

# A Friend of the Earth

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PENGUIN BOOKS

## *Prologue*

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I'm out feeding the hyena her kibble and chicken backs and doing what I can to clean up after the latest storm, when the call comes through. It's Andrea. Andrea Knowles Cotton Tierwater, my ex-wife, my wife of a thousand years ago, when I was young and vigorous and relentlessly virile, the woman who routinely chained herself to cranes and bulldozers and seven-hundred-thousand-dollar Feller Buncher machines back in the time when we thought it mattered, the woman who helped me raise my daughter, the woman who made me crazy. Jesus Christ. If somebody has to come, why couldn't it be Teo? He'd be easier—him I could just kill. Bang-bang. And then Lily would have something more than chicken backs for dinner.

Anyway, there are trees down everywhere and the muck is tugging at my gum boots like a greedy sucking mouth, a mouth that's going to pull me all the way down eventually, but not yet. I might be seventy-five years old and my shoulders might feel as if they're attached at the joint with fishhooks, but the new kidney they grew me is still processing fluids just fine, thank you, and I can still outwork half the spoonfed cretins on this place. Besides, I have skills, special skills—I'm an animal man and there aren't many of us left these days, and my boss, Maclovio Pulchris, appreciates that. And I'm not name-dropping here, not necessarily—just stating the facts. I manage the man's private menagerie, the last surviving one in this part of the world, and it's an

important—scratch that, vital—reservoir for zoo-cloning and the distribution of what's left of the major mammalian species. And you can say what you will about pop stars or the quality of his music or even the way he looks when he takes his hat and sunglasses off and you can see what a ridiculous little crushed nugget of a head he was born with, but I'll say this—he's a friend of the animals.

Of course, there isn't going to be anything left of the place if the weather doesn't let up. It's not even the rainy season—or what we used to qualify as the rainy season, as if we knew anything about it in the first place—but the storms are stacked up out over the Pacific like pool balls on a billiard table and not a pocket in sight. Two days ago the wind came up in the night, ripped the roof off of one of the back pens and slammed it like a giant Frisbee into the Lupine Hill condos across the way. Mac didn't particularly care about that—nobody's insured for weather anymore and any and all lawsuits are automatically thrown out of court, so don't even ask—but what hurt was the fact that the Patagonian fox got loose, and that's the last native-born individual known to be in existence on this worn-out planet, and we still haven't found the thing. Not a clue. No tracks, no nothing. She just disappeared, as if the storm had picked her up like Dorothy and set her down in the place where the extinct carnivores of all the ages run riot through fields of hobbled game—or in the middle of a freeway, where to the average motorist she'd be nothing more than a dog on stilts. The pangolins, they're gone too. And less than fifty of them out there in the world. It's a crime, but what can you do—call up the search and rescue? We've all been hit hard. Floods, winds, thunder and lightning, even hail. There are plenty of people without roofs over their heads, and right here in Santa Barbara County, not just Los Andiegoles or San Jose Francisco.

So Lily, she's giving me a long steady look out of the egg yolks of her eyes, and I'm lucky to have chicken backs what with the meat situation lately, when the pictophone rings (think

*Dick Tracy*, because the whole world's a comic strip now). The sky is black—not gray, black—and it can't be past three in the afternoon. Everything is still, and I smell it like a gathering cloud: death, the death of everything, hopeless and stinking and wasted, the pigment gone from the paint, the paint gone from the buildings, cars abandoned along the road, and then it starts raining again. I talk to my wrist (no picture, though—the picture button is set firmly and permanently in the off position—why would I want to show this wreck of a face to anybody?). “Yeah?” I shout, and the rain is heavier, wind-driven now, snapping in my face like a wet towel.

“Ty?”

The voice is cracked and blistered, like the dirt here when the storms move on to Nevada and Arizona and the sun comes back to pound us with all its unfiltered melanomic might, but I recognize it right away, twenty years notwithstanding. It's a voice that does something physical to me, that jumps out of the circumambient air and seizes hold of me like a thing that lives off the blood of other things. “Andrea? Andrea Cotton?” Half a beat. “Jesus Christ, it's you, isn't it?”

Soft and seductive, the wind rising, Lily fixing me from behind the chicken wire as if I'm the main course: “No picture for me?”

“What do you want, Andrea?”

“I want to see you.”

“Sorry, nobody sees me.”

“I mean in person, face to face. Like before.”

