

## The Matter of Dawn

That comets are said to portend disaster, famine, and other unfavorable events is not foremost in the minds of Robert and Pauline who stand together, arm in arm, eyes skyward. To them, a glimpse of this rare phenomenon is fortuitous—a natural wonder that also happens to coincide with their reunion after nine years.

The comet is wonderful to see—its hazy tail of dust and gas trailing behind is much like a child's drawing. A black crayon sky over bright yellow paper, squiggles scratched out with a fingernail. The comet appears stilled in the heavens, yet it is driving forward at 176,000 kilometers an hour.

“So beautiful,” says Pauline. She has recently traveled from Colorado to meet with Robert after all these years. He has been courting her via e-mail for some months now.

“You know what it means,” says Robert. “Us, forever and ever.” He pulls her close and they stare at the sky. They are slightly drunk from sitting in the bar for five hours, eating nachos, drinking beers, and holding hands. Perhaps, if all goes well, the comet's appearance will be a happy detail in the recounting of this date as told to their future offspring.

There is evidence, however, already to the contrary, as there always is. First of all, Hale-Bopp's memory is forever tainted by those poor deluded souls whose suicides recently covered the front page of every newspaper. Though the romantic-minded would like to pose that perhaps those men and women of the cult Heaven's Gate are safely aboard a spaceship now, transformed into children, and ready with the odd things they packed: quarters and lip balm, the pragmatist knows a fatal fantasy has been played out. Jokes have already circled the planet, flown through the Internet in a matter of seconds. Quarters for cosmic tolls.

Secondly, there is the matter of Robert's past. He hasn't been completely honest with Pauline, or himself, about a previous relationship—one he hasn't quite ended yet, and so *previous* isn't the right word at all. *Ongoing* would be better.

Disaster is always a possibility.

But wait. There is the celestial body overhead and here are Robert and Pauline, full of hope and good intentions, standing just outside the restaurant by the Atlantic Ocean on this unusually warm March evening.

A few minutes later, before Robert drops Pauline off at a friend's house where she's staying, they'll make their own private joke. They'll say that they should name their firstborn Hale-Bopp. Or at least Haley, if it's a girl, though then the history of her name might be confused with a different comet: Halley's comet. No matter. A boy could be Hale. Pauline can imagine Robert holding an infant, kissing its tiny fingertips one by one and saying, "Hello little Hale-Bopp. My little bop."

Their first meeting at the restaurant was on neutral ground, but now it's two days later and Pauline has left the coast and headed inland to visit Robert on his own turf for the first time. After a spirited greeting from Robert's dog, a prancing, tail-wagging, three-year-old German Shepherd named Traven, Pauline stands in Robert's living room. Robert says he's nervous about how closely she is looking at everything. What does she make of it? This, his home, and his life here on the mountain. She smiles at him, nods so he will understand that she's not ready to say. She needs to walk from room to room slowly. There is a lot to see. Much to take in. A gargoyle face, pinned to the stones above the fireplace. A jar of red tulips, sagging with heavy heads on the sunny wooden table. "For you," Robert says. An aluminum tray on a window sill—ten dirt-filled cups, sprouting green-white shoots, bent toward the light. Tomatoes. Black bronze figures on shelves and sills—delicate, pinched metal: an Asian man carrying a bundle on his shoulder; a woman's torso—on her knees, headless and half arms; a wiry tree, the branches tangled and coming to buds at the ends, like Medusa's hair.

"My parents," Robert says, when she stops in front of a framed black and white photograph of a couple on their wedding day. The train of the bride's gown spreads in a lacy, ice-white pool at the feet of the newlyweds. Pauline looks for Robert in his father's face. The resemblance is there—dark eyebrows over serious eyes. The chin is strongly dimpled. Robert wears a beard.

A tall basket by the fireplace holds an array of wooden canes, with handles carved into the shapes of animal heads—a bird, an elephant, a weasel. The room is filled with so many odd things—accumulations from travel, from a forty-year life. Objects that reveal much more about

Robert's tastes than she'd gleaned through e-mail. She isn't displeased. Each ornament is like a word, or a whole phrase—much more flowery than his usual, spare sentences. And everything has its careful place—much tidier than the typos in his e-mails. His program, he once apologized, won't let him scroll back or delete.

On one dark wall, a painting of a nude. The woman is standing, curving to the side, arms above her head. Long reddish-brown hair.

Robert puts his hands on Pauline's shoulders as she gazes at the painting.

"She's like you," he says.

"You've never seen me," she teases. She means naked.

