



JAMES GILL

ROCK OF KNOWLEDGE

Ray Stinson had been on the backhoe for three hours, tearing out a ruined sidewalk for the city of Martin so that new cement could be poured along the old crumbling storefronts, all of it paid for with a grant from the state to restore small-town main-street economies, when he hit something that strained the hydraulics and lifted the machine off its outriggers. He pulled the hoe in and idled the engine, then climbed down to find the trouble, and there among the broken slabs of concrete and damp earth, untouched by sunlight for decades, was the Rock of Knowledge.

People say that in August of 1945, giddy with the news of VJ Day, Herschel Evans stood on the old well in front of Faye's Café and, during the course of a single night, read an entire set of encyclopedias, and after that the well was known as the Rock of Knowledge. For the next twenty-four years it was the central landmark in town, a place where young people sat of the evening, until a generation later, when it was removed in the fall of 1969. It was close to Halloween, and a group of guys sat in front of Faye's with their new big-engined musclecars parked side by side, most paid for with the last of their military pay, the only reward given to them for surviving Vietnam, and Rob Mundy, who was just home from his second tour as a lurp, had brought a straw-stuffed dummy that his parents had set on their porch for decoration. Around one in the morning, a single car came down the highway from the west, and Rob jumped out into the middle of the street wielding his K-bar high above his head, smiled into the oncoming headlights, and plunged the blade, over and over, into the dummy's body, while straw drifted in the air around him like snowflakes. The car swerved up onto the sidewalk and rammed headlong into the Rock of Knowledge, killing both passengers, an old man and woman who'd been visiting rela-



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tives in St. Louis. The next day, after the wrecked car had been towed to the salvage yard on the south edge of town, the top of the well was ripped from the ground and smoothed over with the very sidewalk that Ray Stinson had just torn out.

The well had been filled with cement and sand and dirt, running fifty feet straight down beneath the streets of Matin, and Ray, who had been two years old when it was capped and had no actual memory of the Rock except from tales that his dad and Uncle Wiley told when he was a kid, dug around the stone with his foot until the dirt was pushed away and the edges were clearly defined, as if it were some ancient monolith uncovered by archaeologists.

It was nearing the lunch hour, and Ray went to climb into the cab of the backhoe and drive to the Street Department equipment barn to tell the superintendent what he'd found, but the mud had caked around the soles of his boots, and when he put his weight on the steel foot rung, the mud caused him to slip and fall face first against the machine. White streaks filled his vision, and he felt the smooth flow of blood running across his face. He never went completely to the ground, only to one knee, and there regained his composure. He used the tail of his T-shirt to wipe his face and found a fairly clean shop towel in the backhoe to use as a compress.

At the equipment barn, he walked into the superintendent's office, still holding the bloodstained towel to his head, to find Dave Easter sitting at his desk, filling out paperwork.

Easter looked up at Ray and said, "What happened to you?"

"I was tearing out that sidewalk on Market and found the Rock of Knowledge." Ray could feel the dried blood crack above his eyebrows as he spoke.

"Looks like you found it with your head."

"It's a historical monument to this town," Ray said.

Easter flipped one of the papers on his desk. "You're due for vacation next week." He nodded toward Ray's bloodstained head. "Why don't you start tomorrow."

"Will you tell the mayor about it?" Ray asked. "Maybe mention putting up a historical marker or something?"

"Go home." Easter nodded again to the cut on Ray's head, which had grown dark with clotted blood, and wondered when workman's comp would enter the conversation.



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Ray stood imagining his work site becoming an excavation, the marker being erected, a brass plaque proclaiming the Rock of Knowledge. “Don’t start anything without me,” he said.

So Ray Stinson left the Street Department equipment barn and drove to his house. His head began to hurt now, and he reached up gingerly with one hand to feel the gash beneath his blood-soaked hair. When he pulled into his driveway, he expected to see his wife’s car there, home for lunch from the high school where she taught chorus and general music, but instead he saw another car, a four-door compact that belonged to Steve Aster, a history teacher.