Rain streams from my hat. One of the sorry inbred lions starts coughing its lungs out, a ratcheting, oddly mechanical sound that drifts across the weedlot and ricochets off the monolithic face of the condos. I'm trying to hold back a whole raft of feelings, but they keep bobbing and pitching to the surface, threatening to break loose and shoot the rapids once and for all. “What for?”

“What do you think?”

"I don't know—to run down my debit cards? Fuck with my head? Save the planet?"

Lily stretches, yawns, shows me the length of her yellow canines and the big crushing molars in back. She should be out on the veldt, cracking up giraffe bones, extracting marrow from the vertebrae, gnawing on hoofs. Except that there is no veldt, not anymore, and no giraffes either. Something unleashed in my brain shouts, IT'S ANDREA! And it is. Andrea's voice coming back at me. "No, fool," she says. "For love."

I am a fool, a fool in a thousand hats and guises, and the proof of it is that I agree to see her, with hardly any argument and the paltriest spatter of foreplay, the old voice banging around inside my head like a fist with a gnawed bone in it. And how long has it been—exactly, now? Since '02 or '03, anyway. We used to climb mountains together, dance till the music went deaf in our cars, fuck till the birds woke up and sang and died of old age. Once we spent thirty days naked together in the Sierra Nevada, and even if it wasn't exactly like *The Blue Lagoon*, it was an experience you could never forget. And, yes, all my working parts are still in order, no Viagra Supra or penile implants needed here, thank you very much, and I wonder what she looks like after all this time. She was eight years younger than me, and unless the laws of mathematics have broken down like everything else, that would make her sixty-seven, which from my perspective can be a very interesting age for a woman. So, yes, I am going to see her.

But not here. No, I'm not that much of a fool. I've arranged an assignation at Swenson's Catfish and Sushi House in Solvang for six this evening, despite the torrents and the washed-out roads, because I've got Mac's 4x4 and whatever she's got or how she's going to get there isn't exactly my problem. Not yet, anyway.

She'll be there, though—you can bet on that. She wants

something—money, a place to crash, clothes, a nice bottle of wine, my last can of Alaskan snow crab (now extinct, like everything else that swims or crawls in the sea, except maybe zebra mussels)—and she always gets what she wants. I try to picture her as she was back then, in her mid-forties, and all I can see is her eyes, eyes that took hold of you and wouldn't let go, as hot and hard and punishing as a pair of torches. And her breasts. I remember them too. I don't think she ever went out of the house a day in her life in anything that didn't cling to them like a fresh coat of paint, except for the month in the Sierras when she wore nothing but bug bites and dirt.

Andrea. Yeah, sure, it'll be good to see her, even if nothing happens—and as I say, I haven't gone over the horizon as far as sex is concerned, not yet, and even if I haven't actually participated in anything remotely sexual since Lori died in the *mucosa* epidemic that hit here three years ago, I still think about it all the time. I look at the women Mac's bodyguards bring in and reconfigure how they're built under their rain clothes, and I watch the lean-legged things in khaki dresses wheeling their carts around the forlorn aisles of the supermarket when I take the 4x4 in for kibble and whatever they've got by way of half-rotten vegetable matter for the spectacled bear and the peccaries. Sex. It's a good thing. Even if I don't think I could stand it more than maybe once a month, and only then if all the attachment that comes with it—the hand-wringing and nose-wiping, the betrayals and shouting matches and the animal intimacy that isn't a whit higher on the emotional scale than the licking, sucking and groveling of the hyenas—is strictly exiled from the process.

*Love*, she said. *For love*. And despite myself, despite everything I've learned and suffered and the claw marks etched into my back, I feel myself soften for that fatal instant, and I know she's got me.

I'm standing there gazing into Lily's pen, all the rain in

the universe dripping from the brim of my silly yellow rain-hat and the jutting overgrown humiliation of my old man's nose, when a windblown shout comes to me across the yard. It's Chuy, lit by a fantastic tendril of lightning that brings me back to my tie-dye days, blotter acid, strobe lights in a dance club and Jane, my first wife and first love, but Chuy isn't Jane, he's Chuy, who has no surname because he can't remember it since the crop-dusting accident that took his hair, his manhood and half his brain and left him as jittery as a cockroach on a griddle. He's dragging something, a bundled wet rug, old newspapers, the rain intercepting him in broad gray sheets that are just like the flung buckets of the old comedy routines—like special effects, that is.

