

A House of Order

John Bennion

THREE WEEKS HAD PASSED since Howard and Sylvia Rockwood last made love. Earlier, before the days of silence, they could have begun casually, prompted by any minor conversational motion, finally drawing close enough for physical discourse, but now it would take singular effort. That morning, riding the fence to make sure his cattle couldn't climb through and be lost in the higher reaches of the mountain, Howard looked down on the fields of Rockwood. Perched on the slope, he felt that if he wasn't careful the cultivated green which was his life would slide away into the desert and dissipate in the dry heat.

Soon afterward he discovered a transparent snakeskin rolled against the base of a cedar post, like a tendril of mist keeping out of the sun. He dismounted and curled it in his fingers — the second rattlesnake skin he had found in his life. It could become a gift to help them talk, a prompt or a gimmick. Cradling the brittle shell, he rode toward town, which was caught midway between the western Utah desert and the watered communities of the Wasatch front. His great-great-grandfather, James Darren Rockwood, had settled the area under a call from Brigham Young.

At home he placed the intricately ribbed snakeskin on the kitchen table. "Sylvia, come see what I brought you." He blew, and the transparent skin rustled against the salt and pepper shakers. "Sylvia?" He dropped his saddlebag with what was left of lunch on the wood stove, dusty in the summertime, and looked at the pans hanging on the wall. Suddenly, he felt close to another, familiar universe and he was returning from school to the same kitchen, wrapped in the same sunlight, calling for his mother. The only difference was that now the radio played "Hey, Jude" instead of "Love Me Tender."

He looked at the empty electric stove; Sylvia hadn't started dinner. "Surprise. I've brought a friend." The kitchen window was the old kind, installed

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by James Darren or replaced by his son with glass that distorted the trees on the other side, compressing and stretching the branches, but he could see that Sylvia wasn't in the orchard. "OK, where are you reading today?"

The bathroom door opened, and she walked down the hall toward him, a book dangling from her hand. Wearing one of his shirts — too big for her, hanging straight from her shoulders, flat across her chest — she looked like a little girl. She bent over the skin, pulling her black hair sideways out of her eyes.

"A snake," she said. She knelt on the floor with her chin on the edge of the table. "Did you see him with his fresh skin?"

Howard shook his head. "I'm lucky I didn't. Dad told me that they'll strike at anything if you disturb them while they're shedding." The cover of her book showed a heavy-breasted woman lying in the arms of a cowboy. "I almost smashed it bringing it to show you."

She caught him looking. "The real West. I've been expanding my mind."

"Romance," he said. "The opiate of the Mrs." She made a face. Reading all day, especially when she read trash, made her dull-headed and disagreeable. The cowboy had wide, muscled shoulders.

"I found it in the garage; I think it was one of your father's." She gave him a slight smile and walked into the living room. His father had indulged in romance, had tried to live fictions. "I'm almost finished," Sylvia called. Sticking her head back through the doorway, she nodded toward the snakeskin. "Thanks."

She was gone. Since the morning after the last time they had made love, she had acted this way — cold and distant. Or she made wisecracks, like the one about his father's stash of westerns. Howard had offended her either during the lovemaking or earlier in a way that the lovemaking emphasized, but he wished she would talk about it. Riding the fence, he had tried to decide what bothered her: (a) he had moved too quickly that night, leaving her unsatisfied or in some other way trammelled; (b) she was bored since she quit her job; (c) she had a secret lover, an option he didn't take seriously but inserted to make sure he covered everything; and (d) the most obvious choice, she had finally decided that living in his parents' old house, on his father's old farm, wouldn't work, and she was using her body to imply what she knew would hurt him if said directly.

Two years earlier his father had left his mother. When he later died in an auto accident in California, Sylvia and Howard had interrupted school at the University of Utah, a sacrifice for both of them, and Howard began gathering into his own hands the reins his father had dropped. Howard's mother moved to Salt Lake to be near his sister, and he and Sylvia established themselves in the old house. They had committed to a two-year experiment, which was now half completed. Sylvia had grown up in Charlottesville where her father taught at the University of Virginia, and she had surprised Howard by agreeing easily to the long sabbatical from school and the city. As he plowed, planted, and harvested his land, turned his cattle out to feed on the mountain, he had been less and less able to think of their stay as temporary.

He looked past the skin toward the empty stove and counter. "Hey, what

do you say if I cook tonight?" he called. She had quit her job at the insurance agency two months before and since then had been winding down, perhaps getting herself to where she could challenge their waiting even another year.

"Fine," she said.

He pulled two steaks from the freezer and laid them in a frying pan, then sliced several potatoes and an onion in with the meat. After pouring a cup of water across the food, he settled a lid over the top. He washed then walked back into the high-ceilinged living room, drying his hands. "Anything wrong?" he said, knowing the answer already. Confronting her directly had never worked.

She looked up. "No. Why do you ask?" She turned again to her reading.

"All last night you sat there staring out the window as if I were invisible."

"I'm sorry." She looked up at him. "You look tired."

"And today—" She was reading again. "You're not listening to me."

She looked up, wide-eyed, holding her face blank. He stood and left the room. In the bathroom, he sat on the toilet lid, his feet up on the legged porcelain bathtub while he unlaced his boots. He stood and slowly shook them out into the toilet. "I *am* tired," he said, out loud, looking into the mouth of his boot. It was hard work making the farm produce like it had when his father was thirty, getting it to look as it did in memory. He was also tired of her devices. "What is talking to your shoes a sign of?" he called down the hall.

"Did you say something?"

