

Epilogue

KENNY AND I met in Provincetown over fifteen years ago. I was living in Brooklyn then and had gone up for the weekend with my friend Bob Applegarth (whose ashes we scattered several years later on the big dune at the end of Snail Road). Kenny, who lived in Manhattan, was in Provincetown for a week by himself, though he was not often by himself once he got there. We spoke to each other casually, as strangers do, in an art gallery, then ran into each other again, later that night in front of Spiritus, where we exchanged phone numbers. If we hadn't happened onto each other that second time, I suspect we'd never have met again, and we've wondered over the years whether we were likely ever to have met, under any circumstances, in New York. It seems doubtful. We had little, outwardly, in common. But Provincetown is the kind of place where people who are not technically supposed to meet at all not only do so but see one another over and over again. Kenny and I have been together all of

the last fifteen years, and we still go to Provincetown every chance we get. We imagine ourselves, only half jokingly, as old coots there, prone to a little more gold jewelry than is absolutely necessary, walking wire-haired dachshunds on leashes down Commercial Street. I can think of worse fates. Wherever you go, Provincetown will always take you back, at whatever age and in whatever condition. Because time moves somewhat differently there, it is possible to return after ten years or more and run into an acquaintance, on Commercial or at the A&P, who will ask mildly, as if he'd seen you the day before yesterday, what you've been doing with yourself. The streets of Provincetown are not in any way threatening, at least not to those with an appetite for the full range of human passions. If you grow deaf and blind and lame in Provincetown, some younger person with a civic conscience will wheel you wherever you need to go; if you die there, the marshes and dunes are ready to receive your ashes. While you're alive and healthy, for as long as it lasts, the golden hands of the clock tower at Town Hall will note each hour with an electric bell as we below, on our purchase of land, buy or sell, paint or write or fish for bass, or trade gossip on the post office steps. The old bayfront houses will go on dreaming, at least until the emptiness between their boards proves more durable than the boards themselves. The sands will continue their slow devouring of the forests that were the Pilgrims' first sight of North America, where man, as Fitzgerald put it, "must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic

contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder." The ghost of Dorothy Bradford will walk the ocean floor off Herring Cove, draped in seaweed, surrounded by the fleeting silver lights of fish, and the ghost of Guglielmo Marconi will tap out his messages to those even longer dead than he. The whales will breach and loll in their offshore world, dive deep into black canyons, and swim south when the time comes. Herons will browse the tidal pools; crabs with blue claws tipped in scarlet will scramble sideways over their own shadows. At sunset the dunes will take on their pink-orange light, and just after sunset the boats will go luminous in the harbor. Ashes of the dead, bits of their bones, will mingle with the sand in the salt marsh, and wind and water will further disperse the scraps of wood, shell, and rope I've used for Billy's various memorials. After dark the raccoons and opossums will start on their rounds; the skunks will rouse from their burrows and head into town. In summer music will rise up. The old man with the portable organ will play for passing change in front of the public library. People in finery will sing the anthems of vanished goddesses; people who are still trying to live by fishing will pump quarters into jukeboxes that play the songs of their high school days. As night progresses, people in diminishing numbers will wander the streets (where whaling captains and their wives once promenaded, where O'Neill strode in drunken furies, where Radio Girl—who knows where she is now?—announced

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the news), hoping for surprises or just hoping for what the night can be counted on to provide, always, in any weather: the smell of water and its sound; the little houses standing square against immensities of ocean and sky; and the shapes of gulls gliding overhead, white as bone china, searching from their high silence for whatever they might be able to eat down there among the dunes and marshes, the black rooftops, the little lights tossing on the water as the tides move out or in.