

The Haunting of the New, Ray Bradbury

I hadn't been in Dublin for years. I'd been round the world—everywhere but Ireland—but now within the hour of my arrival the Royal Hibernian Hotel phone rang and on the phone: Nora herself, God Bless!

"Charles? Charlie? Chuck? Are you rich at last? And do rich writers buy fabulous estates?"

"Nora!" I laughed. "Don't you ever say hello?"

"Life's too short for hellos, and now there's no time for decent good-byes.Couldyou buy Grynwood?"

"Nora, Nora, your family house, two hundred rich years old? What would happen to wild Irish social life, the parties, drinks, gossip? You can't throw it all away!"

"Can and shall. Oh, I've trunks of money waiting out in the rain this moment. But, Charlie, Charles, I'malonein the house. The servants have fled to help the Aga. Now on this final night, Chuck, I need a writer-man to see the Ghost. Does your skin prickle? Come. I've mysteries and a home to give away. Charlie, oh, Chuck, oh, Charles."

Click. Silence.

Ten minutes later I roared round the snake-road through the green hills toward the blue lake and the lush grass meadows of the hidden and fabulous house called Grynwood.

I laughed again. Dear Nora! For all her gab, a party was probably on the tracks this moment, lurched toward wondrous destruction. Bertie might fly from London, Nick from Paris, Alicia would surely motor up from Galway. Some film director, cabled within the hour, would parachute or helicopter down, a rather seedy manna in dark glasses. Marion would show with his Pekingese dog troupe, which always got drunker, and sicker, than he.

I gunned my hilarity as I gunned the motor.

You'll be beautifully mellow by eight o'clock, I thought, stunned to sleep by concussions of bodies before midnight, drowse till noon, then even more nicely potted by Sunday high tea. And somewhere in between, the rare game of musical beds with Irish and French contesses, ladies, and plain field-beast art majors crated in from the Sorbonne, some with chewable mustaches, some not, and Monday ten million years off. Tuesday, I would motor oh so carefully back to Dublin, nursing my body like a great impacted wisdom tooth, gone much too wise with women, pain-flashing with memory.

Trembling, I remembered the first time I had drummed out to Nora's, when I was twenty-one.

A mad old Duchess with flour-talcummed cheeks, and the teeth of a barracuda had wrestled me and a sports car down this road fifteen years ago, braying into the fast weather:

"You shall love Nora's menagerie zoo and horticultural garden! Her friends are beasts and keepers, tigers and pussies, rhododendrons and flytraps. Her streams run cold fish, hot trout. Hers is a great greenhouse where brutes grow outsize, force-fed by unnatural airs, enter Nora's on Friday with clean linen, sog out with the wet-wash-soiled bedclothes Monday, feeling as if you had meantime inspired, painted, and lived through all Bosch's Temptations, Hells, Judgments, and Dooms! Live at Nora's and you reside in a great warm giant's cheek, deliriously gummed and morseled hourly. You will pass, like victuals, through her mansion. When it has crushed forth your last sweet-sour sauce and dismarrowed your youth-candied bones, you will be discarded in a cold iron-country train station lonely with rain."

"I'm coated with enzymes?" I cried above the engine roar. "No house can break down my elements, or take nourishment from my Original Sin."

"Fool!" laughed the Duchess. "We shall see most of your skeleton by sunrise Sunday!"

I came out of memory as I came out of the woods at a fine popping glide and slowed because the very friction of beauty stayed the heart, the mind, the blood, and therefore the foot upon the throttle.

There under a blue-lake sky by a blue-sky lake lay Nora's own dear place, the grand house called Grynwood. It nestled in the roundest hills by the tallest trees in the deepest forest in all Eire. It had towers built a thousand years ago by unremembered peoples and unsung architects for reasons never to be guessed.

Its gardens had first flowered five hundred years back and there were outbuildings scattered from a creative explosion two hundred years gone amongst old tomb yards and crypts.

