

The Homecoming



'HERE they come,' said Cecy, lying there flat in her bed.

'Where are they?' cried Timothy from the doorway.

'Some of them are over Europe, some over Asia, some of them over the Islands, some over South America!' said Cecy, her eyes closed, the lashes long, brown, and quivering, her mouth opening to let the words whisper out swiftly.

Timothy came forward upon the bare plankings of the upstairs room. 'Who are they?'

'Uncle Einar and Uncle Fry, and there's Cousin William, and I see Frulda and Helgar and Aunt Morgianna, and Cousin Vivian, and I see Uncle Johann! They're all coming fast.'

'Are they up in the sky?' cried Timothy, his little grey eyes flashing. Standing by the bed, he looked no more than his fourteen years. The wind blew outside, the house was dark and lit only by starlight.

'They're coming through the air and travelling along the ground, in many forms,' said Cecy, in her sleeping. She did not move on the bed; she thought inward upon herself and told what she saw. 'I see a wolf-like thing coming over a dark river — at the shallows — just above a waterfall, the starlight shining up his pelt. I see a brown oak leaf blowing far up in the sky. I see a small bat flying. I see many other things, running under the forest trees and slipping through the highest branches; and they're *all* coming this way!'

'Will they be here by tomorrow night?' Timothy clutched the bedclothes. The spider on his lapel swung like a black pendulum, excitedly dancing. He leaned over his sister. 'Will they all be here in time for the Homecoming?'

'Yes, yes, Timothy, yes,' sighed Cecy. She stiffened. 'Ask no more of me. Go away now. Let me travel in the places I like best.'

'Thanks, Cecy,' he said. Out in the hall, he ran to his room. He hurriedly made his bed. He had just awakened a few minutes ago, at sunset, and as the first stars had risen, he had gone to let his excitement about the party run with Cecy. Now she slept so quietly there was not a sound.

The spider hung on a silvery lasso about his slender neck as he washed his face. 'Just think, Spid, tomorrow night is All Hallows' Eve!'

He lifted his face and looked into the mirror. His was the only mirror allowed in the house. It was his mother's concession to his 'illness.' Oh, if only he were not so afflicted! He opened his mouth, surveyed the poor, inadequate teeth nature had given him. No more than so many bean kernels, round, soft and pale in his jaws. The canines were nothing at all! Some of the high spirit died in him.

It was now totally dark and he lit a candle to see by. He felt exhausted. This past week the whole family had lived in the fashion of the old country. Sleeping by day, rousing at sunset to move about. There were blue hollows under his eyes. 'Spid, I'm no good,' he said quietly, to the little creature. 'Can't even get used to sleeping days like the others.'

He took up the candle. Oh, to have *strong* teeth, with incisors like spikes. Or strong hands, even; or a strong mind. To have the power to send one's mind out, free, as Cecy did, while lying on her soft bed, sleeping. But, no; he was the imperfect one, the sick one. He was even — he shivered and drew the candle flame closer — afraid of the dark. His brothers snorted at him. Bion and Leonard and Sam. They laughed because he slept in a *bed*. With Cecy it was different; her bed was part of her comfort for the composure necessary to send her mind abroad to hunt. But Timothy, did *he* sleep in the wonderful polished boxes like the others? He did *not*! Mother allowed him his own bed, his own room, his own *mirror*! No wonder the family skirted him like a holy man's crucifix. If only the wings would sprout from his shoulder blades. He bared his back, stared at it. He sighed again. No chance. Never.

Downstairs were exciting and mysterious sounds. The slithering sound of black crêpe going up in all the halls and on the ceilings and doors. The smell of burning black tapers crept up the banistered stairwell.

Mother's voice, high and firm. Father's voice, echoing from the damp cellar. Bion walking from outside the old country house, lugging vast two-gallon jugs of liquid that gurgled as he moved.

'I've just got to go to the party, Spid,' said Timothy. The spider whirled at the end of its silk, and Timothy felt alone. He would polish cases, fetch toadstools and spiders, hang crêpe, but when the party started he'd be ignored. The less seen or said of the imperfect son the better.

