heard her whisper, faintly, "Kiss me."

He turned his head and saw her waiting for his kiss. He pressed his

lips to hers for the first time since the day he had left her at the bus station. He kissed a stranger's mouth. He tried to ignore that chill warning and kept his lips on hers, as he felt her hands begin to move on his back. Now, surely, she would give herself to him.

Her hands remained lightly pressing on his back, however, holding him in a chaste embrace, never straying below his waist, showing no inclination to go exploring. He continued kissing her until his lips grew numb, and then he drew back. For the first time since they had left the kitchen they looked into each other's eyes, and he saw there bewilderment and sadness, her feelings reflecting his own.

The love he had come looking for existed only in a dream. He closed his eyes.

Cara would not let him give up, however. Just as, once, his memory of her had kept him alive, now the real woman refused to let the dream die. She demanded, "Heath, talk to me!"

Talk was the furthest thing from his desire.

"Please, tell me what you want!"

He could not; it was impossible; what he wanted was for her to know without being told, and if he so much as said so, everything would be spoiled.

Finally, she began to cry. "You don't love me any more."

"Oh, Cara, of course I do!" He hugged her close. "Please don't cry. I love you. I wish I could show you how much."

She stilled in his arms. "You—you mean it?"

"Yes. Loving you was all that got me through the war."

"Really?" She hesitated, then lifted her head to look him in the eye. "I don't mind, I'd understand, if you'd found another girlfriend, or even—even if you went to, you know—" she faltered, barely whispered the word: "prostitutes."

He shook his head. "Never, Cara. There's never been anybody but you. Never."

Understanding lit her face. “There’s never been anybody but you for me, either. So we’re both virgins—that’s why—oh, Heath, it’s like before! We just need *time*, that’s all! Time to learn how to please each other. And we have plenty of time.”

When he agreed, she hugged him, then abruptly pulled herself free of his embrace, rolled away from him, out of bed, and began dressing.

“I have to check on Dad and get his dinner,” she explained. “We’ll have to wait until bedtime—think you can manage to wait? Luckily, we go to bed early in this house.” She flashed him a smile he could not recall seeing from her before, sexy and mischievous, and he felt a stirring of arousal. Maybe it would be all right.

He got up and dressed himself, determined to help. He followed Cara downstairs to the kitchen, assisted her chiefly by being present as she prepared a tray, and followed her back upstairs.

Cara’s father sat in an upholstered chair and gazed through the curtain of his bedroom window. He looked frail and tired and impossibly older than he could actually be. A faint sour smell hung in the room. He only glanced at Cara as she set the tray on a table beside his chair. Then he noticed Heath standing behind her in the doorway, and started violently.

“Daddy, it’s Heath,” Cara said. “You remember Heath.”

“Heath,” said the old man, slurring the word almost beyond recognition. One side of his mouth barely moved; one side of his face seemed unsynchronized with the other. “Heath’s dead.”

“No, Daddy. Heath was taken prisoner of war. Now he’s back.”

“That’s not Heath.”

“Yes, it is, Daddy. They did terrible things to him in the prison camp, but it is Heath, I promise you.”

“No, no...”

“I’m upsetting him,” Heath said, backing out of the room.

“Give him time,” said Cara.

We all need time, Heath thought. He went downstairs and stepped

outside. Twilight was already settling; he listened for insect song, bird calls, then for sounds of neighbors, distant traffic, anything, but all was weirdly silent. He imagined the evening holding its breath as it waited to see what he intended to do.

Then, as he came around the corner facing the street, something small and dark like a dog or a very dirty child yelped and darted away quickly, too fast for him to get a good look at it, disappearing into a gap among the wild shrubbery. Heath stared after it, breathing hard, waiting for his heart's beating to return to normal. When he had recovered, he walked back and forth on the sidewalk in front of the house, always stopping well short of the shrubbery. He glimpsed, as though from a distance, as though through air turned hazy with impossible distance, a few indistinct human figures stirring in the neighborhood. They took no notice of him; wraithlike, silent, those who evidently had jobs were returning from them, others evidently were leaving home for a night out. Heath recalled the closed factory, the empty shops. He could not imagine what sort of jobs there might be, or where, exactly, in this small town, one went for a night out.

When he re-entered the house, he found Cara putting dinner on the table. They sat opposite each other and ate without talking until Heath finally asked, "What happened here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Everything. The town. What happened to everything, where did everybody go?"

Cara stared at him blankly. At last she said, "*I'm* still here."

Now he stared. "You mean you never left? But why did you stay?"

"What else was there for me to do? I told you I'd wait. I never thought the war could go on for so long."

"No," he muttered, feeling cold, "neither did I. Nobody did."

