

**THE  
VIOLET QUILL  
READER**

**THE EMERGENCE OF GAY WRITING  
AFTER STONEWALL**

**EDITED BY  
DAVID BERGMAN**



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middle, like a keel, that passed through the center of the hearth and out the bay window into the heart of the sea with the sudden precision of the speed of light. The sea, visible from every room, was in some rooms a wall; in others a picture on the wall. From the upper windows it seemed you were on a riverboat, and in winter, with the furnace, as if the whole place were under way, moving through a delta; approximately. From the long deck over the porch, leaning into the wind, he could see the sharp edge of the planet he was on.

Mark was ill, dying perhaps. He stood at the window downstairs—the window toward the pond, as opposed to the one toward the ocean, or toward the lighthouse. Its view contained a wedge of sea on the right, high after a storm and figuratively rushing across a bight of beach as if to flood the house. A man with a metal detector was weaving an invisible herringbone pattern across the sand, feathering back and forth along the beach, now and then scooping up small amounts of sand with a long-armed basket. Within the ranging intimacy of his binoculars Mark could almost hear the electronic ping of the metal detector as the man suddenly stopped.

This small drama: the man drops to a crouch. After two or three diggings in the sand, the little metal scoop proves inadequate. Only the human hand will do. The man is young, distantly handsome. Through his binoculars Mark can see the cold, downlike glow on his cheek. Fingers touch something that then is held up. It glints. Again the young man takes up the scoop and detector, glances for an instant up at the house, perhaps sees Mark in the window, and resumes the inferred pattern along the beach.

Mark's heart is thumping. What had he seen? Someone searching for valuables on the beach. His beach. Taking a deep breath he calmed himself. His sister Vita, had she been present, would have an explanation. An obvious metaphor, she would say, considering his illness, but useful. Mark might feel that much of his life lay buried on the beach—to be found and pocketed indifferently. This could be it, he thought. Or was it that the man with the metal detector was handsome? Perhaps Mark, being alone and frightened, merely wanted company—to talk—but wanted it as a pale vestige, in all its dimmer configurations, of desire.

Like the Birds before her, Mark's mother had died upstairs, eclipsing those two earlier, less-felt deaths, and claiming the house at last and utterly from its builders. Their two transparent shades faded further

## From Second Son



Robert Ferro

*Following is the opening chapter of Second Son (1988), published the year Robert Ferro died. This section of the novel is highly autobiographical. The Ferro family owned the beach house, which plays a principal role in The Family of Max Desir, and was known to Robert's friends as Gaywyck. Andrew Holleran's memorial to Ferro and Grumley (later in this book) discusses the importance of that house for Robert. After Ferro's mother's death, the family considered selling the property, and Robert stubbornly fought the decision. The house is still in the possession of the Ferro family.*

After some time he realized the house was speaking to whoever might be listening: this was Mark. He heard it in the wind through the porch, in the boom at the end when a door slammed, in the whine of the furnace when first engaged; sounds that held images the house reminded him not to forget, images of moments fractured in air as when, turning at the banister at the top of the stairs, he saw his young niece tilt her head to listen to her vanity and adjust a gypsy earring—a languorous, emblematic moment of her magic childhood, in an older safer world. The house made this possible. He could see it still in the air.

Images also, besides his family, of the two strangers who long ago had built the house and lived in it and died upstairs: the Birds. Captain Bird, it appeared. The childless Birds had never struck such chords, while the numerous Valerians, occupying every room, adding others, had changed the house into something alive and hovering, a huge pet that loved them, vitally interested in the goings-on. Captain Bird however had seen to it that everything about the place was nautically and astronomically sound. It faced exactly east, on a line drawn up the

and Mrs. Valerian's presence took over, as had been her intention. Her dying one year before, from a series of hemorrhagic strokes, had overlapped in an ironic but intentional way with an extensive restoration of the house—two processes sharing themes and schedules along similar though reversed lines: an Egyptian way of death, in which a place for the abiding comfort of the spirit is prepared. Mrs. Valerian had theorized that the house would bind its occupants—her family—to her after she was gone. She had concluded that she herself would also be bound, an intention to be evoked with her name and memory by whoever entered the house.

Restoration had required a lot of money, thousands every week for months. This was regarded as a medical expense by Mr. Valerian, who on the surface appeared to be rich, and who on the surface was, and he willingly gave whatever was needed because doing so assuaged his helplessness and grief. You could do nothing about a stroke, but the roof could be changed, and even the roof-line. On the ocean side windows could be cut to improve the views and lighten the interiors, with the immediate effect of liberation, as if something trapped inside the house, the Birds themselves, was at last released. Ten rooms of curtains, a dozen new rugs, every stick of furniture restored—the house emptied into a huge van and hauled to a penitentiary in Pennsylvania for refinishing. This had been arranged by Mr. Valerian, a person not averse to pursuing a bargain across state lines. Mark had asked if this meant their furniture would be stripped by convicts with guns held at their backs—the sort of question his father found surprising. Outside, the garden was reconsidered, with spaces around the house pushed back so that new sweeps of lawn were created where sea rose and masses of creeper and honeysuckle had stolen up over the years nearly to the porch. A different curve was cut for the drive, as if Margaret Valerian, in her imagination, had flown up above the house and looked down to select the ideal line. These improvements went on all at once with a number of different crews and loud machines. After the broad measures came the smaller, meaningful ones—with outside the new garden, a dozen trees, a fence—all corresponding to the different phases of Mrs. Valerian's decline, in which every day some new deficiency appeared or matured. As she deteriorated she rested her ruined mind on the new stability of the house, its lovely air of completion and bounty. Each day she went in a wheelchair room to room to see everything in its place, fixed by rules of association and design. Beyond regular use of the wheelchair, she lay propped on pillows, re-