He pushed open the swinging door into the living room.

"Acute schizophrenia," he said.

"Are you talking to yourselves again?" She wasn't looking up from her book. But she was listening. She was staring at the page listening.

"A cute schizophrenic." He smiled across the room. "Can you read and think at the same time?" He wanted to confront her with what she was doing to him. But that would bring anger.

"Of course not." She wouldn't admit her readiness to talk.

Without moving, he let the door swing shut, standing with his nose against one of its panels. "Who do you think you're fooling, Howard Rockwood?" he whispered. In the bedroom he changed out of his work clothes, gradually failing, despite his efforts at humor, to control his anger. He knew the joking meant nothing, but he was too tired for deeper talking. They would both wait in tension until the mechanism of her mind shifted, like an uncertain clock; nothing he did could move her faster. "You know, Howard, I've been thinking," she would finally say. Then they would pour it all out for two or three hours, slowly becoming correct again. He thought of the pleasure, toward the end of their talk, when, after the pain of digging up and cataloging feelings, they'd talk in rhythm. After the communication shifted from words and eyes to hands and bodies, the oneness would melt them into passion. They made better love after those talks than any other time. "Yes, sir," he said. "We could use some loving." He looked across at the picture of James Darren which hung on the wall opposite the bed. His Victorian ancestor wore a long, dark-brown beard and a black suit. The painter had made the eyes look

straight out, so that wherever a person moved, they followed. "Sorry," Howard said. "The royal prerogative. I wasn't including you."

He weighed again the patience and effort before they would feel close, wanting to get Sylvia in bed. "Nothing wrong with that," he said, looking at the picture. "Do I see the hint of a smile behind those beady polygamist eyes? Are you trying to say that after living with three wives at once, you think my problem is insignificant?" He put on his slippers. "Having one wife is what makes it significant."

His mother, as far as he knew, had never treated his father to arbitrary silence and coldness. Sylvia looked like the younger pictures of his mother, the same dark hair, the same slight body. But he couldn't picture his mother reading forever or getting into moods that lasted for days; she was too busy. If she had a disagreement with his father, she worked it away. He could only remember her active: sewing, gardening, holding a baby, or visiting her friends in town. He waved his finger at James Darren. "The first law of marriage, which every husband must break at once, is don't compare your wife with your mother." But her activity hadn't kept his father from leaving.

Howard knew Sylvia was bored in Rockwood. "I started thinking the work was important," she said after quitting her job selling insurance. "Besides, my brain has started twitching." She hadn't explained herself.

He looked out the window at his mother's garden plot. In the spring he had tried to get Sylvia to grow some vegetables — replowing the spot, showing her how to dig the earth open, to insert the corn and bean and carrot seeds, and to fold the soil back across. He started her, then watched her leave with the rows only half done. "What's the good of it?" she said. Afterward, he realized that he had been trying to get the house and yard to look as they had in his memory. He shared his insight, and they didn't talk about the garden again.

But he knew one result of his mother's hard work. When his father was excommunicated for adultery, leaving town with Sister Sorenson, their neighbor across the road, his mother had survived. "He's just like Samuel Rockwood," people whispered about his father. His great-grandfather, the son of the polygamist James Darren, at the age of sixty took another wife, an extremely young woman, three decades after the Prophet Wilford Woodruff said it wasn't celestial marriage anymore. After his parents' separation, his mother's hard work quilting and selling her quilts had kept her sane. If he and Sylvia had children, it might soften the force of her introspection. Better for him too, to have a son or a daughter. The doctor said that there was no apparent reason they couldn't have children. (e) Frustration at not conceiving.

He walked through the kitchen to check the food, upset that she read instead of cooking, that she wouldn't talk, and angry because he let himself be bothered. Tangled and bound, he sat on the sofa across from her, staring at the floor. She glanced over her book at him several times, finally standing. Soon he heard her taking plates out of the cupboard and silverware out of the drawer.

When he followed, putting his hands on her waist from behind, she turned

away and set two glasses on the table. "Will Edgar want some?" She indicated the snakeskin.

He smiled. "Spirit mice maybe."

"I hear them nights."

"Mice or spirits?"

"Both."

He looked at her. "It's getting to you, isn't it?" he said softly. "Living in this old house." Even though they had changed all the yellowed lace curtains and put carpet down on the floors, he could imagine how she might feel: she didn't have the immediate memory of his family and the acquired memory of his ancestors moving through the musty rooms, enlivening them.

She paused. "I'm handling it. We agreed." They *had* agreed, and that was her problem. He kept the farm constantly before her: she knew it was integral to what he was becoming.

"Too many ghosts," he said, his voice wavering. His grandfather and his great-grandfather had both died in the bedroom, twenty-five years apart. They had brought his father's body back from California and buried it next to the others in the cemetery. He wanted to be laid there himself.

"We're not alone," she said in the same voice, grinning.

Tonight, he knew. Tonight. He could feel her readiness. If he could just keep his patience and humor. They had sacrificed too many days to tension, too many nights to her lying still on her side of the bed.

"I don't know what I'm doing here, but that's something I'll work out myself." She wouldn't yet commit herself to any specific concern. "I'm happy to see you excited about the farm."

He touched her hand. Closer and closer. They were quiet, eating the steaks. Then the sadness settled back into her, her eyes dropping away to look at the plate. He could see it happening but couldn't put out his hand to prevent it.

"Yes, the farm and house are OK," she said.

He waited. "You didn't finish."

She said nothing.

"Sylvia?"

"Do the ghosts bother *you*?" she said.