"We were going to love each other forever," Cara said, her voice growing sharp, "and be together always. But then the war came, and you wanted to go be a soldier."

"I didn't *want* to. I *had* to. It was my duty."

She shook her head. "It was your excuse. You wanted to get away

from this town so much, you couldn't think of anything but getting out, and you left me behind."

"I said I'd come back for you, and now I have."

She set her fork on her plate. "Yes. You have. I'm sorry if I sounded a little bitter just then. It hasn't been easy for me, but I know what you've been through must have been so much worse. But it's going to be all right now that we're together."

Even so, though he felt another stirring of passion that night as he watched her undress, it quickly faded and died. He told himself the problem was too much light. Cara's bedroom was never truly dark, owing to a hall-light she left turned on for her father's sake, and to the streetlights that sent their sickly yellowish glow through the filmy curtains and cast unnerving shadows on the wall. He suspected, however, Cara's dull passivity was the real cause of his impotence. She seemed both slow and skittish, reluctant to touch him, and when at last he tried to direct her, the result was even worse. He could not enjoy what he could only think of as masturbation by proxy.

Still, with fingertips and lips, he managed to bring her to orgasm. She shuddered and cried out softly and then lay very still in his embrace. He listened as her breathing slowed; he fancied he heard the slowing beat of her heart as well.

Finally, she said, "Heath, that was *beautiful*."

He could think of nothing to say except, "I'm glad you liked it." After a moment he added, "It *was* beautiful."

"But what about you?" She touched him hopefully. He felt nothing, not the least tremor of arousal.

"Never mind me."

"Heath, I want to make you happy."

"I know, and you do," he told her, "you do make me happy," and hated himself for lying.

They said no more, only held each other, drifting into sleep. He awoke in the unmoving depth of the night and looked for the little painted Swiss clock that Cara always kept on her bedside table. Its glowing dial faced

away from him; he picked up the clock and turned it and held it to his ear. It was silent, inert. He returned it to the bedside table and lay staring at the pattern of shadow on the bedroom wall, listening to nothing, thinking about the sleeping woman at his side, with her head cradled in the hollow of his shoulder.

Then he found himself thinking about the other Cara, the one he had known in the hole. How had her imagined touch aroused him so incredibly, when the real woman, using her mouth and hands as he taught her, could not? What was wrong with him? He lay awake almost until dawn, worrying and wondering.

On the second day, he walked around the house, noting jobs that needed doing. Then, without telling Cara or even thinking to tell her, he set off for a long walk around the town and did not return until late afternoon. He found her in the kitchen, preparing her father's dinner tray.

"Where have you *been*?" she demanded.

"I went searching for old landmarks," he told her. "I didn't find many. In fact, at one point I started wondering if I'd ever actually lived in this place before."

"That's ridiculous. Of course you did."

"Cara, more than half the houses I passed looked like nobody lives in them. Many were uninhabitable. There's a house at the end of this street with only half its roof. Its ceiling's caved in, too. I could see, through the dirty windows, the shadow of rafters cast on an inside wall. Other houses I saw had charred walls, broken, sagging roof beams, empty windows, missing doors. And everything overgrown, vines, fallen limbs of trees." He hesitated, groped for words. "Disappearing into wilderness. Here and there I passed a lot covered in rubble, as if the house that'd been there just burst apart under the impact of an immense fist. Further on, the same fist must've ploughed through the cemetery. I think some graves are broken open there—I couldn't bring myself to look too closely. And feral, starving cats, prowling everywhere, skittering away when I looked at them. Cara, what *happened* here?"

He saw emotions flowing across her face like a speeded-up history of grief: flat denial gave way to fury at his lies, then she reluctantly conceded that some of it might be so, yet haggling over the details, then sinking into abject misery, before, finally, achieving a sad acceptance of the truth.

“Terrible things,” she said softly. “While the war was going on over there—*your* war—awful things happened here, too. But that’s all past now.”

“What happened?”

“There’s no point talking about it.” Her voice grew stronger. “It’s wrong to brood on what we can’t change—it’s harmful. It only makes things worse. You should just remember the good things. That’s what I do. And look what happened! You came back. And now we can have the rest of our lives together.”

“But, Cara—”

“Heath!”

And so he let it pass.

That night, their second together, she kissed him determinedly, almost savagely, and ground herself against him, forcing him to respond. It was what he had thought he wanted from her, this passionate attack, and finally it did arouse him. He managed to sustain an erection long enough to enter her and move himself to a mechanical climax.

