

Somerset Dreams by Kate Wilhelm

First published in Orbit 5, ed. Damon Knight, 1969

I AM ALONE in my mother's house, listening to the ghosts who live here now, studying the shadowed features of the moon that is incredibly white in a milky sky. It is easier to believe that it is a face lined with care than to accept mountains and craters. There a nose, long and beaked, there a mouth, dark, partially open. A broad creased forehead... They say that children believe the sun and moon follow them about. Not only children... Why just a face? Where is the rest of the body? Submerged in an ethereal fluid that deceives one into believing it does not exist? Only when this captive body comes into view, stirring the waters, clouding them, does one realize that space is not empty at all. When the moon passes, and the sky clears once more, the other lights are still there. Other faces at incredible distances? I wonder what the bodies of such brilliant swimmers must be like. But I turn my gaze from the moon, feeling now the hypnotic spell, wrenching free of it.

The yard has turned silvery and lovely although it is not a lovely place any more. Below the rustlings in the house I hear the water of Cobb's Run rippling softly, breaking on the remains of an old dam. It will be cool by the flowing water, I think, and I pull on shorts and a blouse. I wonder how many others are out in the moonlight. I know there are some. Does anyone sleep peacefully in Somerset now? I would like to wander out by the brook with nothing on, but even to think of it makes me smile. Someone would see me, and by morning there would be stories of a young naked woman, and by noon the naked woman would be a ghost pointing here and there. By evening old Mr. Larson, or Miss Louise, would be dead. Each is waiting only for the sign that it is time.

I anoint myself with insect repellent. It is guaranteed to be odorless, but I can smell it anyway, and can feel it, greaseless and very wet, on my arms and legs.

I slip from the house where my mother and father are sleeping. The night is still hot, our house doesn't cool off until almost morning, and there is no wind at all, only the moon that fills the sky. Someone is giggling in the yard and I shush her, too close to the house, to Mother's windows on the second floor. We race down the path to the pool made by damming the run and we jump into the silver-sheened water. Someone grabs my ankle and I hold my breath and wrestle under the surface with one of the boys. I can't tell which one it is. Now and then someone lets a shriek escape and we are motionless, afraid Father will appear and order us out. We play in the water at least an hour, until the wind starts and blows the mosquitoes away, and then we stumble over the rocks and out to the grass where now the night is cool and we are pleasantly tired and ready for sleep. When I get back to the house I see the door closing and I stop, holding my breath. I listen as hard as I can, and finally hear the tread on the steps: Father, going back to bed.

I slip on sandals and pick up my cigarettes and lighter without turning on the light. The moonlight is enough. In the hall I pause outside the door of my parents' room, and then go down the stairs. I don't need a light in this house, even after a year's absence. The whole downstairs is wide open, the kitchen door, the front door, all the windows. Only the screens are between me and the world. I think of the barred windows of my 87th Street apartment and smile again, and think how good to be free and home once more. The night air is still and warm, perfumed with grass and phlox and the rambling rose on the garage trellis. I had forgotten how much stronger the fragrance is at night. The mosquitoes are whining about my face, but they don't land on me. The path has grown up now with weeds and volunteer columbines and snapdragons. By day it is an unruly strip with splashes of brilliant colors, now it is silver and gray and dark red.

At the creek I find a smooth rock and sit on it, not thinking, watching the light change on the moving water, and when the wind starts to blow, I think it must be three in the morning. I return to the unquiet house and go to bed, and this time I am able to fall asleep.

I walk to town, remembering how I used to skip, or ride my bike on the sidewalks that were large limestone slabs, as slick as polished marble when they were wet. I am bemused by the tilted slabs, thinking of the ground below shoving and trying to rid itself of their weight. I am more bemused by myself; I detest people who assign anthropomorphic concepts to nature. I don't do it anywhere but here in Somerset. I wear a shift to town, observing the customs even now. After high school, girls no longer wore shorts, or pants, in town.

I have been counting: seven closed-up houses on First Street. Our house is at the far end of First Street, one ninth of a mile from the other end of town where Magnolia Avenue starts up the mountain as Highway 590. All the side streets are named for flowers. I pass Wisteria Avenue and see that the wicker furniture is still on the porch of Sagamore House. The apple trees are still there, gnarled, like the hands of men so old that they are curling in on themselves, no longer able to reach for the world, no longer desiring the world. I come back every year, and every year I am surprised to see that some things are unchanged. The four apple trees in the yard of the Sagamore House are important to me; I am always afraid that this year they will have been cut down or felled by one of the tornadoes that now and again roar like express trains from the southwest, to die in the mountains beyond the town.

How matter-of-factly we accepted the long, hot, dry summers, the soul-killing winters, the droughts, the tornadoes, the blizzards. The worst weather in any part of the country is equaled in Somerset. We accept it as normal.

I am not certain why the apple trees are so important. In the early spring, tempted by a hot sun into folly, they bloom prematurely year after year, and are like torches of white light. There is always a late frost that turns them black, and then they are just trees, growing more and more crooked, producing scant fruit, lovely to climb, however.

In Mr. Larson's store, where I buy my groceries when I am home, I learn from Agnes McCombs that a station wagon and two cars have arrived early this morning with students and a doctor from Harvard. Agnes leaves and I say goodbye absently. I am thinking of yet another rite of passage that took place here, in old Mr. Larson's store when I was thirteen. He always handed out chunks of "homemade baloney" to the children while their mothers shopped, but that day, with the tidbit extended, he regarded me with twinkling eyes and withdrew the meat impaled on a two-pronged fork. "Mebbe you'd like a Coke, Miss Janet?"

He is so old, eighty, ninety. I used to think he was a hundred then, and he changes little. His hands are like the apple trees. I ask him, "Why are they here? What are they doing?"

"Didn't say. Good to see you home again, Janet. The old house need any repairs?"

"Everything's fine. Why'd Miss Dorothea let them in?"

"Money. Been six, seven years since anyone's put up at the Sagamore. Taxes don't go down much, you know."

I can't explain the fury that is threatening to explode within me, erupting to the surface as tears, or a fishwife's scolding. Mr. Larson nods. "We figured that mebbe you could sidle up to 'em. Find out what

they're up to." He rummages under the counter and brings out a letter. "From your dad," he says, peering at the return address. "He still thriving?"

"About the same. I visited him last month. I guess he thought of things he forgot to tell me and put them in a letter."

Mr. Larson shakes his head sadly. "A fine man, your dad." After a moment, he adds, "Could be for the best, I reckon."

I know what he means, that without Mother, with the town like it is, with his only child a woman nearing thirty... But he doesn't know what Father is like or he couldn't say that. I finish my shopping and greet Poor Haddie, who is back with the truck. He's been making his delivery to the Sagamore House. He will bring my things later. Leaving, I try to say to myself Haddie without the Poor and the word sounds naked, the name of a stranger, not of the lumbering delivery "boy" I have known all my life.

I have other visits to make. Dr. Warren's shingle needs a bit of paint, I note as I enter his house. He doesn't really practice now, although people talk to him about their sore throats and their aches and pains, and now and again he suggests that this or that might help. If they get really ill, they go to Hawley, twenty-eight miles away, over the mountain. Dr. Warren never fails to warn me that the world isn't ready for a lady doctor, and I still try to tell him that I am probably one of the highest-paid anesthesiologists in the world, but he forgets in the intervening year. I always end up listening to advice about sticking with nursing where a woman is really accepted. Dr. Warren delivered me back there at the house in the upstairs bedroom, with my father assisting gravely, although later he broke down and cried like a baby himself, or so Dr. Warren said. I suspect he did.

Dr. Warren and his wife, Norma, make a fuss over me and tears are standing in my eyes as they serve me coffee with cream so thick that it has to be scooped up in a spoon. They too seem to think I will find out what the flatland foreigners want with our town.

Sagamore House. I try to see it again with the eyes of my childhood: romantic, forbidding, magnificent, with heavy drapes and massive, ornately carved furniture. I have a snapshot memory of crawling among the clawed feet, staring eye to eye at the lions and gargoyles and sticking out my tongue at them. The hotel has shrunk, the magic paled and the castle become merely a three-storied wooden building, with cupolas and many chimneys and gables, gray, like everything else in the town. Only the apple trees on the wide velvety lawn are still magic. I enter by the back door and surprise Miss Dorothea and Miss Annie, who are bustling about with an air of frantic haste.

There are cries and real tears and many pats and kisses, and the inevitable coffee, and then I am seated at the long work table with a colander of unshelled peas in my lap, and a pan for them.

"... and they said it wasn't possible to send the bus any more. Not twenty-eight miles each way twice a day. And you can't argue with that since no one's done a thing about the road in four years and it's getting so dangerous that..."

A cul-de-sac, I am thinking, listening first to Dorothea and then to Annie, and sometimes both together. Somerset used to be the link between Hawley and Jefferson, but a dam was built on the river and the bridge was inundated, and now Somerset lies dying in a cul-de-sac. I say the word again and again to myself, liking it very much, thinking what a wonderful word it is, so mysterious, so full of meanings, layers and layers of meanings....