"It's a dog," Chuy says, panting up to me through the ocean of the air, and sure enough, that's what it is, a dog. Two, three days dead, bloated a bit in the belly, collie-shepherd mix, never seen him before and at least it's not the Patagonian fox, because that's all we need. "Found him dead in the bushes, Mr. Ty, and what I'm thinking is maybe he is the kind of something Lily can *come*, no?"

Me, judicious, old, scrawny, rain-beaten: "Poison? Because if it is—"

Chuy is squinting up at me, my personal reclamation project, his eyes loopy, no control of his jaws or tongue, every nerve fried and sizzling still. "No poison, Mr. Ty, road tracks." And he lifts the hind end of the thing to show the mangled legs and crushed spine.

Well, and this is good, a real bonus, and as the two of us hoist the sodden carcass to the level of our armpits and heave it up over the chicken wire to where Lily, interested, lurches up out of the mud, I can't help thinking of Andrea and what shirt I'll wear and whether or not I should bother with a sportcoat. I'm picturing us there at the bar at Swenson's, her irreducible eyes and deep breasts, no change in her at all because change is inconceivable, Andrea at forty-three,

a knockout, a killer, hello, look at me, and then Lily gets hold of the dog and all I can hear is the crunch of bone.

The lions have had their horsemeat and the giant anteaters (*Myrmecophaga tridactyla*) are busy with some half-rotted beams full of Formosa termites, lunch enough, I expect, when finally I develop the sense to come in out of the wet. By this time—it must be four, four-thirty—the rain has slackened off a bit and the wind, which always seems to be peaking at Force 10 lately, seems a bit quieter too. What would you call it?—hat-extracting velocity. A strike and a spare and eight more frames to go. Gusty. Blustery. Not-quite-gale-force. It rattles the hood of my slicker, slapping my cheeks with wet vinyl, thwack-thwack, and my glasses are riding up and down the bridge of my nose as if it's been greased. Things are a mess, and no doubt about it, every step a land mine, the shrubs tattered like old sails, the trees snapped in two and then snapped in two again. But what can I do? I leave all that to Mac's gardeners and the masochistic pup of a landscape architect who keeps popping up, unfazed, whenever the rain lets up for an hour—though with all the topsoil running off and the grass gone to seed, I can see we'll be living in the middle of a desert here in the dry season. If it ever comes.

As part of my arrangement with Mac, I occupy a two-room guesthouse on the far verge of the estate, just under the walls of Rancho Seco, the gated community to the east of us. It was built back in the nineties, with all the modern conveniences, and it's a cozy-enough place but for the fact that the winds have long since torn off the gutters and three-quarters of the shingles and the fireplace is bricked up, as per state law. Still, I have a space heater, and it never gets too cold here, not like in the old days—never below sixty, anyway—and I'm field marshal over an army of old pots and paint cans that catch at least half the rain at least half the time. Yet how can I account for the fact that I'm shivering

like a cholera victim by the time I actually shrug off the slicker and stamp out of my boots and take a towel to my head? Because I'm old, that's how. Because sixty degrees and wet at my age is like the temperature at which water turned to ice when I was thirty-nine, the year I met Andrea.

The place smells of mold—what else?—and rats. The rats—an R-selected species, big litters, highly mobile, selected for any environment—are thriving, multiplying like there's no tomorrow (but of course there is, as everybody alive now knows all too well and ruefully, and tomorrow is coming for the rats too). They have an underlying smell, a furtive smell, old sweat socks balled up on the floor of the high-school locker room, drains that need cleaning, meat sauce dried onto the plate and then reliquefied with a spray of water. It's a quiet stink, nothing like the hyena when she's wet, which is all the time now, and I forgive the rats that much. I'm an environmentalist, after all—or used to be; not much sense in using the term now—and I believe in Live and Let Live, Adat, Deep Ecology, No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth.

Andrea. Oh, yes, Andrea. She burned me in that crucible, with her scorching eyes and her voice of ash, and her body, her beautiful hard backpacker's body, stalwart legs, womanly hips and all the rest. She's on her way to Swenson's to meet me. Maybe there already, the *sake* cup like a thimble in her big female hands, leaning into the bar to show off what she has left, stupefying Shigetoshi Swenson, the bartender, who can't be more than sixty-four or -five. The thought of that scenario wakes me up, just as surely as it ever did, and the next minute I'm in the bedroom pulling a sweater from the bureau drawer (black turtleneck, to hide the turkey wattles under my chin), thinking, No time for a shower and I'm wet enough as it is. I find a semi-clean pair of jeans hanging from a hook in the closet, step into my imitation-leather cowboy boots and head for the door—but not before I finish off the ensemble with the crowning

touch: the red beret she sent me the second time I went to jail. I pull it down low over the eyebrows, like a watchcap. For old times' sake.

