

O W L E Y E S



J O Y C E C A R O L O A T E S

“Fifteen.”

“*Fifteen*. That seems young.”

It is an inane remark. He steels himself for more.

In the advanced calculus class at the Math Institute twenty-six university students regard him with curiosity. Unmistakably, Jerald Tabor is the youngest individual in the room. His cheeks smart with an obscure sort of shame as the late-middle-aged professor continues in a vague kindly manner:

“Well, it is true in math there is no ‘young’ – no ‘old.’ In math all ages abide equally . . .”

The professor is a renowned mathematician, Jerald knows. Has been told.

Though the professor’s name is not one Jerald will readily recall as he will not readily recall the man’s face if he happens to encounter him outside the classroom.

Still less is Jerald Tabor likely to learn the names of other students in the class, or their faces. In the six-week summer session he will scarcely glance at them at all, as in the public school he has attended for years he has made little effort to learn the names and faces of classmates. Jerald is unsentimental and prag-

matic: memory is precious, not to be squandered on what is inconsequential.

In this class as in other classes Jerald feels “islanded” – uncomfortably distinct from the other students. As often he feels “islanded” in life.

As if – almost – he can see a shimmering aura surrounding him, setting him apart from others.

They see him, or some variant of him. Always from the outside, at a little distance.

Sometimes these others are friendly. More often, they are not so friendly. They can be cruel, crude, indifferent, curious. They can be unexpectedly kind. Sometimes they are resentful, as the undergraduates in this class are likely to be resentful of a skinny lanky-limbed fifteen-year-old high school junior with math skills (allegedly) sharper than their own.

Jerald’s mother has told him many times that he is *special*. He understands that he has no choice in the matter.

There! – the owl-eyed man. Staring at Jerald so strangely.

Not often is Jerald aware of his surroundings, still less of strangers in public places. Yet he notices this man.

A startled look in the stranger’s face. Eyes magnified behind thick lenses.

Is this someone Jerald should know? Someone who knows *him*?

It is frightening to Jerald, who rarely goes anywhere alone, whose mother has overseen much of his life, to realize that he has seen this man before: at the train depot, on campus, in the vicinity of the Math Institute.

Jerald is a shy boy, too shy even to turn away quickly from a rude stranger as another boy might. Instead he stands irresolute at the foot of the math building steps as other students pass around him. His heart is beating rapidly. He’d had a triumph in the calculus class, the professor standing at the green board had directed a curt nod of approval in his direction – *Good work*. No words, just the nod, and the joy in Jerald’s heart, glaring up quickly, in gratitude.

The stranger might be in his mid-fifties, or older – Jerald has a vague sense of adult ages. He wonders if it is someone who knows his mother.

It is the eyes that frighten Jerald. So fixed upon Jerald's face, intense and glaring behind the lenses of his glasses – *owl eyes* . . .

Quickly Jerald moves on. In the wake of a noisy cluster of undergraduates as if he were one of them.

It is true, Jerald Tabor is fifteen. But not a mature fifteen.

He is thin, underdeveloped for his age. Fairly tall – five feet seven – but with narrow shoulders, the face of a bright evasive-eyed eleven-year-old.

His mother selects his clothes for him. Lays out his clothes for him. If he has distractedly misbuttoned a shirt she buttons the shirt correctly. It is rare for her to chide him. She does not at all mind his dependence upon her. She brushes his stiff pale hair, which he is likely to have forgotten, but she has no need (at least) to remind him to brush his teeth – that, Jerald never forgets, for the sensation of bits of food between his teeth is disagreeable.

Much of his waking life Jerald is at his computer. If he is away from his computer he is immersed in his iPad.

The actual world is blinding to him. A maze. But if there is a way to be memorized through the maze, Jerald will memorize it.

The great adventure of Jerald's young life until now: commuting to the Math Institute at the university each weekday afternoon for six weeks, mid-June through July, to take a course in advanced calculus.