"What ghosts?" He stopped eating.

"I mean, I wouldn't want to live in the house I grew up in." She looked at him. "Too many memories. But that's your business. It doesn't have much to do with what's bothering me."

"What *is* bothering you?"

"You asked that already."

"Right."

They waited.

"Howard, what's bothering me?"

"How should I know?" But Howard thought that they both knew. He watched her eyes, waiting, afraid of acknowledging a difference of mind which would be irreconcilable. The truce of not saying was strong between them.

"I don't know either," she said finally.

"So what am I supposed to do? Just put my life on hold until *you* decide how to talk about it?" He wasn't being fair, and she said nothing. "You never get out since you quit your job, except to go to church. I've tried to introduce you to people, help you fit in. Is that it — you don't have friends?"

"They are your mother's friends or daughters of your mother's friends. I've tried to reach out to them, and they smile and act friendly, but they never talk to me like they talk to each other." She looked at him. "Don't you see what I mean? Really, what do I have in common with them? What kind of life can I have among them?"

"Now we're getting somewhere."

"Not really. Even that is outside." She was retreating again. "It could be managed."

"Have I pushed you to be like my mother?"

"Don't be foolish. In the first place, I wouldn't let you. I thought you understood that. In the second place, I love your mother. You're way off. It's different in Rockwood, no question about that. I'm just not sure that what's bothering me would be any better anywhere else."

"Well, what is it then?"

"I can't put it into words yet. It's all mixed up."

"Sylvia."

She looked at him. "We've been married three years."

He waited, surprised, still sure that being in Rockwood was the core around which any aggravation had built. "So?"

"Sometimes I feel like my body's going blind, like it no longer has a way of touching anything outside itself."

He grinned, then saw it hurt her and stopped quickly. That's what joking can do, he thought — backfire without warning. She changed her expression, eyes wide and spooky. "Sometimes," she rasped, "I feel like one blink and I'll be gone." She rolled her eyes. "Sometimes there's mold growing all over my skin."

"Be serious now," he said softly. "You started to say it."

"I can't say anything yet."

"Just try."

"I did. You saw how well it worked."

"I'm sorry. I'll listen now."

"No. Not now. It's too complicated. It's you and me and the farm and your father and your mother and the town. But it's mostly something I feel from you."

"When then?"

"Don't push me, Howard." She turned away. "Just leave me alone for a while, if it's not too much to ask."

He stood. "Well, when you figure it out you can tell me." He took his plate into the living room, his patience gone. When she played this game, he felt less loyal. In his anger he thought of his high school girlfriend, Belinda Jackson, now Belinda Sharp, who worked at the feed store. She had worn a

shirt open at the collar today. Filling out his order, she leaned forward and he could see where her breasts flattened against each other. She had a full, nearly muscular body. With Belinda watching, he had refused the help of the dock worker and his hand truck and had lifted a seventy-five pound bag of barley under each arm. Driving home, the force of his desire frightened him. He realized that he had taken to finding reasons to go to the feed store, lingering and talking with Belinda. Though he knew that looking and even talking were not fatal, for years he hadn't allowed himself to let his eyes linger on a woman, waiting for her to look up and discover him flirting. That is until the last month. When he leaned across the counter and talked, he remembered kissing Belinda, remembered fumbling as they held each other and touched, awkwardness and fear keeping them from going too far. Now, after having made love with Sylvia, knowing the motions of sensuality, he wondered how he could have been so ignorant, so backward. Imagining possibilities now felt much more dangerous.

His father must have watched Sister Sorenson in a similarly intense manner at first. A speculating eye, one which dragged the body with it as it wandered, was the beginning of the path to infidelity. He had seen the pain his father caused his mother, and he didn't want even to approach that failing. But he was curious. How had it happened? What had the two of them thought and done beforehand? "Exactly how are the seeds of adultery planted?" he asked in the voice of a preacher.

"I'm not sure I heard what you said, Howard," said Sylvia from the kitchen.

"I said, you could drive me to drink, you know."

"Not me." She said nothing else.

Finished with his food, he brought the plate back, sliding it into the sink. He put his hands on her shoulders, but she shrugged them away. "No. It has something to do with the way I feel when you touch me, especially the way I feel when you touch me making love."

"Is it the way I touch or the way you feel when I touch?"

"Don't be so analytical."

"What don't you like?"

"I don't know."

"Are you being too sensitive about something I've done?"

She looked at him. "My skin often feels dead when you touch it. Something basic is wrong between us."

"I'm sorry."

"Please don't. It doesn't help to be sorry. Something has just changed."

"Your idea of me?"

"Why do I get the feeling I'm not getting through to you?"

"I'll listen now."

"You're just missing me. You're here looking, but you're not really seeing me. Like touching. Yes, it's like the touching. You touch me, but it's mechanical. As if it's not really me you want, but I'm handy."

He felt his neck warming. "(f)," he thought. "All of the above and

more.” For some time now he had used Belinda when Sylvia and he made love, borrowing the more voluptuous curve of Belinda’s breasts and hips. He had always known that Sylvia and he were sensitive to subtle changes of attitude, but he was surprised to think she had sensed his thoughts.

“I’ve got something to tell you,” he said. He had the idea that, even if his mental sleight of hand only indirectly bothered her, confession would keep them talking.

She looked at him, puzzled.

“I mean I admit it, I sometimes look at other women.”

“You what?”

“I sometimes think about the way other women look, when we — you know —” He saw she was laughing.

“Oh. A bonus,” she said. “I had no idea we weren’t alone. I was thinking more about simple communication. Just getting on the same wavelength or something. Though I doubt it would do me much good if I got on your wavelength in this case.”