Here was a convent hall become a horse barn of the landed gentry, there were new wings built on ninety years ago. Out around the lake was a hunting-lodge ruin where wild horses might plunge through minted shadow to sink away in greenwater grasses by yet further cold ponds and single graves of daughters whose sins were so rank they were driven forth even in death to the wilderness, sunk traceless in the gloom.

As if in bright welcome, the sun flashed vast tintinnabulations from scores of house windows. Blinded, I clenched the car to a halt. Eyes shut, I licked my lips.

I remembered my first night at Grynwood.

Nora herself opening the front door. Standing stark naked, she announced:

"You're too late. It's all over!"

"Nonsense. Hold this, boy, and this."

Whereupon the Duchess, in three nimble moves, peeled herself raw as a blanched oyster in the wintry doorway.

I stood aghast, gripping her clothes.

"Come in, boy, you'll catch your death." And the bare Duchess walked serenely away among the well-dressed people.

"Beaten at my own game," cried Nora. "Now, to compete, I must put my clothes back on. And I wassohoping to shock you."

"Never fear." I said. "You have."

"Come help me dress."

In the alcove, we waded among her clothes, which lay in misshapen pools of musky scent upon a parqueted floor.

"Hold the panties while I slip into them. You're Charles, aren't you?"

"How do you do." I flushed, then burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter. "Forgive me," I said at last, snapping her bra in back, "it's just here it is early evening, and I'm putting youintoyour clothes. I—"

A door slammed somewhere. I glanced around for the Duchess.

"Gone," I murmured. "The house has devoured her, already."

True. I didn't see the Duchess again until the rainy Tuesday morn she had predicted. By then she had forgotten my name,myface, and the soul behind my face.

"My God," I said, "What's that, andthat?"

Still dressing Nora, we had arrived at the library door. Inside, like a bright mirror-maze, the weekend guests turned.

"That," Nora pointed, "is the Manhattan Civic Ballet flown over on ice by jet stream. To the left, the Hamburg Dancers, flown the opposite way. Divine casting. Enemy ballet mobs unable, because of language, to express their scorn and vitriol. They must pantomime their cat-fight. Stand aside, Charlie. What was Valkyrie must become Rhine Maiden. And those boysareRhine Maidens. Guard your flank!"

Nora was right.

The battle was joined.

The tiger lilies leapt at each other, jabbering in tongues. Then, frustrated, they fell away, flushed. With a bombardment of slammed doors, the enemies plunged off to scores of rooms. What was horror became horrible friendship and what was friendship became steamroom oven-bastings of unabashed and, thank God, hidden affection.

After that it was one grand crystal-chandelier avalanche of writer-artist-choreographer-poets down the swift-sloped weekend.

Somewhere I was caught and swept in the heaped pummel of flesh headed straight for a collision with the maiden-aunt reality of Monday noon.

Now, many lost parties, many lost years later, here I stood.

And there stood Grynwood manse, very still.

No music played. No cars arrived.

Hello, I thought. A new statue seated by the shore. Hello again. Not a statue …

But Nora herself seated alone, legs drawn under her dress, face pale, staring at Grynwood as if I had not arrived, was nowhere in sight.

"Nora … ?" But her gaze was so steadily fixed to the house wings, its mossy roofs and windows full of empty sky, I turned to stare at it myself.

Somethingwaswrong. Had the house sunk two feet into the earth? Or had the earth sunk all about, leaving it stranded forlorn in the high chill air?

Had earthquakes shaken the windows atilt so they mirrored intruders with distorted gleams and glares?

The front door of Grynwood stood wide open. From this door, the house breathed out upon me.

Subtle. Like waking by night to feel the push of warm air from your wife's nostrils, but suddenly terrified, for the scent of her breath has changed, she smells of someone else! You want to seize her awake, cry her name. Whoisshe, how, what? But heart thudding, you lie sleepless by some stranger in bed.

I walked. I sensed my image caught in a thousand windows moving across the grass to stand over a silent Nora.