She clung to him afterward, refused to let him move off her while, within her, he went soft and shrank and crept away, it occurred to him, as though in disgrace. He supported himself on his elbows and lowered his head to blow a cool stream of air into the hollow between her sweat-slicked breasts. She murmured with pleasure. It was, he thought, the single honest moment of the evening. When she spoke, Heath cringed at the sheer inane repetition of avowals of love even as he found himself helpless to respond otherwise. He could think of nothing meaningful to say, and as Cara, with excruciating forced brightness, began to speak of their wonderful, shared future, he reflected bleakly that though now neither of them was, technically, a virgin, nothing fundamental had changed. He suspected that, for all her hopeful, loving words, Cara found him no more satisfactory a lover than he found her.

Lying next to her, half-listening as she spoke of destinies entwined, lives inextricably bound together by love, he felt shamed by his estrangement from this girl whom he had loved in solitude for so long.

When she paused, waiting for his answer to some question he had not heard, he said, painfully, the words bruising his throat and bringing tears to his eyes, “Cara, this doesn’t—none of this seems real. I feel like—I feel

like a ghost in my own life.”

After a long moment’s consideration, she asked, “How does a ghost feel?”

After another long moment, he answered, “Ghosts move among the living and believe that they, too, are still living. But they’re not.”

“Heath, you’re not dead. You’re alive.” She squeezed his hand, and though he was aware of the pressure, he knew he did not feel her touch the way he should, the way he would have in the past.

“People don’t have to be *dead* to be ghosts.” He tried to explain a truth he only dimly sensed. “Maybe they only have to be out of step with their surroundings. It’s very confusing...”

“Oh, Heath.” She sighed. “You think too much. Can’t you just *accept* things as they are?”

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t. What things? How are they? This war—”

“The war’s *over*.”

“Is it?”

“Of course! Would you be here, would *we* be here like this if it wasn’t?”

“Maybe—why not? I don’t think it’s really over. And maybe it’s not just me. Maybe we’re all ghosts.”

“We’re not any of us ghosts. We’re two people who love each other. Why is that so hard for you to accept? We have a future to build for ourselves. It may be hard work, but it’s worth it to both of us, isn’t it?”

Puttering around this house, he wanted to say, and taking care of the yard can never be a full-time occupation for me, but he did not say it, as he did not say many other things.

It fell to Cara to say things.

By late the next afternoon it occurred to him that she had spent much

of their third day together not exactly complaining but certainly bringing to his notice things she did not like: his failure to notice what needed to be done, his silence, his lack of appreciation, his air of bewilderment. When, however, he stood up for himself she became indignant: it was *because* she loved him that she told him when he did something wrong; if she cared less, she would not bother; when two people loved each other, communication was the most important thing—he must agree!

After that, he could not tell her how her ceaseless talk sawed across his nerves. Adding to his discomfort was her father's fearful fury: at dinnertime, the old man clumsily knocked away the tray, scattering bread and beans on the carpet. Then, as Cara knelt to clean up the mess he screeched at her, somehow conveying the accusation that the two of them were paying a trick on him. Heath retreated, unable to blame the old man for his mistrust, only too aware of himself playing a part, pretending to be somebody who no longer existed. He went outside and stood under the tree carved with *heath loves cara forever*.

That night, because she felt it important that they talk about their lovemaking, he described several scenes he recalled from X-rated films, presenting them as his own fantasies. He got her to act out one scenario, and she proved gratifyingly eager to do as instructed. At least, he knew he ought to have found it gratifying, but, as before, every word he spoke and every act she performed at his command served only to deal his libido another bruising blow. He felt like some dirty-minded puppeteer and knew that if she ever again did exactly anything he suggested, ostensibly of her own accord, he would be too aware of his own impatient, flat, whispering voice to enjoy it.

I ask for too much, he thought. In the hole, with his life stripped down to mere survival, physical wants were basic: the feel of sunlight on his skin, clean water, enough food to fill his belly, the chance to stand upright and walk around. Now he took all those things for granted, and this beautiful, loving woman could not satisfy him. Nor could he shake the feeling that, whatever she might say, he disappointed her as much as she disappointed him.

After Cara fell asleep, he rolled away from her and out of bed and padded quietly down the hall to the bathroom. He meant only to relieve himself without disturbing anyone, and he could see well enough by the hall light. He let the door fall quietly shut behind him, and darkness enclosed him—not total, but the nearest thing to complete darkness he had known since the hole.

For a moment it threw him back to an earlier time; the last few days became no more than a particularly vivid, extended dream. Then, as his eyes adjusted he saw a thin line of light marking out the bottom of the door, and he breathed again in this world. Although naked, his skin was clean, still smelling of the soap and deodorant he had used earlier in the day, and he was in Cara's house, and darkness not forced on him held no terrors, only a promise. He sank to the softly carpeted floor, and waited as he had waited before, and she did not disappoint him. When he opened his arms, she came into them as ready and eager, hungry and passionate, as she had ever been before, her lips and tongue going everywhere her fingers explored, and with a groan of pleasure, a cry of relief he could not stifle, he fell back...