All through the house below, Laura ran. 'The Homecoming!' she shouted gaily. 'The Homecoming!' her footsteps everywhere at once.

Timothy passed Cecy's room again, and she slept soundly. Once in a great while she went below stairs. Mostly she stayed in bed. Lovely Cecy. He felt like asking her, 'Where are you now, Cecy? And *in* whom? And what's happening? Are you beyond the hills? and what goes on there?' But he walked on to Ellen's room instead.

Ellen sat at her desk, sorting out all kinds of blonde, red and dark hair and little clips of fingernail gathered from her manicurist job at the Mellin Town beauty parlour five miles over. A sturdy mahogany case lay in one corner with her name on it.

'Go away,' she said, not even looking up at him. 'I can't work with you gawking.'

'All Hallows' Eve, Ellen!' he said, trying to be friendly. 'Just think!'

'Huh!' She put fingernail clippings in small white sacks and labelled them. 'What's it mean to you? It'll scare the hell out of you. Go back to bed.'

His cheeks burned. 'I'm needed to polish and work and help serve.'

'If you don't go, you'll find a dozen raw oysters in your bed tomorrow,' said Ellen, matter-of-factly. 'Goodbye, Timothy.'

In his anger, rushing downstairs, he bumped into Laura.

'Watch where you're going!' she shrieked from clenched teeth, out of which stuck tiny flat-headed nails. She hammered them into doors and upon them hung — what a joke! — imitation wolfsbane! 'Won't this give Uncle Einar a fright!' she shouted to everybody.

She swept away. He ran to the open cellar door, smelled the channel of moist earthy air rising from below. 'Father?'

'It's about time,' Father shouted up the steps. 'Hurry down, or they'll be here before we're ready!'

Timothy hesitated only long enough to hear the million other house sounds. Brothers came and went like trains in a station, talking and arguing. If you stood in one spot long enough the entire household passed with their pale hands full of things. Leonard with his little black medical case, Samuel with his large, dusty, ebon-bound book under his arm, bearing more black crêpe, and Bion excursioning to the wagon outside and bringing in many more gallons of liquid.

Father stopped polishing to give Timothy a rag and a scowl. He thumped the huge mahogany box. 'Come on, shine this up, so we can start on another. Sleep your life away.'

While waxing the surface, Timothy looked inside.

'Uncle Einar's a big man, isn't he, papa?'

'Umm.'

'How big?'

'The size of the box'll tell you.'

'Seven feet tall?'

'You talk a lot.'

Timothy made the box shine. 'And he weighs two hundred and five.'

Father blew. 'Two hundred and *fifteen*.'

'And space for wings!'

Father elbowed him. 'You're doing that wrong. *This* way. Watch!'

About nine o'clock Timothy ran out into the October weather. For two hours in the now-warm, now-cold wind he walked the meadows collecting toadstools and spiders.

He passed a farm house. If only you knew what's happening at *our* house! he said to the glowing windows. He climbed a hill and looked at the town, miles away, settling into sleep, the church clock high and round white in the distance. The town didn't know, either.

He brought home many jars of toadstools and spiders.

In the cellar chapel a brief ceremony was celebrated, with father incanting the dark lines, mother's beautiful white ivory hands moving in the reverse blessings, and all the children gathered except Cecy, who lay upstairs

in bed. But Cecy was present. You saw her peering from now Bion's eyes, now Samuel's, now mother's, and you felt a movement and now she was in you, fleetingly, and gone.

Timothy prayed to the Dark One with a tightened stomach.

'Please, please, help me grow up, help me be like my brothers and sisters. Don't let me be different. If only I could put the hair in the plastic images as Ellen does, or make people fall in love with me, as Laura does with people, or read strange old books as Sam does, or work in a fine job like Leonard and Bion do. Or even raise a family some day, like mother and father've done. . .'

At midnight the first relatives arrived!

Grandmother and Grandfather, all the way from the old country; cheery and talkative. There was much greeting!

