

Castle Freeman Jr.

Squirrel Trouble at Uplands

UPLANDS, WHERE ELSIE WOULD BE SAFE, WHERE BLAKE WOULDN'T LOOK for her, proved to be a large, lofty, white-clapboarded, black-shuttered cliff of a house five miles from what seemed to be the nearest village. Elsie reached it sometime after three in the morning. She turned off her engine and sat exhausted, looking at the house, at the woods behind and around it, at the cold northern stars in their rural profusion wheeling above the peaked gable. Her engine cooled, ticked, sighed, was still. She had been driving for thirteen hours.

She left the car and made her way to the house by starlight. She found the key on the nail where Helen had said it would be. Inside, in the kitchen, she put her suitcase down. She felt for a wall switch, found one, and turned on the lights. She should call Helen and tell her she had arrived. She didn't. She didn't have the strength. She might have called. Helen was five hours ahead: eight in the morning in London. She would be up, but Hugh might not have left for the embassy yet; he might answer the phone, and Elsie didn't want to talk to him. She didn't want to talk to anybody. She left the kitchen and went through the downstairs turning on the lights.

In a sitting room, she found a couch with a heavy blanket folded on its back. She took off her shoes, she took off her dress, she lay down on the couch with her head on her arms. She would call Helen in an hour. She turned onto her side under the warm blanket.

She woke with a start, her heart galloping. Overhead, thumps and bumps and a kind of pattering and scabbling. Immediately she thought: Blake. No. Impossible. (Or was what she thought: *not yet?*) She sat up. Yellow sunlight streamed through the windows, and in the bright day all the lights were on. Elsie listened to the noises above. Mice. An old, closed-up house far out in the country would of course be full of mice. She stood, wrapped the blanket around herself, and went to the stairs. As she began to mount, the noises stopped. On the second floor she found four bedrooms and a bath. All were empty, all were silent. Elsie turned to go back downstairs. As she reached the foot of the stairs, the telephone in the kitchen rang. Elsie went to it. She looked at it. She touched it. She picked it up.

"You're there," said Helen. The overseas connection echoed.

"Yes."

"You got off all right, did you? No trouble?"

"No. I left for school as usual. He had a double shift. Has. He won't know

I'm gone, even now, maybe."

"Good. What did you tell the school?"

"That my sister was ill. That I was needed, couldn't say how long I'd be away."

"They took that?"

"Sure. They know you're over there. They know me. I never miss school. They'll get a sub."

"Good. What about the house? Is everything there all right?"

"I guess so. I went right to sleep, on the couch. There are mice upstairs. They woke me up. They run around."

"They're not right upstairs," said Helen. "They're in the attic. They're not mice, either. They're squirrels. Enormous great gray things. They live in the attic. We try to shut them out. But they get in somehow, don't they? I'll call Eli. He'll come with his trap."

"Who's Eli?"

"Oh, Eli's a kind of caretaker, I suppose," said Helen. "He's useful when he chooses to be. He lives on the next hill. Hugh calls him the spirit of the place. Quite a character, Eli is. You'll enjoy him."

"Does he have to come while I'm here?"

"Hugh will want him to. The squirrels make a mess. But Eli won't come right along. He'll come when he's ready. He might not come at all. I'll call him."

Elsie didn't speak.

"What about supplies?" Helen asked. "There's not much in the house, I don't think. Some cans. Did you bring anything?"

"No."

"Go to the village, then. Go to Clifford's. Clifford's is all right, mostly. Sniff the milk. If they have fish, don't get any. Do you have money?"

"Yes."

"Do you need money?"

"No. I have enough money."

"How much?"

"Five hundred, about."

"I'm going to wire you money," said Helen. "There's a bank branch in the village. You can get it there later today."

"There's no need."

"There's every need. I want you to stay there for as long as necessary. I mean that: as long as necessary. I want us to talk every day. I'll ring. I'll ring in the evening. If you don't answer, I'll ring the police."

"Oh, god, not the police."

"Well, of course, the police. Why not?"

"He *is* the police. He'll know."

"How will he know?"

"I don't know. He will. He'll have ways of finding out. Police ways. Systems."

"What systems?"

“I don’t know—systems. Systems of information.”

“Sweetie, get a grip,” said Helen. “He’s a dumb redneck highway cop in Virginia. He’s not Professor Moriarty.”

“West Virginia.”