He smiled, uncomfortable. They were going too quickly, and he wanted to slow down, be sure of what was said.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t think it’s funny,” he said, trying to keep his voice level.

“Oh,” she said. “You don’t.” She stopped smiling. “You really don’t like centering on you, do you? As long as you thought it was just me, we could talk, and you could pat me on the head after it’s over and we’d climb into bed and forget it.”

“I’ve never said that it’s you.”

“No, I guess you haven’t. It’s not me and it’s not you.” She frowned. “It’s sex. Sex is like a magnet or a radio receiver, drawing all our ambiguity and confusion into a single act. Confusion is its territory. But you probably don’t want to talk about that.”

“Who says I don’t?”

She was quiet.

“Well?” he said.

“I need to finish my book.”

“Don’t you dare. You can’t start then stop with me like that. How could you think of it?”

“Watch me,” she said. “We talk and nothing else changes and you think it’s all right. I want to think and think until I figure it out; then we’ll talk.” She left the room.

He strode out the back door, slamming it. Soon he would lean across the counter at the feed store, which was empty in his daydream, and put his hand into Belinda’s shirt. She’d lead him back and they would lie on grain sacks in the heavy darkness. They had come so close to sex when they were younger, but he knew he still didn’t have the courage to do anything in reality.

He walked through the orchard and the barnyard into the fields, the dark alfalfa rustling with the night breeze around him, just blossoming. He would start cutting Monday. At the ditch he turned left. Walking helped, moving

through the alfalfa, which his work had made luxuriant. His field, his farm. He had walked here the night after he had caught his father with Sister Sorenson, soothing himself with the canal and trees he had known since knowing anything. He moved down the path into the next property, Brother Johnson's, where the willows weren't cut and where thick brush grew along the ditch. Remembering that night and what followed stopped him: he determined never to hurt Sylvia, never to destroy his integrity as his father had his.

"Something about the way you touch me," Sylvia had said. Touching and loving in bed was good, approved by God, such sex being foreign in nature to his father's act, but still when Sylvia and he sweated against each other, panting and clutching, he thought of his father moaning over Sister Sorenson and over his mother, rutting as James Darren and Samuel and his grandfather rutted, and Howard was ashamed. Sometimes he filled his head with Belinda so he didn't have time to think, which also made him ashamed. Now, walking along the canal, he was ashamed to be ashamed of his natural, physical self. "Good Lord, Howard," he said to himself. "You are in one hell of a bind." But knowing he was irrational had never helped him, when in the winding down of his emotions after sex, he had to make himself hold Sylvia, make himself even stay in bed with her. "You are a century behind your time, you slug-minded Victorian prude."

When he came to the next boundary fence, he turned and walked back. A mist, a thickness, had come into his head, keeping him from understanding how to talk to Sylvia. She wasn't in the kitchen, and he saw that she hadn't moved the book from where she dropped it. When he walked into the bedroom, she was sitting naked on the edge of the bed, watching herself in the mirror. Her small breasts sloped forward to the nipples. Her hands lay flat on her narrow thighs. She didn't turn her head.

"I didn't mean that the way I feel is your fault," she said. "It's easier to analyze someone else's problems. I mean my analyzing you." He couldn't understand what she was doing. "Good lord, we've got to get rid of this painting." She took it off the wall and stuck it in the closet, shutting the door. "The grim old goat." She turned toward him. "Look at me," she said. He did and felt his body reacting. Resenting his own action, he reached to shut off the light, keeping his eyes on her body, white in the moonlight. He stretched his chest with a deep breath. In the darkness he could watch and make Sylvia's body blur, he could close his eyes, and her breasts grew heavier, her hips curved wider, her eyes became sensuous. Though he felt silly, it gave him pleasure thinking of himself holding Sylvia as the cowboy on the book cover did, with Sylvia submissive as the woman was. As he stepped out of his pants and took off his shirt, moving toward her. She turned the light on.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She touched his cheek and looked into his eyes, too close. "Where are you?" She still hadn't covered herself.

He thought about Belinda. Frankness might help. "I told you. I look at other women. Sometimes I think of them too."

"Who are they?"

"They? I don't mean to suggest that there are dozens."

"You don't have to tell me."

But he did if they were to continue. Part of his attraction for Belinda was the memory of early love, the seventeen-year-old which seemed to glow out of her fuller body. He was stimulated by imagining again how smooth her skin had been then, how her lips had felt moving against his, how it felt to press against her. In his memory their tentative and incomplete approaches toward full sex possessed a dark intensity which he wanted again.

"What do they look like?" said Sylvia.

He opened his mouth and shut it.

Sylvia laughed. "You look like a fish," she said. He glared at her, grabbing his pants and going into the kitchen. "Don't be mad," she called after him. He waited. "You look so silly when you get mad," she called, deliberately provoking him. He replaced his pants. She followed into the kitchen, moving slowly to touch him on the arm, holding her hand there. "Don't be angry," she said. "It makes you too serious. You start feeling like a black hole and I feel like everything, including me, is going to be pulled into you."

"What are you doing tonight? Playing games? Teasing? What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing, I want you to do nothing."

"I think of Belinda Sharp for one, the clerk at the feed store."

Still naked, she sat at the table near her uneaten dinner. "Oh," she said, stopped for a moment. He sat in the chair opposite, feeling quieter after his outburst. She pointed to the tubular skin. "I think it's quite Freudian that you brought this home." She stroked her chin and made her voice deeper. "Now, Mr. Rockwood, just what were you intending?"

