Robarge was a happy man who had taken a great risk. He had transplanted his family – his wife and small boy – from their home in America to a bizarrely named but buried-alive district called World's End in London, where they were strangers. It had worked, and it made his happiness greater. His wife, Kathy, had changed. Having overcome this wrench from home and mastered the new routine, she became confident. It showed in her physically – she had unstiffened; she adopted a new hairstyle; she slimmed; she had been set free by proving to her husband that he depended on her. Richard, only six, was already in what Robarge regarded as the second grade: the little boy could read and write! Even Robarge's company, a supplier of drilling equipment for offshore oil rigs, was pleased by the way he had managed; they associated their success with Robarge's hard work.

So Robarge was vindicated in the move he had made. He had considered marriage the quietest enactment of sharing, connubial exclusiveness the most private way to live – a sheltered life in the best sense. And he saw England as upholding the domestic reverences that had been tossed aside in America. He had not merely moved his family but rescued them. His sense of security made him feel younger, an added pleasure. He did not worry about growing old; he had put on weight in these four years at World's End and began to affect that curious sideways gait, almost a limp, of a heavy boy. It was a game – he was nearly forty – but games were still possible in this country where he could go unrecognized and so unmocked.

Most of all, he liked returning home in the rain. The house at World's End was a refuge; he could shut his door on the darkness and smell the straightness of his own rooms. The yellow lights from the street showed the rain droplets patterned on the window, and he could hear it falling outside, the drip from the sky, as irregular as a weeping tree, which meant in London that it would go on all night. Tonight he was returning from Holland – a Dutch subsidiary machined the drilling bits he dispatched to Aberdeen.

Without waking Kathy, he took the slender parcel he had carried from Amsterdam and crept upstairs to his son's room. On the plane he had kept it on his lap – there was nowhere to stow it. A man in the adjoining seat had stared and prompted Robarge to say, 'It's a kite. For my son. The Dutch import them from the Far East. Supposed to be foolproof.' The man had answered him by taking out a pair of binoculars he had bought for his own boy at the duty-free shop.

'Richard's only six,' said Robarge.

The man said that the older children got the more expensive they were. He said it affectionately and with pride, and Robarge thought how glad he would be when Richard was old enough to appreciate a really expensive present – skis, a camera, a pocket calculator, a radio. Then he would know how his father loved him and how there was nothing in the world he would not give him. And he felt a casual envy for the man in the next seat, having a son old enough to want the things his father could afford. His own uncomprehending son asked for nothing: it made fiercer Robarge's desire to show his love.

The lights in the house were out; it was, at midnight, as gloomy as a tunnel and seemed narrow and empty in all that darkness. Richard's door was ajar. Robarge went in and found his son sleeping peacefully under wall posters of dinosaurs and fighter planes. Robarge knelt and kissed the boy, then sat on the bed and delighted in hearing the boy's measured breaths. The breaths stopped. In the harsh knife of light falling through the curtains from the street Robarge saw his son stir.

'Hello.' The word came whole: Richard's voice was wide-awake.

'It's me.' He kissed the boy. 'Look what I brought you.'

Robarge brandished the parcel. There was a film of rain on the plastic wrapper.

'What is it?' Richard asked.

Robarge told him: A kite. 'Now go back to sleep like a good boy.'

'Can we fly it?'

'You bet. If it's windy we'll fly it at the park.'

'It's not windy enough at the park. You have to go in the car.'

'Where shall we go?'

'Box Hill's a good place for kites.'

'Is it windy there?'

'Not half!' whispered the child.

Robarge was delighted by this odd English expression in his son's speech, and he muttered it to himself in amazement. He was gladdened by Richard's response; he had pondered so long at the gift shop at Schiphol wondering which toy to buy – like an

eager indecisive child himself – he had nearly missed his flight.

‘Box Hill it is then.’ It meant a long drive, but the next day was Saturday – he could devote his weekend to the boy. He crossed the hall and undressed in the dark. When he got into the double bed, Kathy touched his arm and murmured, ‘You’re back,’ and she swung over and sighed and pulled the blankets closer.

‘I think I made a hit last night,’ said Robarge over breakfast. He told Kathy about the kite.