After that, people arrived every hour. There were flutters at side windows, raps on the front door, knocks at the back. Noises from the cellar and rustlings from the attic, and the chimney whistled with autumn wind. Mother filled the large crystal punch bowl with a fluid. Father hurried from room to room lighting more tapers. Laura and Ellen hammered up more imitation wolfsbane. And Timothy stood in the centre of the excitement, no expression on his face, his hands trembling a little at his sides, gazing now here, now there, quickly, quickly! See everything! Banging of doors, laughter, darkness, the sound of wine fluidly poured, sound of wind, the rush of feet, the welcoming bursts of talk at the doors, the transparent rattlings of windows, the shadows passing, re-passing, whirling, vanishing.

The party was begun!

Five, ten, fifteen, thirty people! And sixty more to come!

'Well, and *this* must be Timothy!'

'What?'

A chilly hand took his hand. A long beardy face leaned down over Timothy's brow. 'A good lad, a good lad,' said the man.

'Timothy,' said mother. 'This is your Uncle Jason.'

'Hello, Uncle Jason.'

'My, my, you don't sound very happy, nephew Timothy.'

'I'm all right.'

'Thanks for telling me, my boy. Perk up.' The man buffed Timothy's chin with his cold fist, gently.

'And over *here* — ' Mother drifted Uncle Jason away. Uncle Jason glanced over his caped shoulder, winked at Timothy, glassily.

Timothy stood alone.

From off a thousand miles in the candled dark, he heard a high fluting voice; that was Ellen. 'And my brothers, they *are* clever. Can you guess their occupations, Aunt Morgianna?'

'I have no *idea*.'

'They operate a mortuary in town.'

'What!' A gasp.

'Yes!' Shrill laughter. 'Isn't that *priceless*!'

'Wonderful!'

They all roared.

Timothy stood very still.

The laughter quieted. 'They bring home sustenance for us all, you know.'

Laura cried, 'Oh, yes! Are you familiar with how a mortician works, Auntie darling?'

Aunt Morgianna was uncertain of the details.

'Well,' began Laura, scientifically. 'They push little silver needles attached to red rubber tubing into the bodies, draw out the blood. They inject preservative. Most morticians flush the blood down the drain. But not Leonard and Bion, ah no! They carry it home in gallon casques for mamma and papa and all of us. Of course — Timothy. . .'

Timothy jerked his mouth, softly.

'No, no,' cried mother in a swift whisper to Laura.

'Timothy,' drawled Laura, reluctant to leave the word alone.

An uneasy silence. Uncle Jason's voice demanded. 'Well? Come on. What *about* Timothy?'

'Oh, Laura, your tongue,' sighed mother.

Laura went on with it. Timothy shut his eyes. 'Timothy doesn't — well — he doesn't *like* blood. He's — delicate.'

'He'll learn,' explained mother. 'Given a little time,' she said very firmly. 'He's my son, and he'll learn. He's only fourteen.'

'But I was *raised* on the stuff,' said Uncle Jason, his voice passing from one room to another. The wind played the trees outside like harps. A little rain spattered on the window. 'Raised on the stuff. . .' passing away into faintness.

Timothy bit his lips and opened his eyes.

'Well, it was all *my* fault.' Mother was showing them into the kitchen now. 'I tried forcing him. You can't force children, you only make them sick and then they never get a taste for things. Look at Bion, now, he was thirteen before he'd drink b — '

The last word was lost in a rise of wind.

'I understand,' murmured Uncle Jason. 'Timothy'll come round.'

'I'm *sure* he will,' said mother, defiantly.

Candles flamed as shadows crossed and recrossed the dozen musty rooms. Timothy was cold. He smelled the hot tallow in his nostrils and instinctively he grabbed at a candle and walked with it around and about the house, pretending to straighten the crêpe.

'Timothy.' Someone whispered behind a patterned wall, hissing and sizzling and sighing the words. 'Timothy iss — a — fraid — of — thee — dark.' Leonard's voice. Hateful Leonard! 'So — mother sometimes — lets him take — a candle. You see them up and down the stairs together — the candle and Timothy's two grey eyes just behind the flame — close to it for warmth and colour — shining.'

'I *like* the candle, that's all,' said Timothy, in a reproachful whisper.

'He'll be all right. Children are children,' said an aunt's voice way over in the dining-room blacknesses.