Five days a week Jerald takes the 11:47 A.M. train – alone – for fifty-three minutes to the university which brings him there well in time for his 2 P.M. calculus class. Five days a week his mother drives him to the train depot and will be waiting to pick him up when he returns at 6:09 P.M.

On the Saturday before his first class Jerald's mother and he rehearsed the trip to the university in every particular. Travel from home to the Math Institute, and back, can be divided into seven distinct steps, and these steps Jerald has memorized as in a game of chess in which all moves are known beforehand.

It was Jerald's high school math teacher, Mr. Edelman, who arranged for Jerald to receive a summer scholarship at the Institute. "How far you can go in math isn't for me to say, Jerald. But I know that you are already beyond me." Mr. Edelman had spoken

affably, frankly. You could see in his face the relaxation that comes with knowing his limits.

Jerald has seen his math teacher at the mall with his young children and has understood that there is happiness in Mr. Edelman's life, in the life of the family, that has nothing to do with the math-world. This would be beyond Jerald, he thinks. He will have to content himself with the higher life.

Though sometimes, it frightens him, there might be no higher life.

How Mr. Edelman acquired a scholarship for Jerald at the prestigious Math Institute Jerald does not know, though (he supposes) his mother has to know, for she'd had to approve.

Jerald is enrolled in Calculus II for credit. Jerald is not merely *auditing* the course, he is *enrolled* in the course as if he were (already) a university undergraduate.

You must not fail, Jerald. You must not embarrass us.

These are unspoken words, of course. Jerald's mother would never speak so openly.

The university is a very elite school. Often this is said, with an air of subtle reproach. As if *very elite* were an insult directed against those who are not, who cannot be, will never be *very elite*.

Jerald's mother has sometimes spoken of the university and all that the university entails with an air of reproach. Or rather, with an air of bitterness and chagrin. For she'd once been a Ph.D. student, and an instructor, at another university of nearly the same prestige, in another state.

Now that Jerald, who is her only son and indeed her only family, has been given a scholarship to the Math Institute she is not so bitter, though she is still wary.

She is proud of Jerald, of course. Yet she is anxious for him.

... must not fail. Even if no one knows but us.

Failure preoccupies Jerald's mother. Much of life, most of life, for most people, is *failure*. For *failure* is measured by a significant *lack of success*.

There is much in their lives about which Jerald's mother does not speak to him. So much that Jerald does not hear. Yet anxiety pervades the household as a faint chemical odor sometimes pervades the air of the small suburban community in northeast New Jersey where they live.

In the calculus-world all anxieties rapidly fade. It has always been the case that while doing math, even simple arithmetic when he'd been a child, Jerald has forgotten the ordinary anxieties of his life; he forgets even his mother, whose pride has kept him leashed close to her, in an old dispute (about which Jerald knows little) with the man said to be his father.

The location of Jerald's father is not clear. Not even the man's exact name is known to Jerald, for it is (evidently) not Tabor – this is the maiden name of Imogene's mother. It has not (yet) occurred to Jerald to question his mother, who has assured him that his father has cut off all ties with them and is so remote from them as to inhabit another “galaxy.”

Sometimes his mother's pinched mouth refuses to utter so much; the unspoken words become a din like nocturnal insects in the dry heat of summer that keep Jerald awake at night.

But the calculus-world is another world. It is both distant and contiguous with this world, into which Jerald can pass like a child stepping through a transparent wall.

“Hello. Is it – Jerald?”

He has not eased away in time. Saw Owl Eyes approaching him on the walkway after class and now it is too late.

It has always been painful to Jerald to give pain to another. To seem to be, still less to *be*, discourteous to any adult.

So, now. Trapped.

“I think we know each other? At least, I know you – ‘Jerald Kovacs’ – ”

The stranger speaks with a faint accent and with an air both hesitant and eager. Such yearning in the voice, Jerald wants to flee.