‘You mean you woke him up to give him that thing?’

Kathy’s tone discouraged him: he had hoped she would be glad. He said, ‘He was already awake – I heard him calling out. Must have had a bad dream. I went straight up.’ All these lies to conceal his impulsive wish to kiss his sleeping child at midnight. ‘We’ll fly the thing today if there’s any wind.’

‘That’s nice,’ said Kathy. Her voice was flat and unfocused, almost belittling.

‘Anything wrong?’

She said no and got up from the table, which was her abrupt way of showing boredom or changing the subject. And yet Robarge was struck by how attractive she was; how, without noticeable effort, she had discovered the kind of glamour a younger woman might envy. She was thin and had soft heavy breasts and wore light expensive blouses with her jeans.

Robarge said, ‘Are you angry because I travel so much?’

‘You take your job seriously,’ she said. ‘Don’t apologize. I haven’t nagged you about that.’

‘I’m lucky I’m based in London – think of the rest of them in Aberdeen. How would you like to be there?’

‘Don’t say it in that threatening way. I wouldn’t go to Aberdeen.’

‘I might have been posted there.’ He said it loudly, with the confidence of one who has been reprieved.

‘You would have gone alone.’ He guessed she was poking fun; he was grateful for that, grateful that things had worked out so well in London.

‘You didn’t want to come here,’ he said. ‘But you’re glad now, aren’t you?’

Kathy did not reply. She was clearing the table and at the same time setting out Richard's breakfast.

'Aren't you?' he repeated in a taunting way.

'Yes!' she said, with unreasonable force, reddening as she spoke. Then she burst into tears. 'There,' she stuttered, 'are you satisfied?'

Robarge, made guilty by her outburst (what had he said?), approached his wife to calm her. But she turned away. He heard Richard on the stairs, and the rattle of the kite dragging. He saw with relief that Kathy had fled into the kitchen, where Richard could not hear her sobbing.

He had dropped Kathy on the Kings Road and proceeded – Richard in the back seat – out of London toward Box Hill. It was only then that he remembered that he had failed to tell Kathy where they were going. She hadn't asked: her tears had made her stubbornly silent. It was late May and once they were past Epsom he could see bluebells growing thickly in the shade of pine woods, and the pale green of the new leaves of beeches, and – already high and drooping from the weight of their blossoms – the cow parsley at the margins of plowed fields.

Richard said, 'There are seagulls here.'

Robarge smiled. There were no seagulls – only newly plowed fields set off by windbreaks of pines, and some crows fussing from tree to tree, to squawk.

'The black ones are crows.'

'But seagulls are white,' said Richard. 'They follow the tractor and eat the worms when the farmer digs them up.'

'You're a smart boy. But seagulls –'

'There they are,' said Richard.

The child was right; at the edge of a field a tractor turned and just behind it, hovering and swooping – seagulls.

They parked near the Burford Bridge Hotel, and above them Robarge saw the long scar of exposed chalk, a whole eroded chute of it, and the steep green hill rising beside it to the brow of a grassy slope where the woods began.

'Mind the cars,' said Richard, warning his father. They paused at the road near the

parking lot. A motorcyclist sped past, then the child led his father across. He was being tugged by the child to the far left of a clump of boulders at the base of the hill, and then he saw the nearly hidden path. He realized he was being led by the boy to this entrance, then up the path beside the chalk slide to the gentler rise of the hill. Here Richard broke away and ran the rest of the way up the slope.

‘Shall we fly it here?’

‘No – over there,’ said Richard, out of breath and pointing at nothing Robarge could see. ‘Where it’s windy.’

They resumed, Robarge trudging, the child leading, until they were on the ridge of the hill. It was as the child had said, for no sooner had he walked to the highest point on that part of the hill than Robarge felt the wind. The path was sheltered, but here the wind was so strong it almost tore the kite from his hands. Robarge was proud of his son for leading him here.

‘This is fun!’ said Richard excitedly, as Robarge fixed the cross-piece and looped the twine, tightening and flattening the paper butterfly. He took the ball of string from his pocket and fastened it to the kite.

Richard said, ‘What about the tail?’

‘This kite doesn’t need a tail. It’s foolproof.’