More noise, more laughter, more thunder! Cascades of wild laughter! Bangings and clickings and shouts and whisperings of clothing and capes! Moist fog swept through the front door like powder from exploded cannons! Out of the fog, settling his wings, stalked a tall man.

'Uncle Einar!'

Timothy propelled himself on his thin legs, straight through the fog, under the green webbing shadows. He threw himself into Uncle Einar's arms. Einar lifted him!

'You've wings, Timothy!' Light as thistles, he tossed the boy. 'Wings, Timothy, fly!' Faces wheeled under. Darkness rotated. The house blew away. Timothy felt breeze-like. He flopped his arms. Einar's fingers caught and threw him again to the ceiling. The ceiling fell like a charred wall. 'Fly! Fly!' shouted Einar, loud and deep. 'Fly with wings! Wings!'

He felt exquisite agonies in his shoulder-blades, as if roots grew, burst to explode and blossom into fresh long, moist membranes! He babbled wild stuff; again Einar hurled him high!

Autumn wind broke in a tide on the house, rain crashed down, shaking the beams, causing chandeliers to tilt their enraged candles. And the one hundred relatives stared out from each black enchanted niche and room, circling inwards, all forms and sizes, to where Einar balanced the child like a puppet in the roaring spaces. 'Beat your wings! Take off!'

'Enough!' cried Einar, at last.

Timothy, deposited gently on the floor timbers, exaltedly, exhaustedly fell against Uncle Einar, sobbing happily 'Uncle, uncle, uncle!'

'Good flying, eh, Timothy?' Einar patted Timothy's head. 'Good, good.'

It was almost dawn. Most had arrived and were ready to bed down for the daylight, sleep motionlessly with no sound until the following sunset, when they'd jump out of their mahogany boxes for the revel.

Uncle Einar, followed by round dozens of others, moved towards the cellar. Mother directed them downwards to the crowded row on row of highly polished boxes. Einar, his wings like sea-green tarpaulins tented behind him, moved with a curious whistling and sussurus through the passageway; where his wings touched they made a sound of drumheads gently beaten.

Upstairs, Timothy lay wearily, thinking, trying to *like* the darkness. There was so much you could do in darkness that people couldn't criticize you for, because they never saw you. He *did* like the night, but it was a qualified liking; sometimes there was so much night he cried out in rebellion.

In the cellar, mahogany lids sealed downwards, drawn in upon gesturing pale hands. In corners, certain relatives circled three times to lie down, heads on paws, eyelids shut.

The sun rose. There was a sleeping with no snores in it.

Sunset. The revel exploded like a bat nest struck full, shrieking out, fluttering, spreading! Box lids banged wide! Steps rushed up from cellar damp! More late guests, kicking on front and back portals, were admitted, and apologized.

It rained, and sodden visitors flung their capes, their water-pelleted hats, their sprinkled veils over Timothy who bore them to a closet, where they hung like mummified bats to dry. The rooms were crowd-packed. The laughter of one cousin shot from the hall, angled off the parlour wall, ricocheted, banked and returned to Timothy's ears from a fourth room, accurate and cynical. It was followed by a volley of laughs!

A mouse ran across the floor.

'I know *you*, Niece Leibersrouter!' exclaimed father.

The mouse spiralled three women's feet and vanished in a corner. Moments later a beautiful woman rose up out of nothing, stood in the corner, smiling her white smile at them all.

Something huddled against the flooded pane of the kitchen window. It sighed and wept and tapped continually, pressed against the glass, but Timothy could make nothing of it, he saw nothing there. In imagination he was outside, staring in. The rain was on him, the wind at him, and the taper-dotted darkness inside was inviting. Waltzes were being waltzed; tall thin figures pirouetted and glided to outlandish music. Stars of light flickered off lifted bottles; small earth clods crumbled from the handled casques, and a spider fell and went silently legging over the floor.

Timothy shivered. He was inside the house again. Mother called him to run here, run there, help, serve, out to the kitchen, fetch this, fetch that, bring plates, heap the food, be careful, don't stumble, here now, and here — on and on — the party happened around him but not *to* him. Dozens of towering black shapes pressed by him, elbowed him, ignored him.

