

FENCE of EARTH

by

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"No going not followed by a return: This is the boundary of heaven and earth."

from the *I Ching*
Hexagram 11, Peace

CHAPTER ONE

May 18, 1980

Maggie spotted him near the artichokes, out of the corner of her eye. She dropped the grapefruit she was holding. He was the man who'd told her that her husband Scott had killed himself. He was ten feet away, down the same aisle. Was it him? She turned away, towards the hanging baskets, and began to examine the difference between the English walnuts in the top basket and the black walnuts in the lower one.

This man's hair was completely white. But it had been more than eleven years since she'd seen him. She'd been back in California for almost a year. The man carried himself with the same military grace with which she remembered him from the Oceanside boatyard.

She knew his name. But what was it?

She wondered how he had recognized her at a distance in those days. Because she was with Scott? Or, after they separated, because she always went to the boat where Scott was living? Or by her chartreuse VW van, or lavishly embroidered bell-bottoms? Or because her long chestnut hair, kept down usually with a headband, was curlier than most? If so he surely wouldn't recognize her now. Her hair was cropped. She was eight months pregnant.

Now he was a foot nearer, by the plums. Her knees were giving way. What was he doing in Monterey? Only the locals shopped at this fruit and vegetable stand. He was four hundred miles north of his home.

A boy of about ten appeared next to him. The man turned towards him, and she could see his profile. The same leathery, suntanned skin, the straight nose, the trim chin now sagging slightly.

She had always liked him. Though she would never have admitted it then, the fact he was way over thirty and a retired Naval officer had given her a sense of security. He hadn't seemed to notice their freaky hair. Once he'd called her "the pretty-faced girl." He was always there early in the morning. He used to wave to them, and sometimes stopped to talk. He'd told them a few stories about World War II. He had taken great care of his boat.

She touched the baskets, steadying herself. She could almost hear his easy voice. The black walnuts were blacker than the English. She picked one up. They were also more bitter.

He hadn't told her directly. He had informed Scott's parents that Scott had hung himself. They, in turn, had called her in Michigan. Laying the black phone on its hook, telling her sister Carole, she'd wondered why he was the one who'd told them. How had he known? What did he have to do with it?

One thing for sure. He knew more than she did.

"Grandpop, will you buy us some peaches, too?"

Maggie moved her head just enough to see them walk to the cashier. A woman and a little girl, younger than the boy, joined them. They were leaving. She would not have to reveal herself now, she would not have to speak to him. But could she? She turned a little further towards them.

A pain seared her heart. No. She could not.

He pocketed his change. The little girl tugged on his arm and pointed to the peaches. The man's gaze followed, and for a split second, Maggie saw him full-face.

Hank. That was his name.

PART ONE: MORNING

CHAPTER TWO

May 19, 1980

The hills of Corral de Tierra lay like old velvet, worn over the ridges, brushed deep brown one way and golden the other. The dark clotted shapes of manzanita and bay bushes abounded upon them and the winter's rains had left a haze of green. Spanish moss hung from the scrub oak trees, and the air in the afternoons was dry and cool. Fiery poppies and mustardweed rose up among the wild oats.

The house was on top of one of these hills, in the Pastures of Heaven, east of Monterey, between the Salinas and Carmel Valleys. On a clear day you could see all the way to the Pacific Ocean as far north as Santa Cruz. But this morning there was fog.

Maggie and Jed lay cupped together in the bedroom of this house. There was a rhythm like the hills in the rumpling of the blankets that covered them and in their bodies beneath the blankets. Maggie was nearing the full of her term of pregnancy. She could lie only on her side to be comfortable, and she was lying that way now. Jed lay on his side too, the length of his chest along her back, his arm over her belly.

She opened her eyes, then closed them again. She had to go to the bathroom. She pressed her back ever so slightly closer to his chest. This natural heat from their bodies, it was the best warmth. Jed's skin was so sweet. The net of tiny curls on his stomach and chest nuzzled her cozily.

She couldn't lie turned to him the other way anymore. She missed that, her breasts and belly snug to his back, her hips and thighs bending around his buttocks. She liked to put her arm around his chest, floating her hand atop his cushioning hair.

She had been dreaming. She'd moved among the crowds in the seaport town, a hang glider surrounding her like a parachute. She was bountiful with fruits and nuts and vegetables. There was a child, her child. It was normal, nothing deformed, nothing missing, it was intelligent, could speak, she inspected it for all these things.

