"These are the Fates, daughters of Necessity ... Lachesis singing of the past, Clotho of the present, Atropos of the future."
Plato, THE REPUBLIC
FOR SHERRI, WHO PICKED UP THE PIECES.
FOR LESLIE KAY WHO ARRANGES THE PIECES.
FOR LORI, WHO IS OPTING TO BE ONE OF THE PIECES.
There is an inscription on the lintel over the octagonal portal to Ellison Wonderland. It says:
Always look up.
Never look down;
All you ever see
are the pennies
people drop.
There is a seven-headed dog guarding the octagonal portal to Ellison Wonderland. If you aren't nice, it will bite you in the ass.
Kilimanjaro is a snow covered mountain 19,710 feet high, and is said to be the highest mountain in Africa. Its western summit is called the Masai "Ngàje Ngài," the House of God. Close to the western summit there is the dried and frozen carcass of a leopard. No one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude.
THE SNOWS OF KILIMANJARO by Ernest Hemingway
INTRODUCTION
HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH A TROLL

One evening I met a young woman for whom I quickly developed carnal desires. We met at a party, I think. I don't remember now. It was a while ago. And I cut her out of the crowd and finally we got back to my house and it started to go wrong. Oh, not wrong in the way that once we were alone the sexual thing didn't seem to be working out: quite the contrary. She began getting misty-eyed. I could see that she was forming a fantasy view of the man who had swept her away to this strange and colorful eyrie. She was thinking ahead: can this one be THE one I've been looking for? And I didn't want that.
No point here in going into the reason I didn't want that; perhaps I was the wrong one for her on more than a casual basis, perhaps she was wrong for me permanently, perhaps it was a hundred different little things I sensed in the ambience of the evening. Whatever it was, I wanted to discourage the fantasy, but not the sexual liaison. I'm not sure there's anything wrong with that. But maybe there is. It depends where your concepts of morality lead you. For me, it was better to be upfront about it, to say there's tonight, and maybe other nights, but under no circumstances is this permanent.
And I tried to tell her, gently.
And that was wrong. Because it was hypocritical.
I wanted to have my picnic, but I didn't want to have to spend the time necessary to putting the picnic-grounds back in the same condition I'd found it.
(That isn't a casually-conceived metaphor; and it's quite purposely not coarse in its comparisons. To love well and wisely, I now believe, we must attempt to leave a situation with a love-partner with the landscape and its inhabitants as well off, or better off, than they were when We arrived. Like this:
(Walter Huston and Tim Holt and Fred C. Dobbs [sometimes known as Humphrey Bogart] are about to leave the mountain from which they've clawed their gold. And Huston says to Holt and Bogart, "We've got to spend a week putting the mountain back the way we found it." And Bogart looks amazed, because they are running the risk of being set-upon once again by Alfonso Bedoya and his bandidos. So Huston explains very carefully that the mountain is a lady, and it has been good to them, and they have to close its wounds.
(And finally, even flinty, paranoid Bogart understands, and he agrees, and they spend a week repairing the ecological damage they've done to the mountain that was good to them.)
So instead of trying to weasel and worm my way through an explanation that would have been no real explanation at all, I asked her if she would mind my sitting down and writing something for her. She said that would be nice, and I did it, trying to say as bluntly as possible with fantasy images what words from the "real world" would not adequately say. And this is what I wrote:
She looks at me with eyes blue as the snow on Fuji's summit in a woodblock print by Hiroshige. She says, "You're really different, really unique." Beneath the paleness of her cheeks the blood suddenly rushes and she only knows her nervousness has increased in the small room, though nothing has altered from the moment before. She does not understand that her skin and survival mechanisms have registered the presence of an alien creature. Her blood carries the certain knowledge. Like

the sentient wind, she perceives only that she has crossed an invisible border and now roams naked and weaponless in a terra incognita where wolves assume the shapes of men and babies are born with golden glowing eyes and the sound from the stars is that of the very finest crystal.

To her fingertips come the vibrations of flowers singing in silent voices, telling of times before the watery deeps carried the seed of humanity. Her skin: absorbing the vibrations of unicorn's hooves as they beat the molten earth into gold. Her nostrils: bringing to her the scents of dreams being born. Her delicate nerve-endings: vital and trembling with expectation of oddness.

She sits with a troll, with another kind of creature, and her uneasiness grows. Cellular knowledge assaults her in wave after wave, and she cannot codify that knowledge.

"Let me tell you a story," I say, and in few words explain the horizons of the land into which she has wandered.

Will she understand that mortals and trolls cannot mate?

It didn't go well with her. It was a sour relationship from the start. I wound up doing her damage, hurting her; she didn't hurt me. I don't brag about it, I'm certainly not proud of it, there was no notch cut in the stock of the weapon from the encounter. Machismo wasn't part of it: I hurt her and she didn't hurt me only because it didn't mean as much to me. I was a hard thing. Colder. She was vulnerable. It had to happen, I suppose. If I'd been a nicer person I'd have forgone the sex and sent her away at the start. I explain it now, by way of justification, by saying she is a born victim: someone waiting to be savaged by love. But the truth is simply that I am precisely like everyone else when it comes to love ... I am a child. I want my picnic, and I hate cleaning up the mess.

Pause. Go back to the start of this book, just before the beginning of this new introduction. Read the quote from Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." Do you know what it was the leopard was seeking? Do you understand why the creature climbed to that altitude and what happened to it? The answer to the riddle is the answer, I think, to understanding how to travel the road of love. I put the quote there, what has become a powerful literary metaphor since Hemingway first wrote it exactly forty years ago in 1936, because it seems to me to contain the truest thing one can know about traveling that difficult road. Friends of mine, around this house as I assemble this book for a publisher's deadline, don't seem to understand why that little parable, riddle, metaphor, whatever the hell it is, seems so eloquent, and so right for this book of kinda sorta love stories. I hope these words will clear it up for them. Probably not, though. I'm not too clear on this subject of love myself.

In fact, some years ago, when I was writing the introductions to the stories in an anthology I edited called DANGEROUS VISIONS, I found myself writing these words about myself and Theodore Sturgeon:

"It became clear to Sturgeon and myself that I knew virtually nothing about love but was totally familiar with hate, while Ted knew almost nothing about hate, yet was completely conversant with love in all its manifestations."

That was in 1966. Ten years ago. I've revised my estimates of both Ted's and my understandings of hate and love. It's been an interesting ten years for both of us, and if I were to take the toll today I'd have to admit grudgingly that I've had some of the parameters of the equation of love drilled into me by experts. And so now, ten years later, I set down these first few tentative thoughts about the subject, offering as credentials the stories in this collection.