garding the sea through the big window in her room. On the best and dwindling days Mark read to her from a pile of cookbooks—recipes like short plotted stories, with twists, nuance, surprises and uncertain endings, success by no means assured. To these details she listened closely, as to a chronicle of mysterious events. And when finally she died, it was with everyone around her, after a long and decorous farewell commensurate with the many months of the other sort of preparation. Light played over her face. Mark kissed her cheek and felt her spirit swirl into an angle of the ceiling, like perfume seeping through the house, a faintness of scent relative to its distance from her room—all of it lingering behind as planned.

He could not then agree, precipitously, to a plan to sell the house. Odd that all her labors and intentions, her clearly expressed wishes, should now be used against her. For no one could bear the accomplishment: that she permeated the place. For months everyone but Mark avoided it. And the upkeep, coupled with an obvious enhancement of the site, made its sale an ongoing temptation that grew. Why keep it when no one but Mark cared to use it? Someone had approached Mr. Valerian with a blank check, willing to pay anything, anything at all. Here would be life's financial truncation of the dilemma. To discuss the matter, and since Margaret had left the house in their names, Mr. Valerian invited the children to his house in a Philadelphia suburb.

None of them had been there in a year. Not a thing, not a stick, had been changed since the onset of Margaret's illness three years before. In his grief Mr. Valerian was reassured by the certainty of things as they were, like a blind person who has memorized the layout. In a state of only slightly diminished mourning, now ritualized, he relied on the illusion of permanence, of repetition and changelessness. The legs of chairs sat in invariable indentations in the thick rugs, so that if moved they could be put back exactly, with the precision of landmarks. They were landmarks. Everything in the house referred to something else—something absent.

The fact that it was their first gathering in this house since the funeral brought back all the same feelings, so that Mark at first sat in a daze in the huge den while Mr. Valerian outlined the situation.

"This came in the mail," he said, holding up the check. "Some people have too much money, and rocks in their head." He handed the check to his older son, George, who held it with both hands, a live

delicate thing, and shook his head in wonder. George handed it over to Vita, sitting on the couch beside Mark. Together they examined it for clues to such extravagant behavior.

George said, "We could get as much as a million dollars . . ."

"It's worth much more than that," Mark dropped in. He knew something about real estate since he had chosen to spend his time landscaping gardens professionally; with some success, since there were so many gardens, and people with so much money they mailed out blank checks to buy whatever caught their eye. Mark thought he overvalued the beach house because of its associations and his outright love for it; but its location directly on the sea, surrounded by empty buildable lots, the last in the area, had made the place more valuable than even he imagined. His younger sister, Tessa, came over and took the check from Vita. "Oh my god." She covered her mouth.

"So let's write in two million," her husband, Neil, said.

"Two million dollars?" Tessa exclaimed. "Are you kidding?"

"Four lots at five hundred thousand each," Neil said calmly. "Forget the house. They could bulldoze it and put up condominiums."

Mr. Valerian's eyes, and those of his son George, glittered. "Is it zoned for that?" George asked. And Mr. Valerian said Find out.

"What is this?" Mark demanded. "Aren't you all rushing things? I want you to know I will never agree to sell. You know Mom never would have . . . That house is neutral ground, for all of us. We're supposed to be together there."

"Mark." George turned to his brother from between the wings of a tall chair, the mate to one Mr. Valerian invariably occupied. "Two million dollars," he repeated slowly.

"I don't care. It's been . . . It's too soon. You just can't do it. Besides, it's worth more and more each year . . . If you're just thinking of the money . . ."

"I say sell it," his sister Vita declared suddenly, hers for various reasons the pivotal vote. Mark turned to her as if struck.

"But, Vita . . ."

She gave him a look she sometimes felt it necessary to give, a look of baleful seriousness that meant it was time to absorb something difficult but real, and which she felt would not go away on its own.

"But it can't be a question of money," he insisted. "It's too important for that. The house is the legacy, not the money . . . She wanted us to be there together," he repeated. "I know she did. You all know that." He looked around the room at each of them. "How can you

think of letting it go?" he demanded. "If she were here now she would slap your faces."

"Mark, come on . . ." Vita said.

"No. I won't agree. Ever." He got up and walked out.

