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Deep Kiss

by Tobias Wolff

When Joe Reed was a boy of fifteen, his craziness over a girl became such a burden to his family, and such a curiosity to the small town where they lived, that his mother threatened to pack him off to his married sister in San Diego. But before this could happen Joe's father died and his mother collected a large sum from Northwestern Mutual, sold the family pharmacy, and moved both Joe and herself to California.

Thirty years passed. In that time he heard nothing from the girl, Mary Claude Moore, but now and then word of her reached him through people back in Dunston. She dropped out of high school in her senior year, had a baby, got married, divorced, then remarried a few years later. That second marriage was the last thing Joe knew about Mary Claude until he learned of her death.

He'd dropped by his mother's house one Sunday afternoon. She couldn't keep the house up anymore, alone as she was, and failing, and she'd finally agreed to buy into an assisted-living "community"—oh how she hated that word, how icily she served it up. Joe had come by to make sure everything was in order for the realtor's walk-through later that week. They had coffee together and that was when she told him about Mary Claude and gave him the letter. He didn't want to be thinking about what his reaction looked like, or ought to look like, so he excused himself and took the letter outside, to the backyard.

According to the newspaper clipping his mother's friend had

enclosed, Mary Claude appeared to have fallen asleep at the wheel and drifted into the oncoming lane of traffic. She'd been killed outright and so had the driver of the car she hit, a dentist from Bellingham heading home from a weekend of fishing. That was the newspaper account. The unofficial version, which his mother's friend disparaged but passed along anyway, was that Mary Claude had been having a fling with a real estate agent named Chip Ryan. He drove the same unusual car as the dentist, a red Mercedes station wagon, and Mary Claude had an equally distinctive old Mustang convertible, powder blue. Both of them lived outside town and frequently passed each other coming and going. The story was, whenever they met on an empty stretch of road they played a game where they switched lanes at the last moment. A sort of lovers' game. Mary Claude had mistaken the dentist's car for Chip's, and that was that.

Joe could hardly make sense of the story. His mother's friend doubted it was true, but conceded it certainly was a puzzle how Mary Claude could have fallen asleep just a hundred feet past a series of tight curves. Still, she wrote, there were probably other explanations that wouldn't insult her memory and give needless pain to her family.

The newspaper article said that Mary Claude and her husband owned a tavern. They must have done well; not long before all this, the chamber of commerce had named them Businesspersons of the Year. She was survived by her husband, three children, two grandchildren. For some reason the paper hadn't run a picture of her with the piece. Joe was glad of this omission.

Joe had lived another, submerged life, parallel to the one known by those around him. In this other life he hadn't left for California but had stayed on in Dunston with Mary Claude. He fell into this dream during the first months after the move, in the immensity of summer on a sunstruck street where old people peered anxiously from behind their parted blinds and sprinklers ran at night on lawns visited only by the Mexicans who mowed them. When his mother left her dark-

ened bedroom long enough to chase him outside, Joe took the *Saturday Evening Post* to a pool in a nearby park and watched the girls oil each other and shriek when loitering bravos splashed water on them. He lay on his stomach and stared at the *Post* and lived his ghost life with Mary Claude.

After Joe started school, his mother took an accounting job at an office-furniture store. A few months later she and another woman formed a partnership and bought the owner out. Joe's mother began to dress smartly. She wore her hair straight instead of piled up on her head, and let a gray streak show through. One night at dinner she said "Joe!" so insistently that he realized she'd been speaking to him without his knowing it, and when he looked at her she said, "You can't bring him back, son. You have to let him go." Joe was embarrassed at the depth of her misunderstanding, but he played along and let her think she'd read his mind.