He didn't smile. "Don't be so damn weird," he said. She grabbed his hand and led him, unwilling, into the living room, making him lie on the couch. She left the room, returning with a pad and pencil, wearing the black-framed glasses she had bought to look more like an insurance agent. He glanced toward the front window: they had no close neighbors now, but the curtains were translucent. Someone coming for a visit would get a start. She sat naked on the edge of the coffee table, frowned and crossed her legs. "When we're making love, what do you think about?" He looked away. "No," she said. "Rule number one is you have to speak truly." She touched his hand. "What are you thinking right now?"

"How silly you look."

She slid the glasses down to the edge of her nose and wrote something in her book.

"What are you thinking?" he said.

She turned the pad toward him. "Talking frightens me," it said.

"Why?"

"It's being on the edge."

"Do I scare you?"

She grinned. "Oh, don't hurt me, Mister Punch," she said in falsetto.

"Can't you say anything straight?"

"I guess not." She frowned. "I mean it's frightening being on the edge. But that's better than not talking."

"I know. Talking frightens me because we've been through it before and I'm worried that it won't change anything."

"What I hate is when we make love and you're not there anymore." She was changing again, jerking toward what was at the core of her mind. "And I hate it when we hedge our talking."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I guess it's just part of being married for a few years."

"I don't like that either," he said. "It's too fatalistic. And if it's something which will happen to us because it happens to everyone and which no one can control."

"So you think about a specific woman?" Sylvia put her elbow on her knee, supporting her chin with her hand. Howard felt his face turn red. "I think that your thinking about her is more important to you than it is to me. I wish you wouldn't invite her in though."

"Presto chango."

Sylvia put her pencil to the notebook again, and watched him. "So you're into large breasts?"

He jerked his face up. "So you're into jealousy?" Sylvia had identified his interest, which was upsetting, but she also made his imagining grosser than he felt it. "I don't think it's unusual to be attracted to breasts." But he knew he was attracted to Belinda, to his memories of their good times together.

Sylvia covered her face with the notebook. Her shoulders shook. For a moment he thought she might be weeping. But then she spoke, and it was only a mock whimper. "Are you saying that I don't measure up? She giggled again, unstable.

He looked at Sylvia's legs, at the curve of her waist and felt the motion through his groin, still glad, despite what Sylvia had said, for the tension of a private image, the secret intensification of his emotions. He looked at her eyes over the pad. Suddenly tired of confusion, he longed for a passion strong enough to overwhelm his ambiguity. "I can't help it," he said. "I need you."

"Not so fast!" She looked at an imaginary watch. "Your time's not up." She made her voice serious. "Mr. Rockwood, are those breasts the source of your heaviness?" She looked at him and spoke more softly. "The heaviness that's going to swallow us."

He sat up on the couch. Everything had changed again, and he felt the pain of frustration, a sharp tightening. "Heaviness? What are you after tonight?" He frowned, realizing that she was describing guilt. But he didn't think he could explain to her why he felt guilt, or why that made his loving thick and clumsy, hurried. "When we're making love what do you think about?" He needed to turn it back toward her. Tired of what she had called hedging, he wanted space to gather himself toward an unreserved unburdening.

"How smooth your skin is," she said.

"Is that all?"

"How good it feels to hold you that close."

“Is that all?”

She held the back of her hand to her forehead. “Sometimes — oh, how can I hold my head up — I think about Mick Jagger.”

“OK, so I’m an idiot.” He couldn’t unburden to a chameleon. “Now you’ve proved that, what next? I think you could be serious for three sentences in a row.”

“And sometimes your body clenches and you aren’t there anymore. If thinking of another woman causes that, I hate it.” She wasn’t smiling now. “Sometimes the touching changes.”

“I won’t think of them anymore.”

“It can’t be that easy. I wish you could see that it’s more fundamental than morality. Howard, we’ve made love for three years now. Is it more exciting to think about someone new?”

“I guess so. Easier maybe. I mean —”

“I don’t remember feeling this way in Salt Lake,” she said.

He looked at her quickly. “We were newlyweds then.” He thought about the way he felt when they made love. “You said that the touching changes. Well when I touch you my whole body changes. I want it to be the same.” Immediately he knew he had said too much.

“The same.” She was laughing again. “You want your body to feel the same when you don’t touch me as when you do?”

He didn’t move.

“That might make things difficult,” she finally said.

“Stop it,” he said.

He waited, ready to leave or turn it into a joke too if she didn’t see, but then her face went sad. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“I’m going to finish what I was saying.”

She nodded.

“I can’t look at you,” he said.

She said nothing.

“Do you remember our wedding?” He paused. “I didn’t see you in your long dress until you came out of the bride’s room in the temple. We held hands walking to the sealing room. The mirrors on each side showed us kneeling at the altar for eternity forward and backward in purity. It may be trite, but —”

They were quiet. “But it was important to you,” Sylvia said.

“Wasn’t it to you?”

“Oh, yes.”

“I’ve never been able to feel that way in bed. When I let myself go it seems a violation.”

“Howard, what we do in bed isn’t —”

“Don’t lecture me. I know it’s right. I’m not a total idiot. I can say to myself, the way you feel is a hundred years old. You are acting so stupidly, titillating yourself with dirty thoughts because you can’t stand to have your own wife’s body straight, without any hedging to protect you. But do you think that knowing what I’m doing changes anything? Part of it is Sunday school. No one means harm, but all they drill is self-restraint, holding back

continually. The opposite, no restraint at all, doesn't help either. I should know that better than anyone from my father, but all that women-are-pure stuff, don't degrade their purity — it makes me shut down when we make love." He stopped. "That's only part of it." He thought about his father, how it had been when he had discovered what his father had done. His mother's face was a grim mask when his father was excommunicated. He hated Sister Sorenson.