"The hair," he says. "It's what I always remembered about you. Your beautiful burgundy hair." He puts his nose in her hair, in her neck, and she tips her head to the side, to let him.

There is the bedroom and she stands in the doorway, doesn't quite dare go all the way in. There is the bed. Dark wood headboard and tall rounded posts at the foot. White comforter. White walls. The room is sparse, no pictures on the walls. A bureau and a braided rug. And the bed. Sunlight falls in rhomboid checkers over the bedding. A many-paned window above the bed. It's winter but the window is open a few inches. Water drips off the eaves outside and it sounds like rain. She feels the cool air through the window and when she steps back, away from the room he is right behind her. He turns her to face him, and kisses her hard.

There are books. Hundreds of books in the office and the computer where he writes the messages. For a moment she imagines him sitting in the blue swivel chair, fingers on the keyboard, staring at the screen, typing words for her. The words that brought her back. Brought her here after so many years. He was her teacher, and married then, so they never spoke of their attraction, until they found each other through email and began a correspondence that has led to this reunion, this quixotic (they're not unaware of the potential for artfulness in missives, electronic or otherwise) quest for true love.

Pauline can't help but feel that she has moved faster than e-mail, catching a plane and arriving on the East Coast in four and a half hours. In those hours she has become flesh and blood, standing in front of

Robert, making all the words—his full, sumptuous, slippery, sweet words—take responsibility for themselves.

There is the guest room. Toys. Piles of children's toys. Plastic things, red and blue and green. Yellow truck with big black wheels. Plastic, stiff, little men, with stiff-raised arms, lined on the window sill. The room for guests—where she'll stay, they've joked—but she knows they'll sleep together. It's been inevitable since the first kiss as Hale-Bopp crossed the heavens two nights ago on their first date. Though there are rules—lines to draw—because of the other woman. The woman who is the mother of the child. Not Robert's child, hers alone. The woman who has been Robert's on-again off-again lover.

*Sometjing I have to tell u you. A casual thing. No committments. She doesn't live here, but sometimes stays. write back quick. Tell me you junderstand.*

The woman, whose name is Dawn, is out of town for the night.

Though Pauline was not unaware of Dawn, it isn't until she sees the child's toys in the guest room that she realizes the true presence of the woman.

She wants to leave now. She wishes she'd never come. Her legs feel weak and she could cry. His hand is on the doorknob, still holding the door wide to the guest room and she is standing just in front of him, inside the crook of his arm and his chest as if caught there. She can't go forward or step back. He keeps the door open as if he means for her to take a good look. He doesn't want any secrets. Though she can't help but think that she is the secret—the secret visitor. She knows he hasn't told Dawn about her—the invisible e-woman. Pauline stares into the room, though she wants to shut her eyes. This is the guest room where the child sleeps when he comes here. Comes here with his mother who lies on the white bed with Robert. The mother who stretches with her arms above her head. Her hips, the curve of her waist. Pauline doesn't know what color Dawn's hair is. Dawn lies on the bed and Robert lies next to her, on top of her, and in the other room is the child.

In Boulder, Pauline has had no lover in a long time. No man spoons her body into his. *I'm a born again virgin*, she wrote to Robert when they first made contact and began telling each other what they'd been up to in the last nine years. The medium, safe behind a keyboard, made it easy to speak freely, to write openly.

*Never married? Kids?* Robert asked. *What's the deal?*

*I guess I never met anyone I wanted to marry*, she answered, trying to remember if there was any man who might have ever asked her.

E-mail may be immediate, but it is also blind and selective. She could choose which questions to answer, and which not. For instance, the one about kids: somewhere in the universe is a girl, not hers anymore, since giving birth at seventeen, but hers all the same. A daughter, given up for adoption.

Pauline knows only two possible things 'About her daughter: she is eighteen years old, or she's dead. Neither piece of information helps to quell the sometimes desperate sadness Pauline feels when she remembers her—a child she didn't love, no, couldn't love, but does love. And so love spills out into nowhere to no one for no reason.

The fact is, Pauline's daughter, whose name is Alice, is at this very moment ecstatic because a boy she's had a crush on for some months now has just asked her out. That Alice and her parents live in New Hampshire, a mere eighty-eight miles from where Robert and Pauline stand now, doesn't matter. Pauline will never meet Alice; she'll never know if her daughter is living or dead. For Pauline, Alice will always be as ethereal and ephemeral as a burst of imagination.