There's a whole crowd out on the road, storm or no storm: commuters, evening shoppers, repair crews, teenagers jazzed on a world turned to shit, and I have to be careful with the wind rocking the car and the jolts and bumps and washed-out places. This used to be open country twenty-five years ago—a place where you'd see bobcat, mule deer, rabbit, quail, fox, before everything was poached and encroached out of existence. I remember stud farms here, fields running on forever, big estates like Mac's set back in the hills, even an emu ranch or two (*Leaner than beef, and half the calories, try an Emu Burger today!*). Now it's condos. Gray wet canyons of them. And who's in those condos? Criminals. Meat-eaters. Skin-cancer patients. People who know no more about animals—or nature, or the world that used to be—than their computer screens want them to know.

All right. I'll make this brief. The year is 2025, I'm seventy-five years old, my name is Tyrone O'Shaughnessy Tierwater, and I'm half an Irish Catholic and half a Jew. I was born in the richest county in the suburbs of the biggest city in the world, in a time when there were no shortages, at least not in this country, no storms (except the usual), no acid rain, no lack of wild and jungle places to breathe deep in. Right now, I'm on my way to share some pond-raised catfish sushi with my ex-wife Andrea, hoist a few, maybe even get laid for auld lang syne. Or love. Isn't that what she said? *For love?* The windshield wipers are beating in time to my arrhythmic heart, the winds are cracking their cheeks, the big 4x4 Olftutt rocking like a boat at sea—and in my head, stuck there like a piece of gum to the sole of my shoe, the fragment of a song from so long ago I can't remember what it is or how it got there. *Down the alley the ice wagon*

*flew. . . . Arlene took me by the hand and said, Won't you be my man?*

This is going to be interesting.

The parking lot is flooded, two feet of gently swirling shit-colored water, and there go my cowboy boots—which I had to wear for vanity's sake, when the gum boots would have done just as well. I sit there a minute cursing myself for my stupidity, the murky penny-pincher lights of Swenson's beckoning through the scrim of the rain-scrawled windshield, the Mex-Chinese take-out place next door to it permanently sandbagged and dark as a cave, while the computer-repair store and 7-Eleven ride high, dry and smug on eight-foot pilings salvaged from the pier at Gaviota. The rain is coming down harder now—what else?—playing timbales on the roof of the 4x4, and the wind rattles the cab in counterpoint, picking up anything that isn't nailed down and carrying it off to some private destination, the graveyard of blown things. All the roofs here, where the storms tend to set down after caroming up off the ocean, have been secured with steel cables, and that's a company to invest in—Bolt-A-Roof, Triple AAA Guaranteed. Of course, everything I ever had to invest, every spare nickel I managed to earn and everything my father left me, went to Andrea and Teo and my wild-eyed cohorts at Earth Forever! (Never heard of it? Think radical enviro group, eighties and nineties. Tree-spiking? Ecotage? Earth Forever! Ring a bell?)

It takes me that long minute, mulling things over and delaying the inevitable in the way of the old (but not that old, not with all the medical advances they've thrust on us, what with our personal DNA codes and telomerase treatments and epidermal rejuvenators, all of which I've made liberal use of, thanks to Maclovio Pulchris' generosity), and then I figure what price dignity, jerk off the boots, stuff my socks deep in the pointed toes of them and roll my pants up my

skinny legs. The water creeps up my shins, warm as a bath, and I tuck the boots under my slicker, tug the beret down against the wind and start off across the lot. It's almost fun, the feel of it, the splashing, all that water out of its normal bounds, and the experience takes me back sixty-five years to Hurricane Donna and a day off from school in Peterskill, New York, splash and splash again. (And people thought the collapse of the biosphere would be the end of everything, but that's not it at all. It's just the opposite—more of everything, more sun, water, wind, dust, mud.)

I'm standing under the jury-rigged awning (steel plates welded to steel posts set in concrete), trying to balance on one bare foot and administer a sock and boot to the other, when the door flings open and two drunks, as red in face and bare blistered arm as if they've been baked in a tandoori, trundle out to gape at the rain. "Shit," the one to my right says, and I'm squinting past him to the bar, to see if Andrea's there, "may as well have another drink." His companion blinks at the deluge as if he's never seen weather before—and maybe he hasn't, maybe he's from Brazil or New Zealand or one of the other desert countries—and then he says, "Can't. Got to get home to" (you fill in the name) "and the kids and the dog and the rats in the attic . . . but fuck this weather, fuck it all to hell."