Ray had been married to Janie for five years and they had no children. She had been pregnant once not long after their wedding but had miscarried. Within two years, endometriosis had eaten away her insides, and she had a hysterectomy at twenty-six. After that, Ray and Janie seemed happy enough—went out to eat most week nights, went shopping on weekends, took a two-week vacation every summer to some place they couldn’t have dreamed of if they’d had kids: Cancun, Hawaii, Scotland—but the fact was that Ray never truly acknowledged what had happened to Janie. And it wasn’t because he didn’t love her, but because there was no way he could begin to understand, so instead of making an effort and failing, he simply remained silent and tried to go on like everything was fine.

She was seven years younger than Ray, and they had met during her first year teaching after college, at the high school senior prom, which she’d been urged by veteran teachers to chaperone as a way of ensuring tenure, mostly because they didn’t want to get stuck doing it themselves. Ray had gone uptown to watch his niece get announced in a teal-green dress beside a boy who would get her pregnant later that night, then marry and divorce her within the year. After the couples had gone into the dance, Ray turned to leave, and Janie, who was standing too close behind him, looking down at a scuff on the brand-new pair of heels she’d bought for the event, was knocked to the ground. He apologized and took her hands to pull her up, and she smiled in humiliation, and they introduced themselves. And because Ray felt so bad, he asked if he could buy her dinner, and because she was too embarrassed to say no, she went.





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Ray climbed out of his truck and walked toward the house, running through scenarios of what he would find inside and building himself up to knock the shit out of Aster as soon as he saw his face. But when Ray opened the front door and stepped heavily through the living room, he saw Janie and Steve Aster sitting at the kitchen table eating turkey sandwiches.

Ray must have looked a sight coming into the room, his head stained with the dark crust of dried blood, wild-eyed and looking for a fight, because when Janie and Steve saw him they both rose from their chairs.

“Ray?” Janie said. “Are you okay?”

He stood for a moment, his focus darting between the two of them, looking for any sign of foul play. His breathing slowed.

“Let me get you a bandage.” Janie smiled sweetly, but with hesitation. “Did you get hurt at work?” she asked, walking past him to the bathroom.

“Slipped off the backhoe,” Ray said. He never took his eyes from Steve Aster, who smiled and nodded, then sat back at the table to finish his lunch. Ray could hear Janie shuffling around in the bathroom closet, then she appeared with gauze and tape and peroxide. She started to clean his head with cotton balls soaked in the peroxide just as he started to ask her why Steve Aster was in his kitchen eating, but the sting made him wince for a second, and Janie answered before he could ask.

“Steve and I were in the teachers’ lounge this morning, drinking coffee before class, when he realized he’d forgotten his wallet and couldn’t buy lunch for himself, so I told him that we could just swing by here and grab something.”

Then Steve spoke, still sitting at the table: “She didn’t have to do it.” He held the last bite of his sandwich up between his finger and thumb. “But I sure do appreciate it.”

Janie finished dressing Ray’s wound and sat back down to eat. Ray watched her for a while, then said, “I found the Rock of Knowledge today.”

Janie stopped chewing for a moment. Though she hadn’t grown up in Matin County, Ray had told her stories, the same as he had been told, about the Rock of Knowledge and its place in the town’s history. She smiled, working her jaw a few times before swallowing, and said, “You’re kidding.”



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“Hit it tearing out the sidewalk up on Market.”

“I thought it was removed back in the sixties.”

“Just the top.”

“I guess I never thought about the rest still being there underneath everything.”

Janie stood and took her and Steve’s plates to the kitchen, and Steve stood up, brushing the front of his khaki pants free of crumbs. She came back into the room, her purse slung over her shoulder, and stopped in front of a mirror hanging on the wall of the dining room to straighten the gig of her skirt and reapply lipstick. Then she turned to Ray. “Well, we’ve got to go. They only give us a half hour, you know.”

She stepped toward the hallway, and Steve fell in behind her. “See you around, Ray,” he said, and cupped his palm around Janie’s elbow, guiding her as they walked.