The light was everywhere, dazzling, almost as shattering as Cara's shriek.

Was it disgust that made her scream, or jealousy? What had she seen, exactly, when she opened the bathroom door?

She would not say. For once, though he implored her, she refused to speak. It was a natural urge, he told her, you were asleep, I was alone, it wasn't like I cheated on you, I've never loved, never even really lusted after, anyone but you. Please, can't we talk about this?

Pale, rigid, she stood with her face averted, as though she could no longer bear the sight of him, and told him to take a shower and get dressed. When he emerged from the bathroom, she had his bag packed. Dawn was just breaking when she all but pushed him out the front door.

He stumbled along the strange, familiar street. In all the town, it seemed, he alone stirred. Too early to be going to work, he supposed. Then he stopped, disoriented, wondering if he had come the wrong way. Near the end of the street, at the edge of a driveway, a bird stood with its ashy back turned toward him, like some sort of vulture but impossibly large, bigger than anything he had ever seen outside a zoo. It pecked and worried at something that looked like a big, lumpy bag of garbage.

Heath gave a little cry of astonishment and turned away from the horror. Not real, he thought, not real. Nothing here is very real except...

In turning, he found himself facing in the direction he had just come. He could still see Cara's house though it appeared to rest on the rim of a jumbled horizon. He closed his eyes and dropped his suitcase and his hands balled into fists as the wrongness of everything assaulted him. It's

not *fair*. He took a step, and another. After all I've been through, she can't just throw me out like this, reject me because I had one brief moment of pleasure away from her. He kept his head down, ignoring everything around him, concentrating on walking, on getting back to Cara. She wanted to talk; very well, he would make her listen. And then, he hoped, they could start again, and love each other, more honestly this time.

It was early morning by now, and though Cara's street was still weirdly quiet, he sensed human activity going on somewhere, though he could not tell if it was near by or far away. A door opened and closed, an automobile engine wheezed asthmatically. He risked a glance over his shoulder, saw people behind him, moving purposefully, going about their unimaginable business, ignoring or perhaps simply oblivious to the creature feasting at the end of the street.

Just as when he had first arrived, Heath headed for the backyard rather than formally present himself at the front door. As soon as he came around the side of the house he heard Cara's voice, and knew she was there under their tree, talking to someone. He heard her speak his name, but not angrily; she sounded calm and normal. She seemed to be running through her plans for the day. He could not imagine to whom she spoke. She had introduced him to no one nor mentioned any friends.

He stopped short, staring, trying to make out who that was beside her. Not another woman, but a man—a young man.

"Maybe a picnic down by the river ... maybe we could even go for a swim, what do you say to that, Heath?"

He froze, certain she must have seen him, but her entire attention focused on the young man who leaned against the tree and smiled down at her, a terribly familiar young man, though Heath had not seen that face in the mirror for a long time.

"Then we'll come back, and I'll make you something nice for dinner, one of your favorites." She laughed and tossed her head girlishly, as if the silent, ghostly young man beside her had said something. "Just because—because I love you, Heath, you know that! Forever."

He crept away, though he had an idea she would not have bothered to look in his direction no matter how much noise he made. He knew there was nothing he could say to her that would make her take him back. There was no point in trying. She was happier, her life much simpler, with the young man she had first fallen in love with. She did not need him.

Avoiding the end of the street where he had seen the strange bird, Heath made his roundabout way to the bus station on foot through the decaying neighborhoods of the town that would never be his home, this time not stopping or staring, this time unsurprised by the wasteland. Of course, there were junked cars and ruined houses on every street, as well as piles of uncollected refuse; and all this would attract scavengers and carrion-eaters. The morning advanced, and he was no longer alone: others, people he glimpsed from the corner of the eye, far away across the street, walked to work or somewhere else, continuing lives he could not imagine. Cars went by, some of them black and shiny with tinted windows rolled up tight, others old, rattling, aggressively noisy.

At the barred grille of the ticket counter he passed through the largest bill in his wallet in exchange for a printed strip of paper that would allow him to board the next bus. He had no idea where it would take him, or what he would do when he got there, but that seemed not to matter.

There were only half a dozen other people on board, each sitting separately, all half-turned away from him and from one another as they munched doughnuts or sipped coffee from paper cups. Heath settled into a window seat near the back. He glanced across a debris-littered lot at the railroad station platform, at the crowd patiently waiting there, and wondered why he had not taken the train instead of the bus. He had always loved the train as a boy. When the bus began to move again he stared blankly out at the world, wondering if it would always seem as strange to him. He shifted uneasily in his uncomfortable clothes, on the uncomfortable seat, and then his fingers strayed to his face. Yes. He was still there.