Finally, he turned and slipped away up the stairs.

He stood by Cecy's bed. There was not a tremor in her long narrow white face; it was completely calm. Her bosom did not rise or descend. Yet if you touched her you felt warmth.

'Cecy,' he called, softly.

There was no response until the third call, when her lips parted a little. 'Yes.' She sounded very tired and happy and dreaming, and remote.

'This is Timothy,' he whispered.

'I know,' she said, after a long wait.

'Where are you tonight, Cecy?'

After he had repeated the question twice, she said,

'Far west of here. In California. In the Imperial Valley, beside the Salten Sea, near the Mud Pots and the steam and the quiet. I'm a farmer's wife, and I'm sitting on a wooden porch. The sun's going slowly down.'

'What's it like, Cecy?'

'You can hear the mud pots talking,' she said, slowly, as if talking in church. 'The mud pots lift little grey heads of steam, pushing up the mud like bald men rising in the thick syrup, head first, out in the broiling channels, and the grey heads rip like rubber fabric and collapse with a noise like wet lips moving. And little plumes of steam escape from the ripped tissue. And there is a smell of sulphur and deep burning and old time. The dinosaur has been abroiling here ten million years.'

'Is he done yet, Cecy?'

Cecy's calm sleeper's lips turned up. 'Yes, he's done. Quite done.' The languid words fell slowly from her shaping mouth. Nothing else of her moved. She was quite still save for the tremor of lips when they answered. 'You know what a surrey top is like, Timothy? Well, that's how the night comes here in this shallow between the mountains. The sun pulls the dark cover down after it. I'm inside this woman's head, looking out through the

little holes in her skull. I don't even know her name, while I'm listening to the silence. The sea doesn't move on the shore, it just lies there, so quiet it makes you afraid. I'm smelling the salt of it, quietly. And over me a number of bombers and pursuit planes float across the first stars. They resemble pterodactyls on huge wings. Further over in the sump-land, the iron spine of a steam shovel shows — a brontosaurus frozen in metal pantomime, gazing at those aluminium reptiles flying high. And I am watching these prehistoric things, and smelling the smells of prehistoric cookings. It is so quiet, so quiet. . .'

'How long will you stay in her, Cecy?'

'Until I've listened and looked and felt enough. Until I've changed her life some way. Living in her isn't like living anywhere in the world. Her valley with her little wooden house is a dawn world. Black mountains lift on the west, north and south, all enclosing this huge, solemn valley. Two concrete roads rim the sea, emptied by the war. Once in half an hour I see a car run by, shining its headlights. But the dark closes behind it. I sit on the porch all day, and watch the shadows run out from the trees, join and become one big night at sunset. I wait for my husband to come back from town. The sea is on the shore, salted and making no noise. Once in a while a fish leaps up, starlight catching its scales, falls back. The valley, the sea, the few cars, the porch, my rocking chair, myself, the silence.'

'What *now*, Cecy?'

'I'm getting up now,' she said.

'Yes?'

'I'm walking off the porch, towards the mud pots. Another flight of planes goes overhead, flinging off noise in every direction that propellers whirl in. They take the silence apart and the sound gets into my bones.'

'And now?'

'Now, I'm walking along the board planks to where the tourists before the war used to stand watching the grey bubbles rise. My feet make hollow knocks on the planks, slowly.'

'Now?'

'Now the sulphur fumes are all around me. The bubbles come up in breaking clusters, smoothing again. A bird flies over, crying sadly. Suddenly I'm in that bird! I fly away! And as I fly, inside my new small glass-bead eyes, I see something, a woman, below me, on a board-walk, take one two three steps forward into the mud pots! I hear a sound as if a boulder has been dropped into molten depths! I keep on flying, ignoring this sound. I circle. As I come back I see a white hand, like a spider, wriggling, disappearing into a pool of grey lava. The lava seals over.

'Now, I'm flying home, swift, *swift!*'

Something rattled hard against the window.

Cecy flicked her eyes wide, full, bright, happy, exhilarated.

'Now I *am* home!' she said.

Cecy lay upon her pillow, letting her eyes wander for a time. Finally, she saw Timothy.