A thousand of me sat quietly down.

Nora, I thought. Oh dear God, here we are again.

That first visit to Grynwood …

And then here and there through the years we had met like people brushing in a crowd, like lovers across the aisle and strangers on a train, and with the whistle crying the quick next stop touched hands or allowed our bodies to be bruised together by the crowd cramming out as the doors flung wide, then, impelled, no more touch, no word, nothing for years.

Or, it was as if at high noon midsummer every year ior so we ran off up the vital strand away, never dreaming we might come back and collide in mutual need. And then somehow another summer ended, a sun went down, and there came Nora dragging her empty sandpail and here came I with scabs on my knees, and the beach empty and a strange season gone, and just us left to say hello Nora, hello Charles as the wind rose and the sea darkened as if a great herd of octopi suddenly swam by with their inks.

I often wondered if a day might come when we circled the long way round and stayed. Somewhere back perhaps twelve years ago there had been one moment, balanced like a feather upon fingertip when our breaths from either side had held our love warmly and perfectly in poise.

But that was because I had bumped into Nora in Venice, with her roots packed, far from home, away from Grynwood, where she might truly belong to someone else, perhaps even to me.

But somehow our mouths had been too busy with each other to ask permanence. Next day, healing our lips, puffed from mutual assaults, we had not the strength to say forever-as-of-now, more tomorrows this way, an apartment, a house anywhere, not Grynwood, not Grynwood ever again, stay! Perhaps the light of noon was cruel, perhaps it showed too many pores in people.

Or perhaps, more accurately, the nasty children were bored again. Or terrified of a prison of two! Whatever the reason, the feather, once briefly lofted on champagne breath, toppled. Neither knew which ceased breathing upon it first. Nora pretended an urgent telegram and fled off to Grynwood.

Contact was broken. The spoiled children never wrote. I did not know what sand castles she had smashed. She did not know what Indian Madras had bled color from passion's sweat on my back. I married. I divorced. I traveled.

And now here we were again come from opposite directions late on a strange day by a familiar lake, calling to each other without calling, running to each other without moving, as if we had not been years apart.

"Nora." I took her hand. It was cold. "What's happened?"

"Happened!?" She laughed, grew silent, staring away. Suddenly she laughed again, that difficult laughter that might instantly flush with tears. "Oh, my dear Charlie, think wild, think all, jump hoops and come round to maniac dreams. Happened, Charlie, happened?!"

She grew frightfully still.

"Where are the servants, the guests—?"

"The party," she said, "was last night."

"Impossible! You've never had just a Friday-night bash. Sundays have always seen your lawn littered with demon wretches strewn and bandaged with bedclothes. Why—?"

"Why did I invite you out today, you want to ask, Charles?" Nora still looked only at the house. "To give you Grynwood. A gift, Charlie, if you can force it to let you stay, if it will put up with you—"

"I don't want the house!" I burst in.

"Oh, it's not if you wantit,but if it wantsyou.It threw us all out, Charlie."

"Last night … ?"

"Last night the last great party at Grynwood didn't come off. Mag flew from Paris. The Aga sent a fabulous girl from Nice. Roger, Percy, Evelyn, Vivian, Jon were here. That bullfighter who almost killed the playwright over the ballerina was here. The Irish dramatist who falls off stages drunk was here. Ninety-seven guests teemed in that door between five and seven last night. By midnight they were gone."

I walked across the lawn.

Yes, still fresh in the grass: the tire marks of three dozen cars.

"It wouldn't let us have the party, Charles," Nora called, faintly.

I turned blankly. "It? The house?"

"Oh, the music was splendid but went hollow upstairs. We heard our laughter ghost back from the topmost halls. The party clogged. Thepetits fourswere clods in our throats. The wine ran over our chins. No one got to bed for even three minutes. Doesn't it sound a lie? But, Limp Meringue Awards were given to all and they went away and I slept bereft on the lawn all night. Guess why? Go look, Charlie."