I can tell you many things love is not. Telling you what it is comes much harder to me. When one feels like a novice, it becomes an act of arrogance to pontificate. Much of what I think changes from day to day. And I suppose by the accepted standards of success, I'm a poor spokesman. It seems the more experience I get, the less sure I become about anything where love is concerned. (I'm not talking about my three marriages and divorces. That's another thing, and peculiarly, it has less to do with my caution about this subject than more "informal" relationships.)

Lori and I were talking about this several weeks ago, and with what I take to be the normal curiosityof anyone merging his or her life with someone else's, she asked me how many women I'd been with. For a few days I wouldn't answer her. I wasn't hiding anything, I just didn't think she'd care to hear the real answer. Finally, I told her. "I tried to count up, one time about six years ago," I said. "And I used snapshots and correspondence and phone lists I found lying around in old files and desk drawers, and I had to stop when it got over three hundred. I suppose I've been to bed with maybe five hundred different women."

She didn't say anything for a long while, but I could see she was shocked. When I'd tried to take the tally half a dozen years ago, I'd been shocked, too.

I realize there will be guys out there who'll read that figure--five hundred--which I think is pretty accurate, and they'll react in one of several different ways. There will be assholes who'll think that's pretty terrific. There will be amateur Freudians who'll think it's sick. There will

be professional sympathizers who'll feel sorry for me. There will be guys who can't get laid who'll think I'm lying, trying to trumpet some kind of bogus swashbuckler image.
Each view has some validity going for it.
But mostly, since I went through all those days and nights and people, since I was there (or as much of me as I had control of was there), I subscribe to the view that I was looking for something very hard, perhaps with uncommon desperation. I think I understand the psychological reasons I was on that endless hunt, and I submit there was less of deviation, perversion or obsession than of loneliness and a determination to find answers. I'm constantly perplexed at the dichotomous position of people who laud a student's seeking everywhere to find the answers to life, or creativity, or the existence of God, or the direction of the student's career ... who cluck their tongues and badrap the same attempts to discover the answers to interpersonal relationships by those who seek in every area that presents itself. If the true purpose of living a fulfilled life is in establishing meaningful liaisons with people, if it's part of that fulfillment to seek and find and give and accept love, then why should the search be looked on with such moral disapproval?
Perhaps I'm advocating profligacy, but I don't think so. Discovering the nature of love is infinitely more complex and exhausting than, for instance, learning how to be a brain surgeon. But the smug, self-satisfied moralists think it's precise and proper for someone to spend fifteen years learning how to ease a subdural hematoma, yet twisted, sick and sad for someone to spend the same fifteen years learning how to ease his or her loneliness. Answers to the former can be found in medical textbooks and in O.R.s all over the world; answers to the latter slide and skitter and avoid discovery save by chance and steady application to all possibilities.
The search is as important as the discovery.
(And therein lies the core of the answer to Hemingway's riddle about the leopard.)
Lori seems to feel as I write this, that even if I don't have the answers. at least I've had a greater opportunity to find the answers than those who deny the search, settle for whatever's handiest, and then spend the rest of their lives with secret thoughts and open frustration.
On the basis of her view, and the fact that I trust her opinions most of the time, I'm plunging ahead with this essay on love. I hope to God she's right. If she's wrong, and I've been merely a profligate, indulging myself in adolescent sex-antics, I'm going to look like a righteous schmuck by the time this introduction is completed. If I don't already.
Ambrose Bierce has two definitions of "love" in THE ENLARGED DEVIL'S DICTIONARY (Doubleday, 1967, and a sensational book). Bierce, a cynic beside whom I look like Pollyanna, writes this:
Love, n. The folly of thinking much of another before one knows anything of oneself.
Love, n. A temporary insanity curable by marriage or by removal of the patient from the influences under which he incurred the disorder. This disease, like caries and many other ailments, is prevalent only among civilized races living under artificial conditions; barbarous nations breathing pure air and eating simple food enjoy immunity from its ravages. It is sometimes fatal, but more frequently to the physician than to the patient.
People reading my books, most particularly the introductions in my books, think I am the reincarnation of Bierce: that I am a mean, pugnacious, constantly depressed or alarmed sonofabitch into whose life the sunshine of affection has never cast its effulgent glow. Fuck you, I say politely.
Even the most drooling of the Jukes or the Kallikaks* should be able to perceive that someone who manifests such volatile feelings about injustice, racism, stupidity, mediocrity and general negative bullshit in the Universe has his times of joy and happiness and noble dreams that soar aloft as one with the greatest aspirations of the human race. Those who read my works and remember only the stories and essays that deal with blood, lust, violence, death, disfigurement, pain, depression, smarmy sex and ka-ka do me a disservice. Also, they are sick and ought to be "put away," if you catch my drift. I have written dozens and dozens of kind, gentle, happy, funny stories and introductions. But do they remember those? Do they? Huh, I ask you, do they!?! Not on your cryonic crypt, they don't! All they remember are stories such as "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" or "The Prowler in the City at the Edge of the World." All they recall when my work is mentioned are the shrieks of torment coming from my characters.
When the truth of the matter is that I'm basically a very happy fellow. Funny, too. I adore small children, dogs of all breeds, Barney Miller and Richard Pryor and George Carlin and M*A*S*H, noodles, the humorous novels of Donald Westlake. (Noodles have always seemed hilarious to me, go figure it.) For instance, I got a letter today from Debe (No Last Name Given) at Millikin University in Decatur, Illinois; and she went on you wouldn't believe about being a fan of my writing, but how disturbing it all was, how I always seem to write sad or mean stuff. "Is there another side?" she asked. "We all have our demons. But tell me more of you. You must have some