'Is the Homecoming on?' she asked.

'Everybody's here.'

'Then why are you upstairs?' She took his hand. 'Well?' She smiled slyly. 'Ask me. Go on. Ask me what you came up to ask.'

'I didn't come to ask anything,' he said. 'Well, almost nothing. Well, oh, Cecy!' It came from him in one long rapid flow. 'I want to do something at the party, to make them look at me, something to make me as good as them, something to make me belong and there's nothing I can do and I feel funny and, well, and I thought you might —'

'I might,' she said, closing her eyes, smiling inwardly. 'Stand up straight, and stand very still.' He obeyed. 'Now, shut your eyes and blank out your thoughts.'

He stood very straight and thought of nothing, or at least thought of thinking nothing, which was almost as good.

She sighed.

'Shall we go downstairs now, Timothy?'

Like a hand into a glove, Cecy was within him.

'Look, everybody!'

Timothy lifted the crystal of warm red wine, wine that veins had distilled, muscled hearts had pushed and pumped through thinking minds.

He held the glass so that the whole house turned to watch. Aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters!

He drank it straight down.

He jerked a hand at sister Laura. He held her gaze, whispering to her in a subtle voice that kept her silent, frozen. He felt tall as the trees as he walked to her. The party, a regular vortex, now slowed. It waited on all sides of him, watching. From all the doors the faces peered. They were not laughing. Mother's face was astonished. Father looked bewildered, but pleased and getting prouder every instant.

Timothy took Laura's hands behind her, she didn't fight him, her eyes were glazed. He spoke and reached up, gently moving her head back, exposing her long white neck.

Gently, over the neck vein, he nipped her.

Candle flames swayed drunkenly. Wind climbed around the roof above. Relatives stared and shifted in the dark and stared again.

He released Laura, turned, popped toadstools in his mouth, swallowed, then, seized, he beat his arms against his flanks and dashed about. 'Look, Uncle Einar! I'll fly, at last!' Beat! went his hands. Up, down, pumped his feet! Faces flashed by him!

At the top of the stairs before knowing it, flapping, Timothy heard his mother cry, 'Stop, Timothy!' far below. 'Hey!' shouted Timothy, and leaped off the top of the well, thrashing!

Half-way down, the wings he thought he owned dissolved. He screamed.

Uncle Einar caught him.

Timothy flailed whitely in the receiving arms. A voice burst from his lips, unbidden:

'This is Cecy! This is Cecy!' it announced, shrilly. 'Cecy! Come see me, all of you! Upstairs, first room on the left!' Followed by a long trill of laughter. Timothy tried to cut it off with his tongue, his lips.

Everybody laughed. Einar set him down. Running through the crowded blackness as the relatives flowed upstairs towards Cecy's room to congratulate her, Timothy kicked the front door open. Mother called out behind him, anxiously.

Flap! went his dinner, straight down upon the cold earth.

'Cecy, I hate you, I hate you!'

Inside the barn, in deep shadow, Timothy sobbed bitterly and thrashed in a stack of odorous hay. Then he lay still. From his blouse-pocket, from the protection of the matchbox he used for his retreat, the spider crawled forth. Spid walked along Timothy's arm. Spid explored up his neck to his ear and climbed in the ear to tickle it.

Timothy shook his head. 'Don't, Spid. Don't.'

The feathery touch of a tentative feeler probing his ear-drum set Timothy shivering. 'Don't Spid!' He sobbed somewhat less.

The spider travelled down his cheek, took a station under the boy's nose, looked up into the nostrils as if to seek the brain, and then clambered softly up over the rim of the nose to sit, to squat there peering at Timothy with green gem eyes until Timothy filled with ridiculous laughter.

'Go away, Spid!'

In answer, the spider floated down to his lips and with sixteen delicate movements tacked silver strands back and forth, zig-zag, over Timothy's mouth.

'Mmmmmm,' cried Timothy.

Timothy sat up, rustling the hay. The land was very bright with moon now that the rain had retired. In the big house he could hear the faint ribaldry as *Mirror Mirror* was played. In that game a huge mirror was set against one wall. Celebrants shouted, dimly muffled, as they tried to identify those of themselves whose reflections did not, had not ever, and *never would* appear in a mirror!