The high school was new and bright and vast. In the echoing hallways the voices of the students mingled in a roar that Joe came to hear as an aspect of the silence in which he passed his days. He sometimes went home without having spoken a word to anyone. It seemed to him that he might go through the whole year that way, and the next year too, until he graduated, but before long he became friends with his biology lab partner, who took him to parties and introduced him to girls. When Joe got his driver's license that spring he began dating Carla. He aced his courses and played Officer Krupke in *West Side Story*. In the fall of his senior year he and Carla left a dance early and went to a motel. It was the first time for both of them, and a failure. They tried again a few days later in Carla's bedroom and had better luck, and by Christmas Joe was starting to see Courtney on the sly. He didn't really prefer her, but it seemed inevitable that sooner or later either he or Carla would be unfaithful, and he wanted to be the one. This became far more complicated than he'd expected. Joe was soon exposed and denounced by both girls as a heartless cheat, which did not, it turned out, entirely discourage other girls from going out with him.

And through all this he continued his phantom life with Mary

Claude. He was with her on a blanket in a moonlit clearing or in a car parked above the river with Ray Charles on the radio, her fingertips grazing the back of his neck, her mouth open to his, her caramel taste on his lips and tongue and deep in his throat. Only the kiss was a memory; only the kiss was real. He'd hardly been anywhere with Mary Claude except when they could sneak off at school, and a few times in town. But from the kiss he made everything else, or everything else made itself, for that was how it happened—without any effort of imagination or sense of unreality, he watched his life with Mary Claude go on as he had once believed it would. The scenes grew more particular as time passed, each new one framed by those that had gone before, and always with a kiss at the heart of it.

At Berkeley Joe went out with Lauren, and when she left for a year at the Sorbonne there was Toni, then Candace. He and Candace shared a house with two other couples until they graduated and afterward rented an apartment of their own through Joe's first year of medical school. Then Candace went to New York to visit her family and never came back. She sent Joe a letter in which she asked his forgiveness for the problems she'd caused through her alcoholism, which she was now in the process of confronting. She said she couldn't return to the life she'd led in Berkeley, as he surely understood.

No, Joe didn't understand. They'd had their troubles, the two of them; he'd been going all out and so had Candace, waitressing nights as she worked toward a degree in dance therapy. Of course there were problems, but nothing all that serious, and he certainly didn't begrudge her a little relaxation. Yet when Joe's mother heard about Candace leaving, the first thing she said was that she hoped she'd get some help for her drinking. Joe hadn't mentioned the letter.

Until he finished his training and met the woman he would marry, Joe had no more love affairs, just occasional sessions with women working too hard themselves to want much more of him. The practicality of these arrangements gave the whole enterprise a starkly biological cast, which made Joe nervously conscious of his masculine duty and thus left him unmanned with oppressive frequency. By the

time he started his residency, in Seattle, he'd entered a state of near quarantine that made his shadow life more moony and detailed than ever.

Dunston was just three hours north of Seattle. Joe sometimes thought of driving up on a free afternoon, but never did. By then he'd heard that Mary Claude was married again. There was no purpose in making the trip except to see her, and he was afraid she wouldn't want to see him, and also afraid that she would. It was too late for that. She had a daughter and a husband and a house to run, she had work to do. So did he—useful, exacting work. It depended on a clarity Joe knew he couldn't rely on, that he had to improvise day by day. He'd lost it before and could not risk losing it again.

When Mary Claude was killed, Joe had been married for seventeen years. His wife, Liz, was a pediatrician in the same clinic where he practiced as an internist. They had a son in his junior year of high school, a daughter a year younger. The boy was a gifted cellist, unworldly, an aesthete. Their daughter was more calculating but fiercer in her attachments once she'd made them. Joe began taking her rock climbing when she was still in grade school and found her to be the most fearless and inventive partner he'd ever had.

Then came a time when his daughter ceased to confide. Both daughter and son developed private sources of amusement, and Joe began to detect a certain condescension in their handling of him. His children were slipping away into the deep forest; he tried not to hurry them with the panic he felt at the gathering signs of their departure.

Liz, too, kept changing on him. When they first met she was girlish and unsure of herself in spite of being three years older than Joe, but since then she'd grown calm and regal, which both unsettled and excited him. In their lovemaking he approached her almost wistfully and sometimes concluded with a bark of triumph, as if he'd brought a notorious virgin to ground. Away from her for more than a day or two, Joe hardly knew who he was.