light, some happiness, something good that you cherish?"
Now, see! There you go. A perfect example. Here's this young woman (I presume she's fairly young from the writing and the content) who encounters me in a series of books and gets all grunched out of shape because she thinks I'm downcast, and she wants me to spill the beans on myself, to tell her what makes me smile and laugh and love.
And apart from wanting to keep some personal feelings to myself--Gawd, you're a greedy bunch, no matter how much I blather and reveal, you're never satisfied--the things I do unleash are frequently as happy as they are miserable. But when I try to look on the bright side, and pass along the lucent limbus of my personal joy, everyone who remembers those screams of anguish comes down on me like a tsunami, accusing me of being maudlin and saccharine.
So if the observations I make about love seem just a tot on the pragmatic, even cynical, side ... well, it's purely an attempt to walk the tightrope: to indulge an uncommon (to my readers) softness of spirit without slopping over into Rod McKuen-ism; to be as tough-minded as possible (and thereby useful) about something as intangible as love, without sounding bruised or discouraged; to avoid cliché without purposely wandering in the glades of perversion.
I've included two of those tightrope-walking routines in this book. Originally, they were installments of a column I wrote for Art Kunkin when he was editor of the Los Angeles Free Press and later, when legitimate-thugs-turned-illegitimate-"businessmen" screwed him out of his own newspaper and he started an abortive, short-lived competitor, for Art's Los Angeles Weekly News. Though they're true, not stories, they read like stories--I've listed them on the Table of Contents as Personal Reminiscence I and II--and it's in the story-form that I feel most at ease writing my views of love. Unless one is Shelley, a Nuñez de Arce or La Rochefoucauld, one has no business publicly shooting off one's mouth about something as mysterious and ethereal as love. Unless one is le Marquis de Sade, in which case one has a personal vision of love that defies all strictures.
But in fiction, even a groping dullard like myself can stumble upon a truth or two; or at least a rule-of-thumb that seems to work in certain situations, among certain kinds of people. So when I pass along these remarks, I'll try and couch them in anecdotal terms, all the better to entertain you, my dears, and not coincidentally to alleviate my own nervousness in this area.
So here is just about all I know concerning love. Some of it light and happy, some of it cynical, perhaps some of it even accurate and truthful. One never knows, do one.
The minute people fall in love, they become liars.
You'd think such good feelings in the gut and other places would make people want to ensure the continuance of those feelings. But their fears overcome their good sense, not to mention their ethics. They begin to lie, virtually from the first moment they feel the stirrings in the aorta ... or wherever it is love is supposed to make itself felt.
They lie in a hundred different ways. From the first tentative social conversations that bore them silly, they lie by pretending to be interested in inanities. This is a generality, but I think it holds: if it's guys, they listen to banal bullshit just on the off-chance they'll get laid. If it's women, they listen to the blown-out-of-proportion nonsense of men so they can reinforce the guy's need to be a Big Man. They lie to one another with looks and with words, and only the body-language tells the truth.
They lie to keep the upper hand, even before they're threatened. The fear of rejection is so ingrained, from the schoolyard, from the locker room, from the parties, from the Homecoming Dance, from the years of seeing lithe tanned women in bikinis and feral muscular men with shirts open to the sternum up there on four-color billboards; they fear the unknown outer darkness of someone saying, "No."
So they lie to one another. Granted, it's akin to the social lying we all do at parties, in restaurants, at social events: putting up with trivia to be politic or civilized or "gracious," whatever that means. Nonetheless, it is lying. And by feigning interest in that which bores or turns one off, they set up artificial grounds for a potential relationship that they have to maintain all through the rest of the association. I know a young woman who met a guy at a party. He turned her on, and he started voicing some of his rustic views on busing. She had worked for the integration legislation as a regional attaché to one of the senators pushing the facilitation of busing. She came out of ten years of hard and thankless work trying to achieve racial balance. He was a divorced businessman with two kids, who was, at heart, a man who feared and hated blacks. Though he would have gone to his grave swearing there wasn't a scintilla of bigotry in his well-clothed body. But they turned each other on, and she listened and nodded, and said nothing. They started dating. It lasted six months. Then it fell apart. When his narrow view of the world became too much for her, she started to fight back. Now he tells everyone she was a "castrating bitch" and she harbors guilt feelings for her own intransigency. False and untenable rules for the

relationship had been the order of their mating from the git-go. It was doomed to fail.
Earlier, I passed along a generality. There are, of course, exceptions. There are women who listen to the crapola put out by guys at parties because they want to get laid, and there are guys who put up with women's inanities because they want to be polite. It happens. But the point still holds. They do it because they want to be liked. They lie and listen to lies so they'll be accepted. The first faint stirrings of love--barely codified, still inarticulate--force them into the role of liar.
And then the lies, once having been freed from Pandora's Hope Chest, begin to breed. They multiply like maggots and riddle a relationship like a submarine hit by a depth charge. Consider just the most obvious ones we've all either used or been victimized by:
You walk into a room and she (or he) is brooding.
"What's the matter, something wrong, something bothering you?" That's what you say.
Then he (or she) replies, "Nothing."
A lie, a bald-faced lie. You know damned well there's something wrong. The way the legs are crossed, the way the arms are folded, that telltale pursing of the lips, the vacant, abstracted stare, the peremptory way the words are bitten off. There's something wrong. But she (or he) says, "Nothing."
Is it because the brooding party really has something heavy to brood about and, out of love, chooses to lie rather than to lay it on the other person? Is it (more likely) that the brooder has been brought down by something the other party did, and wants to whip a little unconscious, free-floating guilt on the perpetrator before spilling the loadof shit being carried in the gut? Is it part of the stylized ritual of hide-and-seek so many lovers play? Is it a physical manifestation of the brooding party's having done something they mutually consider "wrong" (like going out and getting laid on the sly), and getting him or herself set to rationalize it in such a way that the other member of the team feels like the criminal, using the brooding dark mood as a kind of head start in the argument that will follow?
What does it matter? What we're dealing with here is dishonesty, cupidity, misdirection, acting-out ... lying.
Here's another one. And you've all been on one or the other end of this one:
"No, I have a headache."
"No, I'm tired."
"No, I'm a little inflamed."
"No, I have a hard day tomorrow."
"No, it isn't right."
"No, I'm still in love with [fill in appropriate name]."
Now none of those oldies but goodies is being spoken by a man or woman on a first date. I'm talking about their use in an already ongoing relationship. But a relationship in which one of the partners has been turned off, and won't cop to it! So he or she lies. Again and again and again. Instead of simply saying, "You have bad breath," or "I'm not sexually turned on by you any more," the lies are ranked like Mirv missiles and fired off, one each time an enemy approach is sighted.
Here's another one. Before they met, he was attracted to medium-height, auburn-haired females between the ages of seventeen and twenty-eight with high conical breasts and very thin legs. She was attracted to guys with tight little asses and an almost total absence of chest and arm hair; guys with blue eyes and heavy torsos and English accents and thin, aquiline noses. But one time he made the error of going on admiringly about one of those fantasy-women just a few seconds too long, as they sat there watching the hair coloring commercial in which the woman appeared, and she got extremely uptight. And one time she made the error of spending a half hour in a corner at a party talking to a guy just like the kind she lubricated for, and he (her boy friend) went into a towering Sicilian machismo rage about her flirting.
So now, they purposely turn away from the somatotypes that attract them, when they're out driving, when they're walking in the shopping mall, when they go to the movies, when they spend an evening at the bowling alley, when the tv camera pans across the bleachers at the football game, when they're at a party. She'll test him by drawing his attention to a girl he's already clocked and turned away from, by saying, "Do you think she's attractive?" And he'll glance over quickly, and with feigned disinterest mumble, "Legs're too skinny." But he has a stack of beaver magazines hidden away in his work bench, each magazine containing 372 unretouched shots of girls just like the one he dismissed. He'll test her by introducing her to a guy at the office party who fits her secret sex fantasies, and later asking, "What'd you think of Ken?" And she'll go right on basting the roast or drawing up the blueprints for the new museum wing or finishing the sketches for that children's book, and she won't even look up as she says, "He's nice enough, I suppose. Not very bright, though, is he?" But half the time when she's fucking him, she's envisioning Ken.