We walked up to the open front door of Grynwood.

"What shall I look for?"

"Everything. All the rooms. The house itself. The mystery. Guess. And when you've guessed a thousand times I'll tell you why I can never live here again, must leave, why Grynwood is yours if you wish. Go in, alone."

And in I went, slowly, one step at a time.

I moved quietly on the lovely lion-yellow hardwood parquetry of the great hall. I gazed at the Aubusson wall tapestry. I examined the ancient white marble Greek medallions displayed on green velvet in a crystal case.

"Nothing," I called back to Nora out there in the late cooling day.

"No. Everything," she called. "Go on."

The library was a deep warm sea of leather smell where five thousand books gleamed their colors of hand-rubbed cherry, lime, and lemon bindings. Their gold eyes, bright titles, glittered. Above the fireplace which could have kenneled two firedogs and ten great hounds hung the exquisite GainsboroughMaidens and Flowersthat had warmed the family for generations.

It was a portal overlooking summer weather. One wanted to lean through and sniff wild seas of flowers, touch harvest of peach maiden girls, hear the machinery of bees bright-stitching up the glamorous airs.

"Well?" called a far voice.

"Nora!" I cried. "Come here. There's nothing to fear! It's still daylight!"

"No," said the far voice sadly. "The sun is going down. What do you see, Charlie?"

"Out in the hall again, the spiral stairs. The parlor. Not a dust speck on the air. I'm opening the cellar door. A million barrels and bottles. Now the kitchen. Nora, this is lunatic!"

"Yes, isn't it?" wailed the far voice. "Go back to the library. Stand in the middle of the room. See the GainsboroughMaidens and Flowersyou always loved?"

"It's there."

"It's not. See the silver Florentine humidor?"

"I see it."

"You don't. See the great maroon leather chair where you drank sherry with Father?"

"Yes."

"No," sighed the voice.

"Yes, no? Do, don't? Nora, enough!"

"More than enough, Charlie. Can't you guess? Don't youfeelwhat happened to Grynwood?"

I ached, turning. I sniffed the strange air.

"Charlie," said Nora, far out by the open front door, " … four years ago," she said faintly. "Four years ago … Grynwood burned completely to the ground."

I ran.

I found Nora pale at the door.

"Itwhat!?" I shouted.

"Burned to the ground," she said. "Utterly. Four years ago."

I took three long steps outside and looked up at the walls and windows.

"Nora, it's standing, it's all here!"

"No, it isn't, Charlie. That's not Grynwood."

I touched the gray stone, the red brick, the green ivy. I ran my hand over the carved Spanish front door. I exhaled in awe. "It can't be."

"It is," said Nora. "All new. Everything from the cellar stones up. New, Charles. New, Charlie. New."

"Thisdoor?"

"Sent up from Madrid, last year."

"This pavement?"

"Quarried near Dublin two years ago. The windows from Waterford this spring."

I stepped through the front door.

"The parqueting?"

"Finished in France and shipped over autumn last."

"But, but, thattapestry!?"

"Woven near Paris, hung in April."

"But it's all thesame,Nora!"

"Yes, isn't it? I traveled to Greece to duplicate the marble relics. The crystal case I had made, too, in Rheims."

"The library!"

"Every book, all bound the same way, stamped in similar gold, put back on similar shelves. The library alone cost one hundred thousand pounds to reproduce."

"The same, the same, Nora," I cried, in wonder, "oh God, the same," and we were in the library and I pointed at the silver Florentine humidor. "That, of course, was saved out of the fire?"

"No, no, I'm an artist. I remembered. I sketched, I took the drawings to Florence. They finished the fraudulent fake in July."

"The GainsboroughMaidens and Flowers!?"

"Look close! That's Fritzi's work. Fritzi, that horrible drip-dry beatnik painter in Montmartre? Who threw paint on canvas and flew them as kites over Paris so the wind and rain patterned beauty for him, which he sold for exorbitant prices? Well, Fritzi, it turns out, is a secret Gainsborough fanatic. He'd kill me if he knew I told. He painted thisMaidensfrom memory, isn't itfine?"