Ray stood in the dining room listening to their steps on the wood floor, the strain of the front door opening and shutting again, then the quiet of the house. After they had pulled away, he went into the bathroom and sat on the toilet. Across from him, streaks of black stained the Sheetrock abutting the tub, and the wall was damp and spongy to the touch. “Son of a bitch,” he said. “She’s really letting things go.” He was speaking of course about Janie, and the fact that in the first years of their marriage, she never failed to tell him about any little problem in the house: slow drains, burnt-out lightbulbs, strange smells coming from the utility room. Now it seemed that the tub had been leaking for quite some time without any mention of it, and while Ray could have noticed it as easily as Janie, the fact that she hadn’t noticed first got Ray’s attention.

That night, Ray showed Janie the problem in the bathroom and told her that he’d taken his vacation time early so he could start working on the house first thing in the morning. Unlike previous years, they had decided not to take a trip that summer; instead, Janie had gone to visit her mother in Urbana for two weeks right after school let out, and Ray worked through, planning on taking his vacation time in the fall when the weather would be cooler and he could maybe get out and do some fishing.

So the next morning, after Janie had left for work, Ray started digging at the waterlogged Sheetrock with a claw hammer. He figured it would only be a small place around the





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edge of the tub, but as he dug, he saw that the damage had spread through the wall, soaked into the studs, and ruined the insulation. By the time he finally hit something solid and untouched by the leak, he'd practically taken out one side of the bathroom. The floor was covered with ruined drywall and rotten wood, and Ray studied the situation for a moment before noticing a magazine hanging in the insulation between two wall studs. He picked it up, and though its cover was faded and brittle from the water, he could clearly make out the 1958 publication date and the image of a smiling naked woman. The pages were stuck together, but he was able to open it to the middle without tearing it, and there in black and white were women playing badminton in a fenced-in backyard without a stitch of clothing on. He grinned, and though these women were softer, more natural in their curves than the female ideals of current media, he thought them beautiful.

It was the last thing he'd figured on finding behind the water-soaked wall, and he tried to put together how it could have gotten there—maybe a worker from some past bathroom repair reading on his lunch break and thinking it would be a good joke to leave it behind, as if it were a cultural time capsule. Then, looking up between the studs, Ray noticed a gap in the ceiling that led to the attic, half of which was finished with carpet and paneling, the other still bare-raftered storage space, and so he went upstairs to investigate. There the band of yellow light from the bathroom shone through the gap, and his hypothesis immediately shifted from a bathroom worker to a young teenage boy, sitting in the quiet dark of the attic with a flashlight while his parents slept below, flipping the pages, awestruck by the images that flashed by—flesh and smiles and bliss—and in a nervous reaction to a sound, a footfall on the stairs perhaps, he shoved the magazine between the gap with the hope of coming back to it when the coast was clear, losing the treasure in the depths of the bathroom wall forever.

While Ray sat crouched in the attic thinking all this, his neighbor, Aileen Bond, walked through her backyard picking up fallen limbs, and when she passed in view of the upstairs window, he hurried downstairs and out the back door to the fence that separated their yards and called out to her. It





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took a few times—Mrs. Bond was eighty-three and hard of hearing, which seemed to be her only ailment since she still smoked a half-pack of Pall Malls every day without apparent consequence—but soon she came over.

“Did you know the people who lived here in the fifties?” Ray asked. “Maybe into the early sixties?”

Mrs. Bond slanted her mouth to one side and narrowed her eyes in a way that let him know that he’d asked a stupid question. But she answered anyway. “The Milazzos. They lived here for a little over ten years. Had a big family. Catholic, you know. That’s why your attic is finished halfway. They had ten. Lined beds up side by side in that attic, dormitory style.”

Ray tried to imagine ten kids living in his small house—thirteen hundred square feet in all—and while he could picture the sleeping arrangements, he couldn’t see where they all ate, much less how they survived with only one bathroom.

“Anyway,” Mrs. Bond said, “they moved not long after the mother—Beatrice Stevens was her name before she married the man—tried to kill herself. All she’d done for practically her whole adult life was be pregnant.” She held a finger up and pointed at Ray. “A man wouldn’t have made it half as long before he went crazy.” Then she pulled a cigarette from her coat pocket and lit up. “Besides,” she said after a long drag, “you should ask your Uncle Wiley Tate about it. I seem to recall his car parked around the corner here an awful lot the summer Beatrice got pregnant the first time.” By the end of her sentence, small puffs of smoke drifted from her nose and mouth even though she had never exhaled.