These are only a few. There are others, many others. Add your own at leisure. Talk it over with your mate or love-partner. See if you can get further examples to convince yourself that what I'm talking about here is hypocrisy and fear, not standards of sexual conduct. What I'm talking about is the title of this book: love ain't nothing but sex misspelled. The perversion of sex in the name of love, using two quite clearly separable needs as reinforcements of one another, because you're not secure enough in either to think they stand by themselves and take care of themselves and enrich through their separate powers. The perversion of love to obtain sex as a commodity. The lies that are told because honesty might well mean rejection. And the unbelievably crippling fear of rejection that moves most of us more than we care to admit. Thus doth love make liars of us all.

An obnoxious woman is a strong man's "limp."

(I'm sure there's a reverse to this, as seen from the viewpoint of a woman; but being a man, I'm most familiar with this side of it. You'll forgive me if I report this section only from what I know, even if it is one-sided. Female readers can mentally write an addendum in which they project what I'm about to say for the flip-side.)

Here's this really sensational sweet guy. He's gentle, fair, moderately talented, seems to be happy with his life and what he's doing; and he's involved with a woman who is a righteous phony. She's loud, she drinks too much, she's a fucking pain in the ass at a dinner table: namedropping, interrupting, belittling him in front of his friends, cutting the other women who try to show some warmth to the guy because they're embarrassed for him, interrupting everyone, rearranging the environment to suit herself ("I have to sit here, not there" ... "Would you ask the maítre d' to lower the air conditioning" ... "There's absolutely nothing on this menu, would you ask the waiter if they can find me an abalone steak" ... "Sid, would you mind not smoking, I washed my hair this afternoon").

And you ask yourself, how can this terrific guy hang out with such a creep?

(It occurs to me that the reverse, a sensational woman tied to a schmuck guy, is more clearly changing these days. The incidence of women splitting from their husbands, initiating divorce or dissolution of a living-together situation, is very much on the rise. Female-initiated divorces have risen in this country alone by three times what they were even fifteen years ago. Now it's the men who try to hang in there with a lousy relationship while the women, I suppose because of widespread consciousness-raising that has advised them it's feasible to break up without social stigmatization, are taking off. But that's just a guess.)

I've fiddled around with trying to come up logical on this one, finding some kind of Universal Truth why strong people should harness themselves to albatrosses, but this is one of those aspects of love that I've seen again and again, and every time it's for a different reason. In one case it was that the guy wasn't sufficiently secure in his ego-strength, sufficiently filled with feelings of his worthiness to love and be loved in return. In another case it was because the woman was devoted to the guy in private, absolutely revolved around him. In yet another case the guy felt guilt about how he and his woman had gotten together, and he hung in there because he was paying dues.

Lori shrugs and says, "Love is blind."

Maybe that's the best answer. I don't know. It's one of those troublesome areas that defies pat answers.

All I know for sure is that there are many, many women and men who are hanging out--because of "love"--with partners who are clearly their inferiors.

Shit, maybe it's that one of the selfish aspects of love is that we be able to feel we're the dominant love-partner in the link-up. I don't know. Think about it; maybe you can write a critical study, then we'll both know.

Love weakens as much as it strengthens, and often that's very good for you.

The operable part of that aphorism is that vulnerability is a good and enlarging thing. When you fall in love, you start to need. For people whose self-sufficiency or fears of life have made them encysted creatures, love opens them.

For instance, the other day Lori and I were talking about what a prick I am when someone tries to chop me conversationally. Being a "fast gun" in a verbal encounter has always been a stance I believed to be extremely pro-survival. There aren't too many people who have as vicious and insulting a manner as I can manifest when I'm annoyed. That's because in some ways I'm conversationally suicidal: I'll say anything. There are no bounds to how deeply I'll cut to win. That's simultaneously one of my strengths and one of my weaknesses. I won't go into how it got started, it goes 'way back. I'll just say that it makes me a very enclosed individual a lot of the time. I'm constantly on the alert for the attack.

So Lori put forth the proposition that I was stronger than she in such situations, and I said,

"No, we're evenly matched." And then she said, with considerable disbelief, "But you could cut me up in a minute and we both know it."
Which led me to think about it and I responded, "Then why don't I?"
"Because you love me," she said.
"Right," I said.
Then she grinned and made the perfect point. "You're handicapped."
Right!
Willingly, gladly, joyously handicapped. A mercurial sprinter happily tying a bag of cement to his left leg so he can race with fairness to the competition, because he loves the race, not the winning.
Love can do that. It can make you dull those savage aspects of your nature so you become more nakedly ready to accept goodness from your love-partner. It is even more pro-survival, if one accepts the theory that life is a string of boredoms, getting-alongs, sadnesses and just plain nothing-happening times, broken up by gleaming pearls of happiness that get us through the crummy stretches on that string.
Weakness becomes strength.
After you've had the Ultimate Love Affair that has broken you, leaves you certain love has been poisoned in your system, then, and only then, can you be saved and uplifted by the Post-Ultimate Love Affair.
Because that's when you're most uncertain, most self-doubting, most locked into a tunnel vision of love and life. And that's when new experiences come out of nowhere to wham you.
I guess this ties in with what I was saying about pain in the introduction to PAINGOD and about how we cannot savor the full wonder of joy unless we've gone through some exhausting, debilitating times of anguish. No one likes pain (and please be advised I'm not advocating S-M or any of the torture-games some people need to get them off; I'm talking about life-situation pain; enemas and shtupping amputees and whips 'n' chains may be superfine for Penthouse and other sources of communication for those who're into such things, but I'm not, and so when I talk about pain I mean getting your brain busted, not your body shackled; okay?) but it seems to me that we spend so much time avoiding pain of even the mildest sort, that we turn ourselves into mollusks. To love, I think, one must be prepared to get clipped on the jaw occasionally.
Otherwise, one would always settle for the safest, least demanding, least challenging relationship. Wouldn't we?
I think that makes sense.
And so, having been destroyed by an affair, knowing one has had the Ultimate Love, one wanders lost and broken in a new place. And then, from out of nowhere--and I've seen it happen time and again--comes this whirlwind that sweeps you up and carries you along, and three, four, five months later you realize it isn't a rebound affair, it's the Post-Ultimate Affair, and you're whole again, and stronger than ever.
So go find the greatest love of your life, the one that burns and sizzles and chars everything around it, and fling yourself into it like a child in a playground. Drain all you can from it, and then get your back broken. Suffer and stumble around and weep and piss and moan. And then look out! Because here comes The Lone Ranger or Wonder Woman, ready to make it all good again ... and this time probably for keeps.
Here are a few more things about love I think work.
Friendship is better than passion.
As Richard Shorr says, if you can say to your partner, even when you hate him or her the most, I wish you well, then you've got a chance to make it. Lust works wonders, it puts apples in your cheeks (and sometimes crabs in your bed), but it ebbs and flows. Friendship sustains and enriches and stays constant.
Hate and love have the same intensity of emotion.
Hate ain't nothing but love misspelled.
But you know that one already .
You can't go home again.
If you were sweethearts after college, and had a thing going, and one or the other of you took off and did your number and it went sour--the marriage dissolved, the career didn't materialize, discovering yourself turned out to be a drag filled with Tantric Yoga and Kahlil Gibran platitudes--and you fantasize what it would've been like if you'd stuck with that Great Love of Your Youth ... forget it. He's changed, she's changed, you've changed, and the best you can have is a quick fuck and a lot of recycled memories. It just doesn't play.
Next to telling your lover what turns you on precisely, the best thing to bring to bed is a sense of humor.