I take a deep breath, dodge around them, and step into the restaurant. I should point out that Swenson's isn't the most elegant place—elegance is strictly for the rich: computer repairmen, movie people, pop stars like Mac—but it has its charms. The entryway isn't one of them. There's an empty fish tank built into the cement block wall on your immediate right, a coat rack and umbrella stand on the left. Music hits you—oldies, the venerable hoary inescapable hits of the sixties, played at killing volume for benefit of the deaf and toothless like me—and a funk of body heat and the kind of humidity you'd expect from the Black Hole of Calcutta. No air-conditioning, of course, what with electrical restrictions

and the sheer killing price per kilowatt hour. Go straight on and you're in the bar, turn left and you've got the dining room, paneled in mismatching pine slats recycled from the classic California ranch houses that succumbed to the historical imperative of mini-malls and condos. I go straight on, the bar teeming, Shiggy glancing up from the blender with a nod of acknowledgment, some antiquated crap about riding your pony blistering the overworked speakers.

No Andrea. *Ride your pony, ride your pony.* My elbows find the bar, cheap *sake* (tastes of machine oil, brewed locally) finds me, and I scan the faces to be sure. I even slide off my glasses and wipe them on my sleeve, a gesture as habitual as breathing. Replace them. Study the faces now, in depth, erasing lines and blotches and liver spots, pulling lips and eyes up out of their fissures, smoothing brows and firming up chins, and still no Andrea. (Swenson's, in case you're wondering, caters strictly to the young-old, the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population, of which I am a reluctant yet grateful part, considering the alternative.)

A woman in red at the end of the bar catches my eye—that is, I catch hers—and my blood surges like a teenager's until I realize she can't be more than fifty. I look again as she turns away and lets out a laugh in response to something the retired dentist at her elbow is saying, and I see she's all wrong: Andrea, and I don't care what age she might be—sixty, eighty-five, a hundred and ten—has twice her presence. Ten times. Yes. Sure. She's not Andrea. Not even close. But does that make it any less depressing to admit that I'm really standing here on aching knees in a dress-up shirt and with a sopping-wet beret that looks like a chili-cheese omelet laid over my naked scalp, waiting for a phantom? A blood-sucking phantom at that?

*Ride your pony, ride your pony.* What is it Yeats said about old age? It wasn't ride your pony. An aged man is but a paltry thing, that's what he said. A tattered coat upon a stick. In spades.

But what is this I feel on the back of my neck? Dampness. Water. Ubiquitous water. I'm looking up, the ceiling tiles giving off a gentle ooze, and then down at the plastic bucket between my feet—I'm practically standing in it—when I feel a pressure on my arm. It's her hand, Andrea's hand, the feel of it round my biceps as binding as history, and what can I do but look up into her new face, the face that's been molded like wet clay on top of the one glazed and fired and set on a shelf in my head. "Hello, Ty," she says, the bucket gently sloshing, the solid air rent by the blast of the speakers, the crowd gabbling, her unflinching eyes locked on mine. I can't think of what to say, Shiggy moving toward us on the other side of the bar, mountainous in a Hawaiian shirt, the bartender's eternal question on his lips, and then she's smiling like the sun coming up over the hills. "Nice hat," she says.

I snatch it off and twist it awkwardly behind me.

"But, Ty"—a laugh—"you're bald!"

"Something for the lady?" Shiggy shouts over the noise, and before I've said a word to her I'm addressing him, a know-nothing I could talk to any day of the week. "*Sake* on the rocks," I tell him, "unless she's paying for her own—and I'll take a refill too." The transaction gives me a minute to collect myself. It's Andrea. It's really her, standing here beside me in the flesh. Pleasure, I remind myself, is inseparable from its lawfully wedded mate, pain. "We all get older," I shout, swinging round with the drinks, "—if we're lucky."

"And me?" She takes a step back, center stage, lifting her arms in display. For a minute I think she's going to do a pirouette. But I don't want to sound too cynical here, because time goes on and she's looking good, very good, eight or nine on a scale of ten, all things considered. Her mouth settles into a basket of grooves and lines when the smile fades, and her eyes are paler and duller than I remembered—and ever so slightly exophthalmic—but who's to quibble? She was a beauty then and she's a beauty still.