“Well, I mean, that’s worse, isn’t it? Look, Else, I’m not asking. This is how we’re going to proceed. This is how we’re going to get you through. You’re in my house—Hugh’s house, my house. You’ll do as I say. You know it’s the best way. It’s the only way. It’s not as though you could change your mind and go back. Is it?”

“No. Not now.”

“No. So? All right?”

“All right.”

“We’ll speak tomorrow.” Helen hung up. She wasn’t Elsie’s big sister for nothing.



Blake. Not even Helen denied Blake had the whole package, for looks. “He’s gorgeous enough, isn’t he?” she’d asked Elsie, handing back a snapshot of Blake, dark, curly-haired, bare-chested, grinning in the cockpit of a boat. “He might be in films, mightn’t he?” Films. Elsie had been visiting Helen and Hugh in London. Helen, she found, had begun to sound vaguely British. “What’s he like, then?” Helen had asked.

“I don’t know,” said Elsie.

“You don’t know? What do you mean, you don’t know? You’ve been with him for months.”

“Three months. No, I meant, he’s not like anybody I’ve ever known.”

“I should hope not,” said Helen. She had taken against Blake, or the idea of Blake, from the beginning.

“I should hope he wasn’t like anybody you’d know,” said Helen.

Helen and Blake had never met. They never would. Blake knew Elsie had a married sister in the UK, but he didn’t know, he couldn’t have known, where. He couldn’t have known Hugh or their twins. And he couldn’t have known about Hugh’s family’s place, Uplands.

Blake didn’t know about Uplands and the rest because nobody had told him. Elsie hadn’t told him. Why hadn’t she? Was it because Elsie in some way knew, even early on, that she shouldn’t, that Helen was right? Was it because she knew some day she would need Blake not to know about Uplands? Was it because of now?



Elsie thought she might as well move into a proper bedroom upstairs. She would be more comfortable there than she had been on the couch, and her being up there might get the squirrels to shut up. She carried her suitcase and the blanket from the couch up the stairs and into the smallest bedroom. She found linens in a closet and made the bed. She opened the curtains and looked out the window. There was her little car, parked in the driveway below. It occurred

to her that if she slept upstairs she would be trapped there should somebody (should *somebody?*), should Blake enter the house. She would have to jump from an upper window, then, and the windows were high.

She gathered the blanket, picked up her suitcase, and went back downstairs. Later, in the kitchen, she found a can of chili and a bottle of wine. She had the chili for supper that evening, and she drank most of the wine. She hoped it would help her sleep. She hadn't left the house since she'd walked in the night before.

That night, on the couch, she lay awake. Upstairs, the squirrels weren't to be heard, but from outdoors, Elsie couldn't tell where but from some way off, came waves of odd shrieking, laughing sounds, tremulous whoops, now faint, now clearer, as though a loud party were going on in the next street. Elsie lay and listened, but she didn't sleep. She wasn't sleeping, she was waiting. She found the wine she'd drunk didn't help her sleep. It didn't help her wait. The cries from the party came and went. Wine and parties, parties and wine. Not for the first time, Elsie reflected that she hadn't always been well served by either.



They were four. They had Grant's car, but Grant said he'd better not drive, he was in bad shape; Rick, Elsie's blind date, was in worse; and Jill was semiconscious, so Elsie drove. Was that smart? Absolutely, it was not smart; but the band had gone home, and the bar was closed. Time to roll. Elsie got them down the long curving driveway and made the left. She got them out of the state park. Then she drove them into the ditch.

She might have passed out. She was sitting behind the wheel. She looked ahead. There was Blake, in the lights of his cruiser, talking to Grant, making notes. The others had left the car. Rick was locked in the back of the cruiser. Jill, Grant's fiancée, was leaning over behind the cruiser, being carefully sick into the roadside weeds. Blake was examining their identification. Presently he left them at the cruiser and came to Elsie where she sat alone in the ditched car.

"Evening, miss," said Blake. "You okay?"

"I guess so," said Elsie. "I don't know."

"Have you had anything to drink tonight, miss?"

Elsie giggled. "What do you think?" she asked him.

"What do I think?" Blake opened the driver's door. "You want to come with me, now, please, miss?" he said.

Elsie left the car. She was being arrested. She was being arrested for drunk driving. She let Blake lead her to his cruiser. He opened the passenger door in front and helped her in. Then he came around and took the driver's seat.

"Let's get you home, miss," said Blake.

"Home?"

"Wrecker's on the way. Sheriff, too. Nobody's hurt. Your friends will be fine. I'll take you home."

"I'm not under arrest?"

“No. Why would you be?”

“Well,” said Elsie, “you know: I was driving. I was under the influence. I still am.”