And still through all these years he had thoughts of Mary Claude. He thought of her sitting across from him at a kitchen table, barely awake, drinking coffee. The kitchen was small and untidy, and Mary Claude's robe gaped open as she bent to drink. She saw him looking and looked back at him. He stood. She put her cup down and waited. He thought of them standing on a porch and waving as friends drove off. And when they were alone Mary Claude turned to him and slipped an arm around his waist, and they went slowly inside and up the stairs, stopping to kiss on the landing. Sometimes he thought of what was to follow, but this was the moment he lingered on, the kiss. Joe remembered very well what it was like to kiss Mary Claude; he'd done it as much as anyone could for as long as they were together, which came to just over three months.

Her father owned a dairy farm several miles out of town. Her mother had moved away when Mary Claude was eleven, taking her along. She married again, but things did not go well between her daughter and this new husband, and she sent Mary Claude back to her father when she was fifteen. Joe had gone through grade school barely noticing her, drab little hick that she was, but she came back a different girl, flaunting and witchy. She mouthed off to the teachers and walked around in a pout with her back arched like a bow. She had no friends except for an equally friendless cousin. During volleyball games in her gym class she baited the other girls by deliberately hitting the ball out-of-bounds or into the net. She cut classes and smoked and made out with other girls' boyfriends, or so it was said, and Joe, curious to test the rumor, found it to be true: Mary Claude went behind the school with him during a dance to which he'd brought another girl, and kept him out there for over an hour. He knew she was doing it to shame his date—at first anyway, until she warmed to him—but once he started he couldn't stop kissing her.

Joe had by then kissed several girls and thought he had a pretty fair idea of the possibilities. Kissing was good, but he tended to think of it as a beachhead from which to launch more serious operations, or

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as a safe harbor when, inevitably, he was forced to retreat. But he didn't remember to try anything else that night, leaning against the gymnasium wall with this girl who tasted so good and pressed so fully against him, humming in his ear when they stopped to breathe and swaying to the music that rattled the high windows above them. There were other couples along the wall, and Joe knew his date would hear about this, but when he started to lean away Mary Claude laid her fingers along his cheeks and guided his mouth back to hers, and after that he forgot about leaving. He would have stayed there all night, with no sense of time passing, but finally a girl came out and told Mary Claude that her ride was waiting to take her home. She turned to go, then stopped and kissed Joe again. He walked around the school twice before going back inside. The gym was almost empty. His date had left with friends.

When he saw Mary Claude in the hallway on Monday morning he didn't pretend that nothing had happened. Nor did she. She let him take her books and walk her to class. At the lunch period they went to the cafeteria and sat across from each other. He understood what would happen—the hush around them, how they'd be looked at, even by his friends. Joe knew the rules. He'd been a shit and hurt a nice girl, and for Mary Claude, of all people. You could make out with Mary Claude, but you had to laugh about it later and cut her dead. They ate without talking. Her color was high, otherwise she gave nothing away. She helped herself to his carrots, and that was that. They were a pair.

There was a fern-choked gully behind the school. There were the stands by the football field. Empty classrooms. They met before school started and at lunch and for a few minutes after school, until her bus left. Joe didn't say much. When he heard the things he said, he felt hopeless. Mary Claude was either stone silent or gabby. She often got on a jag between kisses when they were making out, a steady murmur, vague, domestic, whatever came to mind. Joe liked feeling her low voice against his chest but paid little attention to what she said and afterward remembered almost none of it.

She tasted of lipstick and cigarettes and candy. When she opened her mouth to his the first sensation was a **shock of relief as the tight-**

ness melted in a rush from his neck and shoulders. And then he was swaying with her, drinking that smoky sweetness, drinking forgetfulness of the schoolwork he hadn't done, the stammer he was developing, his mother dazed and pale, the room at the end of the hallway where his father lay gasping for the next breath like a trout dropped on the riverbank. He forgot to plan what to try next, where to touch, how hard to press. He stopped thinking ahead; there was no ahead, no before and no after. He was itchy with thirst and deeply satisfied all at once.