I know they want to hear about my father, but won't ask, so I tell them that I saw him last month and that he is about the same. And the subject changes briskly, back to the departure of the last four families with school-age children.

The door from the lobby is pushed open and the Harvard doctor steps inside the kitchen. I don't like him. I can't decide if it is actually hatred, or simple dislike, but I wish he were not here, that he had stayed at Harvard. He is fortyish, pink and paunchy, with soft pink hands, and thin brown hair. I suspect that he whines when he doesn't get his way.

"Miss Dorothea, I wonder if you can tell me where the boys can rent a boat, and buy fishing things?" It registers on him that he doesn't know me and he stares pointedly.

I say, "I'm Janet Matthews."

"Oh, do you live here, too?"

Manners of a pig, I think, and I nod. "At the end of First Street. The big white house that's afloat in a sea of weeds."

He has trouble fitting me into his list of characters. He introduces himself after a long pause while he puckers his forehead and purses his lips. I am proud of Dorothea and Annie for leaving him alone to flounder. I know it is an effort for them. He says, "I am Dr. Staunton."

"Medical doctor."

"No." He starts to turn back toward the door and I stop him again.

"What is your doctorate, Dr. Staunton?"

I can almost hear the gasp from Dorothea, although no sound issues.

"Psychology," he says, and clearly he is in a bad temper now. He doesn't wait for any more questions, or the answer to his question to Dorothea.

I go back to shelling the peas and Annie rolls out her piecrust and Dorothea turns her attention back to the Newburg sauce that she hasn't stopped stirring once. A giggle comes from Annie, and we all ignore it. Presently the peas are finished and I leave to continue my walk through the town, gradually making my way home, stopping to visit several other people on the way. Decay and death are spreading in Somerset, like a disease that starts very slowly, in a hidden place, and emerges only when it is assured of absolute success in the destruction of the host.

The afternoon is very hot and still, and I try to sleep, but give it up after fifteen minutes. I think of the canoe that we used to keep in the garage, and I think of the lake that is a mile away, and presently I am wrestling with the car carriers, and then getting the canoe hoisted up, scratching the finish on the car.

I float down the river in silence, surprising a beaver and three or four frolicking otters; I see a covey of quail rise with an absurd noise like a herd of horses. A fish jumps, almost landing in the canoe. I have sneaked out alone, determined this time to take the rapids, with no audience, no one to applaud my success, or to stand in fearful silence and watch me fail. The current becomes swifter and I can hear the muted roar, still far ahead, but it seems that any chances to change my mind are flashing by too fast to be

seized now, and I know that I am afraid, terribly afraid of the white water and the rocks and sharp pitches and deceptive pools that suck and suck in a never ending circle of death. I want to shoot the rapids, and I am so afraid. The roar grows and it is all there is, and now the current is an express belt, carrying me along on its surface with no side eddies or curves. It goes straight to the rocks. I can't turn the canoe. At the last minute I jump out and swim desperately away from the band of swift water, and I am crying and blinded by my tears and I find my way to shore by the feel of the current. I scrape my knees on a rock and stand up and walk from the river to fall face down in the weeds that line the banks. The canoe is lost, and I won't tell anyone what has happened. The following summer he buys another canoe, but I never try the rapids again.

And now there are no more rapids. Only a placid lake with muddy shores and thick water at this end, dark with algae and water hyacinths. I am so hot after getting the canoe on the car, and the air is so heavy that it feels ominous. A storm will come up, I decide. It excites me and I know that I want to be at home when the wind blows. I want to watch the ash tree in the wind, and following the thought, I realize that I want to see the ash tree blown down. This shocks me. It is so childish. Have I ever admitted to anyone, to myself even, why I come back each summer? I can't help myself. I am fascinated by death, I suppose. Daily at the hospital I administer death in small doses, controlled death, temporary death. I am compelled to come home because here too is death. It is like being drawn to the bedside of a loved one that you know is dying, and being at once awed and frightened, and curious about what death is like ultimately. We try so hard to hide the curiosity from the others, the strangers. And that is why I hate the Harvard doctor so much: he is intruding in a family matter. This is our death, not his, to watch and to weep over and mourn. I know that somehow he has learned of this death and it is that which has drawn him, just as it draws me, and I refuse him the right to partake of our sorrow, to test our grief, to measure our loss.

The storm hangs over the horizon out of sight. The change in air pressure depresses me, and the sullen heat, and the unkempt yard, and the empty house that nevertheless rustles with unseen life. Finally I take the letter from Father from my pocket and open it. I don't weep over his letters any longer, but the memory of the paroxysms of the past fills me with the aftertaste of tears as I stare at the childish scrawl: large, ungraceful letters, carefully traced and shaky, formed with too much pressure so that the paper is pierced here and there, the back of the sheet like Braille.

It is brief and inane, as I have known it would be; a cry for release from Them, a prayer to an unhearing child who has become a god, or at least a parent, for forgiveness. Statistics: every year fifty thousand are killed, and she was one of them, and 1.9 million are disabled, and he was one of them. Do all the disabled bear this load of guilt that consumes him daily? He is Prometheus, his bed the rock, his guilt the devouring eagles. The gods wear white coats, and carry magic wands with which they renew him nightly so that he may die by day.

Why doesn't the storm come?

I wait for the storm and don't go down to the lake after all. Another day, I tell myself, and leave the canoe on the car top.

I mix a gin and tonic and wander with it to the back yard where nothing moves now. I stare up at the ash tree; it has grown so high and straight in the twenty years since we planted it. I remember the lightning that shredded the cherry tree that once stood there, the splinters of white wood that I picked up all over the yard afterward. The following week Father brought home the tiny ash stick and very solemnly we planted it in the same spot. I cried because it wasn't another cherry tree. I smile, recalling my tears and the tantrum, and the near ritual of the tree planting. At eight I was too old for the tears and the tantrum,

but neither Father nor Mother objected. I sit in the yard, letting the past glide in and out of my mind without trying to stop the flow.

At six I dress for dinner with Dr. Warren and Norma. This is our new ritual. My first evening home I dine with the doctor and his wife. They are very lonely, I suspect, although neither says so. I walk through the quiet town as it dozes in the evening, the few occupied houses tightly shaded and closed against the heat. Norma had air-conditioning installed years ago and her house chills me when I first enter. She ushers me to the far side, to a glassed porch that is walled with vines and coleus plants with yellow, red, white leaves, and a funny little fountain that has blue-tinted water splashing over large enameled clam shells. I hesitate at the doorway to the porch. Dr. Staunton is there, holding a glass of Norma's special summer drink which contains lime juice, rum, honey, soda water, and God knows what else. He is speaking very earnestly to Dr. Warren, and both rise when they see me.

"Miss Matthews, how nice to see you again." Dr. Staunton bows slightly, and Dr. Warren pulls a wicker chair closer to his own for me. He hands me a glass.

"Edgar has been telling me about the research he's doing up here with the boys," Dr. Warren says.

Edgar? I nod, and sip the drink.

"I really was asking Blair for his assistance," Edgar Staunton says, smiling, but not on the inside. I wonder if he ever smiles on the inside.

Blair. I glance at Dr. Warren, who will forever be Dr. Warren to me, and wonder at the easy familiarity. Has he been so lonesome that he succumbed to the first outsider who came in and treated him like a doctor and asked for help?

"What is your research, Dr. Staunton?" I ask.

He doesn't tell me to use his first name. He says, "I brought some of my graduate students who are interested in the study of dreams, and we are using your town as a more or less controlled environment. I was wondering if some of the local people might like to participate, also."

Vampire, I thought. Sleeping by day, manning the electroencephalograph by night, guarding the electrodes, reading the pen tracings, sucking out the inner life of the volunteers, feeding on the wishes and fears...

"How exactly does one go about doing dream research?" I ask.

"What we would like from your townspeople is a simple record of the dreams they recall on awakening. Before they even get up, or stir much at all, we'd like for them to jot down what they remember of the dreams they've had during the night. We don't want them to sign them, or indicate in any way whose dreams they are, you understand. We aren't trying to analyze anyone, just sample the dreams."

I nod, and turn my attention to the splashing water in the fountain. "I thought they used machines, or something...."

I can hear the slight edge in his voice again as he says, "On the student volunteers only, or others who volunteer for that kind of experimentation. Would you be interested in participating, Miss Matthews?"

"I don't know. I might be. Just what do you mean by controlled environment?"

"The stimuli are extremely limited by the conditions of the town, its lack of sensory variety, the absence of television or movies, its isolation from any of the influences of a metropolitan cultural center. The stimuli presented to the volunteers will be almost exactly the same as those experienced by the inhabitants of the town...."