Ray stood and talked to her a while longer about planting iris bulbs and the dusk-to-dawn light that was grown over with mulberry branches near the alley, and then she went inside. But the story Mrs. Bond had told about Beatrice Milazzo, this woman who had once lived in his house and felt enough despair to try to end her life there, stuck with him, and Ray sat on his back steps with an unlit cigarette hanging from his lips, believing now he was connected with this woman, even though in a small town most people’s pasts are interlinked more than they’d like to know.

It was nearing lunch, and he half expected Janie to show up with Steve Aster, but when she didn’t, Ray decided he



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would go to the school and check up on her. He went to the teachers' lounge first, imagining he would find them there, planning some rendezvous for after the basketball game she had volunteered to work that evening, but there was only a teacher's aide, sitting alone, eating a microwave dinner and reading a worn paperback romance, who said she thought Janie had gone uptown to eat with some of the other teachers.

Ray walked back into the hall and found himself scanning the large picture frames full of faces above the rows of metal lockers, noting the class years as he went, and soon found his own picture. He hadn't changed all that much since 1985: his face was fuller now, though he was still tall and lanky, his hair cut short instead of the mullet he had worn in the faded picture—top parted carefully down the middle and feathered to perfection while the back hung almost to his shoulders. Ray laughed to himself and thought of Janie's high school picture that she kept in the cedar chest at the foot of their bed, still in the frame her mother had kept it in when she lived at home; it hadn't been so long ago for her, and now only her eyes showed any real change.

He walked further down the hall, skipping the early eighties and the seventies altogether, slowing through the sixties, to stop in front of 1963, where his mother and father sat with youthful smiles, looking down on him. He studied their faces and tried to remember a time when they had looked that way, and though he couldn't, he didn't picture them in his mind as they were now either, the lined skin, gray hair, the tired look in their eyes. He stepped down, watching the photos carefully for Beatrice's name, and soon he found it in 1957; she had a thin pale neck and short brown hair cut with straight bangs like Audrey Hepburn, girlish and beautiful, but Ray focused on the name written below—*Beatrice Milazzo*.

At seventeen, in her last year of high school, she had married Jake Milazzo, who was two years older, and as Ray studied her face again, this difference was apparent next to the other girls hanging around her—her eyes dark and cutting, mouth closed in a slight smile, the look that cannot be defined except to say that when she stepped from her innocence into the unforgiving world, she wore it like a mask. Ray felt





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his chest drop with longing, as if he'd fallen in love with this girl he was unable to be with, and at that moment he could think of no other way to find out more about her, until he recognized his uncle Wiley Tate, smiling under his flattop, beside Beatrice Milazzo.

Wiley lived in the country in a huge farmhouse that was terribly run-down on the exterior. The original clapboard had been torn away and particleboard had been decked in its place, and the roof was bowed and wavy with too many layers of asphalt shingles. But Wiley had been working on the place for years, though no one would have known it unless they went through the front door—tongue-and-groove cherry flooring, high ceilings, fresh Sheetrock walls painted in varied colors, crown molding, stainless steel kitchen appliances, on and on in every room. He had done it all without credit, saving every year to do a little more, and by the end of the coming summer, vinyl siding and a new roof would go on, and the house would appraise well above one hundred thousand dollars. Wiley had paid only twenty.

Ray found him sitting in a sunroom built where the back porch had been, sipping a bourbon and water and smoking a cigarette.

“Wife kick you out of the house?” Wiley said when Ray walked into the room.

“I’m on vacation.”

“Looks it.”

They sat for a while, making small talk about the house.

“So,” Wiley finally said, “what do you need?”

Ray thought about trying to cover the nature of his visit, but he knew Wiley would see through it. “Well, I wanted to ask you about Beatrice Milazzo.”

Wiley sat up in his chair and crushed his smoke into an ashtray.

Ray said, “She used to live in my house.”