After Mrs. Valerian's death, alone in the beach house, Mark had moved into her room and slept in her bed. This felt peculiar only on the first night. Margaret Valerian's room, with its large bay window on the ocean, was long and handsome, running the width of the house, with fine views up and down the coast. It was blue and white, with white taffeta curtains, Indian rugs, and white lacquer furniture. Through the line of windows the horizon stretched around like the true walls of the room, making it immense, bringing in the sea and sky with all its light. It was a room to wake up in. At sunrise the lemon, red, and orange colors of the sun revolved over the white curtains like flame, drifting down the wall as the sun rose, as in a stateroom on an enormous, slowly listing ship. Outside the sea slapped the beach resolutely, but he would be awakened by the clamorous light. Next to the blue room was a green room, and then a pink, no longer pink but referred to as such after so many years. The green room had been Mark's. Now he slept in the blue.

He felt that nothing was more important to him than this house, and since no one else stood in this relation to it they would not have understood the degree to which, day by day, the obsession grew. He saw himself as its custodian and protector, its Mrs. Danvers, the connection coming through the blue room, " . . . the loveliest room in the house, the loveliest room you've ever seen." Like Mrs. Danvers he was proud to show it to anyone who called—though callers were not automatically interested—alluding in a fond crazy gaze over objects and views to a special, mysterious, nostalgic association with the past, never specified. Mrs. Warden, a neighbor passing by, had been brought into it on a bright sunny morning, when all the white and blue seemed edible, and had said excitedly that if this were her room she would never leave it. Exactly, Mark thought; a woman skilled in noisemaking. And in fact his mother had never left. Sometimes it seemed he might suddenly turn and catch a wispy glimpse.

But the others did not love the house in these terms; why should he so care? Its beauty, no doubt; its canopic aspects regarding his mother, and now, being ill, regarding him; the memory of thirty years there together. This, while enough, overwhelmingly enough for Mark, was

insufficient to them, for whom it remained a pretty house by the sea with associations. They might say to him and to all this emotion: why and so what? Were it not for Mark, things would be different—simply the profit, really, instead of the expense and upkeep. He had no firm answer for himself or them, for whom beauty and recollection, like danger, glamour, greed, hunger—everything but disappointment and desire—were concepts belonging to other people. In fact, he thought, they might not see themselves for what they were, since what Mark saw and what they saw were not the same—when they should have been. House and mother had belonged to all. All had been children here; he and Tessa practically the same age, Vita just three years older, only George very grown at fifteen.

They had peered in at the misted, dusty windows. To one side Mark saw the dead startled Birds withdraw backwards through a doorway. His father signaled disapproval by keeping his hands in his pockets. Furniture lay in the middle of the vast room stacked like expensive fuel before the bulky fieldstone fireplace. Mark stood and turned toward the sea, which tilted over him at a slant like a picture, the line of the horizon that day blurring higher into the sky than might seem normal—it was all so important. "Only on the ocean," Mrs. Valerian had instructed the realtor. Downstairs the ancient furnace spread itself across the cellar like the roots of a banyan tree, funneling huge fat limbs along the ceiling and up through the house. Mr. Valerian shook his head, Margaret shuddered. She wanted to see the bedrooms.

He was ten, Tessa nine, the first summer, living like the Birds. Mr. Valerian was not yet so rich and they camped out at first. It was necessary to replace many of the windows right away. They were fake and did not open. Margaret Valerian repeated this unbelievably. How could they be fake? The cost of thirty windows was thus added to the mortgage. The air then blew through it—as long ago Captain Bird, besides saving money, had feared the sea might some day enter at the portholes—and the long front room behind the porch became a deeper veranda in itself, open to the blue breeze. On the dune beside the house Mark built a network of sand channels down the incline, encouraging a pink rubber ball to travel from up there to down here as if under its own power, to fall with a snug plop into a pit at the end; the top, center, and bottom; the beginning, middle, and end; up coming down. As a metaphor it seemed to fit for a long time. Most things in life, including life itself, seemed to have articulated sections, discrete and separate and straightforward.

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Some weeks after the meeting at Mr. Valerian's, Vita came to the beach house. On a late fall morning, the same as a summer day but for a faded difference in the light, they sat with coffee on the enormous porch. Up and down, the beach lay empty for miles. Boats in the offing, gulls and the changing light, the broad planes of sea and sky—these bright pictures were framed by the porch supports. Vita spoke first. Given the weight of his feelings she had changed her mind: she would not now agree to sell the house. For this was the most important thing, that when a person felt strongly about an issue in life, it mustn't be ignored by others; for if it was, everything subsequent to it would turn out badly, even though there should seem to be no direct connection.

"Then why did you say you would sell?" he asked.

"Because I was tired of Pop's games," she replied. "He thinks we're beyond his control here." Mr. Valerian, since being widowed, had not again set foot in the house. "I think," she said, "he believes that if it's sold we'll spend more time with him."

In the morning light, regarding the female version of his own face, Mark said, "Is it as simple as that?"