"What are you thinking about now?"

"My mother," he said quickly.

"Your mother?"

"She didn't deserve it."

Sylvia said nothing. He watched her eyes flick to his face then away as she thought.

"I mean she loved him. How could he do it? I can't comprehend what was in his head."

Sylvia watched him.

"Not knowing scares me. Not being able to understand how anyone could do what he did. And when we make love, instead of you and me clear, forever forward and backward, it's as if he's sitting next to the bed, as if his spirit has seeped out from the floorboards, so he can watch and laugh." He stopped, trying to confront his own captivity. "It would be better if we had a child, if we could make something with our love."

She was quiet.

"No, that's not it. Did I make you sad?"

"Yes."

"I'm sor —"

She put her hand across his lips. "It wouldn't change everything if we had children." She looked at him. "Do you think what your father did is unforgivable?"

"Of course not." Someone might forgive and understand.

"I only met your father once," she said.

"I remember. That was after he was excommunicated."

"He was a sad, old man."

He looked at her quickly. "You should have seen him when he was young. He was hard and sharp and strong then."

"Like you?" She smiled.

"What?"

"You are that now. Do you want to be even more like him?"

"You should have seen him."

"When he was younger?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to see *you* when you were younger." He smiled. "I'd like to see you free and simple."

"Don't get insulting," he said.

"I'd like to see your little boy body. See your little boy head."

"You perverse woman!"

"We're getting away from the women with the pendulous breasts," she said.

"Oh, yes. I'd forgotten."

"Don't lie to me. Why do you want to live here?"

"What do you mean?" He was wary.

"What do you get out of it? All it does is remind you of your mother and your father."

"You don't know how good it feels to make this place look right again. I mean when we moved here that field was covered with weeds and brush and crap." He pointed toward the back of the house. "Now, after I've plowed the fields, it's filled with alfalfa. I'm fixing the fences, making the barn good again."

"Why?"

"I want it to be like it was before."

"Why?"

"This could go on forever." He thought. "This town is named after my family."

"I know."

"I want people to see the farm like it was when my grandfather ran it, and like it was when my father was young, before he left."

"Oh." She turned her face sharply away.

"Whats' wrong?" He could see she was angry.

"I thought we came here because you wanted to farm."

"I do want to farm."

"Right." She slid to the edge of her chair.

Had she softened her voice and attitude, finally talking to him, only to persuade him to leave? Everything was falling away again. "I don't understand why you're so angry," he said.

"I came here with you, away from any chance I have of living the way I want to live, to this farm because I thought it was of itself important to you, not because you were trying to prove something." He felt dragged back through the last hour of struggle, as if the pain of opening had been worth nothing.

"It's more than just proving something."

"Is it? Whose idea will you change? You once told me that everyone in town thought your father was like Samuel Rockwood, that they all looked down on your father. Who told you that?" He was silent. "Who did you hear say it?"

"I could see it in their faces."

"You just thought you saw it. Was what your father did so important that they are going to spend all that time worrying about it? For years after it happened? And if the bad Christians among them do remember, do you really think that anything can ever change their minds?"

"I could." She had known all this already, was only now putting it in this desperate light.

"Good lord, you take yourself seriously. If that's what you want to spend your life doing, fine, but do you think any rational woman would want to stay with a husband whose highest desire is to live someone else's life?"

"Shut up," he said. "You're twisting it now, making it more than it is. I don't know what you're trying to do, but whatever it is, it isn't working."

"I'm trying to help you see what's happening to me."

"You're pushing me into something. I can't change magically at your demand." He remembered that earlier he could have taken her in his arms, loving her. He hated her for trying to make everything straight first, for having to talk first.

"Mr. Rockwood," she said. "Tell me more about your father. Tell me about your desire to live his life over for him."

"Go to hell." He stood. "Be damned in hell. I won't take any more of this warped game. Why can't you just say what's wrong like any normal person? God, I hate it." He finished dressing and walked through the living room and out the front door, slamming it behind him. He saw through the curtains that she didn't move. She thought he'd walk around for a while then come back like an obedient animal. He knew he was angry, but he had tired of the talking and talking without coming to any conclusion. If her plan had been to force him to a choice, then her plan was backfiring. "Ahhhhh," he shouted in the front yard.

Climbing into his pickup, he sat behind the wheel growing tighter and tighter with anger, his body clenching as he thought of the ways she tried to entangle him in her twisted emotions. He felt like smashing his hands through the windshield, cutting himself, anything to release him from the confusion which she and his own history had conspired to weave for him.

Starting the engine suddenly, he jerked the vehicle out of the driveway and headed too fast toward town. His first thought was of Belinda as he determined to make a violent break with Sylvia. He turned down the road to the feed store. It would be closed, but, because she had complained about it two or three times when they had talked, he knew Belinda worked late every Saturday totaling the books. Feeling a rush of adrenaline, he wanted to see what could happen if he actually approached her. From the top of the road, he saw a single light. No one was at home in the house opposite the feed store. No other building was on the street, and Belinda's car was the only vehicle. Though he couldn't see her yet, he thought Belinda was inside working. Lightheaded, astonished at what he was doing, he parked his truck to the side of the building, hiding it behind a low tree.