Robert pulls the guest bedroom door closed and watches as Pauline moves on to the next room. She looks smaller, somehow. Where before her arms were crossed in contemplation, now it seems she's freezing. He thinks maybe he should offer her a sweater. He thinks maybe he should have shoved the toys under the bed.

He's a bit unsure of what to do, or say. When she wrote, saying she'd be in his area, visiting an old graduate school friend who happens to live just over the border in Maine, he couldn't not see her. Of course they'd meet. More than anything he wanted to see her. But now he must determine if his feelings for her are something more than quick sentences scrolling down a screen. More even than the kisses and hand holding they came to so easily.

He must also decide if Dawn and he are indeed finished. But how could he know anything until he met Pauline in person? The sexy-worded sensual writer who appears via e-mail twice, sometimes three times a day.

Pauline stops in front of the fireplace. Later he'll build a fire and they can lean against one another. That they can do that, touch each other finally, is amazing to him and it reminds him of the past—of the days at school nine years ago when he found himself longing for her to come by his office. How he couldn't stop thinking about her. She'd sit

across from him, holding her papers and looking down. He'd wanted to reach out and tuck her hair back behind her ear. He wanted to tell her how beautiful her eyes were—full of texture and light, like dark suede brushed one way, then the other—and once he nearly did, but stopped himself. He was married then. Pauline was a student. She was prim and diffident, all neat-skirted and careful responses. He imagines she respects him for never having said anything, and he's glad she knows he was faithful, to his wife for their entire marriage. It thrilled him when Pauline e-mailed her own confession: "Back then I had a fantasy about making love with you on your desk."

"Do you want to borrow a sweater?" he asks her now.

She smiles and shakes her head. "No, I'm fine," she says. Her voice is soft and airy-sweet. Shy. So unlike the stories that poured from her fingers to his computer screen. Such a different woman in those words. It's as if she'd let him into her brain and taken him on a tour. But here, in reality, it isn't so easy to get inside her. He can tell that the toys in the guest room bothered her, but he can only guess how much and why.

He wrote her once that he never cared much for kids, but Dawn's child opened him up a little. No, a lot. He loves that little boy.

The boy, whose name is Dillon, is at this moment on the other side of town with a baby-sitter. Dillon is a lovely child. A spirit of innocence. He likes to sing songs to Robert (*there are bears bears bears everywhere where where and I don't cares cares cares any more*), and it's not unlikely that Dillon, who has just gotten off the bus from school, might ask the baby-sitter (a friend of Dawn's and a student of Robert's) to visit the man whom he has come to love as a father. The man who is his mother's boyfriend. The funny, roughhouse man who also owns a German Shepherd named Traven. Dillon loves Traven too.

Dawn, driving south for her tenth high school reunion, is thinking at this moment that not only did she forget to pack her own toothbrush, but she forgot to put Dillon's into his overnight knapsack. If that's all she's forgotten, everything will be fine. He can go a night without brushing; it won't damage him for life. She cringes; she hates it when she thinks things like that. How many little things add up to damage?

She checks her face in the rearview and thinks of her ex-husband. How many punches did she endure until she'd had enough? Her eyes are blue-green, and more on the blue side in this late afternoon light. After her divorce, she threw out all face make-up. She'd used it to cover

bruises mostly. She looks okay, not bad, hair still blond as it ever was in high school. She hasn't changed that much—just the slight tip of her nose from where he broke it that time.

Robert can't understand how she could have stayed with the man so long. Sometimes she can't either, but everything is more complicated than that. Lately, she's tired of explaining herself to Robert. She gets the feeling that he doesn't quite see her for who she is. She's afraid he pities her and it makes her uncomfortable. Re's great with Dillon. She's happy for that. Though their growing affection worries her too. Robert's twelve years older than she is; it's a gap they can't always ignore. He couldn't believe it when he figured out she wasn't even born when the astronauts first landed on the moon. Then he got mad when she suggested that maybe the whole walk on the moon thing was a hoax. It could be, why not? A government conspiracy. They've covered up things before. It's not that she really gives credence to this, either; it's Robert's attitude she pushes against. Keeping an open mind, allowing for other possibilities does not always a nut make. In fact, it's what's given her hope when things were really bad. She and Robert believe in different things.

She'll buy a toothbrush for herself when she stops for cigarettes, even though she quit smoking two weeks ago when Robert told her she smelled like an ashtray. Right now she wants a cigarette more than anything; she's a bit nervous about the reunion. She has nothing to say to anyone. No great successes to report. A failed marriage. She can't imagine telling anyone about the college degree she's been hacking away at part-time for the last five years. Or the waitress job. She can tell them about Dillon. Her pride and joy. She's going to get that college degree, and then a stable job with good benefits so she can give her son everything he deserves, though she tries to give him everything now. She does pretty well. Robert helps sometimes too (he's the sweetest man she's ever known), though she'd rather do it herself.