And Mary Claude was thirsty for him. He'd never had this happen before, a girl impatient for the taste of him, greedy for it. She didn't like to break off; when he leaned away for a breath she would close her fingers in his hair and pull him back to her. She sometimes said his name in a low, almost mocking way as they were about to return to class, and the sound of it whipped him back around as if she'd yanked on a leash.

Mary Claude soon grew careless with their privacy. She didn't care who saw them, or when. She'd command a kiss—a profound kiss—as she boarded her bus, or in the hallway, even on the street in town when her father let her go in for some shopping after school. Joe knew this was beyond carelessness, that she was making a display of their appetite, perhaps especially of his appetite for her. He could see she was proud of her claim on him, and this made him proud and brazen too. He didn't mind if people thought they were ridiculous, even a sort of joke, the two of them "stitched together at the mouth," as his mother put it. She'd heard about them, of course; she heard everything in the pharmacy.

At first she came at him askant about it, then she lost patience. Was this the time to be carrying on with some girl? This was not the time; couldn't he see that? Now, of all times? Couldn't he sit with his father awhile instead of mooning in his room and tying up the telephone? Would that be too much to ask? Joe knew he should care that he was giving his mother trouble, but nothing she said touched him. It wasn't out of concern for her that he ruined everything.

He and Mary Claude were in the stands during a basketball game. She was bored and wanted to leave, go outside. Joe kept putting her off; the game was close. She started to play with the hair at the nape of his neck. He liked the feeling and almost surrendered to it, then something came over him and he shrugged her hand off. He felt Mary Claude go still beside him. He knew she was looking at him, but he kept his eyes on the players and even shouted when one of them muffed a pass. Mary Claude slid her fingers back into his hair, tightened them, and began to turn his head toward hers. Without taking his eyes from the game he gave a rough shake and pulled away. Mary Claude stood up and waited there a moment; though Joe knew he could still turn to her, even then he did not. She made her way to the aisle. He watched her descend the steps and cross in front of the stands and leave the gym. The game had become meaningless to him, but he sat through the rest of it. His mouth was dry, his heart thudding as if he were hollow.

Joe phoned Mary Claude when he got home. No answer. He called again just before he went to bed, and someone picked up but didn't say anything. "Mary Claude," he said. "Mary Claude, please."

She wouldn't answer. He knew she was waiting for him to give an account, to justify himself, and he couldn't think what to say. In the end, all he could say was her name. "Mary Claude."

Then she hung up.

She hung up whenever he called. He pushed notes into her locker and got no answer. He met her bus every morning, and she walked right past him. He waited outside her classrooms and followed her down the hall and out to the bus stop after school. He knew he was making a fool of himself, but he had no choice; there was no other way to be close to her. When his mother demanded that he leave the girl alone, it made no difference. He kept trailing her. And still Mary Claude did not relent.

They had one class together, Washington State history. She sat two

seats ahead of him in the next row to the left. He could watch Mary Claude without her seeing him watch her, though of course she knew. Back when they were together, before he ruined it all, she turned her head every little while to look at him and always found his eyes on her. She didn't turn now, but had to know—yawning, lifting her hair away from her neck with both hands and letting it fall again—*had* to know that he was watching her. And the way she slipped one foot out of its loafer and slowly scratched the other ankle with it—all this was to sharpen the ache he felt. The curve of her neck as she inspected her fingernails. Her lips, pursed with impatience as the class wore on.

He was alert to any movement that allowed him a view of Mary Claude's mouth. She often turned to look at the clock over the door, and Joe never failed to seize that glint of her face in profile. When he saw her mouth he leaned forward, narrowing the distance by at least that much. It was wrong that he couldn't put his mouth to hers, it was an impossible mistake that kept him confused and on edge.