‘All kites need tails,’ Richard said. ‘Or they fall down.’

The certainty in the child’s voice irritated Robarge. He said, ‘Don’t be silly,’ and raised the kite and let the wind pull it from his hand. The kite rose, spun, and then plummeted to the ground. Robarge tried this two more times and then, fearing that he would destroy the frail thing, he squatted and saw that a bit of it was torn.

‘It’s broken!’ Richard shrieked.

‘That won’t make any difference.’

‘It needs a tail!’ the child cried.

Robarge was annoyed by the child’s insistence. It was the monotonous pedantry he had used in speaking about the seagulls. Robarge said, ‘We haven’t got a tail.’

Richard planted his feet apart and peered at the kite with his large serious face and said, ‘Your necktie can be a tail.’

‘I don’t know whether you’ve noticed, Rich, but I’m not wearing a necktie.’

‘It won’t work then,’ said the child. Robarge thought for a moment that the child was going to stamp on the kite in rage. He kicked the ground and said tearfully, ‘I told you it needs a tail!’

‘Maybe we can use something else. How about a handkerchief?’

‘No – just a tie. Or it won’t work.’

Robarge pulled out his handkerchief and tore it into three strips. These he knotted together to make a streamer for the tail. He tied it to the bottom corner of the kite, and while Richard sulked on the grass, Robarge, by running in circles, got the kite aloft. He tugged it and paid out string and made it bob; soon the kite was steadied on the curvature of white line. Richard was beside him, happy again, hopping on his small bow legs.

Robarge said, ‘You were right about the tail.’

‘Can I have a go?’

A go! Robarge had begun to smile again. ‘You want a go, huh? Think you can do it?’

‘I know how,’ said Richard.

Robarge handed his son the string and watched him lean back and draw the kite higher. Robarge encouraged him. Instead of smiling, the child was made serious by the praise. He worked the string back and forth and said nothing.

‘That’s it,’ said Robarge. ‘You’re an expert.’

Richard held the string over his head. He made the kite climb and dance. The wind beat against the paper. The child said, ‘I told you it needed a tail.’

‘You’re doing very well. Walk backward and you’ll tighten the line.’

But Richard, to Robarge’s approval, wound the string on the ball. The kite began to rise. Robarge was impatient to fly the kite himself. He said he could get it much higher and then demanded his turn. He got the kite very high and while it swung he said, ‘You’re a smart boy. I wouldn’t have thought of coming here. And you’re good at this. Next time I’ll get you a bigger kite – not a paper one, but plastic. They can go hundreds of feet up.’

‘That’s against the law.’

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘Yes. You can get arrested. It makes the planes crash,’ said the child. ‘In England.’

Robarge was still making sweeping motions with the string, lifting the kite, making it dive. ‘Who says?’

‘A man told me.’

Robarge snorted. ‘What man?’

‘Mummy’s friend.’

The child screamed. The kite was falling on its broken string. It crashed against the hill and came apart, blowing until it was misshapen. Robarge thought: I am blind.

Later, when the child was calm and the broken kite stuffed beneath a bush (Robarge promised to buy a new one), he confirmed what Robarge had feared: he had been there before, seen the gulls, climbed the hill, and the man – he had no name, he was ‘Mummy’s friend’ – had taken off his necktie to make a tail for the kite.

The man had worn a tie. Robarge created a lover from this detail and saw someone middle aged, middle class, perhaps prosperous, a serious rival, out to impress – British, of course. He saw the man’s hand slipped beneath one of Kathy’s brilliant silk blouses. He wondered whether he knew the man; but who did they know? They had been happy and solitary in this foreign country, at World’s End. He wanted to cry. He felt his face breaking to expose all his sadness.

‘Want to see my hide-out?’

The child showed Robarge the fallen tree, the pine grove, the stumps.

‘Did Mummy’s friend play with you?’

‘The first time –’

Kathy had gone there twice with her lover and Richard! Robarge wanted to leave the place, but the child ran from tree to tree, remembering the games they had played.

Robarge said, ‘Were they nice picnics?’

‘Not half!’

It was the man's expression, he was sure; and now he hated it.

'What are you looking at, Daddy?'

He was staring at the trampled pine needles, the seclusion of the trees, the narrow path.