She'd stepped one, two, three, and sprung off from the ground into a thermal of air. She was rising over cliffs and high dunes, she and her bountiful hang glider, on a powerful current. Winds rushed past, she became terrified, it was sweeping her out over nothing but ocean.

She opened her eyes again. Dim grey light. The hands on the clock said a little before five. An hour shy of rising. It won't be this quiet for us much longer, she thought, and after that, not for a long time again.

Last spring she was performing with the dance company in New York. How astonishing that what wasn't, became what was. Her stomach growing over the months to this globe. Last spring she hadn't even met Jed. Who was he? He was a stranger, really. What did they have to do with one another?

How equally astonishing that what was became what wasn't. Scott popped into her mind and she dismissed his image swiftly. But then she thought, what of Jed? He was a man. Would he leave her too?

She drew away from him and felt a cool space along her back. Scott and I were married, I'm not married to Jed, she thought. But I am pregnant. So we are bound.

She got up. She moved carefully so Jed would not rouse. At the bedroom door she remembered with a jolt: she'd seen Hank.

Hank had been there at the end and she hadn't.

She was not going to think about Hank or Scott. She had this baby to think about, and Jed.

In the bathroom, she squatted down on the toilet and rested her hand on the top of her belly, which seemed to be all there was of her. "Hello in there," she said.

She'd miscarried Scott's baby. That bloody matter. It had plopped into the toilet.

She'd not allowed herself to consider that these months.

Not told Jed.

On the way back to bed she heard her cat scratching on the screen doors of the bedroom. She drew the chintz drapes aside and peered through the glass. There had been this kind of dense fog the first day she had awakened in this house. She slid the screen and the glass door back just a crack. Kootchimoo rubbed in past her bare legs. Her fur was damp.

Maggie shivered. She couldn't even see the garden. Usually when it was like this, she felt secure within the house and protected against the outside world. But this morning she felt the thick moisture threatening to enter the room. She pulled the door shut.

"Where've you been this time?" Jed's voice was thick with sleep.

She turned to him. "The Himalayas." Kootchimoo was already at Jed's armpit, purring.

"What'd you see there?"

"Parasols, made of paper."

"Did you bring any for me?"

"I couldn't. A great mist melted them away."

"Ohh," he said, sleepily. "You brought me a tiger though." He stroked Kootchimoo.

"Yes," she said.

"Come back to sleep."

She squatted, cupping her hands beneath her belly until she sat on the edge of the bed. She drew her legs up and pressed her hands down by one side, straining against the weight of her belly so as not to flop when she lay down, but she did, anyway. She had been getting into bed this way for the last month.

"You okay?" He put a finger through a curl on the back of her neck.

"No." She snuggled back against him.

"What's the matter?"

"I long to pee in one full steady stream."

He kissed her earlobe. "You'll be able to do that in a couple of months."

The cat stood above her. She was white with black patches like abstract butterflies. Maggie lifted the covers and Kootchimoo disappeared inside. She did that occasionally when she'd been out a long time in the night or when there was a storm. Maggie hoped she would stay awhile underneath. There was nothing more delicious than lying between her soft fur on one side and Jed's vibrant skin on the other. This purring bundle, this draping warmth. This nest.

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The alarm jangled. "Just throw the goddamn thing across the room," Jed murmured.

She reached for it but Jed stretched across her and snapped the button in. "It would be utterly satisfying to throw the thing across the room," she said.

"You'd just have to get another one. McGinty used to do that. Went through alarm clocks like nobody's business." Jed rolled onto his back, and Kootchimoo leapt off the bed.

"Who's McGinty?"

"He was another young fool compatriot in arms. A crazy Irishman."

Was he using the past tense because he knew this guy in the past? Or because he was dead? She was never sure when Jed spoke of someone in Vietnam. She was never sure whether to ask.

"Helicopter gunner. Had hair the color of cantaloupe. Freckles to match. We called him Cant. Sometimes Cant Lope."

He'd had the dream again last night. He made urgent, strangled sounds, a whimpering; she woke thinking she heard forsaken baby birds. He tried to sit up. His head moved slowly from one side of the pillow to the other, as if his eyes were following something at a great distance.

She turned towards him. "Did he come back?"

"Nope." He was staring at the ceiling. "He was the first guy I knew well. First guy I knew who got zapped."

She lifted her hand to his cheek, but he did not yield to it.

I understand, she wanted to say. Yesterday I saw Hank! Tomorrow eleven years ago Scott hung himself! Don't go away!

"That was my first glimpse Nam was real life," he said softly. "Not on yer silver screen, Mr. Jones."

She put her arm on his chest.