The thing Dawn has neglected (out of financial impossibility) is regular car maintenance. Right now the fan belt is well-worn, and fraying rapidly on one edge. It has not yet snapped, though it's under intense pressure and whirring round spinning disks at sixty-five miles an hour.

In her early twenties, Pauline had an affair with a married man. They lasted about eight months. She learned that you cannot love a married man because he is always a liar and you can never forget it. She doesn't want a married man and though Robert isn't married, the toys in the guest room and the way Robert stiffens and lets the machine answer the

phone, makes her recall the always-kept out of sight, anonymous role she played as the other woman. She swore she'd never play it again.

There is a worn, pinkish couch in front of the fireplace. The gargoyle stares at her. Open, scallop-lipped mouth, devil's eyes.

"Are you all right?" Robert asks. He's standing behind her, looking over her shoulder.

"I like this face," she says and touches the ceramic, covers its whole face with her palm.

"I like him too," Robert says. He slides his arms around her waist, hands on her belly and pulls her back into him. "Is it awful?" he says.

She reaches an arm up, over her shoulder and puts her hand on his cheek. She's not exactly sure what he's referring to. "It's a beautiful house," she says. The water is dripping outside the window, dangling in sparkling chains.

Robert lets go of her when Traven barks at the door.

It is late afternoon and if they want to hike the small mountain behind Robert's house, they should do it now before the light fades. It's hard to leave the couch where they've been kissing for the better part of an hour. *Dishveeled* is a good word. They stand, shake themselves and put on coats, scarves, gloves. Robert has two pair of snowshoes. It doesn't escape Pauline's notice that Robert is ready with things for two. Two tennis rackets stabbed on a wall peg.

"The only part that worries me," Kate, Pauline's friend, said last night as they sipped margaritas at Kate's kitchen table, "is the thing he still has going on with that single mother person."

"I know," Pauline said. "But it's not serious."

"Then why hasn't he told her about you?" Kate asked.

"A good question." She agreed, though she could think of a million excuses for him—one being that they hadn't seen each other in almost ten years. What if she'd turned into a big, fat blob with a face like dog food? Who could blame him for holding off?

"Come on," Kate said. "I'm sure you're the best wagon to roll through his town ever. He's got to see that."

"I hope so," she said. "It feels right, you know. Like magic," she said and toasted her glass toward the window. "Like yonder comet."

"I could vomit on that freaking comet," Kate said. "I've had nothing but bad luck since the thing came around. Every mechanical thing in the house has broken. The furnace shit the bed. My computer is diseased. The car needs ball joints. And yesterday I put metal in the microwave and it blew up."

“Quit putting metal in the microwave,” Pauline said. “Just be careful,” Kate said. “I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Pauline loves Kate and she’s thinking of her now as she zips up her coat. She’s wishing for Kate a streak of good luck, because Kate deserves it.

Robert hangs back to check the answering machine, while Pauline goes outside with Traven. He’s relieved that the voice on the machine is Dawn. Her old car has held up and she’s made it to the high school reunion four hours away. She’ll spend the night in the hotel. That she ends her message with “love you” doesn’t register in Robert’s conscience until he catches sight of Pauline through the window. She has moved to the center of the driveway and lifted her face to the sun. Her hair is long, a waterfall of wine-brown curling in the light. Eyes closed, she seems to be absorbing the warmth. She reminds him of an exotic plant, which seems apropos since she is a botanist.

When they knew each other before, when he was her teacher, she was unsure of the graduate program she’d chosen. She liked to write and she liked literature, which is how she happened into his class (her legs crossed, leaning forward, blouse open at the collar), but it was a mistake. Her love was plants, after all. He reaches back through time and imagines unbuttoning her blouse. And after all, she is here.

So, when Dawn’s voice on the tape, tender and familiar, pronounces her love at the very same time that Pauline—woman of long ago dreams—holds her face to the sky, a cold ice drains down his spine.

Unrequited. This is the word that comes to Pauline’s mind as she stands in the melting snow-balmy air. Traven bounds past her and she opens her eyes. She’s blinded momentarily—a black sun ball imprinted in her vision, skims across the snow bank, the yard, her rental car.