She must be feeling what he was feeling; Joe was sure of that. If he was cut off from her, she was cut off from him. Once it was over everything would be the same between them, maybe better, because they would value more what they'd lost and had to find again, but it went on and on, and Joe came to understand that Mary Claude didn't know how to end it—that she was waiting for him to do it. But what could he do when she wouldn't speak to him? When she wouldn't even look at him?

Then she began keeping company with Al Dodge, a senior, a quiet and well-liked boy who struggled in school and had a limp from polio. He lived just up the road from Mary Claude and drove to school, and she started riding with him instead of taking the bus. They sometimes ate lunch together. Joe was thrown, at first; then he saw that this was his signal. He waited for Al outside the wood shop and began to tell him about Mary Claude and himself, how they were meant to be together. Al tried to brush past, but Joe wasn't through talking and blocked his way. Al pushed at him, and his bad leg gave out and he went down, his metal brace clattering on the cement.

When Joe bent to help him up two boys ran over and shouldered him aside. One of them gave Joe a look as he struggled to lift Al to his feet. Joe wanted to explain everything, and the impossibility of ever doing this left him no choice but to smile at the boy and tell him to go fuck himself.

He could see when he got home that his mother already knew about it. She set him to work in the pharmacy and spoke to him only when she had to. While he was doing the dishes that night she came to the kitchen and told him that his sister and her husband were willing to have Joe come live with them until things got sorted out—until his father died, he took her to mean. Her face was flushed, her eyes brilliant, she stood erect in the doorway and forced him to look at her. She was magnificent, and he resented it. Did he want to go to San Diego? Did he want to do that? No? Was he sure? All right, she said. She needed him here. But one more thing like this, he'd be on the first bus out of town. Did he understand? Good. Now she wanted Joe to go to his father and make the same promise to him.

Joe did no such thing. He listened to the weird submarine clankings emanating from his father's oxygen tank and studied the pattern in the rug and answered a few wheezy questions about his schoolwork and then he got the hell out of there, but not before his father put his dry yellow hand on Joe's wrist and pulled him down into an embrace that left him sick with horror.

He stopped following Mary Claude to her classes. She rode to school with Al Dodge and sometimes walked with him between classes, but Joe could see there was nothing between them. She was alone, as before. So was he, more than ever—the guy who picked on cripples. Though Joe didn't follow Mary Claude he still watched her, from nearby when he could but mostly from a distance, cocking her hip to hold her locker door open, sitting at the end of a cafeteria table and tearing at the peel of an orange with her strong fingers. It was late May. In a couple of weeks school would be over and he'd have no hope of breaking this spell he'd brought on them.

He decided he would kiss her. She was like him. After the first taste she always wanted another, and then another, until she lost herself. That was what they needed—to lose themselves again.

Mary Claude's gym teacher took the girls outside on warm days for softball and track. Joe's French class met that period, though he sometimes cut out early to stand in the shade of the trees at the near end of the field and watch Mary Claude. She suited up with the other girls but usually drifted into the stands to smoke and chew the fat with her cousin Ruth, who was half Indian and never talked to anyone except her relatives. Mary Claude was pale anyway, and beside Ruth she gleamed like a white stone in a streambed. When the teacher led the class back inside, Mary Claude always made a point of lagging, as if the force that compelled the others had no hold on her. Even Ruth couldn't endure this exquisite dawdling and left her behind.

Mary Claude had her eyes on the ground, arms crossed, as she started in from the field. Joe didn't know if she'd seen him or not. He stood under a horse-chestnut tree beside the path that led to the locker rooms; the tree was in bloom, and his eyes had gone weepy from the pollen. When she drew near, he spoke her name and she looked up without surprise. He'd had something all planned out to say, but now that he was close to her he forgot what it was.

She waited, arms still crossed. Then she said, "You been crying?" Joe wasn't sure what happened next. Even right after it happened he had no confidence in any account, even in his own memory, and accepted the blame that fell on him without protest and without belief.

