

SHE CAME TO HIM IN THE ALLEY, she put her arms around him and his breath came out in a grunt as her wet robe pressed against his chest. Intertwined like the fountain statuary they moved, she drew them out in a dizzy circle, into the spitting rain. Until he got wet enough to recognize her, to recognize himself.

“Noah, Noah, Noah,” he said into her hair.

She choked. When finally they stepped back enough to see each other, she shook her head slowly. All the years in her face that he had missed, each one made itself felt in broad gashes from his throat downward. It was hard even to be glad to see her. Hard even to stand up—the land legs, the sea legs, whichever one it was he lacked, or both—

“Are you back?”

If he held her too tight to see her, he was able to face her. “I don’t know.”

“I have to go to temple.”

No, he tightened his grip.

But she got his face in her hands, looked in his eyes.

“It’s dawn,” she said. “If you’re going to lurk about all night—”

The world began to order itself, began to take on manageable form, with only a brush of Noah’s sisterly pragmatism. Giving him, as if out of pity, a pole of identity.

“My boy,” she said, rubbing her wet fingers across his cheeks. He grabbed her fingers and kissed them.

“It’s dawn,” she said. She took his hand, pulled him gently toward the café, where the sacerpastoras were loading up their drums and sticks for the walk to the temple, and the sailors were staggering to their feet. Jackson had never felt more self-conscious.

They saw him now. Good lord, they stared. They stood there, ready to march as soon as the staring duty had been accomplished. One of the women held out Noah’s rainstick; she took it without letting go of his hand.

“My brother Jackson,” she said. With a quiet smile: “What the storm has washed in.”

“You were on the ship?” said one of the drunken sailors.

“Yes,” said Jackson.

“I didn’t know we had a passenger. Where have you been?”

“Not now,” said Noah. “Let’s go! It’s time!” The town was beginning to wake up; there were faint sounds of footsteps coming up the streets from the sea. The sacerpastoras formed their twin lines and began to drum and play their sticks. They began their walk up the boulevard to the temple with the young sailors in a wobbly mass behind them.

Jackson stayed close to the sacerpastoras. This discouraged conversation, but gave him little ease. He was stupid with fatigue, and he felt like a foreign anthropologist trying to be a good sport. As if his childhood on these very streets had been just a fantasy.

Except when he stared at Noah hard enough to shrink her, to feel her skinny strong arms around him back when her baby teeth were falling out, that ragged mouth wide in the roaring contests that left them collapsed in giggles. She told him everything once—strange to think there was a time when she was more isolated than he. But she never seemed to mind. He’d go to school and she’d be outside when he got out, ready to skip home with him. She was a magnificent child, for the brief time they let her be one.