He is not at ease with the emotions of others, particularly adults. It is frightening to him to be *responsible*.

“Not ‘Kovacs’? – has your mother changed your name?”

Changed his name? He has no idea. The possibility has never occurred to him.

Shyly shaking his head *no*. For indeed – literally – with the unyielding logic of the computer – *Jerald Kovacs* is not his name.

Owl Eyes seems not to register *no* and steps nearer. Owl Eyes

risks a smile. He has a swarthy mole-stippled skin, graying dark hair to his shoulders that looks windblown.

A hot midsummer afternoon, yet the owl-eyed man is wearing a brown cloth jacket with pleats and buttons over a white cotton shirt. His trousers are of a texture too heavy for summer. On his feet are leather sandals that expose waxy-white toes with gnarled and discolored toenails.

“But it is ‘Jerald’ – isn’t it?”

Jerald ducks away vaguely shaking his head. It is not like him to be rude, but he has panicked, he must escape.

Hears Owl Eyes call after him – “Jerald? Wait, please . . .”

No no *no*.

On lanky-long legs near-running. His heart is a frantic fluttering in his chest like a trapped bird.

The stranger seems to know him: *Jerald*.

He is *Jerald*. He is not ever *Jerry*.

He is a shy boy, but he is also a vain boy, he thinks well of himself. He has been taught to think well of himself, that he will not despair of himself.

You are special, Jerald. You are special to me.

Many times he has been warned by his mother: Do not speak with strangers. Do not let strangers speak with you.

Yet (he is thinking) his mother would have wished him to behave more courteously with Owl Eyes, who might be (Jerald sees this now, with a stab of chagrin) a professor at the university, a person of importance not to be so rudely dismissed.

Politely might’ve said, *Sorry sir, my name is not Kovacs. That is not my last name.*

Might’ve said, *Sorry sir, but I have to catch a train . . .*

This is how another, more responsible boy would have responded, Jerald supposes.

Another boy, or a girl, his age, approached by an owl-eyed stranger with a faint accent, carrying a briefcase.

Jerald will tell his mother, of course. Jerald’s mother always questions him closely about the university, whom he might have met there or at the train depot.

It is late afternoon, a waning hour, temperature above 90 degrees on this midsummer day. University undergraduates are

wearing shorts, torn jeans, T-shirts, sandals. All are older than Jerald and yet they seem younger than he, more carefree, careless, exuberant. Like glittering minnows they move in waves. Their eyes pass through Jerald Tabor, for he is invisible.

It is a comfort to him, to be invisible. That is the promise of the math-world.

He has slowed his pace. No need to run!

What time is it? – only 4:35.

His train home doesn't leave until 5:16 P.M. He hopes that the owl-eyed stranger will not follow him to the train depot, for (he believes) he'd seen the man there at least once . . .

The train arrives at the university depot at 5:12 P.M. and departs just four minutes later, but Jerald always boards well before this. These precise times Jerald's mother wrote down for him, but of course Jerald has no need to consult her notes, for Jerald memorized them immediately, it is no effort for Jerald to memorize even complicated notations, and Jerald is very anxious about arrivals and departures, *away* and *home*.

By a circuitous route – (in case Owl Eyes is following him after all) – Jerald arrives at the depot nearly a half-hour early.

Few passengers here at this time. No one who looks familiar.

No one who glances at him with more than passing interest.

Jerald has his ticket, purchased that morning by his mother. Several times he checks the ticket in his wallet just to make sure.

Jerald's stop is the first stop. Soon he will be home.

What can go wrong? Nothing can go wrong.

His mother will be awaiting him at the depot. His mother will probably be in her car, awaiting his train. He will see the car first. He will feel a stab of comfort seeing the gunmetal-gray compact awaiting him.

Comfort in this knowledge certain as mathematical certainty, or almost.