But he knew that it started with Mary Claude's crack about his eyes. He heard her mockery as forgiveness; forgiveness and summons. It sent a rush of heat to his face. He could still feel it, thinking back. Then he lost the thread. He remembered holding one of her hands in both of his, and Mary Claude leaning away and looking at him, but struggling? Perhaps. Then he remembered being with her under the tree, his arms around her, though how they got there he couldn't say. Maybe he just led her there, maybe he really did force her. The one thing he was sure of was that her mouth was opening to

his when the gym teacher grabbed his collar. Even as she wrenched him back, shirtfront bunched at his throat, he was straining forward to seal the kiss. Then Mary Claude turned aside and started crying, and he knew he'd have to start all over again.

He didn't argue with anything anyone said. His mother surprised him by trying to make the principal feel sorry for her, something he'd never seen her do, but it didn't pay off; he refused to let Joe finish out the year. As he was clearing out his locker a couple of seniors walked past and made smooching sounds, and other students took it up as Joe carried his stuff down the hallway.

His mother talked about sending him to San Diego that weekend. Though he'd made up his mind to refuse, it never came to a test. Late Wednesday afternoon his father went into a coma; until he died that evening Joe kept the watch with his mother, prowling the room while she held her husband's hand. Now and then Joe looked at the figure in the bed, then turned away, to the window with its darkening view of the neighbor's yard, to the bookcase, to the photographs on the bureau and nightstand. Joe in his Little League uniform. Joe looking over the edge of his crib. Joe and his father beside the Skagit River, holding up a pair of big steelhead.

He helped his mother make the calls and settle the funeral arrangements. He gave his father's best friend all his fishing gear and boxed up his clothes for the Goodwill. He was steady at his mother's side, gallant and grave. On the night after the funeral he slipped downstairs and felt for the car keys on the hook where they were kept. Not there. Not there the next night either. So—his mother had second-guessed him. Joe was surprised that she'd calculated so coolly in her grief. It made him think differently of her. Better, and worse.

Both house and business were sold within the week to a couple from Vancouver. It had all been arranged months back, pending his father's death. Joe was doing an inventory for the new owner, kneeling on the floor with a clipboard, when he heard someone walk up the aisle and stop behind him. He glanced back, and there was Mary Claude's father.

Joe had seen Mr. Moore from a distance a few times but never

really considered him, didn't think of him except as a vague shadow cast by Mary Claude; he was unprepared for the man's actual presence. Mr. Moore loomed over Joe, catching a dusty beam of light square in the face. Wetness gleamed in the slack right corner of his mouth, and his right shoulder sagged as if he were holding a bucket. He wore new overalls and fresh-scraped boots, the marks of the stick still showing through a film of dried mud across the toe caps. He smelled strongly of camphor. His eyes were a pale, watery blue. He didn't narrow them against the light but looked down at Joe stupidously. Joe was sure he knew everything, not only what he'd done with his daughter, and tried to do, but everything he'd dreamed of doing, even his plan to somehow get her in the car and run away to Canada.

Mr. Moore seemed about to say something, but instead he bent down and gave Joe's shoulder a squeeze. Then he turned and walked back down the aisle.

Joe took the letter into his mother's yard and studied it. Hunched in a lawn chair, elbows on his knees, he waited to be struck; down the street someone was blasting a Strauss waltz through an open window, and he couldn't stop himself from following it, even conducting it with minute twitches of his head, though he'd lost his taste for old Vienna after Candace went on a Strauss binge the year before she left. The chair had looked dry when he sat down, but the morning's dew still lingered between the straps of webbing and seeped into his pants, warm, clinging. The grass needed a trim. Joe knew that if he looked up he'd see his mother watching him from the kitchen window, pulling a long face for what she imagined he was feeling. What he did feel was embarrassment at this hambone attempt to create sorrow by imitating it.

He rocked to his feet, looked sourly around, then started toward the shed where the mower was kept. It would come later, if it came at all. Sometimes it didn't. He lost patients and hardly ever thought

of them again, and then with a regret that he recognized as mostly formal.