"In a way. But even without your objections they couldn't sell it now." They were the two Georges, father and brother. "Until other things are settled nothing will be done." Vita looked at him, took a sip of coffee. "Why is it so important to you?" she asked. "Have you thought?"

"... Because of everything."

"Right. You mean, all the years . . ."

"And Mom. And . . ."

Vita squinted into the sun.

"There's something about this place, you know," he went on after a moment. "It's not just me. I think of the pure chance of it being ours. Only chance. You could never arrange something like this again in a thousand years."

"Mark, it's just a house."

"But look at it!"

"Yes, I know," she replied, glancing around her as in a crowd. "But it's still just a house."

"You could say that's just an ass you're sitting on, but you would hate to lose it."

"You mean, it's part of you."

"It seems so basic," he said. "So obvious . . . The house is ours. It's been ours for so long. It's beautiful. To me it represents everything, the past, the future."

"—Yes," Vita interrupted him, "I see that. But I was wondering if you could see the less obvious reasons . . ."

"Such as."

" . . . Some sort of fear," she suggested.

He looked at her, startled. "Can't beauty be enough?"

"No," she replied. "Not usually."

Now when he entered a room or suddenly turned he encountered himself and his family, his siblings and nieces and parents, as if he had been mistaken in thinking them gone and himself alone. How could he be alone there again, except for a few moments at a time? It had become, besides, actually the sort of house that attracted people to it, in a daily ration of deliveries, the maid, plumber, carpenter, furniture man, the painter who never finished and seemed to work on his own; the alarm man, the gardeners. Mark would hear them on the gravel, or the too-loud bell would ring and he would see again the futility of thinking it was a house to be alone in. The others asked what he did with himself, knowing to themselves that he did, simply, everything and was endlessly busy. It was large, with every nook of it developed into something to be maintained. He would sit for a moment and realize the hatch at the top of the tower was ajar; when it was open the covers of magazines on the table by the fireplace, three floors below, lifted and settled on the coil of updraft swirling through the rooms. Or some quadrant of the lawn was being watered, or a storm the day before had misted the north-facing windows to a blur that must be squeezed; or a drain at the back was loose, or moss had begun in the outdoor shower, as it did every year, a furry lime-green that called to mind the baroque grottoes of overachieved Italian villas. He was half inclined, scrubbing it away, to let it this year take hold.

With his mother gone, the house, far from ever being empty or complete or perfectly in order, was, beyond being a house, a place and monument. This is what the others did not see except in the passion with which he explained the undertaking of yet some new repair or project. For it was big enough never to be finished, and everything that was done to it—had been done to it—seemed to call up in him a progression of further things, as if it now itself kept a list for itself, a list far more ambitious than his own. When he tried to explain this to

Vita she characteristically voiced her opinion: that he liked to think this was true, yet of necessity he would have to say it did not come from the house. "These are your standards and ideals," she said. "Within the process, you decide." She was no doubt right. Her field. But the *impulse* she described in him was met by something in the house as palpable as its present shape: the shape it would have in the future. When Mark looked at it in a particular way, he saw it suddenly as it eventually would look. He said to Vita, "It's not imagination. I imagine different features and improvements all the time. They don't occur. But sometimes I see something already done, all its details at once, and after that it's not a matter of imagination but of recollection of the actual thing."

Vita shook her head, willing though temporarily unable to follow. "You mean of course the imposition of your will . . ." she suggested. But he had meant that with the warp of experience folding back on itself, as did time, it was all on a great tape—racial memory, the Collective Unconscious her colleagues had been talking about for so long: history itself, the future; the larger flavorsome bits. The house had a soul, it had a history.

"But not a destiny," she interrupted. "It could be sold tomorrow, and then who would interpret these—visions? Who would have them?"

This was precisely the point, he pointed out. No one would. That was his department. Vita did not doubt the potency of the scheme, as it inspired him, as it affected them all. Four or five weeks each summer she basked in this perfection like Princess Grace in the Monaco of her dreams. The rest of the year, with her children and their commitments, with her job and career, it was as with the others a question of the odd weekend. They might have held on to the place because the original investment was so eternally dwarfed by modern value—this was the Monaco of everyone's dreams—or now because of Mark; but without him keeping track none of it would have worked. Mrs. Valerian had managed it alone for thirty years. Now he did, in his own way. They all saw his reasons overlapped with their own in letting him.