Awaiting the 5:12 P.M. arrival Jerald sits on a bench at the farthest end of the platform facing the track, where no one is likely to approach him. His iPad is open, he has lost himself in the calculus-world, where no one can follow him and no one is named.

Jerald's mother has said she'd left the university world just in time.

Escaped with my life.

Jerald has asked few questions of his mother, for it is not very real to him, a time before his birth. A time before his mother was *his mother* is neither comprehensible nor desirable to contemplate.

Jerald understands that his mother “works” – as other adults “work” – but Jerald knows little of the nature of her work and has not been encouraged to ask about it.

Nine to five, five days a week, a routine job in an office, a job requiring little thinking and little decision making for she’d *Put all that behind me when I lost my nerve.*

Nerve is what you need for a certain sort of life. But one day she’d had enough, she said. At the prestigious university in another state.

No more books, no more thinking. Not the kind of thinking that requires *nerve*.

Jerald’s mother had vacated her small office shared with several others. She’d set out on a table armloads of books with a sign *Free books, please take!* Psychology, computer science, math, economics, analytic philosophy, biology, even art history. These books had caused her to think too much, and had made her sick.

Essentially it was whatever was inside the books that had made her sick. Prying open such books with your fingers, trying to read, underline, comprehend, and assimilate – what a risk! Like biting into a sandwich in which there is broken glass. Or something poison. Rotted.

When Jerald’s mother thought obsessively (she’d told Jerald) she had trouble breathing. Trouble sleeping. Strangers “tramped” through her dreams. The solution (obviously) was to give away the toxic books that had once meant so much to her when she’d been young, hopeful, and stupid.

It was not like Jerald’s mother to speak like this to him. Afterward Jerald (who was twelve at the time) would find it difficult to believe that his mother had ever spoken so openly about her personal life, and at such length.

She’d described how she hated that the books began with particular sentences which excluded all other sentences. This made the books incomplete. What was incomplete was a lie. What was a lie was an insult. What was an insult would do harm, like a wound.

The solution was to give away all that tied her to her old self, to cut her ties with the past and make a new life.

There was no information about the father. Or about other men, who (Jerald very vaguely recalls) had appeared sometimes in their home and at mealtimes.

Shyly Jerald had asked about *father*. He had not said *my father* but rather *Was there a father?* – in a voice so soft his mother seemed scarcely to have heard.

If a man appeared in his mother's life, and if a man disappeared out of his mother's life, there was no available information. There was no language, only just silence.

It is very easy to forget silence.

Yet Jerald's mother has kept a few books from that long-ago time before his birth. Mostly paperbacks, textbooks. Surreptitiously Jerald has perused them in the damp basement of their house. He'd been younger then, no more than nine or ten, curious. He had not yet imagined that curiosity might be wounding.

In one of the textbooks he'd seen a passage outlined in yellow marker –

Life on earth is believed to have evolved from a single primitive species, a self-replicating molecule that lived more than 3.5 billion years ago. The agent for evolution is *natural selection*.

Numerically, he understood *billion*, as he understood *million*. But in no actual way.

He'd asked his mother what *billion* meant. With a quick smile she'd drawn a graph on a sheet of paper in which one half-inch represented 100,000 years and so *1,000,000,000* leapt off the page and onto the wall, around the corner and onto the hallway wall. Jerald's mother laughed at the child's perplexed face.

"Of course you can't *imagine*, silly. No one can."

Jerald does not tell his mother about the owl-eyed man who has (mis)identified him as Jerald Kovacs. Jerald will keep a watch at the university and try to avoid Owl Eyes.

He had not liked Owl Eyes saying *your mother*.

What right had a stranger to say those words – *your mother!*

It is understood that Jerald tells his mother everything – or

nearly. Not about his math classes, which have become too abstruse for her to follow, but other, easier classes, and always about people, adults and classmates, who have “interacted” with him. But Jerald has no intention of telling her about Owl Eyes because (he believes) she will become upset, agitated, and (possibly) report Owl Eyes to university authorities.