No, if it came it would come from behind and push him into a hole so deep he'd forget what it was like to be out of it. That was what happened with his beautiful niece Angela, his sister's only child. Joe had warned her—she had diabetes and was drinking heavily—but somehow he'd failed to expect it himself. He got clobbered a few weeks after her death, laid low. And something like that happened to him after his son was born. One night, holding the baby, he remembered with suspicious clarity his own father holding him, looking down at him, and smiling; there was that roguish gap between his teeth, the crazy upcurved eyebrow. It was a look of unguarded benevolence. Joe knew it well, he'd grown up in the light of his father's pleasure in him, and now he figured that by some trick of the mind he had imposed it on a scene too distant for recall.

False or not, he couldn't shake the memory. And others followed that he knew to be true, though he hadn't thought of them for years: his father's amused, bottomless patience in teaching him to drive or tie flies or work the cash register; the stories he told about growing up wild in rural Georgia, and about his older brother Chet. Chet had been killed on Peleliu, his body unfound, and Joe's father was never able to hide the grief that still overcame him because of that death.

Joe's parents had been close to forty when he was born. He guessed he'd been something of an accident, but a welcome one, especially to his father. They'd been friends. And yet Joe had somehow come to resent his father's sickness as a betrayal, a desertion. He didn't think it out in those terms, didn't think it out at all, but it felt like that, then, as if his father had willfully—perversely—surrendered to the weak, wheezing, yellow-faced sufferer who'd taken his place. Joe's knowledge of his own real desertion, the depth of its injustice and cruelty, came slowly. He'd managed it well enough until the birth of his son, then hardly at all. For weeks it seemed that every new joy came with a shadow of remembrance and shame. His wife grew impatient with his moods, then disgusted. But what was he to do?

Others might forgive you—he knew his father would—but how do you forgive yourself? You don't, really. Yet one day the weight is lighter, and the next lighter still, and then you barely know it's there, if it's there at all. So it is with the best of men and the worst of men, and so it was with Joe.

The lawn mower had a bent blade and shook convulsively as he maneuvered it around the yard. It was folly to use it in this condition, but the pushing felt good and he kept muscling it on. He spun through a corner and saw his mother in the kitchen window, her face overlaid with leaves reflected from the orange tree. She looked worried. Joe raised a hand and she gave a little wave back, the same regretful gesture she used to make from the departing car when they left him at scout camp in the summer—except that she was strong and handsome then, and now she was old and had to wear a diaper. He turned his attention to the rock border where he'd pranged the blade last time, and when he looked up again she was gone.

He squared the yard and kept moving toward the middle. The shaking of the mower no longer held his interest. It was part of the cadence of the work, like the crisp turns he made and the extra push he gave when he hit a thick clump of grass. His hands tingled; his brow dripped; his shirt was soaked through. As he worked he ceased to think, or to feel himself think, and then it came to him. Chip Ryan, the real estate agent Mary Claude had been fooling around with . . . little Chip! He hadn't placed him at first because the boy was so young, just seven or eight, when Joe left Dunston. Chip's older brother had been a friend of his. Chip used to hang around while they played records and talked, but he didn't butt in or act bratty. Joe had been struck by that—what a nice kid he was, little Chip, sitting there with his pet rabbit, stroking its ears while he looked up at the big boys.

Little Chip and Mary Claude.

The letter didn't say whether Chip was married or single. Either way he was on the prowl, or they wouldn't be telling that story. And of all the women in that long green valley, he had to pick Mary Claude. If

it was true. But of course it was. Leave it to Mary Claude to come up with a game like that, all or nothing, no room for error.

He bullied the mower through the last couple of turns and cut the engine. A pall of exhaust hung above the yard. He heard the music again. Violins. Strauss, still. He nodded helplessly along as he towed himself off with his shirt. He'd heard the piece fifty times, a hundred times, Candace dancing naked through their apartment to the rise and fall of it, gleaming with sweat, eyes half closed—but when he reached for the name he felt it slip away. It baffled him that he couldn't hold on to something he'd known so well, and he stood fixed in his puzzlement as the song swelled to a finish and died, and a dog barked somewhere, and another waltz began.