“That she did,” Wiley said, looking out the tall windows that lined the west wall of the room. “That she did.” Then he told Ray what he knew of the girl:

About her beauty and how she carried that beauty—most girls wore their righteous virtues like armor, innocent and helpless, and back then, most guys wanted that—but Beatrice never did. She was a woman amongst girls. Then, in the spring





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of her last year of school, she married Milazzo out of the blue. They had gone together since the fall, nothing more serious than meeting at basketball games or sitting together at Faye's over hamburgers, and no one suspected marriage, at least not until after she graduated high school. At first everyone thought she was pregnant, but the months passed, and Beatrice did not get sick and her stomach did not swell. Some said she miscarried, but there was never any baby, at least not in those early years, that motivated their marriage. Instead, it was her father's hope of a business partnership with the Milazzo Construction Company; he was near bankruptcy with his car lot and figured he could trade his only daughter for a low-interest loan from her in-laws. The couple moved into the house where Ray now lived, and Beatrice's father defaulted on the loan four years later and went broke.

When a baby didn't appear nine months after the wedding, most thought that it would be anytime, what with Milazzo being Catholic, but on their honeymoon, spent at a motor lodge in Collinsville, outside St. Louis, he told her there was no way he would have kids with her until he made the decision to do so—it had nothing to do with what Beatrice wanted. Still, he could have continued to make love to her—after all, there were ways to safeguard against pregnancy, even for a Catholic in the late fifties, but his father had taught him that a man should only have sex with the woman he's married to with the intent of conceiving a child, that pleasure could be found in other places. So after the wedding, Milazzo drove every evening with his work crew to the village of Colp to visit Ma Hatchett's, one of the few whorehouses still open in Southern Illinois, where on any given night, a person would find town aldermen and judges and druggists along with coal miners and truck drivers and day laborers, all of them there to drink cheap booze poured by Ma Hatchett herself, the only white woman on the premises, then slip into one of the back rooms, no bigger than horse stalls, to satisfy what lust was left in them.

The one freedom Milazzo allowed Beatrice was a job waiting tables at Faye's. It was there that Wiley truly came to know her, though he had known her his whole life. Most nights in the summer, after getting off work from the lumberyard, he'd go uptown to sit on the Rock of Knowledge and





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drink with the others, and about seven o'clock, when the sun was still well up, Beatrice would walk out to where they sat and ask for a cigarette. All the boys would fall all over themselves trying to get her lit up, and she'd stay for a while, leaning against the Rock, smoke curling out of her nostrils, while they all joked and laughed around her, then she'd wave and head down the street toward her house. Soon, the embarrassment left the young men when she'd walk slowly from the café, the white of her shirt thin enough to show the faint color of her skin, the outline of her bra. Then one day, in the heat of middle July, she walked through the door of Faye's with half the buttons on her shirt undone and sat next to Wiley, her arms draped around his neck with her cigarette burning near his cheek, and he didn't argue with her, but saw that while she smiled and laughed as she always had, her eyes brimmed with pain. That night she kissed all of the boys sitting there goodnight, and after she left, all agreed that no one would speak a word about it, out of respect for her marriage and out of fear of Milazzo. The next night she did the same, but instead of walking away down the dark sidewalk to go home, she asked Wiley for a ride. He'd just bought a '51 Chevy, pale yellow with a black top, and he escorted her to the passenger's side and opened the door, while the guys on the Rock of Knowledge goofed and whistled, and by the time he slid behind the wheel, she was sitting in the middle of the bench seat with her knees pulled up, flesh-colored garter straps showing below the hem of her skirt.

Wiley asked if her old man was home, and she told him without emotion that he was at Ma Hatchett's and wouldn't be home till late. Still, he parked his car in the alley a block away and walked her to the back door of the house, where, once inside, they fell upon each other in a tangle of arms and legs and discarded clothes.

It happened the same every night afterward: Wiley would drive her home from Faye's, they'd stay in bed together until eight or eight-thirty, then he'd leave before Milazzo came home half drunk from the whorehouse.

As Wiley sat telling all this to Ray, he smiled, shaking his head slightly back and forth, as if he'd forgotten all of it until now, then he rose from his chair and walked to the windows, his drink in one hand, and stood looking out into the fields





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that spread behind his house, full of corn and soybeans a week away from harvest. He emptied his bourbon and turned back to Ray.