Nothing is more tiresome and capable of creating tension in bed than heavy breathing el serioso. God save us from the men and women who need to hear all the artificial "I love you" jingoism, even when they know it's bullshit, said at the moment and having substance no longer than it takes to use a Kleenex and dash to the shower. But laughter, taking the hangups and inconveniences and wonky awkwardnesses as sources of mirth ... wow, how bright that can make it.

Please yourself and be selfish about it.

In love and sex, it's every man and woman in a one-person life raft. If you don't go'n'get it, no one'll stake you to a free ride. Concern for each other goes without saying, and attention to detail; but when it comes right down to it, you've got to satisfy yourself. If the guy ain't doing it right, lady, bite his nose and tell him how to do it. And if you've got a premature problem, fella, let her know about it before the fact so arrangements can be made. And don't clutter up your pleasure by swallowing that outdated nonsense about, "Oh, it seems too clinical that way; it takes all the romance out of it." Romance is one of those ephemerals they whip on you so you won't know that sex is supposed to be sweaty!

And finally: love ain't nothing but sex misspelled.

Which is an ironic title. It means people confuse one for the other. They think passion alone makes love. And so the relationship flares while they explore each other's bodies, and when it's gone, so is their affection for one another.

Love is being utterly honest, even when it's ground glass painful. Tell the truth all the time! All the truth! Not just that part that you can get away with. Go the limit. And the answer to Hemingway's riddle is that the leopard lost his way. He took the wrong path. And that's what so many of us do in love.

Keep aware, keep wide open, and remember everything that's ever happened to you, everything that's ever been said, every motion and change of tone and subtle hint. We'll read a long, essentially dull book on how to get through probate with our skin intact, or take a correspondence course in electrical wiring just so we don't have to pay an electrician to do our house, or go to college for four years to acquire the obscure knowledge that will permit us to make a living in one or another proscribed field of endeavor. But about the most mysterious subject of all, love, we bumble and careen and hope for the best; without proper education, without proper tools, without even a goal that can be named. And more often than not it poisons our lives. The wrong men and the wrong women get together and proceed to kill each other piece by piece.

This is all I know of love: like the leopard we must pick the right path, and we must never confuse what the body needs with what the soul demands. Beyond these idle thoughts, I know no more than you.

As a troll, as an alien creature, I know that having an affair with me is not the same as having an affair with an orthodontist or a salesman of mobile homes or a guy going for his degree in P.E. That's my arrogance.

I hope to God you have yours.

Final words about this book.

In the original edition of LOVE AIN'T NOTHING BUT SEX MISSPELLED, published in hardcover in 1968, there were 22 stories. For this edition, I've dropped nine of those stories. They are good stories, some of them I consider among my best. But they are available elsewhere, in other books of mine currently in print. I have grown highly sensitive to the odd remarks about duplications of stories in my collections, and so I have taken extra-special pains to make sure there are no duplications, or if there are any, they're at a minimum and they've been included to maintain the theme of the book.

So I've added three new, uncollected pieces to the 13 from the original version of this book. Usually, a short story collection bulks out at about 60,000 words. LOVE, first time around, came to 165,300 words, almost the equivalent of three books. I've deleted 51,900 words of stories and added 16,400 to the remaining 115,400 words' worth of material from the hardcover. That makes a total of 131,800 words of stories, plus this introduction of approximately 8000 words, for your money's worth of 139,800. Something well over two ordinary collections' size. And no room for complaints from those who've bought my other books.

For those curious as to which stories were dropped, the following list with the titles of the other Ellison books shows where they can be found.

"Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes
DEATHBIRD STORIES
I HAVE NO MOUTH AND I MUST SCREAM
"The Night of Delicate Terrors
GENTLEMAN JUNKIE
"Final Shtick"

GENTLEMAN JUNKIE
"O Ye of Little Faith
DEATHBIRD STORIES
ALONE AGAINST TOMORROW
"Delusion for a Dragon-Slayer
I HAVE NO MOUTH AND I MUST SCREAM
"Lonelyache
ALONE AGAINST TOMORROW
I HAVE NO MOUTH AND I MUST SCREAM
"The Face of Helene Bournouw
DEATHBIRD STORIES
"Ernest and the Machine God
OVER THE EDGE
DEATHBIRD STORIES
"All the Sounds of Fear
ALONE AGAINST TOMORROW
ELLISON WONDERLAND
As for the stories I've included, some may seem to you less thematic than others. "Blind Bird, Blind Bird, Go Away from Me!" is a war story, and I suppose might easily have gone into another sort of collection. But I intended this book to cover a wide spectrum on the subject of love; and friendship, a sense of duty, love of those who depend on you ... that's love, too. As is the love-turned-to hate demonstrated in "Daniel White for the Greater Good" and "The Universe of Robert Blake" (not the actor, though we're friends and I probably used the name unconsciously years before we met) and "A Prayer for No One's Enemy." These are all stories peripherally concerned with love, and they are included here because this hook was, and remains, one of my personal favorites. And each tale to be told reflects another part of my fumbling attempts to understand the mystery of love.
These stories have helped change my opinion of myself where human knowledge is concerned. They total up to almost 140,000 words of groping in the dark to find the answer.
For a troll, groping in the dark is second nature.
Here's hoping they shed a little light.
HARLAN ELLISON
Los Angeles
12 September 75