“You weren’t driving,” said Blake.

“Um,” said Elsie. “Yes, I was. You saw me. If I wasn’t driving, who was?”

“Who do you want to have been?”

“What?”

Blake grinned. “I’m teasing you, miss,” he said. “It’s Mr. Hathaway’s vehicle. He’s willing to have the report read he was driving so you won’t get the DUI.”

“Grant?”

“Mr. Hathaway is a real gentleman.”

“But what about you?” Elsie asked him. “Can you, you know—can you do that?”

“Can I do that?” said Blake. “I just did it. You’re clear. You’re okay. You’re on your way home. Everything’s good.”

Elsie didn’t speak.

“Don’t thank me,” said Blake.

“Thank you,” said Elsie.

They drove in silence. Blake took the road to Bluefield.

“I live in Bluefield,” Elsie told him.

“I know where you live, miss.”

“You do?”

“I ran your license. I run everybody’s license.” Blake nodded at the small computer monitor mounted under the cruiser’s dash. “You’re in the system,” he told Elsie. “You weren’t, but you are now.”

“Oh,” said Elsie.



“Oh, right,” said Helen on the phone that evening. “They’re coyotes. There’s a band of them, a pack. They live in the woods up the hill. We hear them, don’t see them much.”

“It sounded like somebody having hysterics,” said Elsie.

“Hugh thinks they sound like a muezzin. You know: the call to prayer? They’re harmless—well, they take people’s chickens, even cats and small dogs, but that’s all.”

“Do they go on like that every night?”

“No, no. You might not hear them again. They’re quite shy. Eli shot one once. He brought it by in his truck. Like an underfed German Shepherd. Have you got the money?”

“No. I don’t really need it, you know.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Helen. “It’s there. Go get it. Has Eli called?”

“No.”

“Have you been for supplies?”

“No.”

“For heaven’s sake, Else. You can’t simply shut yourself up in there, can you? You must eat. Brace up. It’s, what? Two o’clock where you are?”

“Yes.”

“Have you had your lunch?”

“No.”

“Go to the village, then,” said Helen. “Get lunch.”

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“Lunch, miss?”

Elsie had left school at the noon recess for a doctor’s appointment. Parked in front of the building was Blake’s cruiser. Blake was showing a few of the kids the vehicle. Elsie stopped short when she saw him.

“Buy you lunch, miss?” He shoed the kids away.

“I have a doctor’s appointment, afterwards,” said Elsie.

“I’ll take you over there when we’re done. Come on, miss, don’t want to be late for the doctor.”

Elsie approached the cruiser. Blake held the door for her.

“Wait,” said Elsie. She stepped back. “I mean, wait. Why are you here?”

“Take you to lunch.”

“But, wait. How? How did you know where to find me?”

“I told you the other night, miss. You’re in the system.”

Elsie got into the passenger’s seat and waited for Blake to come around and take the wheel. He started the engine, and they pulled away from the school. Elsie wasn’t satisfied.

“You had my license the other night,” she said. “That’s how you got my address. There’s nothing on my license about where I work. How did you know that?”

Blake smiled at her. “You can find about anything you want to on someone if you have the right files,” he said.

“Okay,” said Elsie. “Where do you get the right files, then?”

“The file place.”

They went to a barbecue stand a little out in the country. They sat at a picnic table, side by side. They had the table to themselves. Blake kept turning to look at her. Elsie was a little shy. She wasn’t a child; she knew when she was being courted. But she was used to a certain amount of time being taken, a certain amount of going around and around, a certain diffidence, a sense of things withheld, to be discovered presently. Blake withheld nothing.

“I never thanked you for helping me the night we wrecked,” she told him as they sat together.

“Yes, you did.”

“I did?”

“You don’t remember, maybe. You weren’t yourself.”

Elsie laughed. “I was hammered, you mean. But not myself? Really? How would you know? Is that in the system, too? How people are when they’re

themselves? Do you have a file for that, too?"

"What have I been telling you, miss? There's a file for everything. And, yes, you thanked me. It wouldn't have mattered if you hadn't, though. I was glad to do it."

"Why did you?"

Blake smiled. He looked right at her. "I thought you were about the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen," he said. "I still do. Is that a reason?"

They sat at their picnic table and talked for an hour and a half. Elsie's doctor was forgotten. When she remembered her appointment, she was far too late. Blake drove her back to school.

"I'll call you later," said Blake.

Elsie laughed. "Are you sure you have the number?" she asked him.