"You look terrific," I tell her, "and I'm not just saying that—it's the truth. You look—I don't know—edible. Are you edible?"

The smile returns, but just for a second, flashing across her face as if blown by the winds that are even now rattling the windows—and rattling them audibly, despite the racket of the place and my suspect hearing (destroyed sixty years ago by Jimi Hendrix and The Who). She's wearing a print dress, low-cut of course, frilly sleeves, a quarter-inch of makeup, and her hair—dyed midnight black—bunches at her shoulders. She fixes on my eyes with that half-spacey, half-calculating wide-eyed look I know so well—or used to know. "Is there someplace we can talk?"

Most people don't relate to hyenas. You say "hyena" to them and they give you a long stare, as if you're talking about a mythical beast—which it practically is nowadays. The more enlightened might remember the old nature shows where the hyenas gang-pile a corpse or disembowel the newborn wildebeest and devour it in ragged bloody lumps before the awareness has left its eyes, but that's all they remember, the ugliness and the death. I knew an African game-hunter once (Philip Ratchiss, and more on him later) who used to cull elephants for the Zambian government, back when there was a Zambian government, and he'd had some grisly encounters with all three species of hyena. When he retired to California, he brought his Senga gunbearer with him, a man named Mag or Mug—I could never get it straight—who'd had his face removed by a hyena one night as he lay stretched out drunk in front of the campfire. Ratchiss dressed him up in Dockers and polo shirts and got his teeth fixed for him, but Mag—or Mug—didn't want anything to do with plastic surgery. He had an eye left, and a pair of ears. The rest of his face was like a big pitted prune.

The reason I mention it is because people can't under-

stand why Mac wants to save hyenas—in Lily's case, the brown hyena—when the cheetahs, cape buffalo, rhinos and elephants are gone. And what do I tell them? Because they exist, that's why. And if we can't manage to impregnate Lily with sperm from the San Diego Zoo's lone surviving male, we'll clone her—and clone the clones, ad infinitum. "I want to save the animals nobody else wants," Mac told me when we entered into our present arrangement. "The ones nobody but a mother could love. Isn't that cool? Isn't that selfless and cool and brave?" I told him it was. And we got rid of the peacocks and Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs, and the dogs and cats and goats and all the rest, and concentrated on the unglamorous things of the world—the warthogs, peccaries, hyenas and jackals, with the three lions thrown in for the excitement factor. Mac likes to hear them cough and roar when he turns in at night. When he's here, that is. Which is precious little this time of year.

Anyway, Lily looms up in my mind when Andrea leans into the table and asks me what it's like to work for Maclovio Pulchris. We're seated in the candlelit dining room, waiting for our order, deep into the *sake* now and too civilized—or too old—to let all the bitterness of the past spoil our little reunion. I'm rattling on about Mac, how he likes to stay up all night with a bottle of champagne and a favorite lady and sit out in the yard listening to the anteaters snore while Lily roams her cage, sniggering over the rats she traps between her four-toed paws. And then I'm on to Lily, the virtuosity of her digestive tract, her calcified bowel movements (all that pulverized bone), the roadkill we feed her when we get lucky—opossums mostly, another R-species—when Andrea clears her throat in a pre-emptive way.

I duck my head in embarrassment—my shining bald dome of a head (*Flow it, show it/Long as God can grow it/My hair*). Suck at the metallic patchwork of my old man's teeth. Fumble with the *sake* cup. I haven't shut up since we sat down—and why? Because, for all my bravado back at the

house, all my macho notions of reminding an old vein, of exploiting her body in some superheated motel room and then writing her off, good night, goodbye and thanks for the masterful application of the lips, I find myself riveted by her, racked in body and nerve, ready to be slit open and sacrificed all over again. I'm nervous, that's what it is. And when I'm nervous I can't stop talking.

"Do you remember that girl, April Wind—she was about Sierra's age?" Andrea is watching my face, looking for the crack into which she can drive the first piton and begin her ascent to my poor quivering brain. I give her nothing. Nothing at all. My eyes are glass. My face a sculpture by Oldenburg, monumental, impenetrable. Sierra—the famous Sierra Tierwater, martyr to the cause of the trees—is my daughter. Was my daughter. April Wind I've never heard of. Or at least I hope I haven't.

"She was part of that tree-sitting thing, summer of '01?"