"Why, Dr. Staunton, we have television here, and there are movie houses in Hawley, and even summer concerts." Norma stands in the doorway holding a tray of thumbnail-sized biscuits filled with savory sausage, and her blue eyes snap indignantly as she turns from the psychologist to her husband, who is quietly regarding the Harvard doctor.

"Yes, but I understand that the reception is very poor and you are limited to two channels, which few bother to watch."

"When there's something on worthwhile to watch, we tune in, but we haven't allowed ourselves to become addicted to it," Norma says.

I wish Norma could have waited another minute or two before stopping him, but there will be time, through dinner, after dinner. We will return to his research. I take one of the pastries and watch Staunton and Dr. Warren, and listen to the talk that has now turned to the value of the dam on the river, and the growth in tourism at the far end of the valley, and the stagnation at this end. Staunton knows about it all. I wonder if he has had a computer search out just the right spot for his studies, find just the right-sized town, with the correct number of people and the appropriate kind of eliciting stimuli. There are only twenty-two families in the town now, a total population of forty-one, counting me. Probably he can get five or six of them to help him, and with eight students, that would be a fair sample. For what, I don't know.

I listen again to the Harvard doctor. "I wasn't certain that your townspeople would even speak to us, from what I'd heard about the suspicions of rural villages and the like."

"How ridiculous," Norma says.

"Yes, so I am learning. I must say the reception we have received has heartened me tremendously."

I smile into my drink, and I know that he will find everyone very friendly, ready to say good morning, good afternoon, how're things, nice weather. Wait until he tries to draw them into reporting dreams, I tell myself. I know Dr. Warren is thinking this too, but neither of us says anything.

"I would like your help in particular, Blair," Edgar says, smiling very openly now. "And yours, Norma." I swallow some of the ice and watch Norma over the rim of the glass. She is terribly polite now, with such a sweet smile on her pretty face, and her eyes so calm and friendly.

"Really, Dr. Staunton? I can't imagine why. I mean, I never seem to recall anything I dream no matter how hard I try." Norma realizes that the tray is not being passed around, and she picks it up and invites Staunton to help himself.

"That's the beauty of this project," Staunton says, holding one of the tiny biscuits almost to his lips. "Most people say the same thing, and then they find out that they really do dream, quite a lot in fact, and that if they try to remember before they get out of bed, why, they can recapture most of it." He pops the biscuit

into his mouth and touches his fingertips to the napkin spread on his knees.

"But, Dr. Staunton, I don't dream," Norma says, even more friendly than before, urging another of the biscuits on him, smiling at him. He really shouldn't have called her Norma.

"But everybody dreams...."

"Oh, is that what your books teach? How strange of them." Norma notices that our glasses are almost empty, and excuses herself, to return in a moment with the pitcher.

Dr. Warren has said nothing during the exchange between Norma and Staunton. I can see the crinkle lines that come and go about his eyes, but that is because I know where to look. He remains very serious when Staunton turns to him.

"You would be willing to cooperate, wouldn't you, Blair? I mean, you understand the necessity of this sort of research."

"Yes, of course, except that I'm a real ogre when I wake up. Takes an hour, two hours for me to get charged up for the day. My metabolism is so low in the hours just before and after dawn, I'm certain that I would be a washout for your purposes, and by the time I'm human again, the night has become as if it never existed for me."

Dr. Staunton is not sipping any longer. He takes a long swallow and then another. He is not scowling, but I feel that if he doesn't let it show, he will have an attack of ulcers, or at least indigestion, before the night is over. He has no more liking for me than I have for him, but he forces the smile back into place and it is my turn.

"Miss Matthews?"

"I haven't decided yet," I say. "I'm curious about it, and I do dream. I read an article somewhere, in Time, or Newsweek, or someplace, and it sounds very mysterious, but I don't like the idea of the wires in the brain, and the earphones and all."

Very patiently he explains again that only his student volunteers use the equipment, and others who specifically volunteer for that phase. I ask if I might see how they use it sometime, and he is forced to say yes. He tries to get my yes in return, but I am coy and say only that I have to think about it first. He tries to get Dr. Warren to promise to approach other people in the town, try to get their cooperation for him, and Dr. Warren sidesteps adroitly. I know the thought will occur to him to use me for that purpose, but it doesn't that evening. I decide that he isn't terribly bright. I wonder about his students, and I invite him to bring them, all of them, to my house for an outdoor barbecue the following night. That is all he gets from any of us, and dinner seems very slow, although, as usual, very good. Staunton excuses himself quickly after dinner, saying, with his off-again, on-again smile, that he must return to work, that only the fortunate are allowed their nights of rest.

No one argues with him, or urges him to linger, and when he is gone I help Norma with the dishes and Dr. Warren sits in the kitchen having black coffee, and we talk about the Harvard doctor.

"I plain don't like him," Norma says with conviction. "Slimy man".

I think of his pink face and pink hairless hands, and his cheeks that shake when he walks, and I know



what she means.

"I guess his project isn't altogether bad, or a complete waste of time," Dr. Warren says. "Just got the wrong place, wrong time, wrong people."

"I want to find out exactly what he expects to prove," I say. "I wonder what sort of contrast he expects between students and our people. That might even be interesting." I wonder if the research is really his, or the idea of one of his graduate students. I try not to draw conclusions yet. I can wait until the next night when I'll meet them all. I say, "Dr. Warren, Father keeps begging me to bring him home. Do you think it would help him?"

Dr. Warren puts down his cup and studies me hard. "Bedridden still?"

"Yes, and always will be, but I could manage him in the dining room downstairs. He's so unhappy in the nursing home. I'm sure the house, the noises there would bring back other days to him, make him more cheerful."

"It's been four years now, hasn't it?" Dr. Warren knows that. I wonder why he is playing for time, what thoughts he has that he doesn't want to express. "Honey," he says, in the gentle voice that used to go with the announcement of the need for a needle, or a few stitches. I remember that he never promised that it wouldn't hurt if it would. "I think you'd be making a mistake. Is he really unhappy? Or does he just have moments when he wants the past given back to him?"

I feel angry with him suddenly for not understanding that when Father is lucid he wants to be home. I can only shrug.

"Think on it, Janet. Just don't decide too fast." His face is old suddenly, and I realize that everyone in Somerset is aged. It's like walking among the pyramids, at a distance forever changeless, but on closer inspection constant reminders of aging, of senescence, of usefulness past and nearly forgotten. I turn to stare at Norma and see her as she is, not as she was when I was a child waiting for a cookie fresh and still warm, with the middle soft and the top crackly with sugar. I feel bewildered by both of them, outraged that they should reveal themselves so to me. There is a nearby crack of thunder, sharp-edged and explosive, not the rolling kind that starts and ends with an echo of itself, but a rifle blast. I stare out the window at lightning, jagged and brilliant, as sharply delineated as the thunder.

"I should go before the downpour," I say.

"I'll drive you," Dr. Warren says, but I won't let him.

"I'll make it before the rain. Maybe it's cooler now."

Inconsequential that fill the days and nights of our lives, nonsequiturs that pass for conversation and thought, pleasantries, promises, we rattle them off comfortably and I am walking down the street toward my house, not on the sidewalk, but in the street, where walking is easier.

The wind starts to blow when I am halfway between Magnolia and Rose Streets. I can see the Sagamore House ahead and I decide to stop there and wait for the rain to come and go. Probably I have planned this in a dark corner of my mind, but I have not consciously decided to visit the students so soon. I hurry, and the wind now has the town astir, filled with the same rustles that fill my house; scurrying ghosts, what have they to worry about if the rain should come before they settle in for the night?

Along First Street most of the buildings are closed forever. The ten-cent store, a diner, fabric shop, all sharing a common front, all locked, with large soaped loops linking the wide windows one to one. The rain starts, enormous drops that are wind driven and hard. I can hear them against the tin roof of Mr. Larson's store and they sound like hailstones, but then the wind drowns all noise but its own. Thunder and lightning now, and the mad wind. I run the rest of the way to Sagamore House and arrive there almost dry, but completely breathless.

"Honey, for heaven's sake, come in and get some coffee! Dorothea starts to lead me to the kitchen, but I shake my head and incline it toward the parlor off to the left of the entrance.

"I'll go in there and wait out the storm, if you don't mind." I can hear voices from the big room with its Victorian furniture and the grandfather clock that always stutters on the second tick. I hear it now: tick -- t... t... tick.

"I'll bring you a pot of coffee there, Janet," Dorothea says with a nod. When she comes back with the tray and the china cup and the silver pot, she will call me Miss Matthews.

I try to pat my hair down as I go into the parlor, and I know that I still present a picture of a girl caught in a sudden storm. I brush my arms, as if they are still wet, although they are not, and I shake my head, and at that moment there is another very close, very loud thunder crash, as if to justify my action. The boys stop talking when I enter. They are what I have known most of my life since college: young, fresh-looking, indistinguishable from seniors and graduate students the world over.