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EDITION
The Introduction to the first edition was dumb, and I've dropped it. You wouldn't have liked it, anyway. Trust me.
NEITHER YOUR JENNY NOR MINE
My first inclination, upon learning Jenny was knocked up, was to go find Roger Gore and auger him into the sidewalk. That was my first inclination; when she called, I lit a cigarette and asked her if my girl Rooney, her roommate, knew about it, and she said yes, Rooney knew and had suggested the call to me. I told her to take a copy of McCall's and go to the bathroom, that I had to think about it, and would call her back in twenty minutes. She wasn't crying when she hung up, which was something to be thankful for.
There is a crime in our land more heinous than any other I can think of, right offhand, and yet it goes unpunished. It is the crime of gullibility. People who actually believe the lowballing of used car dealers; people who accept the penciled "2 Drink Minimum" card on their table as law; girls who swallow the line of horse crud a swinger uses to get them in the rack. Like that, yeah. Jenny was a product of that crime wave. She was a typical know-nothing, a little patsy who had been seduced by four-color lithography and dream-images from a million mass media, and she believed the stork brought babies.
In about ninety days her tummy was going to tell her she'd been lied to. And been had.
When I'd started dating Rooney, and had learned that the roommates were two eighteen-year-olds fresh out of nowhere and firmly under Rooney's wing, it had been a toss-up whether I'd try to make them on the sly, or become Big Brother to the brood. As it turned out, Rooney was enough action for me, and I took the latter route.
We started taking Jenny and Kitten (née Margaret Alice Kirgen, the second roommate) with us when we went out. Parties, movies, schlepping-around sessions in which we put miles on the car and layers on our ennui. Kitten wasn't bad; she was a reasonably hip kid who was actually six months younger than Jenny, but much more aware of what was going on around her. Jenny was impossible.

There was a naïve quality about her that might have been ingenuous, if she hadn't been so gawdawful stupid along with it. They are two different facets, naïveté and stupidity, and combined they make for a saccharine-sweet dumb that paralyzes as it horrifies.

Why did we allow them to come along with us, to adopt us someway; or rather, let us adopt them? Put it down to my past, which was filled with incomplete memories of deeds I did not care to think about. I can't remember ever having been young, not really. On my own as far back as I can recall, there was never that innocence of childhood or nature that I longed to see in others. So Jenny and Kitten became my social projects. Not in any elaborate sense, but it pleasured me to see them enjoy the bounties of the young ... oh hell, Norman Rockwell and Edgar A. Guest and let's all pose for a Pepsi ad.

Kenneth Duane Markham, thirty years old and a humanitarian. Let's send this child to camp (if we can't roll her in the hay, hey hey!). Call it noble intentions, for all the wrong reasons.

At one of the parties we took Jenny to, I ran across Roger Gore. He was (is) (will be, till I catch his face in my right hand) a good-looking jackpotter with a flair for wearing clothes that would look slovenly on other guys, and a laudable record of having avoided honest labor. His father owned a chain of something or others, and Roger indulged himself by taking jobs as switchman on the railroad, soap salesman door to door, night watchman. He never did any of them for very long; his rationale for taking on such onerous tasks was the same as that of the aspiring novelist. He wanted to be able to say he had done these things. It was all very Robert Ruark and hairy-chested and proletarian. He was a fraud. But a good-looking, smooth fraud with a flair for wearing clothes that would look--but I said that already.

It was one of those parties where some college kid had met a hipster in a downtown black-and-tan club, and had invited him over the following night for "a little get-together." As a consequence, the room was jammed, half with inept, callow UCLA students, half with sinuous spades wrapped up in color. It was one of those scenes where the gray cats felt a sense of adventure and titillation just being in the same time-zone with Negroes, and the blacks were infra-digging, wasting the white boys' Watusi with their own extra-lovely dancing, and mooching as much free juice as possible.

Everybody hated everybody, 'way down deep.

We walked in and I saw Roger first crack out of the bag. He was trying to make the scene with a couple of black dudes I knew from downtown, and they were being indulgent. But they "felt a draft" and Old Rog was about to get frozen out. When they put him down (which could be noted by the way his sappy expression went sour) and he walked away, I took the two girls over and introduced them. To the black guys. Roger would make his own introductions, I had no worries on that score. But the two downtown operators were bad, meaning they were good. One of them was a shipping clerk for a record distributor, and the other was a gopher in an exclusive men's hair salon. (Gopher: "Go for the coffee, Jerry." "Go for Mr. Bentley's shoes, Jerry." "Go for--")

"Hey, baby, what's shakin'?"

"Howya doin', man, it's been time I seen yoah ass."

"Busy."

"Yeah, sheee-it, man, you always busy one thing'n 'nother."

"Gotta keep the bread on the table ..."

"Got to keep that bread in yoah pocket!"

"True."

Jenny was standing there, her face open, and as far as she was concerned, where was she? Rooney was digging, as usual, and loving me with her eyes, which was a groove. I pointed each one out to the guys and named:

"Hey, Jerry, Willis, want you to meet Rooney and Jenny." Kitten had had a date. A CPA from Santa Monica. Wow!

"Very pleased't meetcha." Jerry grinned. That cat had the most beautiful mouthful of teeth known to Western Man, he knew it. and he flashed them like the marquee at Grauman's Chinese. "Very pleased't meetcha," Willis said, and I knew he was shucking me, just to make me feel good; he was coming on with Rooney because he knew it would make me feel tall. I gave them each a soft punch on the bicep and we moved off into the crowd. We said our hellos to the host, who was an authentic schlepp, and took the coats into the bedroom. A pair of UCLAmnesiacs were making it among the coats, so we laid ours over the windowseat. It promised to be a bad, dull party. The roar of rhythm&blues was coming out of the living room, meeting the bubble gum music from the dining room head-on, and canceling each other out in the hallways connecting.

We stepped out into one of these eye-of-the-hurricane areas, and started looking for the bar. I saw Roger Gore heading for the kitchen, and I knew immediately where the juice was being dispensed. I turned to Jenny. "See that guy in the gray hound's tooth, the one going into the