All my danger sensors are on alert—I should have stayed home with my hyena, I knew it. I'm hurt. I'm lonely. I'm old. I haven't got time for this. But Andrea will persist, she will—if there's one thing I know about her, it's that. Something's afoot here, something I'm not going to like one bit, and once she's sprung it she'll get down to more practical matters—she needs to borrow money, food, clothes, medical supplies, she absolutely has to stay with me a while, a couple of weeks, a month, she needs me, wants me, and suddenly she'll lean forward and we'll kiss with sushi on our lips and her hand will snake out under the table and take hold of me in the one place that's even more vulnerable than my brain.

Her lips, I'm watching her lips—I know she's had collagen implants, and her face is too shining and perfect to be natural, but who wants natural at my age? "You remember her," she insists, picking at her food with an absent squeeze of her chopsticks (she's having the spicy catfish roll, tilapia sushi, smoked crappie and *koï* sashimi, a good choice—or the best available, anyway. And it's not going to be cheap,

but, knowing Andrea, I came prepared with a new five-hundred-dollar debit card). "She came straight to us from Teo's Action Camp? Tiny, she couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds? Asian. Or half Asian? She swore the trees talked to her, remember?"

I'm beginning to remember, but I don't want to. And the mention of Teo shoots a flaming brand into my gut, where it ignites the wasabe lurking there in a gurry of carp roe and partially digested tilapia. "What about Teo?" I say, just as the wind comes up in a blast that shakes the place as if it were made of straw.

"I hate this," she hisses, bracing for the next blast. A sound of rending, some essential piece of the roof above us scraping across the tiles and plucking briefly at the strings of steel cable before hurtling off into the night. People have been decapitated by roofing material, crushed, poleaxed, impaled—you hear about it every day on the news. A woman in the Lupine Hill condos was taking out the trash last year when a flagpole came down out of the sky like a javelin and pinned her to the Dumpster like an insect to a mounting board. And then there are the eye and lung problems associated with all the particulate matter in the air, not to mention allergies nobody had heard of twenty years ago. A lot of people—myself included—wear goggles and a gauze mask during the dry season, when the air is just another kind of dirt. But what can I say? I told you so?

This is the world we've made. Live in it.

"You get used to it," I say, and give her a shrug. "But you've got your own problems in Arizona—that's where you've been living, right?"

She nods, a tight economical dip of the chin that says, Ask no more.

"So Teo," I persist, trying to sound casual though I'm chewing up my insides and wishing I were home in front of the tube with a bottle of Gelusil and the lions coughing me to sleep. "Is he still in the picture, or what?"

Right then is when I begin to notice that my feet are wet, and when I lift first one, then the other from the floor, the rug gives like a sponge. Out of the corner of my eye I can see one of Shiggy's daughters busy at the rear door with a mop and a mountain of napkins, furious activity, but not enough to stanch the flow of water seeping inexorably into the room. Shiggy should have built on pilings and he knows it, but he inherited the place from his father, who ran a successful smorgasbord out of the location for forty years, and the expense of jacking up the building was prohibitive. And Shiggy, like everyone else, kept waiting for the weather to break. "No problem, sir, no problem," Shiggy's daughter is saying to a solitary diner in the corner, "we'll have this mopped up in a minute."

Distracted—my boots are ruined for sure—I've forgotten all about the question I left hanging in the dank air of the place, forgotten where I am or why or even who I am, one of those little lapses that make life tolerable at my age, ginkgo biloba, caffeine and neuroboosters notwithstanding. For a whole ten seconds I've managed to disconnect my gut from my brain. "He's dead," Andrea says into the silence.

"Who?"

"Teo."

Dead? Teo dead? Well, and now I'm back in the moment, as alert as Lily when she sees me reach into the big greasy plastic bag for another chicken back. I'm beginning to enjoy myself. I feel expansive suddenly. I want details. Did he suffer? Was it lingering? Did he lose control of his bowels, his dick, his brain? "I thought it would take a silver bullet," I hear myself say. "Or a stake through the heart."

Her eyes draw down, drop the curtains and pull the shades. Her smallest voice: "It was quick."

"How quick?"

Whoa, shouts the wind, *whoa, whoa, whoa*, and now there's a steady drip of water—the ghost of Teo, his slick aqueous heartbeat—thumping down on the table, just to the left of my chopsticks. I'm watching her, feeding on this, but

my back hurts—it always hurts, will always hurt, has hurt without remit since I was in my mid-thirties—and the arthritis in my right foot isn't being helped any by the dampness of the floor. I have a premature hard-on. I resist the impulse to snatch a look at my watch. "How quick?" I repeat.