Odd that four such people should turn up in the same family, or odd that he should be among them; for it was Mark who made the collection strange, who set the curve, with his inverted sexuality, sensitivities and thin skin, his standards and thoughts from some other, different place. While they seemed or were strange only in these comparisons

with him, which threw them to the opposite ends of all these spectra—George Jr., practical and cunning; Vita, evolved and cool; Tessa the winning, excitable wife and mother, still young, steeped in the details of her children's lives—all so different from Mark and now abundantly clear, after years when it had seemed otherwise. The gallant struggle to convince themselves and the world that he was merely another sort of Valerian—rather like Mrs. Valerian, whose instincts in all of this had been unwavering—this struggle in the end had been incorporated into the great Filial Wars, pitched battles between Mark and his father that had dragged on for a decade, and in which the heaviest losses had seemed as usual to be innocent civilians: the family itself. It seemed to him his mother had given her life as part of this prolonged struggle, the only evidence at first of how deadly such things became if not settled early and wisely through ambassadors. They, he now supposed, were the ambassadors. He felt that the exhausted truce lately reached between his father and himself represented the world's last opportunity to avoid catastrophe. It was, as Vita said, a question of not denying something vitally important to someone else. If you did, it more than harmed you; it destroyed you and your world to the extent it was itself destroyed. Now his mother was dead, his father already old, and he himself apparently dying, although you could never, he had learned, be sure who would die before whom.

Vita did not in the least cavil, or hesitate. Like many of his conclusions this came out in conversation with her. She thought the force of Mark's will, being thwarted by this immovable object—his father—had been turned back on himself with devastating results, and that evidence of this effect would subsequently pull his father down.

"You must cure yourself," Vita said, going right to the payoff—these were not office hours with a stranger, he thought. Meaning that if he could turn the process off he might neutralize its effects in time, and so at least slow the disease, or convert or divert it elsewhere. This was the idea, to buy time.

The stupendous news of his illness had abruptly ended the Filial Wars, like a smothered blaze. In the driveway of the beach house, where Mr. Valerian would come to discuss it and see for himself, they embraced and wept. It no longer meant a great deal that Mr. Valerian could weep, although there had been an era—most of their lives—when the idea itself represented a kind of doom not to be envisioned; while Mark, in compensation, had been always a person to weep as easily and effortlessly as an actor. Together they wept in each other's

arms in a way that might have obviated all unpleasantness, if only, if only; the unfortunate misapprehension of one person, meaning well but getting it wrong, by another; he and his father weeping beside the gleaming automobile that then, a moment later, slid across the white sweep of gravel and carried his father away.

In the huge unnaturalness of the world the most unnatural thing is the death of a child, which is to say death out of order. In Mr. Valerian's mind his son's illness sat at the top of a pile of problems that appeared to constitute this last segment of his own life. It took stepping back, but from his point of view it seemed, as he would presently say to Mark, that if they could only change places all this nonsense would be resolved, beginning with the medical thing which, of everything, was most beyond his control.

The other great problem in his life concerned the collapse at the last moment of the greatest deal of his long and profitable business career—the sale of Marval Products itself, Mr. Valerian's life work, to Court Industries. This collapse, coming only hours after he learned of his son's illness, had transpired with an equal force of devastation, like a second bomb dropped on rubble. In a long moment of realization Mr. Valerian had thought the two events to be in some way connected (as subsequently did Mark) beyond the usual compounded coincidences of life; as if, had you thought in astrological terms, which Mr. Valerian did not, you might find that on this day and at this hour several planetary masses had aligned themselves toward his specific ruination.

But that it should happen now, and so quickly, in this mad, last-minute upheaval of his life; that here at the top of the monument you found not a statue, not the figure of Victory poised for flight, but instead pigeon shit and disappointment—Mr. Valerian's disgust at this was less effective as a demonstration against life than it had been over the years against his mortified children. He was a man who had always intimidated people. He looked at them and dealt with them until he saw a light of defiance go out in their eyes. He kept on until he saw it, minutes or years. At last, in the driveway of the beach house, he saw it in Mark's eyes. Help me, they said: it was all Mr. Valerian had ever wanted to hear.

With something extra in her voice, due to the fact she was discussing her own father clinically, but also for what she considered the endless resourcefulness of the subject, Vita described Mr. Valerian as "very



heavily defended." The fortress of their father's mind, Mark thought, thinking of something rocky and impregnable by Baldassare Peruzzi. "If such a structure collapses, it comes down all at once," she said. "At the end the mind is ruined. Much better if somehow it holds together."

Mark's opinion of his father in these later years had thus been based, he felt, on this other resident expert—for what was Vita but court psychologist? the best money could buy, and right there in the family, rather like the best legal advice from their brother, George. Bolstered by the respect he felt for Vita's mind, Mark had applied these opinions to his own situation: the Filial Wars. It was from Vita he realized he would never convince his father of the legitimacy of his cause; quite simply because Mr. Valerian saw homosexuality in religious terms—as a sin—which then threatened the great buttress of his own defense system: religion. The top third of all widowers, Vita reported, meaning in health and adjustment, survived with the help of strong religious beliefs. Thus Mark's orientation ran in conflict with his father's concept of survival. Not a question of live and let live, Mark saw with dismay. It meant he must think of his father's generation as entrenched and lost—as of course they all thought of his.

For he was different from them—from his own father and sisters, especially different from his brother. He had something of his mother in him but this was because he realized that in the end only her love was unconditional, and in gratitude he had emulated her. Only that much of this appropriation did not sit so gracefully on him, the strapping male, as it had on her. And perhaps he had chosen some of her more problematic traits—the tendency to catastrophe, for instance, of immediately expecting the worst in an unpleasant situation, hardly important but negative, and which seldom turned out as badly as she expected. He heard a variant of this in himself and recognized it as surely as an old piece of clothing that fitted him but belonged to someone else: his mother's sense of catastrophe. This had stuck.