kitchen?"
She nodded.
"Stay away from him. There are ten thousand guys at this party who aren't trouble. That one is. He's clever and pretty fair-looking, but he's a lox, and I tell you three times, one two three, stay out of his reach. That's my only advice for the evening. Now scoot." I gave her a shove on the rump and she moved out.
Rooney grinned at me. "Guardian of the morals of the young."
"Poof you," I answered.
"Not here, surely, sir." There were times I wanted to chomp on her ears. And that damned grin of hers. Heidi. Rapunzel. Snow White. Mata Hari.
We went our way, and nodded to Roger Gore in the kitchen, where he was doing something noxious with martinis and sweet gherkins. What a lox!
About an hour later Rooney was bopping with Willis (that sweet muthuh!) and I was in the corner digging a T-Bone Walker 78 somebody had slipped into the stack. Jenny came up to me; "I'm going out for a drink with Roger. I'll be back in about half an hour."
I didn't even think it was worth getting angry about. I'd known it was going to happen. Don't go up in the top shelf of the cabinet and take a bean out of the jar and shove it up your nose, you tell the infant, and when you get back home, there he is, stretched out blue on the linoleum, a bean up his nose. It's the way children are.
She mulched out of there on Roger Gore's arm, and when Rooney was done sweating with Willis, he brought her back and I told her about Jenny's exeunt simpering.
"Why didn't you stop her?" she demanded.
"Who do I look like: Torquemada?" I got hot. "I've got enough trouble governing the habits of you and me without taking on the world at large. Besides, he won't hurt her, for Chrissakes. They'll be back."
We waited six hours. The party was over, we were really drug with the scene, and finally went back to my place to sack out. About five A.M. the phone rang, I groped for it, somehow got it up to my nose and blew into it. After a minute something fell into place and I knew I had it wrong. I tried my eye and my mouth, and by process of elimination got around to my ear. It was Jenny.
"Can you come and get me?"
"Whuhtimezit?"
"I don't know, it's late. Can you come get me?"
"Whereyooat?"
"I'm in a phone booth on Sunset, near Highland. Can you come and get me?" And she started crying.
I woke up fast.
"Are you all right?"
"Yes, yes, I'm fine, can you come and get me?"
"Sure. Of course, but what happened to you? We waited till everyone else vanished. What the hell happened to you? Rooney was worried sick."
"I'll tell you later. Can you come get me now?"
"Give me fifteen minutes."
She hung up, I slid out without waking Rooney, threw on a pair of chinos and a jacket, and flew the coop. She was standing under a streetlight where she had said she'd be, and I bundled her into the car, where she immediately broke down. I got her back to my house, and bedded her out on the sofabed in the living room, and went back to sleep myself.
Next morning Rooney cooed over her like Little Orphan Annie. We eventually got the story, and it wasn't that spectacular. He'd taken her to a little bar nearby, tried to get her lushed (which he didn't have to bother doing; Jenny was--putting it politely--not smart enough to avoid being a pushover) and finally told her he had to get the car, which was allegedly his roommate's, back to his house. When he got her there, he proceeded to try The Game, and Jenny swore he hadn't succeeded. In childish retaliation, Roger had fallen asleep. She'd waited around for three hours, but he snoozed on, and finally she'd tried to waken him. Either he couldn't or wouldn't rouse himself, because she finally took to her heels, and an hour and a half later had managed to get to the phone booth.
"Why didn't you call from his house?"
"I was afraid he'd wake up."
"But you wanted him up, didn't you?"
"Well, yes."
"So why didn't you call from there?"
"I was afraid. I wanted to get out of there."
"Afraid? Of what? Of him?"

"Well ..."
"Jenny, tell me now, tell me true, did he get to you?"
"No. I swear it. He got very angry when I gave him a hard time. He called me ... he called me ..."
"I know what he called you. Forget it."
"I can't."
"So remember it. But don't lie to me, did he get in?"
She turned her face away. At the time I thought it was because of my choice of words. "No, he didn't," she said. So I couldn't really bring myself to feel possessively angry at Roger Gore. He'd done what any guy would try to do. He'd tried to make her, failed, and gotten disgusted. His chief sin was in not being a gentleman. In falling asleep and letting her fend for herself; but then, I'd known Gore was anything but a gentleman, anyhow, so there really wasn't provocation enough to go find and pound him. We let the matter drop. I forgot about it, and fortunately, didn't run into Roger Gore again for some time.
Now, eight weeks later, I sat smoking a cigarette, while Jenny languished in the bathroom of her apartment, reading McCall's, and the seed grew in her. I felt responsible. The phone rang. I picked it up reluctantly, and it was Rooney. "She told you?" I mumbled something affirmative.
"Have you got a solution?"
"Three of them," I answered. "She can have the baby, she can get it aborted, or she can get Roger Gore to marry her. I'd say the first and third are out, the second one the most feasible, and a quick fourth reason altogether possible."
"What's the fourth one?" Rooney asked.
"She can blow her fucking stupid brains out."
All you have to do is get friendly with a couple of jazz musicians, have met a hooker at a party, be on civil terms with a grocer who takes the neighborhood numbers action, occasionally make an after-hours set in the Negro section, and suddenly you are a figure of mystery, a man with "connections" in the underworld; people come to you for unspeakable foulnesses you have never been within spitting distance of. It is a reflex cliché of people who really haven't the faintest bloody idea of what the Real World is like. Since they themselves never slip over the line, anyone who lives beyond the constrained limits of their socially acceptable scene, has got to be a figure of mystery, a man with--oh well...
Rooney asked me how soon I could locate an abortionist.
"A whaaat?"
She repeated herself, all honey-voiced forthrightness. It was a foregone conclusion. "Spider" Markham, denizen of the murky underworld, familiar of hoods, gunsels and two-bit whores was the man to ask when you needed a butcher.
"What the hell makes you think I know an abortionist?"
"Well, don't you?"
"No. Of course not. I take precautions. I'm not an imbecile like Roger Gore. I've never knocked anyone up, so ergo I don't know any abortionists." I looked at her with unconcealed annoyance, and she stared back blandly. She wasn't convinced. I was, of course, hiding my connections, for obvious reasons.
"Say, you don't believe me, do you?" I was getting highly hacked by this scene. And Jenny just sat there with her face hanging out, and her stomach growing.
"Well, you can call someone, one of your strange friends, can't you?"
I blew higher than the Van Allen radiation belt. "You've got to be putting me on, Rooney! Call who? What 'strange friends'?" My face was so hot I could feel it in my mouth.
She stared at me accusingly.
So I called Candy.
Candy was a muscle for some nameless amalgamation of interests I don't think could be called the Syndicate. Maybe The Group, or The Guys, or Them, but definitely not The Syndicate. To begin with, he was Greek, not Sicilian.
But Candy was a furtive figure, I must admit. He collected the payoffs for the numbers banks in East L.A. and I have seen his 340 pounds walk into a deli as lightly as a prima ballerina, and within ten seconds cause more of a stir than a thermite bomb. "There was a lotta hits this week, Candy," the deli proprietor will con him. "The take is tiny. Tiny. I can't pony it all up. I can give ya 'bout half, though, Candy, and the rest next week sometime."
Candy, who is only slightly less prepossessing than Mount Etna, will suck air into his bellows chest, puff up twice again as large as normal, pouter-pigeon fashion, and in a voice soft as strangling babies, will reply: "Angie, you will kindly get it up or I will have to hurt you. Seriously." They scamper. And from some ratty cache beneath a counter, they produce the held-back portion of Candy's pickup money.