'Nothing.'

Richard did not want to go home, but Robarge insisted, and walking back to the car Robarge could not prevent himself from asking questions to which he did not want to hear answers.

The man's name?

'I don't know.'

Did he have a nice car?

'Blue.' The child looked away.

'What did Mummy's friend say to you?'

'I don't remember.' Now Richard ran ahead, down the hill.

He saw that the child was disturbed. If he pressed too hard he would frighten him. And so they drove back to World's End in silence.

Robarge did not tell Kathy where they had gone, and instead of confronting her with what he knew he watched her. He did not want to lose her in an argument; it was easy to imagine the terrible scene – her protests, her lies. She might not deny it, he thought; she might make it worse.

He directed his anger against the man. He wanted to kill him, to save himself. That night he made love to Kathy in a fierce testing way, as if challenging her to refuse. But she submitted to his bullying and at last, as he lay panting beside her, she said, 'Are you finished?'

A few days later, desperate to know whether his wife's love had been stolen from him, Robarge told Kathy that he had to go to Aberdeen on business.

'When will you be back?'

'I'm not sure.' He thought: Why should I make it easier on her? 'I'll call you.'

But she accepted this as she had accepted his wordless assault on her, and it seemed to him as though nothing had happened, she had no lover, she had been loyal. He had only the child's word. But the child was innocent and had never lied.

On the morning of his departure for Aberdeen he went to Richard's room. He shut the door and said, 'Do you love me?'

The child moved his head and stared.

'If you really love me, you won't tell Mummy what I'm going to ask you to do.'

'I won't tell.'

'When I'm gone, I want you to be the daddy.'

Richard's face grew solemn.

'That means you have to be very careful. You have to make sure that Mummy's all right.'

'Why won't Mummy be all right?'

Robarge said, 'I think her friend is a thief.'

'No – he's not!'

'Don't be upset,' said Robarge. 'That's what we're going to find out. I want you to watch him if he comes over again.'

'But why? Don't you like him?'

'I don't know him very well – not as well as Mummy does. Will you watch him for me, like a daddy?'

'Yes.'

'If you do, I'll bring you a nice present.'

'Mummy's friend gave me a present.'

Robarge was so startled he could not speak; and he wanted to shout. The child peered at him, and Robarge saw curiosity and pity mingled in the child's squint.

‘It was a little car.’

‘I’ll give you a big car,’ Robarge managed.

‘What’s he stealing from you, Daddy?’

Robarge thought a moment, then said, ‘Something very precious –’ and his voice broke. If he forced it he would sob. He left the child’s room. He had never felt sadder.

Downstairs, Kathy kissed him on his ear. The smack of it caused a ringing in a horn in his head.

He had invented the trip to Aberdeen; he invented work to justify it, and for three days he knew what madness was – a sickening and a sorrow. He was deaf, his feet and hands were stupid, and his tongue at times seemed to swell and choke him when he tried to speak. He wanted to tell his area supervisor that he was suffering, that he knew how odd he must appear. But he did not know how to begin. And strangely, though his behavior was clumsily childlike, he felt elderly, as if he were dying inside, all his organs working feebly. He returned to London feeling that a burned hole was blackened on his heart.

The house at World’s End was so still that in the doorway he considered that she was gone, that she had taken Richard and deserted him with her lover. This was Sunday evening, part of his plan – a surprise: he usually returned on Monday. He was not reassured to see the kitchen light on – there was a telephone in the kitchen. But Kathy’s face, when she answered the door, was blank.

She said, ‘I thought you might call from the station.’

He tried to kiss her – she pulled away.

‘My hands are wet.’

‘Glad to see me?’

‘I’m doing the dishes.’ She lost her look of boredom and said, ‘You’re so pale.’

‘I haven’t slept.’ He could not gather the phrases of the question in his mind because he dreaded the simple answer he saw whole: yes. He felt afraid of her, and more deaf and clumsy than ever, like a helpless orphan snatched into the dark. He wanted her to say that he had imagined the lover, but he knew he would not believe words he craved so much to hear. He no longer trusted her and would not trust her until he had the child’s word. He longed to see his son. He started up the stairs.

Kathy said, ‘He’s watching television.’