'What'll we do, Spid?' The mouth-web broke.

Falling to the floor, Spid scuttled swiftly towards the house, until Timothy caught him and returned him to his blouse pocket. 'Okay, Spid. Back in it is. We'll have fun, no matter what.'

Outside, a green tarpaulin fell from the sycamore as Timothy passed and pinned him down with yards of silken goods. 'Uncle Einar!'

'Timothy.' The wings spread and twitched and came in with a sound like kettle-drums. Timothy felt himself plucked up like a thimble and set on Einar's shoulder. 'Don't feel badly, nephew Timothy. Each to his own, each in his own way. How much better things are for you. How rich. The world's dead for us. We've seen so much of it, believe me. It's all one colour; grey. Life's best to those who live the least of it. It's worth more per ounce, nephew, remember that.'

From midnight on, Uncle Einar bore him about the house, from room to room, weaving, singing. Late arrivals by the horde set hilarities off afresh. Great-great-great-great and a thousand more greats grandmother was there, wrapped in Egyptian cerements, roll on roll of linen bandage coiled about her fragile dark brown bird bones. She said not a word, but lay stiff as a burnt ironing board against one wall, her eye hollows cupping a distant, wise, silent glimmering. At the four a.m. breakfast, one-thousand-odd-greats grandmamma stiffly seated at the head of the longest table and red toasts were pantomimed to her.

Grandfather Tom wandered about through the throng at all hours, tickling young nieces, holding them, gumming their necks, a look of unbearable desperation flushing his features as time passed. Poor grandpapa, in *his* profession, and no teeth!

The numerous young cousins caroused at the crystal punch bowl. Their shiny olive-pit eyes, their conical, devilish faces and curly bronze hair hovered over the drinking-table, their hard-soft, half-girl, half-boy bodies wrestling against each other as they got unpleasantly sullenly drunk.

Laura and Ellen, over and above the wine-sated tumult, produced a parlour drama with Uncle Fry. They represented innocent maidens strolling, when the Vampire (Uncle Fry) stepped from behind a tree (Cousin Anna). The Vampire smiled upon the Innocents.

Where were they going?

Oh, just down to the river path.

Could he escort them along the way?

He might if he were pleasant.

He walked with them, grinning secretly, from time to time licking his lips.

He was just preparing to attack one of them (at the river) when the Innocents, whirling eagerly, knocked him flat and drained him vacuum-dry of his blood. They sat down on his carcass as on a bench, and laughed and laughed.

So did everybody at the Homecoming.

The wind got higher, the stars burned with fiery intensity, the noises redoubled, the dances quickened, the drinking became more positive. To Timothy there were thousands of things to hear and watch. The many darknesses roiled, bubbled, the many faces mixed, vanished, reappeared, passed on. Mother moved everywhere, gracious and tall and beautiful, bowing and gliding, and father made sure that all the chalices were kept full.

The children played *Coffins*. Coffins, set in a row, surrounded by marching children, Timothy with them. A flute kept them marching. One by one coffins were removed. The scramble for their polished interiors eliminated two, four, six, eight contestants, until only one coffin remained. Timothy circled it cautiously, pitted against his fey-cousin, Roby. The flute notes stopped. Like gopher to hole, Timothy made it, popped into the coffin, while everyone applauded.

Once more the wine cups were full.

'How is Lotte?'

'Lotte? Did you not hear? Oh, it is too good to tell!'

'Who's Lotte, mamma?'

'Hush. Uncle Einar's sister. She of the wings. Go on, Paul.'

'Lotte flew over Berlin not long ago and was shot for a British plane.'

'Shot for a plane!'

Cheeks blew out, lungs bulged and sank, hands slapped thighs. The laughter was like a cave of winds.

'And what of Carl?'

'The little one who lives under bridges? Ah, poor Carl. Where is there a place for Carl in all Europe? Each bridge has been devastated. Carl is either dead or homeless. There are more refugees in Europe tonight than meet mortal eyes.'

'True, true. *All* the bridges, eh? Poor Carl.'

'Listen!'