"Fine, fine, oh God, Nora, are you telling the truth?"

"I wish I weren't. Do you think I've been mentally ill, Charles? Naturally you might think. Do you believe in good and evil, Charlie? I didn't used. But now, quite suddenly, I have turned old and rain-dowdy. I have hit forty, forty has hit me, like a locomotive. Do you know what I think? … the house destroyeditself."

"Itwhat?"

She went to peer into the halls where shadows gathered now, coming in from the late day.

"When I first came into my money, at eighteen, when people said Guilt I said Bosh. They cried Conscience. I cried Crappulous Nonsense! But in those days the rain barrel was empty. A lot of strange rain has fallen since and gathered in me, and to my cold surprise I find me to the brim with old sin and know thereisconscience and guilt.

"There are a thousand young men in me, Charles.

"They thrust and buried themselves there. When they withdrew, Charles, I thought they withdrew. But no, no, now I'm sure there is not a single one whose barb, whose lovely poisoned thorn is not caught in my flesh, one place or another. God, God, how I loved their barbs, their thorns. God how I loved to be pinned and bruised. I thought the medicines of time and travel might heal the grip marks.

But now I know I am all fingerprints. There lives no inch of my flesh, Chuck, is not FBI file systems of palm print and Egyptian whorl of finger stigmata. I have been stabbed by a thousand lovely boys and thought I did not bleed but God I do bleed now. I have bled all over this house.

And my friends who denied guilt and conscience, in a great subway heave of flesh have trammeled through here and jounced and mouthed each other and sweat upon floors and buckshot the walls with their agonies and descents, each from the other's crosses.

The house has been stormed by assassins, Charlie, each seeking to kill the other's loneliness with their short swords, no one finding surcease, only a momentary groaning out of relaxation.

"I don't think there has ever been a happy person in this house, Charles, I see that now.

"Oh, it alllookedhappy. When you hear so much laughter and see so much drink and find human sandwiches in every bed, pink and white morsels to munch upon, you think: what joy! how happy-fine!

"But it is a lie, Charlie, you and I know that, and the house drank the lie in my generation and Father's before me and Grandfather beyond. It was always a happy house, which means a dreadful estate.

The assassins have wounded each other here for long over two hundred years. The walls dripped. The doorknobs were gummy. Summer turned old in the Gainsborough frame. So the assassins came and went, Charlie, and left sins and memories of sins which the house kept.

"And when you have caught up just so much darkness, Charles, you must vomit, mustn't you?

"My life is my emetic. I choke on my own past.

"So did this house.

"And finally, guilt ridden, terribly sad, one night I heard the friction of old sins rubbing together in attic beds. And with this spontaneous combustion the house smouldered ablaze. I heard the fire first as it sat in the library, devouring books.

Then I heard it in the cellar drinking wine. By that time I was out the window and down the ivy and on the lawn with die servants. We picnicked on the lake shore at four in the morning with champagne and biscuits from the gatekeeper's lodge.

The fire brigade arrived from town at five to see the roofs collapse and vast fire founts of spark fly over the clouds and the sinking moon. We gave them champagne also and watched Grynwood die finally, at last, so at dawn there was nothing.

"It had to destroy itself, didn't it, Charlie, it was so evil from all my people and from me?"

We stood in the cold hall. At last I stirred myself and said, "I guess so, Nora."

We walked into the library where Nora drew forth blueprints and a score of notebooks.

"It was then, Charlie, I got my inspiration. Build Grynwood again. A gray jigsaw puzzle put back together! Phoenix reborn from the sootbin. So no one would know of its death through sickness.

Not you, Charlie, or any friends off in the world; let all remain ignorant. My guilt over its destruction was immense. How fortunate to be rich. You can buy a fire brigade with champagne and the village newspapers with four cases of gin. The news never got a mile out that Grynwood was strewn sackcloth and ashes.