Ah, the victim. This, too, she had allowed, had encouraged in herself until too late. She had proved to him that the victim creates and perpetuates himself. This was the embarrassing part of being ill. The metaphor here was also too tellingly clear: the homosexual as victim. Unfair to pin it on his mother, who would be indignant to be thought of in these terms. But it was Vita's point that this was the cycle to be interrupted if he would break the pattern and save himself.

Yes, Vita, but how? And for a long time—most of his life, and

often even now—he'd thought of this difference between himself and his family as evidence not of his failings, but theirs. Was not the absence of beauty the ugliest thing in life? (Vita would say no.) In the general scheme of things among the Valerians he often felt that wrong choices won out over right—wrong ideas, wrong directions, wrong fears. From an early age he had spoken up, feeling that in this small crowd was room—the dimensions—for more than one opinion; or even two. After all, a family might advance, as in certain quiz programs on TV in which a whole generation, sometimes two or three, put their heads together to define reality, and for their efforts won a car. It seemed the diversity he offered might be of use to them as a family, if they could only see it that way. In this his mother half the time had been his ally; half the time, with a gimlet eye, not. In matters of taste at least—of form, decoration, aesthetics: the usual homosexual métier—they had long since looked to him for quasi-professional guidance; so that George Jr. was legal, Vita psychological, Mark . . . artistic—though it might be argued that this end of things lay otherwise vacant of opinion for cultural, sexist reasons.

—Different, too, in that he was alone. This was it. Each of them had a unit of his own, while Mark clung to an order that had outgrown itself, whose vestigial remains could be found only in his father and himself, and in a ghost of the enmity between them, now laid to rest by . . . by it. The occasions on which the five of them might collude had been reduced to those of state—the meeting about selling the house, for instance—or perhaps when Tessa, whose instincts, though less developed, ran along similar lines, might suggest a public lunch on Father's Day—just them—which, however, George Jr. would be too busy and overworked to attend. It was not that they thought any less of the idea than Mark; if anything they thought more. Simply that family meant their own brood and not the abstract enshrinement, as if in retrospect, of the Valerians as they one day might have been but were no more—something in Mark's imagination. He might make every effort to impose this vision on them—the fight for the beach house had been one such effort—of a caring, interlocked group of siblings. But the demands of their own children made this difficult, except at intervals, or when a flare of need went up over the life of one of them. It was not that it didn't exist, this idea of family, but that it did not seem to exist always, and never as Mark saw it; or if it did, which he saw it did, it was really only among each of them and for their very own.

Meaning that he was not a member, in each case, of *their very own*. Here we had musical families, like musical chairs—life was nothing but quiz programs and time-passing competitions—and when the music stopped he alone stood in the circle of upturned, satisfied faces. None could feel this sense of estrangement, apartness, because all of life's institutions had seen to it that they didn't. Mates, children, parents, and other siblings all fitted into arrangements laid out for this specific accomplishment: to belong. So much easier, he thought, for them to go along—unnatural not to—because for them it was stupefyingly enjoyable, one small triumph of legitimacy after another.

But did he really expect family life to be arranged around the requirements of spinster aunts and bachelor uncles? Freud would say. Grow up. The burden of neurosis added to the weight of history was too great. Darwin would call Mark's kind a mad biological experiment teetering on the edge of extinction and doomed to failure. Both privately would shake their heads; though Freud, being Jewish, would wonder. Vita, their avatar and spokesperson, would say that, considering the twenty-six million Americans extrapolated from Kinsey to be gay—one in ten—some people slipped through history without ever reaping its rewards.

It did not do to complain, but to understand. Her analogy was in this case the primeval tree of primitive man. Mark knew it as a two-story tree house he had built at an early age with Donny and Brock. It popped so immediately into mind that he knew she was right.

"But can we not provide some other service? Is it all just the timely impregnation of females?" he asked indignantly.

"What else did you have in mind?" Vita replied dryly. "... You may of course sound the alarm. But life is not that simple. Sometimes sounding the alarm arouses passions and causes trouble. In the competition branches break, people fall and hurt themselves. The leopard grabs one of them..."

"But without them..." Mark said weakly. He would never be convinced.

In these conversations Mark was aware of this same weight of respect coming across the line from his sister. What was it in him that held her interest? Creativity, he thought; the position engendered by a combination of male egotism—the inculcation of centuries—and a feminine passivity, rarely mixed in those days, openly; or at least in her Philadelphia suburb. Only later did he see she had realized her professional luck in finding, in her own family, a fine pure example

of something they were alluding to at school: Freud's obsessional neurotic. She of course made no effort to inform him of this conclusion, and he went on thinking she saw in him, at least potentially, the artist he wished to be. In any event, it would be one or the other; this was perhaps a matter of opinion, and too soon to say. Art, he thought too, was nothing but obsessional and neurotic. And what might have alarmed the sibling of another shrink seemed, to Mark, to be evidence of some sort of artistic progress not otherwise obvious.