I smile generally at them and sit down on one of the red velour couches with a coffee table before it that has a bowl of white roses, a dish of peppermints, magazines, three ashtrays, each carved and enameled and spotless. The whole room is like that: chairs and chairs, all carved, waxed, gleaming, footstools, end tables, console tables, Tiffany lampshades on cut-glass lamps... The boys are at the other end of the room, six of them, two on the floor, the others in chairs, smoking, sipping beer or tall drinks. Dr. Staunton isn't there.

Dorothea brings my tray and does call me Miss Matthews and asks if I'd like anything else. I shake my head and she leaves me alone with the boys. There is a whispered conversation at the other end of the room, and one of the boys rises and comes to stand near me.

"Hi, I'm Roger Philpott. Are you Janet Matthews? I think you invited us all to dinner at your house tomorrow." Tall, thin, blond, very young-looking.

I grin back and nod. I look toward the others and say, "Maybe by meeting just a few of you now, I'll be able to keep your names straight."

Roger introduces the others, and I remember that there is a Johnny, a Victor, Doug, Sid, and Mickey. No one is grotesque, or even memorable. They regroup around me. Outside we can hear the hail, undeniably hail now, and the wind shrieking in the gables and eaves, all dwarfed by the intermittent explosions of the thunder. Several times the lights flicker, and Dorothea returns with hurricane lamps that she places in strategic places, after a glance to see if I have accomplished my goal of becoming part of the group of students.

Roger switches to coffee, but the other students reorder beer and gin and bitter lemon, and Dorothea leaves us again. Roger says, "I don't know how long some of us will be able to take life in the country.

What do you do around here?"

I laugh and say, "I come here to rest each summer. I live in New York the rest of the year."

His interest quickens. "Oh, you work in the city then?"

"Yes, Columbia Medical Center. I'm an anesthesiologist."

"Dr. Staunton didn't mention that. He seems to think that all the people here are locals."

"I didn't tell him," I say. He nods and I know that he realizes that I have played the part of a local yokel with his superior. I ask, "Is this his research, or is it the thesis of one of the boys?"

One of the others laughs. "It's Roger's original idea," he says. "And mine." I try to remember which one he is and I think he is Sid. Mediterranean type. I glance over the other faces, and none shows surprise. So Staunton has taken over openly, and they accept it as natural. It tells me more than they can know about Staunton.

"You see, I had this idea that the whole pattern of dream content might switch depending on the location of the dreamer. In the city we know pretty much what each of us dreams, we've been subjects and experimenters all year now, and we decided to hunt up a place where there were none of the same things at all and then run a comparison."

"And you'll check that against what you can find out from the people here, to see if there's a correlation?"

"We don't expect one," Sid said. "What we do expect is that our own dreams will change, but that the patterns of the dreams of the people already here will remain relatively stable."

"And what do you expect to prove?"

"I don't know that we'll prove anything, but assuming that dreams reflect the emotional states of the person, by examining them in varying circumstances we might get a clue about how to help people relax more than they do, what kind of vacation to plan for, how long to stay, things like that. If my reasoning is right, then we'll be able to predict from personality sketches whether a three-week vacation is desirable, or shorter periods more frequently. You see?"

I nod and can find no fault with the experiment. It does seem a legitimate line of research, and a useful one, perhaps. "I suppose you will have a computer run the analysis of dream content?"

Sid nods, and Roger says, "Would you like to see one of the cards we fill out? We've broken down dream content into categories. Like sexual with subheadings of hetero, homo, socially accepted, socially unaccepted, and so on, and a further breakdown of overt, covert; participatory, observed; satisfying, frustrating, and so on. I think we've hit everything."

"I would like to see one," I say, and he nods.

"I'll bring one out to your place with us tomorrow. Have you seen any of the sleep lab equipment?"

"Not in this context, not used in these experiments."

"Great. The first afternoon, after three or four, that you can get up here, I'll show you around."

"Perhaps tomorrow?" I say. "Will Dr. Staunton object?"

Roger and Sid exchange a hurried glance and Roger shrugs. "It's my research," he says.

"Is he setting up equipment, testing it out now?"

"No. In fact he came home with indigestion, I think, and conked out right away."

I can't still the sudden laugh that I feel. I finish my coffee and stand up. "The storm is over, I think. At least it's catching its breath now. I'm glad I was forced to stop," I say, and hold out my hand to Roger and then Sid. "I must say, however, that I'm afraid Somerset isn't quite what you expected. I hope you won't be too disappointed in us."

"Will you help?" Roger asks.

I hesitate and then nod. "I used to keep a record for my own psychology classes. I'll start again."

"Thanks."

"If anyone in town asks my opinion," I say, standing in the open doorway now, feeling the cool wind that the storm has brought in, "I'll tell them that I'm cooperating, nothing more. They may or may not pay any attention to what I say."

"See you tomorrow afternoon," Roger says and I leave them and walk home. It is very dark now, and the rain smells fresh, the air is cool and clean. I am thinking of the two halves that make up the whole me. In the city I am brisk and efficient. I know the nurses talk about me, wondering if I am a lesbian (I'm not), if I have any sex life at all (not now). They are afraid of me because I will not permit any sloppiness in surgery, and I am quick to report them. They don't understand that my instruments are to me what the surgeon's scalpel is to him, and they think I worship dials and stainless-steel gods. I once heard myself described as more machine-like than any of the exotic equipment that I have mastered. I know that the thought of those boys staring at the charts of their alpha and beta rhythms has brought this retrospective mood but I can't break out of it. I continue to inspect my life as if from the outside. What no one understands is that it is not the machines that are deified, but the processes that the machines record, the fluctuations and the rhythms, the cyclic patterns that are beautiful when they are normal, and as hideous as a physical deformity when they are wrong. The covered mound on the hard table is meaningless when I observe it. Less than human, inert, it might be a corpse already, or a covered log, or a cache of potatoes. But the dials that I read tell me all I can know about it: male, steady heart, respiration normal... Body processes that add up to life, or non-life. What more is there?

My house is cool now, and rain has blown in the kitchen and dining-room windows. I mop it up and wipe the sills carefully, and inspect the rest of the house. I can't see anything in the yard, but I stand on the back porch and feel the coolness and the mistiness of the air until I start to shiver.

I have read that dreams follow a pattern of their own. The first dreams of the night are of events nearby in time and space, and as sleep progresses and the night goes by the dreams wander farther afield, into the past, or into future fantasy, and toward morning, they return to the here and now of the dreamer. During the night I wake up three times and jot down the dreams I can recall.

Dream number one is a simple-minded wish fulfillment. I am at a party where I sparkle and dazzle everyone in the house. It is an unfamiliar house, not unlike the Sagamore House, except more elegant, simpler, with cool white marble statues replacing the clutter. I am the belle of the party and I dance with everyone there, and in the center of the room is a champagne glass that must hold gallons. Looking through the bubbling wine, I see the statues shimmer and appear to come alive, but I know that it is only because of the rising bubbles, that it is an illusion. I am swept back to the dance floor and I swirl around in a delirium of joy.

Dream number two puzzles me. I am following Father, who is very small. It is not quite dark, but I don't know where the light is coming from. It is like moonlight, but without the moon, which I suspect is behind me somewhere. I am very frightened. Father starts to climb the ash tree and I retreat and watch him, growing more and more afraid but not doing anything at all, simply standing and watching as he vanishes among the leaves. I wake up in a cold sweat.

Dream number three takes place in my apartment. I am remodeling and doing the work myself. I am installing temporary wall boards, decorating them with childish pictures and pinups. I am weeping as I work. Suddenly there is a change and I am above Somerset, or in town, and I can't be certain which it is. I am calm and happy, although I see no one and hear nothing. Somerset is bathed in moonlight that is too golden to be real and the town is as I remember it from my earliest days, with striped green-and-white umbrellas in yards, and silent children playing happily in Cobb's Run.

I wake up and don't want to lose the feeling of peace and contentment. I smile as I write the dream down and when I read it over I don't know quite why it should have filled me with happiness. As I think of it more, I am saddened by it, and finally I get up wishing I had let it escape altogether. It is very early, not seven yet, but I don't want to return to bed. The morning is cool and refreshing. I decide to weed the patio out back and set up the grill before the sun heats up the valley again.

The ash-tree is untouched. I work for an hour, go inside for breakfast, and return to the yard. I am thinking that if I do bring Father home, I will have to find someone who can help with the yard, and I don't know who it would be. Poor Haddie? He might, but he is so slow and unthinking. I could have a wheelchair for Father and bring him out to the patio every day and as he convalesces, we could take short trips in the car, go down to the lake maybe, or over to Hawley now and then. I am certain that he will be able to play chess by fall, and read aloud with me, as we used to do. A quiet happiness fills me as I plan and it is with surprise that I realize that I have decided about Father. I have been over the same reasoning with his doctor, and accepted his advice against this move, but here, working in the bright sunlight, the new decision seems to have been made effortlessly.

I have weeded the patio, swept up the heaps of dandelions and buck weeds and crabgrass that have pushed through the cracks in the flagstones, and set up the barbecue grill. The picnic table is in pitiful condition, but it will have to do. There are some folding canvas chairs in the garage, but I will let the boys bring them out.