Time later to tell the world. Now! to work! And off I raced to my Dublin solicitor's where my father had filed architectural plans and interior details.

I sat for months with a secretary, word-associating to summon up Grecian lamps, Roman tiles. I shut my eyes to recall every hairy inch of carpeting, every fringe, every rococo ceiling oddment, all, all brasswork decor, firedog, switchplates, log-bucket, and doorknob.

And when the list of thirty thousand items was compounded, I flew in carpenters from Edinburgh, tile setters from Sienna, stone-cutters from Perugia, and they hammered, nailed, thrived, carved, and set for four years, Charlie, and I loitered at the factory outside Paris to watch spiders weave my tapestry and floor the rugs. I rode to hounds at Waterford while watching them blow my glass.

"Oh, Charles, I don't think it has ever happened, has it in history, that anyone ever put a destroyed thing back the way it was? Forget the past, let the bones cease! Well, not for me, I thought, no: Grynwood shall rise and be as ever it was. But, while looking like the old Grynwood, it would have the advantage of being really new. A fresh start, I thought, and while building it I led such aquietlife, Charles. The work was adventure enough.

"As I did the house over, I thought I did myself over. While I favored it with rebirth, I favored myself with joy. At long last, I thought, a happy person comes and goes at Grynwood.

"And it was finished and done, the last stone cut, the last tile placed, two weeks ago.

"And I sent invitations across the world, Charlie, and last night they all arrived, a pride of lion-men from New York, smelling of St. John's breadfruit, the staff of life. A team of lightfoot Athens boys.

A Negrocorps de balletfrom Johannesburg. Three Sicilian bandits, or were they actors? Seventeen lady violinists who might be ravished as they laid down their violins and picked up their skirts. Four champion polo players. One tennis pro to restring my guts.

A darling French poet. Oh God, Charles, it was to be a swell grand fine re-opening of the Phoenix Estates, Nora Gryndon, proprietress. How did I know, or guess, the house would not want us here?"

"Can a house want or not want?"

"Yes, when it is very new and everyone else, no matter what age, is very old. It was freshly born. We were stale and dying. It was good. We were evil. It wished to stay innocent. So it turned us out."

"How?"

"Why, just by being itself. It made the air so quiet, Charlie, you wouldn't believe. We all felt someone had died.

"After awhile, with no one saying but everyone feeling it, people just got in their cars and drove away. The orchestra shut up its music and sped off in ten limousines. There went the entire party, around the lake drive, as if heading for a midnight outdoor picnic, but no, just going to the airport or the boats, or Galway, everyone cold, no one speaking, and the house empty, and the servants themselves pumping away on their bikes, and me alone in the house, the last party over, the party that never happened, that never could begin.

As I said, I slept on the lawn all night, alone with my old thoughts and I knew this was the end of all the years, for I was ashes, and ashes cannot build. It was the new grand lovely fine bird lying in the dark, to itself. It hated my breath in the dooryard. I was over. It had begun. There."

Nora was finished with her story.

We sat silently for a long while in the very late afternoon as dusk gathered to fill the rooms, and put out the eyes of the windows. A wind rippled the lake.

I said, "It can't all be true. Surely youcanstay here."

"A final test, so you'll not argue me again. We shall try to spend the night here."

"Try?"

"We won't make it through till dawn. Let's fry a few eggs, drink some wine, go to bed early. But lie on top your covers with your clothes on. You shall want your clothes, swiftly, I imagine."

We ate almost in silence. We drank wine. We listened to the new hours striking from the new brass clocks everywhere in the new house.

At ten, Nora sent me up to my room.

"Don't be afraid," she called to me on the landing. "The house means us no harm. It simply fearswemay hurtit.I shall read in the library. When you are ready to leave, no matter what hour, come for me."

"I shall sleep snug as a bug," I said.

"Shallyou? "said Nora.