He was less different from Vita, perhaps because they had in their own way each been made to follow their brother, George, with Mark's version matching hers in certain cross-gender ways; as if their parents, the Valerians, having thought just so far, had put everything into their first child and had made do, with the remnants of parentage, for the other three. George and Tessa were easier—not that *they* were similar—for being the first and the last. But Vita and Mark, appearing as if unbidden or at random, seemed to share the burden of catching their parents unawares, unprepared, or bereft, even though never in her marriage had Mrs. Valerian made love without the thought of conceiving a child. How for instance did a little girl differ from a little boy? Why then was this second son, who had come from the same people and in the same way, so shockingly different? The Valerians, smug, oblivious and proud, did the best they knew how, making an awful mess, Vita thought; Mark thought. But then in those days who hadn't?

Mr. Valerian stepped from the car and shaded his eyes from the sun. Perhaps he had been weeping on the drive down. Expecting him to the minute and hearing tires on the gravel, Mark came slowly out the door and through the garden, hands in his pockets, footprints blazing up behind him in tiny, sickle-shaped fires; his pockets spiritually picked, his life up in flames. Flowers in the border flashed dots of color at his feet, drifting by in focus within a long green blur. As he approached his father, they each wore the same ripening expression, of remorse and reproach, of colossal disappointment; this overlapping response paired their display—a sad caving-in of their feelings—and like two fine dynamos reaching tandem, they embraced. Mr. Valerian pounded once, twice, on Mark's shoulder in an excess not of tenderness but anguish. He said into Mark's ear, "Believe me, if I could change places with you I'd do it in a second." It was what on the drive down he had decided to begin by saying. Holding his son by the shoulders, and at last seeing all defiance gone, he added, "We're going

to go through this together, and there's nothing we can't do if we want." This sent them back into the vortex. Mark felt infantile, helpless. He was ill; something between the two of them had shifted into something manifest on its own, a third, evil thing set loose, against which both now were helpless. An alliance of his own resolve coupled with his father's was meant to bear some force against this, which, coming from within, must be pursued from within; though it appeared now, even in the abstract, beyond spiritual, intellectual, even emotional measures. Perhaps only the medical remained. Strength of intention his father meant to give him, not realism or facts but something to use in the coming fight, something abstract to fight something real, against which as yet no real weapons existed.

They came through the house into the sitting room. Being alone, Mark had ordered it with the precision and flair of a photo-stylist. The vast blue plane of sea stretched around. Mark could almost feel the little hop his father's heart took, of pride, recognition and pain at the purity of sudden association with Margaret. Mr. Valerian looked out over the beach, nodded his head but sat in a chair with his back to the view—a gesture that meant here again were reasons why, with one thing and another, he was unable to enjoy this house further. They sat quietly. The waves squandered themselves. Two brown rabbits appeared on the lawn to feed, ears ruby sunlight. Mark watched them over his father's shoulder.

"Well," Mr. Valerian began. "Tell me about this . . . Tell me what the doctors said, what—y'know—what you know about it." Put me in the picture, Mark thought his father had with a certain delicacy refrained from saying. The terminology of a business meeting seemed appropriate to the situation, certainly automatic. He saw that sometime in the next few minutes he himself would say, "The bottom line is that there's no cure."

"Look," his father exclaimed when this remark had been delivered, "that's where you're wrong. It's not the bottom line. You mustn't think that way. They'll find a cure. They're all looking—"

"Utter bullshit," Mark interrupted. "It's not a cure they're looking for, it's a vaccine. Protect the healthy, let the sick die off."

"But, Mark . . ." Mr. Valerian protested, shaking his head.

"It's what they did with polio, and they were children."

"Well, you've got to think of yourself," his father went on, "You've got to be positive. You'll beat it one way or another. Either they'll find something or something will happen."

They regarded each other.

"And," his father said—these were the things he had driven here to explain—"I have a feeling this is a light case."

"A feeling?" Mark said.

"I just don't think it's as bad as you think."

"Dad, it's not what I think."

" . . . And there's experimental things. I read yesterday there's a guy in California immune to everything. They're studying his blood . . . "

"I don't think this is something we'll be able to buy."

"Why the hell not?" Mr. Valerian sat forward and went on in a fresh tone, "But you see, Mark, this is what I mean. You mustn't say, 'No, no, I can't, I can't, this is impossible, it won't work and I'm going to die . . . ' You've got to think something will happen. Some goddamn clever Swede or Frog will find the answer . . . And you'll see. It's not as bad as you think—in your case."

"You only say that because you can't face it."

"Then what the hell are you going to do!" his father snapped, "—Lay down and die? Is that it?"

"I'm not going to kid myself because you want to hear it."

"And that's where you're wrong, my friend," Mr. Valerian said derisively. "Why not a miracle? Open yourself up to the idea that anything can happen, and you're going to get through this in one piece."