The party held its breath. Far away the town clock struck its chimes, saying six o'clock. The party was ending. As if at a cue in time to the rhythm of the clock striking, their one hundred voices began to sing songs that were four hundred years old, songs Timothy could not know. They twined their arms around each other, circling slowly, and sang, and somewhere in the cold distance of morning the town clock finished out its chimes and quieted.

Timothy sang.

He knew no words, no tune, yet he sang and the words and tune came correctly, round and high and good.

At the verse end, he gazed at the stairs and the closed door at the top of the stairs.

'Thanks, Cecy,' he whispered.

He listened.

Then he said, 'That's all right, Cecy. You're forgiven. I know you.'

Then he just relaxed and let his mouth move as it wished, and words came out in their own time, rhythmically, purely, melodiously.

Good-byes were said, there was a great rustling. Mother and father and the brothers and sisters lined up in grave happiness at the door to shake each hand firmly and kiss each departing cheek in turn. The sky, beyond the open door, coloured and shone in the east. A cold wind entered.

Again Timothy was forced to listen to a voice talking and when it finished he nodded and said, 'Yes, Cecy. I would like to do that. Thanks.'

And Cecy helped him into one body after another. Instantly, he felt himself inside Uncle Fry's body at the door, bowing and pressing lips to mother's pale fingers, looking out from the wrinkled leather face at her. Then he side-stepped out into the wind, the draught seized him, took him in a flurry of leaves away up over the house and awakening hills. The town flashed under.

With a snap, Timothy was in another body, at the door, saying farewell. It was Cousin William's body.

Within Cousin William, swift as a smoke puff, he loped down the dirt road, red eyes burning, fur pelt rimed with morning, padded feet rising, falling with silent sureness, panting easily, again over the hill and into a hollow, and then dissolving away. . .

Only to well up in the tall cold hollows of Uncle Einar and look out from his tolerant, amused eyes. And he was picking up the tiny pale body of Timothy. Picking up himself, through Einar! 'Be a good boy, Timothy. I'll see you again, from time to time.'

Swifter than the bourne leaves, with a webbed thunder of wings, faster than the lupine thing of the country road, going so swiftly the earth's features blurred and the last stars rotated to one side, like a pebble in Uncle Einar's mouth, Timothy flew, accompanied him on half his startling journey.

He came back to his own body.

The shouting and the laughing bit by bit faded and went away. Dawn grew more apparent. Everybody was embracing and crying and thinking how the world was becoming less a place for them. There had been a time when they had met every year, but now decades passed with no reconciliation. 'Don't forget, we meet in Salem in 1970!' someone cried.

Salem. Timothy's numbed mind turned the word over. Salem — 1970. And there would be Uncle Fry and Grandma and Grandfather and a thousand-times-great Grandmother in her withered cere-clothes. And mother and father and Ellen and Laura and Cecy and Leonard and Bion and Sam and all the rest. But would *he* be there? Would he be alive that long? Could he be certain of living until then?

With one last withering wind blast, away they all shot, so many scarves, so many fluttery mammals, so many sere leaves, so many wolves loping, so many winnings and clustering noises, so many midnights and ideas and insanities.

Mother shut the door. Laura picked up a broom.

'No,' said mother. 'We'll clean up tonight. We need sleep, first.'

Father walked down into the cellar, followed by Laura and Bion and Sam. Ellen walked upstairs, as did Leonard.

Timothy walked across the crêpe-littered hall. His head was down, and in passing the party mirror he saw himself, the pale mortality of his face. He was cold and trembling.

'Timothy,' said mother.

He stopped at the stairwell. She came to him, laid a hand on his face. 'Son,' she said. 'We love you. Remember that. We all love you. No matter how different you are, no matter if you leave us one day,' she said. She kissed his cheek. 'And if and when you die your bones will lie undisturbed, we'll see to that, you'll lie at ease for ever, I'll come and see you every Hallows' Eve and tuck you in the more secure.'

The house echoed to polished wooden doors creaking and slamming hollowly shut.

The house was silent. Far away, the wind went over a hill with its last cargo of small dark bats, echoing, chittering.

He walked up the steps, one by one, crying to himself all the way.