This time he covered it with his. "So, what do you think, Magoo? What's in store?"

It was a game they'd fallen into which she'd come to think of as Whimsical Expectations; each foretold something amusing or silly in the day for the other. Sometimes they failed in that regard. "You will not run into your ex-wife on the road," she'd replied once. Her favorite was when he'd said "I'll bring you home the Big Dipper for dinner." What would they dip with the Big Dipper? And how would he carry it home?

But this morning she replied, "We're steeped in fog."

"Oh." He ceased caressing her ear. "Go back to sleep. I'll get coffee and a donut at the hangar."

"No. I like having breakfast with you."

"Tell you what. I'll fix breakfast. I'll call you when it's ready."

"Thanks, Jed. I'd love that." She was tired. She'd slept fitfully for several weeks, waking nightly two or three times to go to the bathroom. "Would you do me another big favor?" she asked, as he got up. "Would you feed Kootchi?"

"After last night? Your wish is my command." He saluted, picked up the cat, and drew the door closed so gently behind him that it slipped back open.

Maggie moved to the middle of the bed. There was the sound of tap water. He was shaving. Clinkings, the return of the razor, toothbrush.

Now there came a deeper longer stream, then the giant lion-fish roaring from the bowels of the toilet. The monster lurking beyond the hole was invisible, but if you fell in, the lion-fish'd slurp you up like an oyster and you'd be muffled in the flushing. That's what she'd thought when so small a child that she could fall in, or thought she could, if she didn't hold onto the sides.

So many childhood memories rising up. She'd asked other women in the birthing classes if they were experiencing this. One volunteered, "It's more than that, I

feel like a baby myself." That woman had been eight and a half months pregnant while Maggie had been only five then. Now she understood her perfectly. Here she was, round-bellied, emotional, sleeping in spurts, peeing and dripping. At this moment her nipples were leaking colostrum. "Ol soggy breasts," she called herself. "Dewy," Jed would assert. Said they were a great invention, tits. He had more respect for them than he'd ever had. What an ecological system.

She'd call Francine later. Fran knew what tomorrow was. The only friend who did know. She'd tell Fran about seeing Hank. That's how she'd hold onto the sides.

She heard the shower. Jed was singing. "Why did I tell you, it was bye-bye to Shanghai, when I was only going to Salinas?" The tune fell low on the last word. He didn't have the best voice in the world. Faltering, a little off, but full of life and humor. What more could you ask of a voice? Scott loomed in her memory across the firelight on the beach in Ensenada, his face intense, aglow, watching her face, singing a song he'd written for her. You could ask that it be strong, full-toned, sensuous. You could ask that it hold a tune, have perfect pitch.

There was a taste like chicory in her mouth. You could ask for someone who had more to offer than perfect pitch, she thought.

The shower stopped. Jed often sang this ditty and each time he'd change the destination. Now she heard "...it was so long to Hong Kong, when I was on-ly go-ing to Na-a-am?"

Every guy she'd known then had escaped that war one way or another. Scott got his draft notice a year after they'd been married, in 1966. No way he'd go, hell no. It was hard to imagine Jed being so different then, and so different than she had been.

Jed had come home from Vietnam to find that his wife had left him, about the same time that Maggie had left her husband, gone to the mountains, fled to Iowa, then Michigan.

How much did he measure by that rift in his life? As much as she did?

He came in the bedroom, slid the closet door open, hangers pinging. She heard the soft movements of cotton drawn over skin, the tinkle of a belt buckle.

Jed was the all-American quarterback for Monterey. His ex-wife was half-Mexican, a cheerleader at North Salinas High, her father a truck farmer. Jed used to drive from Big Sur to Salinas every weekend to pick up Teresa in the T-Bird he inherited when his father died of a heart attack.

After graduation, Jed took over his father's photography shop in Carmel. His mother remarried and moved to Cape Cod. Teresa wanted an upper class California life with a swimming pool and a country club, Jed had inherited enough money for both, and they were in lust. So they got married, bought a house, then he was drafted. She'd re-married a doctor, much older than herself, with grown children and a swimming pool larger than Jed's.

If Jed took off for Salinas or the moon, Maggie would do something thrilling. She'd head straight back to the Big Apple, dance again with Kei Takei's Moving Earth. Why, she'd take up choreography, start her own company. She knew how to be alone, knew the peculiar longing hunger of loneliness, she could be alone again. Jed could go off. Scott went all the way out of the world. They could all go off. She would go on.

Jed had shut the door. She could hear nothing but the fog's whispering silence. And her own shallow breathing.