It is one o'clock already. A whole morning gone so quickly. My muscles are throbbing and I am sunburned, but the feeling of peacefulness remains with me and I shower and change and then go to town to shop, have lunch with Dorothea and Annie, and then see the sleep lab equipment.

I try to explain to Dorothea the difference between living in the city and living here in my own home, but she has her mouth set in a firm line and she is very disapproving of the whole idea.

Timidly Annie says, "But, honey, there's no one left your age. What will you do all the time?"

"I'll have plenty to do," I tell her. "I want to study, rest, take care of Father, the house. There will be too much to do, probably."

"That's not what she means," Dorothea says sharply. "You should get married, not tie yourself down here where everything's dying." She eyes me appraisingly. "Don't you have anyone in mind?"

I shrug it off. A young doctor, perhaps? I try to think of myself with any of the young doctors I know, and the thought is ridiculous. There are some older doctors, thoroughly married, of course, that seem less absurd, but no one my age who is unattached. I think again of the Harvard doctor's pink hands and pink cheeks, and I shudder. I say, "There's time for that, Dorothea, but right now I feel it's my duty to Father to bring him home where he will be happier."

After lunch I wander into the parlor and have Dorothea ring Roger's room and tell him I'm waiting. She is still unhappy with me, and I know that she and Annie will discuss me the rest of the afternoon.

The sleep lab is set up in the rear of the building on the second floor. There are three bedrooms in a row, the middle one the control room with the equipment in place, and the rooms on either side furnished with beds, telephones, wires with electrodes. I have seen pictures of these experiments and have read about them so that none of it comes as a surprise but I am mildly impressed that they were able to get together so much equipment that I know to be very expensive. Harvard is feeling flush these days, I decide, or else Staunton swings more weight than I have given him credit for.

After I examine the EEGs from the night before and compare them with the reported dreams, I am introduced to the other three students that I missed before. I have already forgotten all of their names except Sid and Roger. We have a drink and I learn that so far they have received no cooperation from anyone in town, with the possible exception of myself. Staunton comes in looking angry and frustrated.

"That hick doctor could do it, if he would," he says before he sees me in the room. He reddens.

"He won't, though," I say. "But I could."

"They'd tell you their dreams?"

"Some of them would, probably enough for your purposes." I stand up and start for the door. "I would have to promise not to give you their dreams, but to process them myself, however."

He starts to turn away, furious again, and I say, "I am qualified, you know." I suspect that I have more degrees than he does and I reel them off rapidly. I walk to the door before he has a chance to respond. Before leaving I say, "Think about it. You can let me know tonight when you come to the house. I will have to be briefed on your methods, of course, and have a chance to examine your cards."

I don't know why I've done it. I walk home and try to find a reason, but there is none. To puncture his smug shield? To deflate him in the presence of his students? To inflate my own importance, reassure myself that I am of both worlds? I can't select a single reason, and I decide that perhaps all of them are part of it. I know that I dislike Staunton as much as anyone I have ever met, and perhaps I hope that he will fail completely in his research, except that it isn't really his.

I make potato salad, and bake pies, and prepare the steaks that Dorothea has ordered. It crosses my mind that Mr. Larson has virtually no meat except for the special order from Sagamore House, and that

I'll have to order everything in advance when I move back home for good, but I don't linger over it. The evening passes quite pleasantly and even Staunton is on his good behavior. They accept my offer and Sid goes over the cards with me, explaining what they are doing, how they are analyzing the dreams and recording them. It seems simple enough.

The days flow by now, with not quite enough time for all there is to do. The doctor in charge of the nursing home answers my letter brusquely, treating me like a child. I read it over twice before I put it on my desk to be taken care of later. I have been able to get six people to cooperate in the dream studies, and they keep me busy each day. People like to talk about their dreams, I find, and talking about them, they are able to bring back more and more details, so that each interview takes half an hour or an hour. And there are my own dreams that I am also recording.

I found the reason for my own part in this when I first typed up my own dream to be analyzed. I found that I couldn't give it to Staunton, and the students are like children, not to be trusted with anything so intimate as the private dreams of a grown woman. So each day I record my own dreams along with the other six, type them all up, fill out the cards, and turn the cards over to Roger. By then the dreams are depersonalized data.

I finish typing the seven dreams and I am restless suddenly. There is something... The house is more unquiet than usual, and I am accustomed to the rustlings and creakings. I wonder if another storm is going to hit the town, but I don't think so.

I wander outside where the night is very clear. The sky is brilliant and bottomless. The music of the night is all about me: the splashing water of the creek, crickets and tree frogs in arrhythmic choral chants and from a distance the deeper solo bass of a bullfrog. Probably I am bored. Other people's dreams are very boring. I haven't started to categorize this latest set, and I feel reluctant to begin. I purposely don't put any names on any of the dreams I record, and I type each one on a separate card and then shuffle them about, so that by the time I have finished with them all, I have forgotten who told me which one.

I stop walking suddenly. I have come halfway down the path toward the creek without thinking where I am going or why. Now I stop and the night noises press in on me. "They are alike," I say, and I am startled by my voice. All other sounds stop with the words.

I think of the stack of file cards, and those I added tonight, and I am amazed that I didn't see it in the beginning. Roger is right: the townspeople are dreaming the same dreams. That isn't really what he said. What he said was that the dreams of the people here would remain stable, unchanged by the experiment, while those of the students would change as they adapted to this life. I haven't asked about that part of the research, but suddenly I am too curious about it to put it out of my mind.

Are they changing, and how? I start back, but pause at the door to the house, and turn instead to the street and town. I slow down when I come in sight of Sagamore House. It is very late, almost two in the morning. The second-floor light is the only light I have seen since leaving my own house. I take another step toward Sagamore House, and another. What is the matter tonight? I look about. But there is nothing. No wind, no moon, nothing. But I hear... life, stirrings, something. This is Somerset, I say to myself sharply, not quite aloud, but I hear the words anyway. I look quickly over my shoulder, but there is nothing. I see the apple trees, familiar yet strange, eerie shadows against the pale siding of the hotel. Across from Sagamore House on Wisteria there is the old boarded-up theater, and for a moment I think someone has opened it again. I press my hands over my ears and when I take them down the sound has stopped. I am shaking. I can't help the sudden look that I give the corner where the drugstore burned down seven or eight years ago.

We wait in the shadows of Sagamore House, under the apple trees for the movie to be over, and then Father and Mother, Susan's parents, Peter's, come out and take us along with them for an ice-cream soda in the drugstore. We know when the movie is ending because of the sounds that filter out when they open the inner doors. Faint music, laughter, a crash of cymbals, always different, but always a signal, and we come down from the trees, or from the porch and cross the street to wait for them to come out.

I stare at the theater, back to the empty corner, and slowly turn and go home again. One of the boys was playing a radio, I tell myself, and even believe it for a moment. Or I imagined it, the past intruded for a moment, somehow. An audio hallucination. I stop at the gate to my yard and stare at the house, and I am desperately afraid. It is such an unfamiliar feeling, so unexpected and shattering, that I can't move until it passes. It is as if I have become someone else for a moment, someone who fears rustling in the dark, who fears the night, being alone. Not my feelings at all. I have never been afraid, never, not of anything like this.

I light a cigarette and walk around the house to enter the kitchen, where I make coffee and a sandwich. It is two-thirty, but sleep seems a long way off now, unwanted, unneeded. Toward dawn I take a sleeping pill and fall into bed.

Roger, Sid and Doug invite me to have dinner with them in Hawley on Saturday, and I accept. The mountain road is very bad and we creep along in the station wagon that they have brought with them. No one is talking, and we all glance back at Somerset at the turn that used to have a tended scenic overlook. The trees have since grown up, and bushes and vines, so that there is only a hint of the town below us. Then it is gone, and suddenly Sid starts to talk of the experiment.

"I think we should call off the rest of it," he says.

"Can't," Roger says. "Eight days isn't enough."

"We have a trend," Sid says.

Doug, sitting in the back seat, speaks up then. "You'll never keep them all here for two more weeks."

"I know that, but those who do hang on will be enough."

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"Boredom," Sid says. "Good God, what's there to do in such a place?"

"I thought that was part of the experiment. I thought you wanted a place with no external stimuli."

"Quote and unquote," Sid says. "Staunton's idea. And we did, but I don't know. The dreams are strange, and getting stranger. And we're not getting along too well in the daytime. I don't know how your people stand it."

I shrug and don't even try to answer. I know he won't understand. Traffic thickens when we leave the secondary road for the highway on the other side of the mountain. It feels cooler here and I find that I am looking forward to a night out with more excitement than seems called for.