And I went up to my new bed and lay in the dark smoking, feeling neither afraid nor smug, calmly waiting for any sort of happening at all.

I did not sleep at midnight.

I was awake at one.

At three, my eyes were still wide.

The house did not creak, sigh, or murmur. It waited, as I waited, timing its breath to mine.

At three thirty in the morning the door to my room slowly opened.

There was simply a motion of dark upon dark. I felt the wind draught over my hands and face.

I sat up slowly in the dark.

Five minutes passed. My heart slowed its beating.

And then far away below, I heard the front door open.

Again, not a creak or whisper. Just the click and the shadowing change of wind motioning the corridors.

I got up and went out into the hall.

From the top of the stairwell I saw what I expected: the front door open. Moonlight flooded the new parqueting and shone upon the new grandfather's clock which ticked with a fresh oiled bright sound.

I went down and out the front door.

"Thereyou are," said Nora, standing down by my car in the drive.

I went to her.

"You didn't hear a thing," she said, "and yet you heard something, right?"

"Right."

"Are you ready to leave now, Charles?"

I looked up at the house. "Almost."

"You know now, don't you, it is all over? You feel it, surely, that it is the dawn come up on a new morning? And, feel my heart, my soul beating pale and mossy within my heart, my blood so black, Charlie, you have felt it often beating under your own body, you know how old I am. You know how full of dungeons and racks and late afternoons and blue hours of French twilight I am. Well … "

Nora looked at the house.

"Last night, as I lay in bed at two in the morning, I heard the front door drift open. I knew that the whole house had simply leant itself ajar to let the latch free and glide the door wide.

I went to the top of the stairs. And, looking down, I saw the creek of moonlight laid out fresh in the hall. And the house so much as said, here is the way you go, tread the cream, walk the milky new path out of this and away, go, old one, go with your darkness. You are with child. The sour-gum ghost is in your stomach.

It will never be born. And because you cannot drop it, one day it will be your death. What are you waiting for?

"Well, Charles, I was afraid to go down and shut that door. And I knew it was true, I would never sleep again. So, I went down and out.

"I have a dark old sinful place in Geneva. I'll go there to live. But you are younger and fresher, Charlie, so I want this place to be yours."

"Not so young."

"Younger than I."

"Not so fresh. It wants me to go, too, Nora. The door tomyroom just now. It opened, too."

"Oh, Charlie," breathed Nora, and touched my cheek. "Oh, Charles," and then, softly, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. We'll go together."

Nora opened the car door.

"Let me drive. I must drive now, very fast, all the way to Dublin. Do you mind?"

"No. But what about your luggage?"

"What's in there, the house can have. Where are you going?"

I stopped walking. "I must shut the front door,"

"No," said Nora. "Leave it open."

"But … people will come in."

Nora laughed quietly. "Yes. But only good people. So that's all right, isn't it?"

I finally nodded. "Yes. That's all right."

I came back to stand by my car, reluctant to leave. Clouds were gathering. It was beginning to snow. Great gentle white leaflets fell down out of the moonlit sky as harmlessly soft as the gossip of angels.

We got in and slammed the car doors. Nora gunned the motor.

"Ready? "she said.

"Ready."

"Charlie?" said Nora. "When we get to Dublin, will you sleep with me, I meansleep,the next few days. I shall need someone the next days. Will you?"

"Of course."

"I wish," she said. And tears filled her eyes. "Oh God, how I wish I could burn myself down and start over. Burn myself down so I could go up to the house now and go in and live forever like a dairy maid full of berries and cream. Oh but hell. What's the use of talk like that?"

"Drive, Nora," I said, gently.

And she drummed the motor and we ran out of the valley, along the lake, with gravel buckshotting out behind, and up the hills and through the deep snow forest, and by the time we reached the last rise, Nora's tears were shaken away, she did not look back, and we drove at seventy through the dense falling and thicker night toward a darker horizon and a cold stone city, and all the way, never once letting go, in silence I held one of her hands.

The End