He climbed out, hesitating with his hand on the door. Having read about cowboys approaching their women and having thought that kind of masculinity silly, he knew enough not to swagger. However, he felt the same aggressive power inside. Conscious that he was shattering boundaries, he climbed the stairs, striding across the cement dock which went all the way around the building. If they had sex, it would be a clean, continuous expression of his vigor. He paused at the side window, standing back in the darkness, shielded by the nearly closed venetian blinds, and watched her work. She hurried, moving her fingers rapidly over a calculator. He watched her waist and hips as she moved across the room and lifted the top bag of a stack of yard fertilizer to check the tags. He admired her motions, a strong, sure woman, and he

realized that she would never be passive as she was in his imagination. She returned to her desk without seeing him. He waited, trying to figure what to say. As he watched her work, a quieter feeling, another way of proceeding, came to him.

If he was careful, if he talked tonight, touched her hands after the talking, moving slow the way he did with Sylvia, he might actually have her. The same physical motions that worked with Sylvia could work with her. He would have to be kind and tender, the same way Sylvia needed him, another way of touching than the wild and aggressive bouts of passion which had filled his daydreams. They could approach person to person, two people who cared, equally strong. He remembered seeing his father's hand on Sister Sorenson's cheek. Despite his years of hating his father, he knew that his sin might have been one not merely of lust but also of humanity.

He walked to the front. Belinda looked up startled as he tried the door, which was locked. She smiled, moving around the counter toward him, opening for him. "Howard Rockwood, what are you doing here?"

He went inside and his imagination failed him: he didn't know how to talk to her out of either vigor or humanity. "I need a bottle of penicillin," he found himself saying. "I remembered you said — ah — that, sometimes, someone is here late."

She walked to the fridge and got out a box. "You're lucky I was here," she said. "Did you use the other one already?" He had forgotten that he had bought a bottle that morning. He took the offered penicillin, brushing her fingers.

"Yes. I mean, no." He hesitated. "I mean I'm lucky that you're here. I wanted to talk to you."

"About what, Howard?" She looked around him out the door. "I didn't hear you drive up. Is Sylvia waiting in the truck?"

Howard cleared his throat. "I parked around to the side," he said. "I came alone."

"What are you saying?" She walked toward the counter where he stood, her eyes on him. "Are you all right, Howard?" She stood directly opposite him on the other side of the counter. "You don't look good."

"Sure. I'm fine." He took a deep breath. He knew they needed to talk but he didn't know what about. "You have a lot of work, don't you?"

"I'm almost finished for the night." She watched him, apparently curious.

He held up the package. "Do you remember when you helped me give my show calf a shot?"

She shook her head, then smiled. "Yes, I do. You held the rope while I jammed the needle into his butt. He jerked you onto your face in the manure."

"You helped me take my shirt off."

"Then I sprayed you with the hose."

"You came almost every night to help me."

"I came to make out with you behind the shed. God, if we didn't have fun."

"Yes," he said, watching her eyes, trying to communicate his feeling.

"Why are you here?" she said. Her face was closed, but he sensed a smile behind her eyes. He felt his neck flushing.

"Ah . . .," he said. She folded her arms across her chest. "Sylvia and I are having a fight, and —"

"You're having a fight?"

"Things haven't been going well for a long time. It's not working with her."

"And you came to your old friend for advice." The smile behind her eyes was more obvious.

He tried to smile back. "I needed to get away from the house."

She turned toward the papers. "It's a lonesome world, isn't it?" Her voice was flat. She moved away from him, her head up, moving proudly to a chair. Then she leaned back, hands behind her head. She watched him without evidence of emotion. "I'm full of advice." Her face was veiled firmly now, nearly hard, and he doubted his imagined modes of proceeding, doubted that he had ever seen warmth in her face. "You shouldn't have come down here."

He searched her face again for the inviting smile he thought he had seen that morning, unable to find the seventeen-year-old behind the weary eyes and thicker face, wondering what he had seen and felt, finally deciding that he had been tricked by the intensity of his memory. She clearly didn't care for him in the way he had imagined for the past month, and he believed he had mistaken the seriousness of his own emotion. Even if he made his motions and voice persuasive, nothing would work. He remembered the awkward hesitation and stumbling of his adolescence, the confusion which he had tricked himself into repeating.

She now retreated even further behind her mask. "I need to finish these and get home," she said. "My husband's expecting me."

"I'll take this anyway," he said.

As he left, she turned back to her work. His face and neck burned with foolishness. He couldn't order his splintering impressions, couldn't bear to think of the haphazard selfhood created by what he did and thought. He felt his essence dissipating, reforming itself outside his control. Driving up onto the flat, he looked down on the fields and houses of Rockwood, over which the souls of his ancestors brooded. Five generations of them had spent their lives fumbling and groping for a bright and vigorous intensity, a marriage of spirit and physicality, which he had no doubt would continue to entice and elude. The lights of his house showed where Sylvia waited, perhaps still watching out the window. After waiting uselessly for some gift of clarity, he started the truck and drove home.

She was dressed when he came in. "Well if it isn't Boomerang Bob." Her voice was strained. "Where did you go?" she said, softer. Her lips were firm, her eyes wide and frightened. "I feel like such an ass for laughing at you."

He said nothing; his head was spinning.

"Where did you go?"

"I went nowhere."

"I don't believe you."

"I went down to the feed store." Her head turned sharply away. "And nothing happened."

"Why don't I feel convinced?"