A stranger has made unwanted advances to my son who is only fifteen years old . . .

Jerald’s mother has access to his computer, his iPad. Not a nook or a sliding panel or a shadowy crack in Jerald’s life is inaccessible to his mother though (in fact) (so far as he knows) his mother does not often investigate his online activities, which are math- and science-related almost exclusively.

Jerald’s mother is not jealous of others in Jerald’s life – (classmates, friends) – for there are no others.

It’s a paradox, she has said. Pronouncing the word with care – *paradox*.

Nothing matters except family – the bond of mother and son. This tie will prevail when all other ties fail.

Yet all that is merely personal in life is transient and of little intrinsic worth. Jerald’s mother is enough of a scientist-mathematician to understand this.

“You will live in both worlds, Jerald. No matter how far you go in the math-world you will always return to your mother.”

“Afraid you’re on the wrong train, son.”

These words most dreaded by Jerald Tabor.

He has given his ticket to the conductor as usual, but this time the conductor frowns at it, for there has been an error, it is Jerald’s error, in an instant Jerald breaks into a clammy sweat and is rendered helpless.

Seeing the stricken look in Jerald’s face the conductor takes pity on him and explains that the train he has boarded is an earlier train running seventy minutes late due to a breakdown and the train he should have boarded is running just four minutes late.

And so it has happened that Jerald boarded the train at the correct time, but the train he boarded was not the correct train.

Fortunately the conductor assures Jerald that the train he is on is stopping at the university in any case.

“I can accept your ticket, son. But just for your information – you are on the wrong train.”

Jerald murmurs thanks. He is weak with relief.

As the conductor moves away Jerald feels a wave of shock that his mother should have been so careless and failed to protect him. Very easily it might have happened that Jerald had boarded a train that would take him far from the university, to a distant place . . . She’d driven him to the depot that morning as usual and had taken it for granted that the train that pulled in beside the platform at the “right” time was the train Jerald should have been taking.

Though the conductor accepted Jerald’s ticket as if it were the correct ticket, and though Jerald didn’t miss his calculus class nor was he even late to the university, yet the experience has shaken him. He is thinking he can’t trust the trains, he must double-check his ticket each time. Can’t trust his mother.

Terror in the magnification of the stranger’s owl eyes.

That a stranger might see so intently, peering into another’s soul.

His soul.

“I was your father, Jerald. For more than four years.”

Jerald is not sure that he has heard correctly.

Father? Owl Eyes is claiming to be – his *father?*

The man is explaining. Providing dates. Jerald is not hearing these words clearly.

“ . . . your mother was separated from her husband, her first husband, when she became pregnant – ”

Jerald flinches at such words. *Pregnant!*

“ – with you. With the child that would be you. She and I were together at that time, though we hadn’t been living together . . . ”

Owl Eyes is speaking haltingly, awkwardly. Clearly it is very difficult for him to utter these words that seem like stones in his mouth.

In a moment of weakness Jerald has allowed himself to be detained outside the Math Institute – *If we could speak for just a few minutes, Jerald. Please.*

He has seemed to acquiesce, that he is indeed *Jerald*.

Seated on a stone bench outside the Math Institute, less than three feet apart. Jerald doesn’t recall sitting.

Staring at the man's moving mouth, uttering such words. Jerald wants to jump up and walk rapidly away. Run away. Lose himself in the swarm of undergraduates crossing the quadrangle.

But as in one of those nightmares about which he never tells his mother he can't move.

There is something wrong with Jerald's breathing. A sensation like a coarse rag yanked through his chest. He is light-headed, an insufficient quantity of blood flows to his brain.

If you feel faint when I am not around lower your head between your knees. You know how to do this, and why. Do it.

Doesn't dare lower his head between his knees for Owl Eyes is regarding him anxiously. He does not want Owl Eyes to touch him.