" . . . Faith," Mark said quietly.

"Faith," Mr. Valerian repeated, adding a slight though unmistakable measure of reverence.

Mr. Valerian turned and they looked out the window together, each backing away from the idea just raised—Mark because he wished to avoid an argument about religion; Mr. Valerian because, while relieved to have hit on something tangible, he was not prepared to pursue it. He knew prayer and hard work were the answer—had already begun his own program along these lines—but not until you came to it yourself. And Mark thought it time to say something about his father's other great problem: the collapse of the deal to sell Marval.

"George told me," he began—out to sea two little sailboats took different tacks on the same wind, sails pinned to the opposite reach, the one crossing the other's wake; Mark thought of the currents as invisible streets— . . . about the rest of your day. I'm sorry this happened all at once."

"I don't want you to think twice about that," Mr. Valerian replied.

"It's a disappointment, that's all. It means more hard work when I would've been retiring. But I can deal with that sort of thing. I've been doing it all my life."

"All in the same day . . ." Mark said wonderingly.

"Yes, well . . ." His father turned away from the window.

They put together a lunch of odds and ends and ate on the porch in front. Here Captain Bird had most seriously contrived to duplicate, on dry land and for the enjoyment of his dwindling days, the unique commanding experience of a ship's bridge. An end of the porch came around and finished in a circle topped with a pointed cone, like a gazebo jutting from a corner of the house. With the arrangement of a sand dune, a trellis, and the eastern orientation of the house, Captain Bird had created the illusion of being actually at sea, within a wheelchair. If you sat or stood in a certain spot the horizon stretched three-quarters of the way around, the beach fell below the level of the porch railing, and all land disappeared, leaving only the sea. As they ate, a net of diamond shadows fell through the trellis, drifting over their shoulders and across the floor.

"What about George?" Mark said, to stay off it for a while. His father looked up. "What about him?"

"Well, he's disappointed, isn't he? He's worked hard on this, for a long time."

"Yes, he has." Mr. Valerian had thought to learn something about George. Sometimes his children told each other things that then he heard secondhand, as intended. "He's got his practice to repair. This thing took a lot of his time."

In conversation, as otherwise, Margaret Valerian had been their connection, the buffer between them—in a way demonstrated by the damage she herself had sustained; by the worry, never clearly stated, that the wrong person being right, the right person wrong, and she herself never sure, not enough had been said or felt for either. Instead she had worked hard to make them comfortable, knowing mere comfort was never enough. Mark and his father seemed only to disagree on principle, the principle of sex. This she held to be impossible, for love alone mattered, not principle. In fitting and tailoring their disparate responses to each other, she managed for years to fend off the implications and disasters of the Filial Wars, saying to one what the other could not. "Your father does not mean what he says. He loves you very much," and vice versa. So real was the need, any transparent effort worked. After her death the connection had devolved through

necessities surrounding her funeral and burial—the plot, the monument—for if the beach house meant the survival of her memory and spirit in Mark's mind, even in her own, in Mr. Valerian's a cemetery was where such things naturally came to rest. To him the beach house, besides being a sad reminder of his dead wife, or the dying one, was now his sole connection with Mark. And some months after Margaret's death, at the change of seasons—when fifty steps to wintering an old mansion on the water suddenly presented themselves—Mark had automatically taken up the job, interpreting this as an extension of his mother's wishes—and now, being ill, it seemed he might belong there as much as she—while Mr. Valerian saw the opportunity as both practical and wise. Several years into the arrangement it had become and remained their subject. In every conversation, one or the other of them brought it up.

"How's the house?" his father said, sociable over the food.

"That depends," Mark replied, "on where you look."

Mr. Valerian waved his hand in agreement. It was endlessly expensive, unfinished, yielding to salt air and sea. They were still compensating, thirty years later, for Captain Bird's economies. "That Bird," Mr. Valerian would say, "had an anchor for brains." It had been some years before they discovered all the drains simply stopped below grade. All had to be dug up and connected. In his own mind Captain Bird had been constructing a boat. Nothing except her moorings must hold her. She must be free to sail at any moment, in the dead of night or day, straight to sea on the course so carefully drawn through the hearth. Now, Mark thought, the place was locked in—by water main, sewers, gas lines, TV cables, telephone wires, even the thin lightning rod of copper braid twisting from its height off the chimney and down the sides of the house like a package tied with cord.

In Mark's mind, as opposed to Captain Bird's, in the moment before setting sail, someone must sever these new connections one by one. Where possible over the years he himself had felt inclined to keep the boat idea in mind. An innovation of his own had been to shape the ocean-side lawn into a bow, with a white, chevron bulkhead pointing east into the waves. He thought that if this bow-shaped piece of earth were included, giving her deck space all around, it would be easier to fit the severed connections to a life-support system, all within a clear crystal cube containing the earth's atmosphere—on a fresh morning, the sun still on the water, or a starry night for sleeping, dreaming—a crystal ship of lights that silently slips her lines and sails away.