On entering the television room, Robarge saw his son stand up and take a step backward. Richard’s face in the darkened room was the yellow-green hue of the television screen; his hands sprang to his ears; the blue fibers of his pajamas glowed as if sprinkled with salt. When Robarge switched on the light the child ran to him and held him – so tightly that Robarge could not hug him.

‘Here it is.’ Robarge disengaged himself from the child and crossed the room, turning off the television as he went. The toy was gift wrapped in bright paper and tied with a ribbon. He handed it to Richard. Richard put his face against his father’s neck. ‘Aren’t you going to open it?’

Robarge felt the child nodding against his shoulder.

‘Time for bed,’ said Robarge.

The child said, ‘I put myself to bed now.’

‘All by yourself?’ said Robarge. ‘Okay, off you go then.’

Richard went to the door.

‘Don’t forget your present!’

Richard hesitated. Robarge brought it to him and tucked it under the child’s arm. Then, pretending it was an afterthought, he said softly, ‘Tell me what happened while I was away – did you see anything?’

Richard shook his head and let his mouth gape.

‘What about Mummy’s friend?’ Robarge was standing; the question dropped to the child like a spider lowering on its own filament of spittle.

‘I didn’t see him.’

The child looked so small; Robarge towered over him. He knelt and asked, ‘Are you telling the truth?’

And it occurred to Robarge that he had never asked the child that question before – had never used that intimidating tone or looked so hard into the child’s eyes. Richard backed away, the gift-wrapped parcel under his arm.

At this little distance, the child seemed calmer. He shook his head as he had before,

but this time his confidence was pronounced, as if in the minute that had elapsed he had learned the trick of it. With the faintest trace of a stutter – when had he ever stuttered? – he said, ‘It’s the truth, Daddy. I didn’t.’

Robarge said, ‘It’s a tank. The batteries are already inside. It shoots sparks.’ Then he shuffled forward on his knees and took the child’s arm. ‘You’ll tell me if you see that man again, won’t you?’

Richard stared.

‘I mean, if he steals anything?’

Robarge saw corruption in the unblinking eyes.

‘You’ll tell me, won’t you?’

When Robarge repeated the question, Richard said, ‘Mummy doesn’t have a friend,’ and Robarge knew he had lost the child.

He said, ‘Show me how you put yourself to bed.’

Robarge was unconsoled. He found Kathy had already gone to bed, and though the light was on she lay on her side, facing the dark wall, as if sleeping.

Robarge said, ‘We never make love.’

‘We did – on Wednesday.’

She was right; he had forgotten.

She said, ‘I’ve locked the doors. Will you make sure the lights are out?’

So he went from room to room turning out the lights, and in the television room Robarge sat down in the darkness. There, in the house which now seemed to be made of iron, he remembered again that he was in London, in World’s End; that he had taken his family there. He was saddened by the thought that he was so far from home. The darkness hid him and hid the country; he knew that if he appeared calm it was only because the darkness concealed his loss. He wished he had never come here, and worrying this way he craved his child and had a hideous reverie, of wishing to eat the child and eat his wife and keep them in that cannibal way. Burdened by this guilty thought, he went upstairs to make sure his son was safe.

Richard was in darkness, too. Robarge kissed the child’s hot cheek. There was a bright cube on the floor, the present from Aberdeen. He picked it up and saw that it had not

been opened.

He put it beside Richard on the bed and leaning for balance he pressed something in the bedclothes. It was long and flat and the hardness stung his hand. It was the breadknife with the serrated blade from the kitchen, tucked beneath these sheets, close to the child’s body. Breathless from the shock of it Robarge took it away.

And then he went to bed. He was shaking so badly he did not think he would ever sleep. He wanted to smash his face against the wall and hit it until it was bloody and he had torn his nose away. He dropped violently to sleep. When he woke in the dark he recalled the sound that had wakened him – it was still vibrant in the air, the click of the front gate: a thief was entering his house. Robarge waited for more, and perspired. His fear left him and he was penetrated by the fake vitality of insomnia. After an hour he decided that what he had heard, if anything, was a thief leaving the house, not breaking in. Too late, too far, too dark, he thought; and he knew now they were all lost.