“Traven,” she whispers. The dog stops and tips his head, ears perked, as if he’s trying very hard to understand English. “What am I doing here?”

The name B. Traven, Robert once explained to her, is a pseudonym for the enigmatic author whose true identity was never quite proven. He might have been a German, though he passed as American. Some theories say he was Ret Marut, a political writer jailed during the Bavarian revolution after the First World War. With a death sentence over his head, he escaped and made his way to Mexico. B. Traven was prolific

and well-versed in all matters and subjects, including several languages. He never wrote by hand, or signed his name anywhere. He may have been more than one man. On the movie set of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, it was said that he disguised himself as his own agent Hal Groves. When the rumors started, suggesting Groves might actually be Traven, Groves disappeared. In the author's first novel, *The Death Ship*, a young sailor loses his papers and is smuggled from country to country where he is told that without papers, he doesn't exist. The death ship, Robert explained, is an old tug, meant to sink for insurance purposes, and so crewed with anonymous souls. Our sailor boards her.

When he told her, Pauline couldn't help but think of the crazy HaleBopp tailgaters (passports tucked into their belongings as if they'd planned to enter another country), boarding their own death ship—a death spaceship. Fathomless faith.

Robert won't tell Pauline what happens to our hero, the sailor. He wants her to read the novel. It's a book he's loved since he was a boy.

Disappearance and existence, Pauline thinks, is somewhat of a paradox. *I think boy is all a matter of believing*, Robert once typed to her. *Who are you?* she wrote back.

Traven stares at her, tips his head, mouth open.

"Come here," Pauline says and pats her thigh. Traven bows on his front legs, tail end up—a challenge, a standoff—then springs forward. Pauline sidesteps and laughs. She strokes his back. He presses against her legs. He's eager to get on the trail. Come on, come on, come on, he pants. Pauline wonders what's keeping Robert. She wants to be away from the house. It will be better in the woods, more relaxed. There's something bothering her, something that settled into her like a weight: the toys in the room.

Pauline might have liked to have another child, but time is running out; she had decided to let the time run out. She thinks she might be happy with a dog. She scolds herself for even the smallest indulgence in the idea of a child. Of little Bop.

What she really wants right now is for Robert to keep touching her. If he keeps touching her, she'll be able to forget everything else. Forget that they hardly know each other. That there are complications—that never-smooth course of true love. His beard has made her chin rough and itchy. She's in love with his lips. Sweet, rounded-middle upper lip. Lips where words fall out and into her ears. A voice that's deeper than she remembered. A soothing voice and unfaltering; it took her by sur-

prise. She'd half expected him to stutter, what with all the quick email incomplete sentences and misspellings and double written words. She's clearly at an advantage being able to edit and revise before sending her messages. Or is she? All that rewording for perfection. So many silent typed words have passed between them. Passed through wire, sky, cog-wheel, sprocket. Queue, launch, vanish, appear. Oh, but Robert. His hands, and his kind dark eyes that make her believe, that say that this is something, something special. It is. She's sure of it.

Once, Robert remembers, when Dawn left for a trip, she'd changed her mind at the last minute and driven back, surprising him with a middle of the night visit. She was horny, she said.

It pains him to think how it would hurt Dawn to discover Pauline here. And he loves that little boy. He erases Dawn's message and in a moment of panic thinks he might call her at the hotel, tell her to settle in. Don't get the urge to drive after drinking, he might tell her. Or, don't trust that junk heap of a car. Stay put. And he wants to tell her all this to protect her from all the bad things in the world. She's a good, kind person. She's had an awful time of it. She doesn't deserve any more pain and he swears he won't add to it.

Robert is paralyzed, staring at the telephone. He thinks he must be the biggest coward in the world. He can't believe he has let Pauline come here, yet he's so happy she's here. He can't believe how happy he is. It's funny sounding—the word happy—when he says it out loud to the gargoyles on his way by.

The lines to be drawn are these: kissing, lots of it. Touching, for sure, but no fucking. They agree to these terms as they wide-walk in their snowshoes. The snow sinks slightly under the webs and Pauline looks back to see the oval-grate footprints left behind. Traven, light enough to stay atop the crust, dashes ahead. Pauline reaches for Robert's hand. The trail gets steeper and they breathe heavily. Fucking is too intimate.

"There's got to be a better word for it," Robert says. "Screw. Getting laid?"

"I don't understand that," Pauline says. "Which gender owns the verb? How about intercourse?"

"Sounds like something people should do with walkie-talkies," Robert says.