“I guess you know how it all ended.”

“I know that she tried to kill herself after being pregnant for a decade.”

Wiley sucked the end of his tongue, then ground his teeth. “More or less.” He took a few steps toward Ray and then stopped. “It came to that because of me.”

It was late summer, and the ritual started no different than any other night since Wiley had been seeing Beatrice; he waited on the Rock of Knowledge with some other guys, looking at a nudie magazine someone had brought back from their trip to St. Louis for a military physical. When Beatrice came out, she walked over and snatched it away, and all the boys held their heads in shame, but Wiley just sat and laughed. She rolled the magazine into a tube and slid it beneath her arm, before climbing into Wiley’s Chevy. Later, at her house, they lay in bed flipping through the pages, reading stories about key parties and secretaries performing oral sex on their bosses in elevators and bored housewives tipping repairmen with more than a glass of lemonade; they were so riled up after that, they nearly tore each other apart trying to make love. But before either of them realized any real pleasure, the long coiled spring on the front storm door strained as it came open.

They jumped from the bed, and Wiley figured he’d have to fight his way out of the house and started pulling on his clothes, not wanting to do it buck naked, but Beatrice was calm, her face the same as it was when she took Wiley’s arm in front of Faye’s for the first time.

By the time Wiley was dressed, he was surprised that Milazzo hadn’t barged into the bedroom, demanding to know what the hell he was doing there. But he never did. Not until Wiley was gone. Maybe he was too drunk to make his way through the darkened house very quickly, or maybe he hadn’t heard them at all, but what Wiley believed, after all the years of thinking about that night, was that Milazzo was waiting quietly in the front room, hoping that whoever was in the bedroom with his wife would have a chance to get away, because in the end, Milazzo was the kind of man who only started fights that he knew he could win, and Beatrice knew this even then.



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She motioned to the closet, and there in the ceiling was a trapdoor leading to the attic. In a few years, when children started filling up the small house, a stairwell would be built, the one Ray had climbed to stare down into the gap between the rafters above his bathroom, but back then the attic was unfinished, musty, and bare. Wiley stood on a small metal-framed chair, where Beatrice sat every morning to put on her makeup at a small mirrored dressing table, and worked his way above the hanging clothes into the dark square hole. Before he slid the trapdoor back into place, Beatrice handed up the magazine and nodded to him with a slight smile, a gesture that Wiley remembered as being a look of defeat, the last moment of freedom she ever knew. He squatted in the darkness, listening as Milazzo finally came into the bedroom and found Beatrice, still naked, and he immediately began asking where the man was that she'd been with, and she said quietly that she'd just undressed to take a bath. The dull pop of Milazzo's hand coming across Beatrice's face made Wiley's jaw clench, and a long silence followed. The bedsprings shifted, as if someone had lain down, then again and again, growing into a steady rhythm punctuated by Milazzo's grunts and breathing, and Wiley sat hearing everything, wanting to climb back through the small hole to kill Milazzo, but he didn't. Instead, he stuffed the magazine into the gap above the bathroom, slid out of the attic window and jumped fifteen feet to the ground, twisting his ankle on landing, and hobbled up the alley to his car.

Within the year, Beatrice became pregnant for the first time, and Milazzo kept her that way until she finally broke down ten years later and cut her wrists in the bathtub. After that, they moved, and he left her and took the kids to his mother's, and Beatrice disappeared from all knowledge of anyone living in Matin County.

After he finished the story, Wiley didn't look at his nephew but at the smooth, glossy surface of the plank floor. Ray stayed for a little while longer, and they spoke of more benign things—weather and crop outlooks and the city's plans for the new main street, and as Ray was leaving, he told Wiley about the Rock of Knowledge. "I found it," he said, "the whole bottom of it still there beneath the sidewalk."

"Well," Wiley said. "Where else would it be?"

Ray didn't respond right away. He'd expected Wiley to be





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excited and nostalgic, but Wiley didn't even grin. "I don't know," Ray said. "Just seemed like everyone had forgotten it was there."

"Just because people don't talk about it," Wiley said, "doesn't mean it isn't there all along."