The man has provided a name, but already Jerald has forgotten the name. Strangers' names do not interest him.

He is a visiting fellow at the university, he explains. He has a permanent position at . . .

Jerald sees the man's mouth move but hears only a fraction of his words. Jerald's own mouth is shut tight as his throat is shut tight, and he is sitting very still gripping his backpack in both hands.

The man has been telling Jerald how he and Jerald's mother (whom he calls Imogene) had lived together intermittently for several years in the early 2000s. When he, Jerald, was a small child they'd traveled together as a family. They'd visited museums, planetariums. They'd gone to concerts and hiked along the lake-shore with binoculars, observing birds. He and Imogene had lived in separate residences but continued to be *together* – a couple.

"It was taken for granted by us – by Imogene and me – that you were my son, Jerald. You'd been born after Imogene had separated from her husband of the time, a man named Kovacs; though in fact, Imogene had not been divorced from Kovacs yet. She was excited by our having a child together and would study pictures of me when I'd been a child to identify the 'likeness' between you and me. She was adamant that you *were not* the child of her former husband. Neither of us questioned the assumption of paternity. At least, I didn't question it."

Imogene. Jerald has rarely heard his mother's name, and never

from a stranger. There is something disagreeable in the very sound, uttered so familiarly in another's mouth.

Kovacs is not a name Jerald knows. (Is it?) The only name he has heard, attached to his own, is *Tabor*.

"The three of us – your mother, you, and me – lived isolated lives for years. I was a university professor, your mother was a Ph.D. candidate in computational psychology, a brilliant woman. Brilliant but 'nervous' – that was said of Imogene. Yet for some reason I never understood, Imogene did not want to marry me. Her first marriage had made her very unhappy, she'd said. She did not even want to live together openly. We rarely appeared together in public. Your mother was not a social person, she had no friends. She was estranged even from her closest relatives. Eventually she had what must have been a nervous breakdown and dropped out of the Ph.D. program. She blamed me for the breakdown, and she blamed you – you were three or four by this time. She would say that being a mother had been a mistake, and for the mistake she would have to be punished. But still – in her way – she loved you. It was a burdensome sort of love, an obsessive love, a weight around her neck that made living with her almost impossible . . . Whenever we tried, and we tried many times, it soon became hopeless. Your mother created complications in all lives that touched hers. She was a beautiful woman in a way not every man would appreciate. She was beautiful to me. (I have not seen Imogene in more than ten years. I would not be able to bring myself to see her again, she so badly wounded me.) I loved her deeply but could not really understand her. Even when she made an effort, when she most insisted that she loved me, she seemed to resent the fact that I was close by – that a man was close by. Propinquity was painful to her. Her skin seemed to smart as if she were allergic to me – to us. You and me. She had breakdowns, illnesses. She refused to seek medical help. She was anxious about you, always anxious about you, for she didn't really want to be a mother to you, and so she had to be extra cautious, she said. She was terrified that she would hurt you. *The temptation to hurt the helpless is too strong. You can't be weak, to resist such a temptation* – she said."

Faltering, hesitating, yet the owl-eyed man continues. Now that he has begun he cannot be stopped. He is leaning forward as Jerald, in a kind of trance, remains unmoving, paralyzed.

“Her focus shifted to you, Jerald. Obsessively. Imogene no longer trusted me to be alone with you even for a brief while. She’d run back to me after twenty minutes desperate to see you – to see if you were all right. She’d checked your breathing countless times a day – and at night – when you were an infant, terrified that you would stop breathing. As if breathing isn’t autonomous and has to be willed. It was she who had accidents with you, not me – dropping you on the stairs, overturning a pan of boiling water so that some of it splashed onto you, household accidents . . . When we went out together as a family she became particularly high-strung, accusing. For a long time she’d said that we would be married when her life was more ‘stable.’ But when her life was stable she became quickly bored, she couldn’t bear peacefulness. She threatened to ‘harm’ both herself and you. I made the mistake of putting pressure on her to acknowledge me as your legal father and to allow me to spend more time with you – but she refused.”