We have drinks before dinner, and wine with dinner, and more drinks afterward, and there is much laughter. Doug teaches me three new dance steps, and Roger and I dance, and I find myself thinking with incredulity of the plan I have been considering to take Father out of the nursing home where he belongs and try to care for him myself. I know that he will never recover, that he will become more and more helpless, not less. How could I have planned to do such a thing? He needs attendants to lift him, turn him in bed, and at times to restrain him. I have tried to think of other alternatives for him, but there are none, and I know that. I know that I have to write to the director of the home and apologize to him.

At eleven Roger says we have to go back. Doug passes out in the car as soon as he gets inside, and Sid groans. "There he goes," he says. "So you do me tonight."

"Where are the others?" I ask.

"On strike," Roger says. "They refused to work on Saturday and Sunday, said they needed time off. They want to forget their dreams for a couple of nights."

"I'll do it," I say.

"You're kidding."

"No. I'll do it. You can wire me up and everything tonight."

It is agreed, and we drive back over the mountain, becoming more and more quiet as we get to the old road and start to pick our way down again. By the time we get back to Somerset, and I am feeling soberer, I regret my impulsive promise, but can think of no way to back out now. I watch Sid and Roger half carry, half drag Doug from the station wagon, and I see the flutter of his eyelids and know that he is not as drunk as he would have us believe. I start to walk to my house, but Roger says for me to wait, that they will drive me and bring me back with my pajamas and things, so I stand on the porch and wait for them, and I stare across the street at the vacant theater. I know that three nights ago I imagined the past, but since then I have been taking sleeping pills, and my nights have been quiet, with no more hallucinations or dreams.

My house is noisier than usual. I glance at the two boys, but neither of them seems to notice. They sit in the living room and wait, and ahead of me on the dark stairs the rustlings hurry along; they pause outside my parents' room, scurry down the hallway and precede me into my room, where, when I turn on the light, there is nothing to see. I know it is the settling of floorboards untrodden for eleven months, and rushing air, and imagination. Memories that have become tangible? I don't believe that, but it has a strangely comforting sound, and I like the idea of memories lingering in the house, assuming a life of their own, reliving the past.

I fold pajamas and my housecoat, and grope under the bed for my slippers, and the thought comes that people are going to know that I spent the night at Sagamore House. I sit on the bed with my slippers in my hand and stare straight ahead at nothing in particular. How can I get out of this? I realize that Somerset and New York are arguing through me, and I can almost smile at the dialogue that I am carrying out silently. It seems that my strongest Somerset argument is that if I am going to live here with my invalid father, I can't return with a reputation completely ruined. I know what Somerset can do to a woman like that. But I'm not going to come back with him, I answer. Or am I?

It is getting very late and I have to go through with it; I have promised. Reluctantly I take my things downstairs, hoping that they have left, but of course they are still sitting there, talking quietly. About me?

I suspect so. Probably I puzzle them. I regard them as little more than children, boys with school problems to solve. Yet we are all in our twenties. I suppose that because I have my degrees and a position of responsibility, my experience seems to add years to my age, and even as I think this, I reject it. Sid has told me that he spent three years in the army, served in Vietnam, so what is my experience to his? Sid has tried to draw me out, has visited twice, and has even gone canoeing with me, but standing in the doorway looking at them I think of them as so very young, prying into things they can't understand, trying to find answers that, if found, will make them question all of reality. I shake my head hard. I don't know what I've been thinking about, but I feel afraid suddenly, and I suspect that I have drunk too much earlier, and I am so very... weary. Sleeping pills leave me more tired than the insomnia they alleviate.

They make small talk that I recognize, the same sort of small talk that a good doctor uses for a nervous patient before measuring his blood pressure. I am churlish with them in return and we go to the sleep lab silently. I understand all of their equipment and I have even had electroencephalograms made when I was studying, so nothing is new to me and the demonstration is short. Then I am alone in the darkened room, conscious of the wires, of the tiny patches of skin with adhesive gel tape that holds the electrodes in place. I don't think I'll be able to go to sleep here wired up like this, at least not into the deep sleep that should come in an hour or so. I deliberately close my eyes and try to picture a flame above my eyes, over the bridge of my nose. I know that I can interrupt my alpha waves at will with this exercise. I imagine Roger's surprise. But suddenly I am thinking of S.L. and I blink rapidly, wondering what kinds of waves I am producing now for them to study. S.L. won't go away. I ask, what does the S. stand for, and he smiles broadly and says Silas. Does anyone name children Silas any more? So I ask about the L. and he says Lerner, which is perfectly all right, his mother's maiden name, but he doesn't like the idea of going around as S. Lerner Wright. It is a farcical name. He is S.L. Lying in the dark room of the almost empty hotel, I can think of S.L. without pain, without recriminations and regrets and bitterness. I remember it as it was then. I loved him so very much, but he said not enough, or I would go with him to Cal Tech and become Mrs. S.L. Wright, and forever and ever remain Mrs. S.L. Wright. I realize that I no longer love him, and that probably I didn't even then, but it felt like love and I ached as if it were love, and afterward I cut my hair very short and stopped using makeup and took several courses in night school and finished the next three years in under two and received degrees and a job...

I am awakened by the telephone and I lift it and mumble into it. "My car isn't working right, trying to back up on the road into Somerset and can't make it go. I keep slipping downward and there is a cliff in front of me, but I can't back up."

I dream of the telephone ringing, and it rings, and I speak, less coherently, and forget immediately what I have said and sleep again. In the morning I have memories of having spoken into the telephone several times, but no memories of what I said. Sid enters and helps me out of the bird's nest of wires. I wave him away and stumble into the bathroom where I wash my face and come really awake.

Sid? I thought Roger was the meter man of the night before. I dress and brush my hair and put on lipstick, and then find them both waiting for me to have breakfast with them. Sid has deep blue circles under his eyes. At a sunlit table with a bowl of yellow roses and a few deep green ferns, I wait for them to break the silence that has enveloped the three of us. There is a sound of activity in town that morning, people getting ready to go to church in Hawley, cars being brought out of garages where they stay six days of the week, several people in the hotel dining room having an early breakfast before leaving for the day. Many of them stay away all day on Sunday, visiting friends or relatives, and I know that later the town will be deserted.

"So they talked you into letting them wire you up like a condemned man?" Dorothea stands over the table accusingly. "Are you all right?"

"Of course. It's nothing, Dorothea, really nothing."

She snorts. "Up all night, people coming and going all night, talking in the halls, meetings here and there. I never should have let them in." She is addressing me still, but the hostility in her voice is aimed at the boys, at Staunton, who has just entered the dining room. He joins us, and there are dark hollows under his eyes. He doesn't meet my gaze

We have coffee in silence and wait for our orders. I finger a sensitive spot on my left eyelid and Sid says quickly, "One of the wires came off during the night. I had to replace it. Is it sore?"

"No. It's all right." I am upset suddenly by the idea of his being there in the night, replacing a wire on my eye without my knowing. I think of the similar role that I play in my daily life and I know how I regard the bodies that I treat. Irritated at the arm that has managed to pull loose a needle that now must be replaced in the vein. Never a person, just an arm, and a needle. And the quiet satisfaction when the dials are registering correctly once more. I feel the frown on my face and try to smooth it out again.

Staunton has ordered only toast, juice and coffee, and he is yawning. He finishes his last crumb of toast and says, "I'm going to bed. Miss Matthews, will you join us here for dinner tonight?"

The sudden question catches me off guard, and I look at him. He is regarding me steadily and very soberly, and I realize that something has happened, that I am part of it, and that he is very much concerned. I am uneasy and only nod yes.

When he is gone I ask, "What happened? What's wrong?"

"We don't know yet," Roger says.

Sid pours more coffee and drinks it black. He is looking more awake, as if he has taken a bennie or something. "We have to talk with you, Janet. I'd like you to hear some of our tapes, including your own, if you will."

"You should get some sleep," I say irrelevantly.

"This afternoon? Can you come here, or should we bring the stuff to your place?"

"You got him up last night?"

Roger nods. "I felt I should."

I watch Myra and Al Newton leave their table, stop at Dorothea's counter to pay the bill and leave, and I am struck by their frailty. They both seem wraithlike. Is anyone in Somerset under sixty? I suppose the Newtons must be closer to seventy-five. I ask, "Where are the other boys this morning?" The dining room is empty except for the three of us.

"A couple of them are out fishing already, and the rest are probably still sleeping. I'm taking Victor and Mickey to Hawley to catch the bus back to Boston later today," Roger says, and then adds, "Probably Doug will be the next to go."

"Doug? I thought he was one of the more interested ones in this whole thing?"

"Too interested, maybe," Roger says.

Sid is watching both of us and now he leans forward, resting his chin on his hands, looking beyond me out the window at the quiet street. "Janet, do you remember any of your dreams from last night?"

I think of what I said over the telephone. Scraps here and there. Something about putting flowers on graves in one of them. I shake my head: nothing that I can really remember.

"Okay. You'll hear them later. Meanwhile, take my word for it that some of the guys have to leave, whether they want to or not." He looks at me for another moment and then asks, in a different voice altogether, "Are you all right, Janet? Will you be okay until this afternoon? We do have to process the tapes and record the data, and I want to sort through all of them and pull out those that seem pertinent."