Ray drove back to his house trying to imagine all that Wiley had told him taking place in the very rooms he and Janie moved through every day. And he thought about how he'd driven by that house as a young man, long after the Milazzos had gone, without the faintest idea he might live there in the future with a woman from a town he'd never been to, or that it would be the place where they would lose a baby. And while Janie knew all too well the emptiness of it all—first with the miscarriage, then with the removal of the womb that had been unable to hold that baby—Ray had only lost the idea of the child, for he had never seen it or felt it, as if maybe it had all been dreamed, the same way he felt after hearing the story of Beatrice Milazzo.

When Janie got home from work, Ray was sitting on the couch in the front room, the mess from his morning's excavation spilled out into the hallway, drywall fragments and dust tracked all over the house. He had been sitting there thinking about taking her out for dinner, maybe trying to talk about why they'd grown distant, why Steve Aster had been eating lunch in their house the day before, but when she saw the mess, she blew up, stormed into their bedroom, and slammed the door. Ray tried to talk to her through the hollow wood, but there was no answer. She came out after a while, wearing a pair of black jeans and a tight black sweater.

"I have to get to the school," she said.

Ray tried to stay calm. "Do you know when you'll be back?"

She stopped in the hallway. "When I get back." Then her face softened for a brief moment, and Ray thought things may ease up to where they could talk. He reached out to touch her arm, but she stepped backward into the pile of broken Sheetrock and nearly fell.

"Goddammit," she said. "This house is such a mess I can't even find myself."

With that she went out the front door, slamming it so that it shook the floor beneath Ray's feet. She spun her car's wheels in the gravel of the driveway and pulled away quickly, while





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Ray stood alone, still thinking about how well he'd come to understand Beatrice Milazzo but had pushed away the woman he'd been married to for the last five years without knowing the reason.

He kicked his boot through the rubbish in the hallway and stared into the bathroom at the stripped wall; the day before everything had seemed fine, structurally sound, but it had been rotting around them as they went on with daily life, unaware.

Ray went outside and brought in a large rubber garbage can and began filling it with all the ruined Sheetrock and rotted wood that he'd torn from the wall. He figured Janie would find Steve Aster and wondered what kind of man stayed at home and cleaned while his wife went off to have an affair, but still he kept working, sweeping and mopping and throwing out the mess, until the house looked as it had the day before, except for the exposed bathroom wall.

Afterward, Ray waited quietly in the attic, lying flat on his back, looking up at eggshell-colored paneling, and after a while Janie did come home. Her steps were quiet on the concrete of the porch and she opened the door slowly. He didn't rush downstairs to meet her with questions, but let her call out to him from the front of the house. He appeared in the hallway and could tell she'd been crying.

"I got all that mess cleaned up," he said.

She nodded. "Looks fine."

"I'll have to watch things with the walls torn apart for a while, and once I figure out where the leak is, I can fix it and hang new Sheetrock."

She slid the strap of her purse over the coatrack and stepped toward him. "Look," she said.

"There's nothing to say right now." He smiled slightly and cupped her forearm with his right hand.

"Sometimes," she said, "I just feel so alone." The corners of her eyes creased, but no tears fell. "Like I'm not sure what the point of me is."

They stood like that for a moment, not speaking, and then all the things that could have been said drifted from their thoughts, and they found themselves standing between the same walls where they had known happiness at one time, and for now, that was enough.

Janie went to bed, and Ray made a point to tuck her in but





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not to climb in beside her. After she was asleep, he left the house to walk through the quiet, empty streets of Matin, not to think, but only to listen to the autumn air unhinge leaves from their stems and rustle them as they fell, and before long he walked the cracked sidewalk that ran along the storefronts of Market Street. Blocks away, he could see the orange construction fence around the area where he'd dug up the Rock of Knowledge the day before, and he wondered for a moment if Dave Easter had told the mayor his idea of creating a monument. But as Ray came closer, he saw that the sidewalk had been poured with new concrete and that the Rock of Knowledge was covered over, the cement pale and smooth in the streetlight, as if all that lay beneath it were the dirt that had been there since the earth had come into being.