"You bet I'm sure," said Blake.

She floated back to her classroom that day. He had told her she was, what? The prettiest thing he'd ever seen? No: not the prettiest, the most beautiful. Elsie didn't get a lot of that. She found she didn't mind it.

Not everyone was so taken. Once some weeks after they had begun together, Elsie and Blake ran into Grant and Jill at the movies in Beckley. Afterwards, the four of them went for a beer. The next day, Grant called Elsie at school.

"Lose that guy," said Grant. "Stat."

"I beg your pardon?"

"That guy is a wrong guy. He is bad news. He's from outer space."

"Oh, of course," said Elsie. "You know him so well. Don't be silly. You just don't like him because he's an officer."

"An officer?" said Grant. "You mean a cop? He's no cop."

"What are you talking about? Of course he is."

"Want to bet? Look, just because he's got a flasher for his car and a little TV up front, and a uniform, and gun, and all, doesn't make him a cop. It does make him bad news. Lose him."

"I'm not sure you get to tell me who to lose and who to keep," said Elsie.

"I'm your friend," said Grant. "I'm telling you as a friend."

"Thanks for calling," said Elsie.



At Uplands, Elsie got into her car and drove to the village for groceries. A late fall day as hard and gray as a slate roof. When she reached the store in the village, Elsie nearly drove on past. Parked in front of the store was a state police cruiser. She had to force herself to slow and turn in to park beside it. She knew she was making herself crazy. She knew she had to stop doing that. She would stop now. The cruiser was a green Vermont cruiser, nothing like Blake's.

In the store, she filled her basket and waited at the counter with three others, one of them the state trooper whose vehicle was outside. Except for his short haircut and his heavy belt, he was nothing like Blake: he was older and softer, and he wore a gray moustache. He and the man behind the counter knew each other.

“Are you going into camp tomorrow?” the counter man asked the trooper.

“Going tonight,” said the trooper. “Leighton’s been up there a week.”

“Uh-oh,” said the counter man. “In that case, I’d probably better sell you some more beer, hadn’t I?”

“I’m expecting there will be plenty,” the trooper said. “There always is.”

“Fairchild’s boy took an eight-pointer off Diamond this week,” said the counter man.

“I saw it,” said the officer. “I hope there’s another.”

“There’s always another,” said the counter man. “Same as the beer: there’s always plenty. Good luck, anyway.” He turned to Elsie. “Miss?” he said.

Elsie clutched her basket. She didn’t move. “Miss?” she said.

The counter man nodded at her. He smiled. “You checking out, here, miss?” he asked.

“Oh, yes, sorry,” said Elsie.

Back at Uplands, carrying her bags into the house, she heard explosions. Shots. Somebody was shooting. Not far off, somebody was firing a gun. Not a gun—guns. More than one.

Bowm . . . bowm . . . bowm; brang . . . brang-brang; bam-bam-bam.

It was either guns or fireworks, and it wasn’t fireworks. Elsie hurried into the house and locked the door. She stood in the kitchen and listened to the shots. They seemed farther away than they had a moment ago, but was that simply because she was indoors?

“Shots?” asked Helen when she called. “You mean gunshots?”

“Lots of gunshots. Dozens.”

“Hunters,” said Helen. “It’s hunting season, it must be. Deer? I’m not sure. I think deer. Everybody there hunts.”

“I got that, but this wasn’t somebody shooting a deer—bang. This was many shots, very many. It went on for an hour. It sounded like a battle.”

“Well, I expect they’re practicing, aren’t they? Today’s Wednesday? The weekend must be the opening of the season, I expect. They’re getting ready, that’s all.”

“Getting ready?”

“You poor thing: you’ve really got the wind up, haven’t you? Not that it’s surprising. You’re frightened. Of course, you are. Of course he frightens you. He frightens me.”

“I thought you said he’s nothing but a dumb redneck traffic cop.”

“I did say it. He is that. He’s also crazy and dangerous. I’ve said that, too. Haven’t I, Else?”

“Yes.”

“More than once.”

“Yes.”

“Have you got the money?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

"I forgot."

"Well, get it, Else, for heaven's sake. Have you heard from Eli?"

"No," said Elsie.

"You poor thing," Helen said again. "I wish I were there. I suppose I could come over. It would take some doing."

"No," said Elsie. "No, no, no. I'm okay, really."

"There's something else," said Helen.

"Something else?"

"Yes. I'm sure it's nothing, but we've had a phone call. Two, actually. From the States. From 304. That's your what-do-you-call-it, isn't it?"