"I don't want to talk about it," she says, "because that's not why I—that's not what I wanted to . . . It was a meteor, all right?"

I can't pull my laugh in. Sharp and resounding, it explodes from my runaway lips and startles the couple two tables over. "You're putting me on."

"Eleven and a half billion people on the earth, Ty, sixty million of them right here in California. Meteors hit the earth, okay? They've got to land somewhere."

"You mean it actually hit him? How big? And when? When was this—ten years ago, yesterday or what?"

"I won't lie to you, Ty: I loved him. Or at least I thought I did."

"Yeah, and you thought you loved me too. That did me a lot of good."

"Listen, I don't want to get into this, all right? This is not why I came—"

"What, did it hit him like a bullet? Go through the roof of his house?"

"He was making a soft-boiled egg. In the kitchen. He was living in one of those group homes for people like me who never saved for retirement—and don't ask, because I'm not going to say a word about my present circumstances, so don't." Patting at her lips with the napkin, pausing to take a doleful sip of faintly greasy *sake*, the best the house has to offer. (Have I mentioned that grapes are a thing of the past? Napa-Sonoma is all rice paddies now, the Loire and Rhine Valleys so wet they'd be better off trying to grow pineapples—though on the plus side I hear the Norwegians are planting California rootstock in the Oslo suburbs.)

"He never knew what hit him," she's saying, chasing me down with her eyes. "His son told me they found the thing—it was the size of a golf ball—embedded in the concrete in the basement, still smoldering."

I'm in awe. Sitting there over my *sake* and a plate of cold fish, holding that picture in my head—a soft-boiled egg! The world is a lonely place.

"Ty?"

I look up, still shaking my head. "You want another drink?"

"No, no—listen. The reason I came is to tell you about April Wind—"

I do everything I can to put some hurt and surprise in my face, though I'm neither hurt nor surprised, or not particularly. "I thought you said you wanted to see me for love—isn't that what you said? Correct me if I'm wrong, but my impression was you wanted to, well, get together—"

"No," she says. "Or yes, yes, I do. But the thing that got me here, the reason I had to see you, is April Wind. She wants to do a book. On Sierra."

I don't get angry much anymore, no point in it. But with all I've been through—not just back then, but now too, and who do you think is going to have to track down the Patagonian fox and the slinking fat pangolins on feet that are like cement blocks?—I can't help myself. "I don't want to hear it," I say, and somehow I'm standing, the carpet squelching under my feet, the whole building vibrating under the assault of another gust. My arm, my right arm, seems to be making some sort of extenuating gesture, moving all on its own, *I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him*. "She's dead, isn't that enough? What do you want—to make some sort of Joan of Arc out of her? Open the door. Look around you. What the fuck difference does it make?"

She's a big woman, Andrea, big still—in her shoulders, the legs tucked up under her skirt, those hands—but she reduces herself somehow. She's a waif. She's put-upon. She's no threat to anybody and this isn't her idea but April Wind's,

the woman who talks to trees. "I think it's a good idea," she says. "For posterity."

"What posterity?" My arm swings wide. "This is your posterity."

"Come on, Ty—do it for Sierra. Let the woman interview you, tell your story—what'll it hurt?"

Everything compresses to rush into the vacuum inside me, the winds dying as if on the downstroke of a baton, the rain taking a time-out, the mop finally prevailing at the door. Andrea is standing now too, and we're a matching pair of the young-old, as rejuvenant as any couple you'd see in New York or Paris or in those TV ads for transplants, poised over the table as if we're about to sweep off across the floor in some elaborate dance routine. "What's it in for you? A finder's fee?"

No response.

"And how *did* you track me down, anyway?"

There's no malice in her smile—a hint of smugness, maybe, but no malice. She holds up her fingers, all ten of them. "The Internet. Search for Maclovio Pulchris and you'd be amazed at what turns up—and as far as what's in it for me, that's easy: you. You're what I want."

I'm stirred, and there's no denying it. But I'm not taking her home with me, never, no matter what. I'm grinning, though—a grin so glutinous you could hang wallpaper on it. "You want to go to a motel?"

"You don't have to do that."

Still grinning, all my dental enhancements on display, my naked gums anaesthetized with *sake* fumes and my eyes on fire behind the twin discs of my glasses: "I want to."

The wind comes back for an encore. Snatches of music drift in from the bar. Everything is roaring, the whole world, noise and more noise. "I won't stay long," she says. "And I'll help with the animals. You know how I love animals—"