It is the voice of a man concerned for a woman, not of a graduate student concerned for his project, and this annoys me.

"Of course I'm all right," I say, and stand up. "For heaven's sake, those are dreams, the dreams of someone who had too much to drink, at that." I know I am flushed and I turn to leave. Have I embarrassed them with erotic dreams, concerning one of them perhaps? I am very angry when I leave Sagamore House, and I wish I could go up to the sleep room and destroy the tapes, all of them. I wish Dorothea had shown just an ounce of sense when they approached her for the rooms. She had no business allowing them to come into our town, upset our people with their damned research. I am furious with Sid for showing concern for me. He has no right. In the middle of these thoughts, I see my father and me, walking hand in hand in the afternoon, heading for the drugstore and an ice-cream cone. He is very tall and blond, with broad shoulders and a massive chest. He keeps his hair so short that he seems bald from a distance. He is an ophthalmologist with his office in Jefferson, and after they dam the river he has to drive sixty-three miles each way. Mother worries about his being out so much, but they don't move, don't even consider moving. On Sunday afternoon he always takes me to the drugstore for an ice-cream cone. I blink hard and the image fades, leaving the street bare and empty.

I am too restless to remain in my house. It is a hot still day and the heat is curling the petals of the roses, and drying out the grass, and wilting the phlox leaves. It is a relentless sun, burning, broiling, sucking the water up from the creek, leaving it smaller each day. Without the dam the creek probably would dry up completely within another week or two. I decide to cut a basket of flowers and take them to the cemetery, and I know the idea comes from the fragmentary dream that I recalled earlier. I haven't been to the cemetery since my mother's funeral. It has always seemed such a meaningless gesture, to return to a grave and mourn there. It is no less meaningless now, but it is something to do.

The cemetery is behind the small white church that has not been used for six years, since Brother MacCombs died. No one tried to replace him; they seemed tacitly to agree that the church should be closed and the membership transferred to Hawley.

It is a walk of nearly two miles, past the Greening farm where the weeds have become master again, past the dirt road to the old mill, a tumbling ruin even in my childhood where snakes curled in the shadows and slept, past the turnoff to Eldridge's fishing camp. I see no one and the sounds of the hot summer day are loud about me: whirring grasshoppers, birds, the scuttling of a squirrel who chatters at me once he is safely hidden.

The cemetery is tended in spots only, the graves of those whose relatives are still in Somerset have cut

grass and a sprinkling of flowers. My mother's grave is completely grown over and shame fills me. What would Father say? I don't try to weed it then, but sit down under a wide oak tree.

I took at the narrow road that leads back to Somerset. Father and I will come here often, after I have made the grave neat and pretty again. It will be slow, but we'll take our time, walking hand in hand up the dirt road, carrying flowers, and maybe a sandwich and a thermos of lemonade, or apples. Probably if I start the proceedings during the coming week, I can have everything arranged by next weekend, hire an ambulance and a driver...

I am awakened by rough hands shaking my shoulders. I blink rapidly, trying to focus my eyes, trying to find myself. I am being led away, and I squirm to turn around because I feel so certain that I am still back there somehow. I almost catch a glimpse of a girl in a yellow dress, sitting with her back to the oak tree, but it shimmers and I am yanked hard, and stumble, and hands catch me and steady me.

"What are you kids doing?" I ask, and the sound of the voice, deep, unfamiliar, shocks me and only then do I really wake up. I am being taken to the station wagon that is parked at the entrance to the lane.

"I'm all right," I say, not struggling now. "You woke me up."

Sid is on my right and Roger on my left. I see that Dr. Staunton is in the wagon. He looks pale and worried.

I remember the basket of flowers that I never did put on the grave and I look back once more to see it standing by the tree. Sid's hand tightens on my arm, but I don't try to pull away. Inside the wagon I say, "Will one of you tell me what that was all about?"

"Janet, do you know how long you've been there at the cemetery?"

"Half an hour, an hour."

"It's almost six now. I... we got to your house at three and waited awhile for you, and then went back to the hotel. An old man with a white goatee said he saw you before noon heading this way with flowers. So we came after you." Sid is sitting beside me in the back seat of the wagon, and I stare at him in disbelief. I look at my watch, and it is five minutes to six. I shake it and listen to it.

"I must have been sound asleep."

"Sitting straight up, with your legs stretched out in front of you?"

We drive to my house and I go upstairs to wash my face and comb my hair. I study my face carefully, looking for something, anything, but it is the same. I hear voices from below; the sound diminishes and I know they are playing the tapes, so I hurry down.

I see that Sid has found my dream cards, the typed reports, and I am angry with him for prying. He says, "I had to know. I found them earlier while we were waiting for you."

Roger has the tape ready, so I sit down and we listen for the next two hours. Staunton is making notes, scowling hard at the pad on his knee. I feel myself growing tenser, and when the first tape comes to an end, I go to make coffee. We all sip it through the playing of the second tape.

The dreaming students' voices sound disjointed, hesitant, unguarded, and the dreams they relate are all alike. I feel cold in the hot room, and I dread hearing my own voice, my own dreams played by the machine.

All the early dreams are of attempts to leave Somerset. They speak of trying to fly out, to climb out, to swim out, to drive out, and only one is successful. As the night progresses, the dreams change, some faster than others. Slowly a pattern of acceptance enters the dreams, and quite often the acceptance is followed swiftly by a nightmarelike desire to run.

One of the dreamers, Victor, I think it is, has a brief anxiety dream, an incomplete dream, and then nothing but the wish-fulfillment acceptance dreams, not even changing again when morning has him in a lighter stage of sleep.

Sid motions for Roger to stop the tape and says, "That was three days ago. Since then Victor has been visiting people here, talking with them, fishing, hiking. He has been looking over some of the abandoned houses in town, with the idea of coming here to do a book."

"Has he..." I am amazed at how dry my mouth has become and I have to sip cold coffee before I can ask the question. "Has he recorded dreams since then?"

"No. Before this, he was having dreams of his parents, caring for them, watching over them." Sid looks at me and says deliberately, "Just like your dreams."

I shake my head and turn from him to look at Roger. He starts the machine again. There are hours and hours of the tapes to hear, and after another fifteen minutes of them I am ravenous. It is almost nine. I signal Roger to stop, and suggest that we all have scrambled eggs here, but Staunton vetoes this,

"I promised Miss Dorothea that we would return to the hotel. I warned her that it might be late. She said that was all right."

So we go back to Sagamore House and wait for the special of the day. On Sunday night there is no menu. I find myself shying away from the implications of the dream analysis again and again, and try to concentrate instead on my schedule for the next several months. I know that I have agreed to work with Dr. Waldbaum on at least six operations, and probably there are others that I agreed to and have forgotten. He is a thoracic surgeon and his operations take from four to eight or even ten hours, and for that long I control death, keep life in abeyance. I pay no attention to the talk that is going on between Roger and Sid, and I wonder about getting an ambulance driver to bring Father in during the winter. If only our weather were more predictable; there might be snowdrifts six feet high on the road, or it might be balmy.

"I said, why do you think you should bring your father home, here to Somerset?" I find that my eyes are on Staunton, and obviously he thinks I have been listening to him, but the question takes me by surprise.

"He's my father. He needs me."

Sid asks, "Has anyone in town encouraged you in this idea?"

Somehow, although I have tried to withdraw from them, I am again the center of their attention, and I feel uncomfortable and annoyed. "Of course not. This is my decision alone. Dr. Warren tried to discourage it, in fact, as Dorothea did, and Mr. Larson."

"Same thing," Sid says to Roger, who nods. Staunton looks at them and turns to me.

"Miss Matthews, do you mean to say that everyone you've talked to about this has really tried to discourage it? These people are your father's friends. Why would they do that?"

My face feels stiff and I am thinking that this is too much, but I say, "They all seem to think he's better off in the nursing home."

"And isn't he?"

"In certain respects, yes. But I am qualified to handle him, you know. No one here seems to realize just how well qualified I really am. They think of me as the girl they used to know playing jump rope in the back yard."

Dorothea brings icy cucumber soup and we are silent until she leaves again. The grandfather clock chimes ten, and I am amazed at how swiftly the day has gone. By now most of the townspeople are either in bed, or getting ready. Sunday is a hard day, with the trip to church, visits, activities that they don't have often enough to become accustomed to. They will sleep well tonight, I think. I look at Sid and think that he should sleep well too tonight. His eyes are sunken-looking, and I suppose he has lost weight; he looks older, more mature than he did the first time I met him.

"Are you going to set up your equipment tonight?" I ask. "Any of the other boys volunteer?"

"No," Roger says shortly. He looks at Sid and says, "As a matter of fact, we decided today not to put any of them in it again here."

"You're leaving then?"

"Sending all the kids back, but Sid and I'll be staying for a while. And Dr. Staunton."