The owl-eyed man pauses. Jerald tries to think of something to say, to ask. But his throat is shut tight. He is mortified by these disclosures, even as he cannot believe that they are true.

“Yet – though it sounds unbelievable – we did many things together as a family. Our lives were bound fiercely together. I loved you and your mother so much – you were the center of my life. You were a remarkable child with your own sort of dignity. You were exceptionally quiet and watchful. And very bright. Even in preschool you were precocious. You had not much interest in other children, as other children had not much interest in you. I think it must be the same way now, judging from what I’ve seen of you on campus . . . You are a very dignified boy, but dignity must come at a price, of loneliness.

“It was about this time, when you were four years old, that I made the mistake, out of exasperation and despair, of putting pressure on your mother to acknowledge me as your legal father. I wanted you to have my name. I wanted your mother and me to be married, finally. But your mother reacted in a kind of panic. She became very unreasonable. She threatened to report me to the police, and accuse me of harassment. Suddenly she was insisting that you were not my son after all. She’d made a mistake, she said. She arranged for a DNA test to establish the fact that I was not your father . . .

“This revelation was devastating to me, heartbreaking. For years your mother had behaved as if I were your father and she was very happy with my being your father, but now it seemed that I was not your father after all. Nor was her first husband your father . . . Somehow, it seemed that another man, whose name I would never be told, was your biological father; but this man, according to Imogene, had no knowledge that he was your father, didn’t even know that Imogene had had a baby, for there was no connection between them. Even now it’s impossible for me to comprehend that your mother had deceived me so cruelly. Why at first she’d insisted upon convincing me that I was your father but a few years later changed her mind and wanted me out of her life – I never understood . . .”

In silence Jerald has been listening to these terrible words. His eyes have misted over with tears of disbelief, rage.

“It was purely by chance that I saw you at the Institute, Jerald. I recognized you at once – of course! Though it has been eleven years . . .”

Earnestly Owl Eyes speaks as if he has no idea how Jerald is trembling with emotion.

“If you don’t believe what I’ve been telling you, ask your mother. Ask if she remembers –”

Again Owl Eyes speaks his name, which Jerald seems not to hear.

There is a buzzing in his ears like cicadas, deafening.

(But does Jerald remember? A man . . .)

(There have been men in his mother’s life. In his own young life. But so young was Jerald at the time, his memory is discontinuous and blurred as in a dream.)

It is too confusing to Jerald, and distasteful. He does not want to recall any of it. At least he knows that his name is not *Kovacs*.

Seeing that Jerald is about to break away from him the owl-eyed man says again urgently, “Ask her. Please. Your mother. If she remembers –”

Jerald wants to murmur, *Leave me alone*. But all he can manage is a near-inaudible – *N-no*.

Stammering he has to leave, he will be late for his train . . .

Turning to run, without a backward glance at the flush-faced

man seated on the stone bench gazing after him with an expression of hurt and yearning.

“Am I adopted?”

It is a bizarre question. Out of nowhere Jerald hears himself ask his mother.

“Adopted? Of course not.”

His mother laughs, this is too ridiculous.

“Considering that we look so much alike, you and I, adoption is not very plausible, is it?”

Jerald has no idea why he has asked his mother this question. Yet he has no idea how he might have asked her another question.

Was there once a man who loved me, who believed he was my father, why did you send this man away . . .

Jerald’s mother continues on the subject of adoption. Her initial amusement is shading into something like impatience, annoyance. For it is not like her son Jerald to ask stupid questions, still less questions lacking some point.

Jerald is somewhat shocked at the suggestion that he and his mother *look so much alike*. Never has Jerald noticed this.

His mother reaches out to touch Jerald. It is her prerogative to touch her son at any time, but on long deft legs Jerald out-manuevers her and exits the room.