"Area code. What else?"

"Nothing else. One call came when nobody was here, the other one, yesterday, it was, I didn't answer. There was no message. There haven't been any calls since. That's all. It's nothing, but I thought I ought to tell you."

"It's Blake," said Elsie.

"I'm sure it isn't," said Helen. "And if it were, it means he has this number. So what? He's no nearer finding out where you are. There's nothing he can do."

"What does Hugh say?"

"Hugh doesn't know. He doesn't know about any of this. I haven't told him."

It was Blake who'd called Helen. Of course it was. But Helen was right: by itself, the call meant nothing. Blake had Helen and Hugh's number in London. Sure, he did. Elsie might have given it to him herself. She thought she remembered giving it to him. As Helen said, so what? Blake's calling didn't reach Uplands, it didn't reach her being at Uplands. Uplands was as safe as it had ever been.

Elsie stood by the phone. Outside, the gunshots had begun again, a little closer now, perhaps; though when she looked out the windows, she saw nobody. Where were they? Where were the hunters? "You poor thing," Helen had said. She didn't understand. She had thought Elsie was afraid of the hunters. No. Elsie didn't care about hunting. Their father had hunted ducks and geese around Chesapeake Bay with a shotgun that was bigger than Elsie. The gun had gone to Hugh. It was very likely in this house someplace, though Elsie hadn't seen it. Was it in the attic? She hadn't been in the attic.

Leave it there, if that's where it was. It wasn't hunting Elsie didn't like. It was guns. Blake had guns. Well, he was a cop, wasn't he (was he?). Therefore he had to have a gun. A gun, one gun. Blake had more than one gun, though, more than five. Blake had guns the way an old king has gold.

The first night Blake stayed over with Elsie, she lay in her narrow bed waiting for him. Blake came out of the bathroom and began to undress. He took off his shirt, then reached behind his back and unclipped a revolver in a leather holster from his waistband.

"Wait a minute," said Elsie. "What's that?"

"Thirty-eight Smith," said Blake. He put the gun on the floor beside the bed.

“What, are you going to bring it to bed?”

“To bed? It’s not in the bed. It’s on the floor.”

“Well, but, could you at least put it on the dresser?”

“Wouldn’t be much use to us way over there, would it, miss?”

“To us?” asked Elsie.

“You bet, us.”

That was Blake. From the beginning, he had bound her, or he thought he had, he acted as though he had. He was protective, he was attentive, he was affectionate. He wanted her all the time. Did Elsie like that? Absolutely, she liked it. She loved it. But, she found, there was an obverse, there was a price. He didn’t like her friends. He thought Grant was a moron, Jill, a slut. (Rick had moved on.) He wanted Elsie all the time, but that meant he wanted all of her. He called her seven or eight times a day, at school, at home. He wanted to drive her to school each morning and pick her up in the afternoon. Elsie told him that wouldn’t work because she often had meetings after school. It was a lie: she seldom had meetings after school; but Blake accepted it. He left off insisting on being her driver. Many days, however, he would be waiting in the cruiser when she left school. He would follow her home.

Home. Right off, Blake wanted them to live together. Elsie wasn’t sure. Blake pressed her. Elsie said her bed wasn’t big enough for two people. Blake bought them a new bed. Three men from the bed store came along with it to get it into Elsie’s apartment. Elsie gave in then. Why wouldn’t she? Weren’t she and Blake a couple? Weren’t they in love? Didn’t she want to live with Blake? If she didn’t, then what was she doing?

So, there was the bed, and there were the guns. Blake had the police-issue sidearm he wore on his belt when he was working. He had the gun in his waistband, another that he wore on his right ankle, another in the glove box of his car, another in a compartment in the driver’s door. He had two shotguns in the trunk. Blake had guns the way a cat has kittens, the way a rich woman has shoes. There’s always another kitten. There’s always another pair of shoes.

“What do you need so many for?” she asked him.

“Need, miss?” said Blake. “You don’t know what you need until you need it. Then you’d best have a choice. You see?”

“No.”

“It’s like having a pony in your yard,” said Blake. “You really love that pony. You couldn’t stand for anything to get in there and hurt it, any dog or anything. So you put a fence around your yard, right?”

“Okay . . .”

“So then, if you’re going to do that, you’d best make that fence go all around the yard, hadn’t you? So there’s no way anything can get in. So you know that pony’s safe. It’s safe all the time. That little pony that you love so much.”