There are no good words, no right definitions. They only know that they want to be careful and slow, and there is also the matter of Dawn. *Fucking* seems the sort of intimacy that would be the act of betrayal Robert doesn't want to commit. *Making love* is the act of intimacy Pauline

wants only when they have complete autonomy. They both know that they are fooling themselves, lines have already been crossed.

But the view from the top is spectacular! Rolling snowy hills and dark mountains in the distance against a dusky sky. One stretch of curving ridge looks like a giant woman, lying on her back. The fire tower on top the summit is her nipple. The next knoll is her rounded belly. Traven circles them, then sits on the toe of Pauline's snowshoe. She takes off her gloves and runs her fingers into his fur. Robert takes off one glove and slides his hand under Pauline's hair at the back of her neck. When she lets go of Traven and turns to Robert, he pulls her face to his. She nearly topples, but he holds her up and they kiss.

Only Traven notices the bright object hovering over the fire tower. It rises, then dips low, zooms forward, coming closer, growing larger, like a huge shiny bowl. The fur on Traven's back stands on end. He lifts his nose to the breeze and cocks his head. There's a barrage of noise in his sensitive dog ears. Tones he's heard a thousand times before now make sense. *Traven, what am I doing here?* He looks at Pauline who is kissing Robert. He wants to tell her that now he understands what she asked him before. He thinks he could even answer the question, but suddenly he's overwhelmed with Robert sounds. They are like a flood, an orchestra warming up, all jumbled and mismatched, thousands of words that blend into one giant ball of good feeling, of friendship. Traven would die for Robert; he loves him that much. Then, the object takes an abrupt right turn, zipping away over the horizon and Traven's new-found words slow, like a ball bumping down steps, one after another until they are gone.

In an hour the sky has darkened and Robert and Pauline are back at the house, clapping their snowshoes free of ice. They look up to see their beloved comet once more.

"A spaceship," Robert says. "How could they believe it?"

Pauline speaks close to his ear, "Perhaps it's no less than believing in belief?"

Robert unzips Pauline's coat and slides his hands inside, around to her bottom and presses her forward. He finds the hem of her sweater and lifts until his palms are on her back, against warm skin.

"Your hands are cold," she says. She grips his jacket at the shoulders and pulls herself closer as his hands circle over bra hooks and around to ribs. She has dropped one hand to his thigh.

What's inside a kiss—inside the heads of lovers? Do they *think* anything at all as they kiss? Is true love born from words or kisses? Both?

Heart and mind. Two different dancers. The romantic and the pragmatic matching steps?

There is more information to consider in our lovers' equation. Pauline has accepted a year-long grant to study the Park Rock Cress, a rare white flower, *Arabis Vivariensis*, that grows principally in Dinosaur National Monument, Colorado. Whether or not she can spend her vacations with Robert is unknown. Robert is tenured, house-settled and dog-owning. Whether or not he can visit her is questionable. There is no easy future for these two. Do they have it in them to weather these storms? To storm these whethers? Pauline's kisses say, yes, yes; it's so rare to find someone at all in the world. She is the romantic. She believes in belief—that love is belief. Robert would claim to be romantic too, but the fact is, he's quite skeptical that long-distance relationships can work. He's not, however, unwilling to hope, by fission or fate, that some path through all the exploding bombs of the universe will open for them.

There is also the more immediate matter of Dawn and Dillon. Which, in our busy day of hiking and kissing, has grown somewhat problematic. Dillon is lethargic and grumpy. The baby-sitter is having a difficult time. He's not at all acting himself. When she puts her hand to his forehead, she must mask her alarm. His skin is on fire. He's burning up.

And Dawn, who has just now decided to forgo the rest of the cardboard-tasting turkey dinner put on by the reunion committee, has the uncanny feeling that she should check in with the baby-sitter, see if all is well.

Frankly, there are other forces astir that may affect the short or long of this love story. A junk-heap car that won't start, for instance, holding back an imminent trajectory. A high school crush, revived during the consolation of a worried mother. And because children are the spirit of innocence. . . a message of relief: the fever has broken.

In the long of it, a professor on spring break may suddenly find himself onboard a speeding jet to Colorado. In Dinosaur a sperm spurred upwards, onwards, inwards, in other words, may begin a happy new life.

Hale-Bopp, hurtling itself across the heavens, tail-heavy with rock and dirt and spaceship, will disappear from the sky in just a few short weeks. What it leaves in its wake is up for interpretation.

But come, it's a chill March evening with miles to go before forever and ever; let's get our lovers into bed.