Searches his mother’s things when his mother is at work.

But his mother is not like other mothers, Jerald must know this. Consequently she has accumulated few “things.”

As she owns few books so she owns few articles of clothing and virtually no jewelry. Few letters, few documents. No photographs.

Doggedly Jerald rummages through the drawers in his mother’s bedroom with a rising sense of self-disgust.

Of course, he finds nothing.

(What is there to find?)

(Resents her, for having so little.)

(Resents *him*, stupid Owl Eyes!)

Jerald has been told that he has a father, for of course he has a father, but *your father* has never been a factor in *our life together*.

His mother has explained. Or rather, his mother has not explained but has told him all he needs to know.

Not a factor in our lives.

Still, Jerald seems to know that the man presumed to be his father lives in another state. Whether a nearby state or a distant state, Jerald does not know.

This man (whose name is Kovacs?) (whose name is not Kovacs?) has never contacted Jerald. Or so his mother has claimed.

This man who'd been Imogene's first (and only?) husband and who is not Jerald's father has never been interested in Jerald – of course. Jerald has never given any thought to the man lacking a name, a face.

This man *is not* the owl-eyed man. But Jerald does not recall the owl-eyed man either.

(But Owl Eyes would have been younger then, eleven years before, and he would have looked different.)

That night Jerald wakes from a confusing dream of rushing faces and muffled cries and realizes that yes, he remembers the owl-eyed man very well.

He had not thought of him as Owl Eyes. Not then.

Remembers the man's deep voice, the voice bearing a faint accent that has not changed in eleven years. Remembers the man close beside him reading a storybook, with illustrations. A rhythmic accent to the voice, a kind of buoyancy.

Memory is tonal. This tone Jerald remembers.

Soon then Jerald recalls a museum with high ceilings, hard-shining floors, echoing sounds. A hall of dinosaurs.

Enormous skeletons. Flying reptiles.

Nighttime sky, a planetarium, a long line of children, an exhibit of aeronautical inventions. A man with dark hair loose to his shoulders, dark eyes. A man who laughed often.

Took hold of the little boy's hand so that on the stairs the little boy would not slip and fall.

Hiking in a pine woods. A beach of hard-packed sand.

Peering at shore birds through binoculars – *sandpipers*.

Memories return in waves, overwhelming. You can drown in memories.

“Jerald! Wake up.”

Jerald's mother is surprised and disapproving, Jerald has slept so long. It is not like her son to sleep past 8:00 on any day of the week but especially on a day he will travel to the university for Calculus II.

Jerald sits up in bed. He is fully awake, his eyes are open and staring. Yet he is very tired, as if he has not slept at all.

Jerald tells his mother that he will be staying later at the Institute that day, in order to attend a lecture. He will return on the 6:12 P.M. train. His mother is surprised to hear this since Jerald has not mentioned any lectures previously, but she checks the university calendar and indeed it's true that there is a math lecture that afternoon at 4:30 at the Institute.

In the privacy of his room Jerald packs his laptop into his backpack as well as his iPad. He packs his charger cords. He packs a single change of clothes. Underwear, socks. He folds his clothing into tight squares, as tight as he can to force inside the backpack. He has some money, in cash in his wallet. He does not have a credit card.

Before he boards the train he double-checks the number of the train and the number on his ticket. Hears his mother call to him from the parking lot and remembers to turn to her, to wave good-bye.

After calculus class that afternoon Jerald lingers in the vicinity of the Math Institute waiting to see the owl-eyed man but does not see him.

Walks slowly to the train depot on the far side of the university and there waits beyond his usual train, which departs at 5:16 P.M. Shyly he peers at strangers standing on the platform waiting to board this train, but the owl-eyed man is not among them.

Rapidly he calculates: two weeks, three more days, in the summer session. These seventeen days can be broken down into a small infinity of seconds. Jerald will wait.