"Belinda was there, working late." He stopped talking. He had seen Sylvia's face totally open, ready to be hurt by what he would say. Despite her clever talk, she had never prepared herself for the possibility of his actually being unfaithful. Talking, he had felt pleasure in a kind of power over her, and more than that — a heightening of emotion, telling her about how he nearly made it with someone else. He shook his head, his mouth turning down bitterly at his reaction. "It's hard for me to talk about it." Then he looked up, seeing from her face one reading of what he had told her so far, and he knew he had to tell her everything, no matter how it made him feel.

"I didn't intend to go there."

"But?"

"But I ended up there. She was working late and —"

"Sounds like what I've been reading today."

"— and then we talked until it was clear that there was nothing but old memories between us. You didn't know this, but we dated in high school. After we made each other depressed and embarrassed, I left."

He could see she thought there was something else. "I could see how my father could have gone ahead, where I couldn't. I just made a fool of myself."

She watched him, uncertain, then he saw her decide to believe him, without understanding. "Did you do this to scare me?"

"Do you think I'd —" He looked at her. "I don't know why I left. I'm not trying to hide something or be someone I'm not. I scared myself." They were silent. "What now?" he said.

"I don't know."

"I had the feeling of what I want — something unusual, intense like a vision. I can't say it. Something better and stronger than what we have. Not just a sexual experience, something beyond that. Sometimes I feel that if I could drop my head away, clear out everything that I've been and start over it would be all right."

She smiled. "My romantic Howard, stuck in the here-and-now." She looked up with tears in her eyes. "Isn't that the hell of it?" He moved closer, and she held his head, his cheek against her breast. Soon he felt quiet.

"That feels good," he said.

"Remember when I first saw you?"

"Yes." He recreated the lawn, the trees around the university, the crisp, brick buildings. He remembered her legs, hair, and face, the way she had acted as she spoke to him. "I sometimes think it was worth it." She bent and kissed him, moving her lips harder against his. He shut his eyes, thinking of her then, the way she had appeared to him years earlier.

"Uh-uh," she said. "No way." He opened his eyes. "Look at me," she said. He saw the way she smiled, a flat line, her eyes that had gone through time with him, clear as they had ever been. Her hands were around his shoulders, soft across his back under his shirt.

"Howard," she said suddenly.

"What?"

"You were going away again."

He moved away and sat on the chair.

"Come back." He did. "I like it when you're tender with me. I like it when you're fast, too. I just don't like it when you make me invisible. When you shut your eyes, and I feel you going away from me." She said it quietly, more as an invitation than a reprimand.

"What now?" He faced her. "You've told me you don't like the way I make love. What else can I look forward to?"

"Howard."

"Maybe I can concentrate on unbuttoning your shirt," he said, doing so. "Maybe I can live in the here-and-now by focusing on taking my pants off."

"You silly fool," she said, looking at him full as he felt the thrill downward through his body. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. He let her pull him after her onto the floor. She kissed him harder. He touched his lips to her hair, brushing his fingers across her skin when he felt himself slipping away. Moving, he watched her eyes, the speckles of gray across her irises, made his lips touch the texture of her hair, attended to her legs wrapped around his legs, her hands holding tight to the back of his neck, her lips on his neck, made himself feel the warmth and moisture inside her body, sense his own body straining toward comprehension of the gifts which she lavished on him and which he waited and waited to return to her.

Afterward, he wanted to sleep, to cave into himself, alone. She pulled him to his feet. "Come on," she said. "I'm hungry."

"Now I like that. I cook you dinner, you don't eat it, but now you're hungry."

"I'll make some cinnamon toast and lemonade."

He took his robe from the bathroom. "Do you care if I slip into something more comfortable?" he said.

"Whatever you want. But you have to admit, being naked kept you humble for a minute."

"Are you making a comment about my body?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Rockwood," she said, making her voice deeper. "It looks just fine." She put her hand on his chest, then cut the bread.

While it was toasting, they sat at the table. "What do you think about when you're making love?" she said.

"How smooth your skin is." They smiled.

"Howard, I need to go to school." He looked up surprised. "The woman's place is in the home," she said.

"That isn't it."

"Then it's a question of primacy of need." She watched his face carefully. "I don't want to thrust us back into the argument. I'm just trying to let you see me."

"You could drive in to Salt Lake."

"It's eighty miles." He saw she had considered it.

"That's a long way to drive everyday."

"Yes. It's too far."

She had come at length back to what she wanted. He thought about his dream for the farm: making it so that people would pass and say, "Those Rockwoods are fine people. Look at that." It was a stupid dream compared to what she offered. "I can stretch only so much in one night," he said anyway.

"Talk about it tomorrow."

"Sure," he said. "Tomorrow."

She looked at him. "Let's leave it, Howard. Let's sell it and go to Bolivia or Australia with the money."

"You're serious," he said. She laughed. "You're really serious."

"Forget it," she said. Tears stood in her eyes. "I'll be with you, Howard," she said. Then she looked away at the snakeskin. "What is your real reason for bringing this home?"

"I've only seen one before."

She laughed again, silvery clear. After running down the hall to the bedroom, she came back with small bottles of oil paints, opening them in front of the snake. She began painting the ribs; dabs of red, violet, and blue building into rings. He watched, smiling and rubbing both hands down across his face. She sat naked in the old kitchen with the cups hanging widemouthed behind their glass doors, her breasts moving back and forth as she painted green and yellow circles around the snakeskin. Something was falling away from him again, more dead air about him moving backward, dropping away, and he held himself, frightened at what was being lost. He looked around him at the familiar kitchen where his family had cooked, prayed, and eaten for four generations. Frowning, he pulled the robe closer around his body.