I put down my spoon and lean back, waiting for something that is implicit in the way Roger stops and Sid looks murderously at him. I watch Sid now.

"We think you should leave, too," he says.

I look to Roger, who nods, and then at Staunton. He is so petulant-looking, even pursing his lips. He fidgets and says, "Miss Matthews, may I suggest something? You won't take it amiss?" I simply wait. He goes on, "I think you should return to the city and make an appointment with the psychiatrist at Columbia."

"And the others you are sending out? Should they also see doctors?"

"As a matter of fact, I do think so."

Sid is examining his bowl of soup with great care, and Roger is having trouble with his cigarette lighter. "But not them?" I ask Staunton, pointing at Roger and Sid.

"Them too," he says reluctantly. Sid looks amused now and Roger manages to light his cigarette.

"Is this your opinion too?" I ask Sid. "That I should see Dr. Calridge?"

"No. Just go away from here, and stay away."

Dorothea is bringing in a cart now and I wonder how much she has heard. I see her lined face and the pain in her eyes and I know that she has heard a lot of it, if not all. She catches my gaze and nods firmly. Then she serves us: sizzling ham steaks, french fried fruits, pineapple, apple rings, bananas, sweet potato soufflé.

It is after eleven when we are finished with dinner, and by now Sid is almost asleep. He says, "I've got to go. Will you set things up, Rog?"

"Sure. Damn shame that Doug pooped out on us. We need all the data we can get now."

"I can do the recording," I say.

At almost the same instant Staunton says, "I thought I was going to record both of you tonight."

Roger and Sid look embarrassed, and Sid says after a pause, "Dr. Staunton, if it's all the same with you, we'll let Janet do it."

"You really think I'm that biased? That I can't get objective data?"

Sid stands up and steadies himself with one hand on the table. "I'm too tired to be polite," he says, "and too tired to argue. So, yes, I think you're too biased to record the dreams. Roger, will you show Janet what we're doing?"

Roger stays with me until the eye-movement trace shows that Sid is having his first dream, and he watches as I call Sid on the phone and turn on the recorder, and then switch it off again. Then Roger goes to bed in the second room and I see that his electrodes are all working, and I am alone watching the two sets of moving lines. The mountains and valleys of life, I think, watching them peak and level out, and peak again.

There is no mistaking the start of REM sleep; the rapid eye movements cause a sharp change in the pattern of the peaks and valleys that is more nearly like a waking EEG than that of a sleeping person. I call Sid again, and listen to him describe climbing a mountain, only to slip back down again and again. Roger is on a raft that keeps getting caught up on a tide and brought back to a shore that he is desperately trying to escape.

The same dream, different only in details. Like the dreams I heard earlier on the tape recorder. Like my own.

At three in the morning Staunton joins me. I can tell that he hasn't been asleep, but I wish he had kept his insomnia to himself. He says, "You might need help, I won't bother you. I'll just sit over here and read." He looks haggard, and like Sid, he seems to have aged since coming to Somerset. I turn my attention to the EEGs again. Roger is dreaming.

"Peaceful now, watching a ball game from a great distance, very silent everywhere." I bite my lips as I listen to this strange voice that seems to have a different accent, a different intonation; flatter and slower, of course, but apart from that, it is a changed voice. It is the dream of contentment, wanting nothing,



needing nothing. This is the dream that my six people keep reporting to me, modified from person to person, but the same. Suddenly Roger's voice sharpens as he recalls the rest of the dream, and now there is a sense of urgency in his reporting. "And I had to get out of it, but couldn't move. I was frozen there, watching the game, afraid of something I couldn't see, but knew was right behind me. Couldn't move."

I glance at Staunton and he is staring at the moving pens. Roger has become silent once more, so I turn off the tape recorder and look also at the continuing record. Typical nightmare pattern.

Staunton yawns and I turn to him and say, "Why don't you try to get some sleep? Really, I'm fine. I slept almost all day, remember?"

He yawns again, then says, "If... if I seem to be dreaming, will you waken me?" I nod and he stretches out on the couch and is asleep almost instantly.

There is a coffee maker with strong coffee hot in it, and I pour myself a cup, and try to read the book that Roger provided, a spy thriller. I can't keep my mind on it. The hotel is no more noisy at night than my own house, but the noises are not the same, and I find myself listening to them, rustlings in the halls, distant doors opening and closing, the occasional squeak of the porch swing. I sit up straighter. A woman's laugh? Not at three fifteen in the morning, surely. I have more coffee and wander to the window. A light on in the Sayer house? I blink and when I look again, I know that it was my imagination. I remember how their baby used to keep night hours, and smile. The baby would be fifteen or sixteen now, at least. I used to baby-sit for them now and then, and the child never slept.

I return to my chair by the electroencephalograph and see that Sid has started a new dream. I reach for the phone, waiting for the peak to level off again, and slowly withdraw my hand. He is dreaming a long one this time. After five minutes I begin to feel uneasy, but still I wait. Roger has said to rouse the sleeper after ten minutes of dreaming, if he hasn't shown any sign of being through by then. I wait, and suddenly jerk awake and stab my finger at the phone button. He doesn't answer.

I forget to turn on the recorder, but rush into the next room to bring him out of this dream turned into nightmare, and when I touch his shoulder, I am in it too.

Somerset is gay and alive with playing children, and sun umbrellas everywhere. There are tables on the lawn of Sagamore House, and ladies in long white skirts moving among them, laughing happily. The Governor is due and Dorothea and Annie are bustling about, ordering the girls in black aprons this way and that, and everywhere there is laughter. A small boy approaches the punch bowl with a wriggling frog held tightly in one hand, and he is caught and his knickers are pulled down summarily and the sounds of hand on bottom are plainly heard, followed by wails. I am so busy, and someone keeps trying to pull me away and talk to me. I shake him off and run to the table where Father and Mother are sitting, and see to it that they have punch, and then swirl back to the kitchen where Dorothea is waiting for me to help her with the ice sculpture that is the centerpiece. It is a tall boy with curly hair rising up from a block of ice, the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, and I want to weep for him because in a few hours he will be gone. I slip on a piece of ice and fall, fall... fall...

I catch the wires attached to Sid and pull them loose, half pull him from the bed, and we end up in a heap. He holds me tightly for a long time, until we are both breathing normally again, and my shaking has stopped, and his too.

There is pale dawn light in the room. Enough to see that his dark hair is damp with sweat, and curly on

his forehead. He pushes it back and very gently moves me aside and disentangles himself from the wires.

"We have to get out of here," he says.

Staunton is sound asleep on the couch, breathing deeply but normally, and Roger is also sleeping. His graph shows that he has had nightmares several times.

We take our coffee into the room where Sid slept, and sit at the window drinking it, watching morning come to Somerset. I say, "They don't know, do they?"

"Of course not."

Poor Haddie appears at the far end of the street, walking toward Mr. Larson's store. He shuffles his feet as he moves, never lifting them more than an inch. I shudder and turn away.

"Isn't there something that we should do? Report this, or something?"

"Who would believe it? Staunton doesn't, and he has seen it over and over this week."

A door closes below us and I know Dorothea is up now, in the kitchen starting coffee. "I was in her dream, I think," I say.

I look down into my cup and think of the retirement villages all over the south, and again I shiver. "They seem so accepting, so at peace with themselves, just waiting for the end." I shake the last half inch of coffee back and forth. I ask, "Is that what happened with me? Did I not want to wake up?"

Sid nods. "I was taking the electrodes off your eyes when you snapped out of it, but yours wasn't a nightmare. It just wouldn't end. That's what frightened me, that it wasn't a nightmare. You didn't seem to be struggling against it at all. I wonder what brought you out of it this time."

I remember the gleaming ice sculpture, the boy with curly hair who will be gone so soon, and I know why I fought to get away. Someday I think probably I'll tell him, but not now, not so soon. The sun is high and the streets are bright now. I stand up. "I'm sorry that I forgot to turn on the tape recorder and ask you right away what the dream was. Do you remember it now?"

He hesitates only a moment and then shakes his head. Maybe someday he'll tell me, but not now, not so soon.

I leave him and find Dorothea waiting for me in the parlor. She draws me inside and shuts the door and takes a deep breath. "Janet, I am telling you that you must not bring your father back here to stay. It would be the worst possible thing for you to do."

I can't speak for a moment, but I hug her, and try not to see her etched face and the white hair, but to see her as she was when she was still in long skirts, with pretty pink cheeks and sparkling eyes. I can't manage it. "I know," I say finally. "I know."

Walking home again, hot in the sunlight, listening to the rustlings of Somerset, imagining the unseen life that flits here and there out of my line of vision, I wonder if memories can become tangible, live a life of their own. I will pack, I think, and later in the day drive back up the mountain, back to the city, but not back to my job. Not back to administering death, even temporary death. Perhaps I shall go into

psychiatry, or research psychology. As I begin to pack, my house stirs with movement.

The End