Elsie counted days. She had been at Uplands three days, four if you included the day she traveled. It was five nights ago, then, that she had awakened in bed beside Blake to feel him touching her belly. She turned to him, then she froze.

Blake was touching her belly, not with his hand or his body, but with the barrel of a gun, one of his guns. Up and down and across her belly, lightly, gently, he moved the gun barrel.

“Blake?” Elsie whispered. “Honey? Please don’t do that.”

Blake didn’t stop. He too whispered. “Right here,” he whispered. He drew the gun barrel down her belly. “Right here. You and I? We have a baby together? This is where he’ll start, this is where he’ll live. Right here.”

“Honey?” Elsie whispered again.

“Don’t worry, miss,” Blake went on. “He’ll be safe. You’ll be safe. I’m here. I’m ready. I’m equipped. You know I am. I’ll keep us safe. I have what I need to keep us safe. All of us. I’ll take care of us.”

The next morning Elsie called Helen in London. That afternoon she drove north.



On her last day at Uplands, Elsie went to the village again, to the bank, to receive the money Helen had wired. She presented herself at the teller’s grille, with her identification. The teller was a pleasant, stout woman whose name badge said *Martha*. She had no record of Helen’s transfer. She tapped at her computer keyboard and looked again. She shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s not here.”

The door of the little bank opened, and the state trooper whom Elsie had seen in the store the day before came in. He stood in line behind Elsie.

“When did you say it was made?” the teller asked her.

“Um, yesterday or the day before.”

“It should be here, then. Do you have a bank number?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry,” the teller said again. “All I can tell you is check with the transferring party, ask them to reconfirm. Maybe they used the wrong number. Tell them it hasn’t come through.”

“Don’t believe her, miss,” said the trooper, behind Elsie. Elsie turned. “Don’t you believe her. What it is, is this one grabbed it. She’s cashed it in, going to take it down to Foxwoods. She does it all the time. We can’t control her.” The trooper winked at Elsie.

“Pay no mind to him,” said the teller, smiling. “He thinks he’s funny.”

“I am funny,” said the trooper. “Aren’t I, miss?” Another wink.

Elsie drove back to Uplands. Helen hadn’t used the wrong bank number for her transfer. Helen had never used the wrong number in her life. (Wrong numbers were Elsie’s department, weren’t they?) Elsie stopped in the driveway and opened the car door. Stepping out of the car, she glanced, only for an instant, at the house and thought she saw the curtains in the attic window part, then close. She stood and looked at the single high window, right under the peak of the roof. The curtains were thin, she knew. A draft might have moved them. The squirrels that lived in the attic might have moved them. Anything might have.

Elsie went to the house. She got out her key to let herself into the kitchen.

She didn't go in. She peered through the window in the kitchen door. She couldn't see much in there.

The telephone in the kitchen rang. Elsie waited outside. Then she put the key in the lock, turned it, opened the door, and went to the phone.

"Else, thank god," said Helen. "I've been calling for an hour. Something has happened."

"Blake," said Elsie.

"He called. He spoke to Hugh. Hugh told him where you are. He didn't know he wasn't to."

"When?"

"I blame myself," said Helen. She might have been crying. (Helen, crying?) "I ought to have told him all about Blake and you. I didn't. He's so conventional, isn't he? Our crazy family. It's my fault. I feel terrible."

"When?"

"Last night. I was out. Hugh didn't mention it right away. He just told me. Listen, Else, he knows. He'll come. He's coming now. He'll be there. You must get out. You must leave this minute . . . Else?"

The phone swung by its cord. Elsie walked across the kitchen into the room where she slept. Blake wasn't coming. He was here. He was in the attic. He was in the attic with the invisibles: the squirrels, the coyotes, the deer hunters; with the strangers: the counter man, the state trooper who thought he was funny, Martha the bank teller; with the hypotheticals: Helen's money transfer, the pony in Elsie's yard, the baby in Elsie's belly. All of them, all of them were up there. They wouldn't stay up there much longer. She saw her suitcase on the floor. She should pack. No time.

She ran back into the kitchen. At the wall, the phone swung to and fro on its cord. "Else?" it said. "Else?"

Elsie didn't answer. She heard them coming downstairs, talking, laughing, whooping, thumping, scabbling, shooting: *bowm . . . bowm*. She fled to the door, opened it, and flung herself out—practically into the arms of a large man with bad teeth who stood at the door, preparing to knock, holding some kind of wire cage or pen in his other hand. He smiled at Elsie and raised the cage to show her.

"Whoa," the man said. "Slow down, there. Somebody got squirrel trouble?"