So I called Candy, who is maybe the gentlest cat I know.
"Hi," I started. It was not a particularly brilliant opening, but it was all I had available at that moment. "Listen, a friend of a friend of mine has got herself in a family way. Do you know anybody who can, uh, take care of her?"
He was affronted. Practically shrieked at me. What the hell kind of a guy did I think he was? He didn't screw around with those kinda people. Listen, if that was the kinda guy I thought he was, I would kindly honor him by forgetting his unlisted number. The nerve! The gall! What kind of a creep did I run around with, to need a guy who'd do that and finally Good-bye slam!
I turned around to Jenny and Rooney. "He hung up on me. Thanks."
They seemed shocked, and Rooney made devious remarks about the furtiveness of some shady types. I think I groaned.
Then I tried Van Jessup, a character actor who seemed to know everyone. He knew no one. Then I tried a tv director I'd played gin with a few times, and he said he'd get back to me. Then I tried a chick who made the Sunset Strip scene, and she asked a couple of guarded questions and said she'd get back to me. Then I called a relative in Pomona and she giggled outrageously, and said I should get back to her. Then I called The Boffer, who is a writer and a singer and a hustler of personal needs, and the conversation went like this:
"I need a doctor."
"So go to one."
"Not for me, man, for a chick."
"Pregnant?"
"Of course, stupid. You think I'm the Blue Cross or somedamnthing?"
"Rooney?"
"Don't be funny."
"Who then? And does Rooney know you've been playing pattyfingers?"
"I didn't do the knocking-up."
"A likely story."
"Cut it, man. I'm serious. This thing has lost its funny for me. It isn't my woman, and I didn't do the job on her, and I need a D&C man. Now can you help me or not?"
"I suppose so. I've had occasion to--"
"I don't want to know. Everyone agrees you're the finest swordsman in these parts. Can you get me a guy ... this is a favor I need, Boffer. It's for a friend."
"You know, everybody you call is gonna think it was you."
"I know."
"Since when did you get such humanitarian instincts?"
"A recent malady. What's his name? Is there a number?"
"You're a lot more noble and friendly than I'd be. This kinda scam is liable to ruin your reputation."
"I haven't got a reputation. What's his name? Give!"
There was a pause, as though The Boffer was seriously considering saying no. He's peculiar that way. His reasoning is on a very furry plane, taken up by intricacies even he barely understands, and informed by a scurrying rodentlike deviousness that comes from having been on the Hollywood merry-go-round for too many years. "Take this down. You got a pencil? Okay, take this down: S. Jaime Quintano: the number is--"
He rattled it off twice and I still didn't get it. So he laid it on me slowly, and I wrote it as accurately as I could.
"Thanks, Boffer. You've got one coming."
I gave the information to Jenny, and she stared at it as though it was contaminated. "You'll have to do the calling," I told her. "Apparently he's a good man, has his own clinic, works most of the week in the Miguel Aleman Hospital, that's the big one down there. This friend of mine says he's taken girls down there a couple of times and this man has been very clean, very good. Three hundred dollars."
She continued to stare at the slip of paper.
"This is the number," I emphasized. It was like talking to a statue. "D-U-five-three-three-seven-two, that's in Tijuana, and I think I have his name spelled right. Jenny ... ?"
First her shoulders began to heave. Silently. Then her entire body shook, as though possessed. And in a second she was dry-crying, her head sunk down on her chest almost, the top of her head bobbing like a cork in a rough sea. It had started to get through to her: what she had undergone had not been love, it had been something far more indelicate, something simpler, more destructive. She felt contaminated, felt insulted, in the strictest possible sense of the outmoded term, she felt sullied.

I moved over to her and put my arms around her. She was incapable, at that moment, of even knowing I was there. I held her very tightly for what seemed a long time, and slowly the shaking passed, and her head came up. The front of my shirt was soaked.
She came out from the burrow of my arms. "What's the area code to Tijuana?" she said softly.
"Nine-o-three," Rooney said, from the other side of the room. I looked at her, startled. "I've been there, too." Her face was very sad, and I realized: no one comes to anyone untouched. Everyone goes through fire.
Jenny picked up the receiver and started to dial.
By the time the Thursday rolled around, I had six more names. A doctor in Monterey Park who was rumored to charge between three and five hundred, but had apparently been busted some time before, and was very much under wraps now. It would have entailed a drive out to that suburb. Five more in Tijuana. Two brothers with their own Enfermería, who only charged one hundred and fifty, and to whom you had to say, "Nurse Carlotta suggested I call you." Apparently Nurse Carlotta was a swinger in L.A. that the brothers dug. Another was alleged to keep the patient over for eight hours, and that was too terrifying for consideration. Overnight in that town would he worse than the operation for Jenny. There was an American doctor down there, Oswald Tremaine, Jr., who was appended with the title "butcher" by my informant, but he only charged one hundred and twenty-five. We decided Quintano was the best bet. His name had come up again, from a very reputable source, so we held to the date of the appointment Jenny had made that night.
It was tacitly understood that Rooney and I would drive her down. If her parents ever found out, the consequences were too hideous to consider. Jenny never expanded on the remark, but when I suggested that perhaps her parents might be very understanding, if she explained what had happened, she said, "My father has never hit me, but he has a very loud voice, and he wears a belt. My mother would cry."
We left it at that, and spent the week between the phone call and that Thursday getting ourselves ready. I was driving an MG Magnette, a pretentious, cheaper copy of the Jaguar touring sedan. It was a lovely sort of thing, though, with glove-leather upholstery, dual carbs, a solid walnut dash panel that could be lifted out, four doors and the traditional MG red-painted engine. I got it lubed and checked out for the ride down. Rooney worked, of course, so her readying was all interior. As for Jenny, all I could tell of her state of mind, her capacity for handling this thing, as her nineteenth year became a nightmare, was that she did not cry again, and her conversation was not introspective.
When I asked her what had been said on the call to the doctor, she said: "A woman answered. She said, 'Bueno.' I told her a friend from Fresno had suggested I call Doctor Quintano about consultation. Then she put me through to him, and I said the same thing, and he asked me consultation about what? I said I was having menstrual difficulties, that was what your friend told me to say, and he said just a minute; he said it very quickly, as though he didn't want to talk any more. Then the girl came back and asked me what day I wanted to come down, and I told her Thursday, and she said to call from San Diego when we got that far."
I had a feeling Jenny was going to be all right. She was getting much sharper, very quickly. Sometimes childhood and adolescence pass away just that fast, like morning mist, burned off by the sun or a rotten experience. Markham, the philosopher. You can't miss my ruminations: they're in that purple-bound folio over there.
Three hundred dollars had been the next point Quintano's woman had brought up. "Do you know the Doctor's fee?" she had asked. Jenny said three hundred. Not any more. That was last year's price. But what with the high cost of this and that, the going rate for Dilation & Curettage was now four hundred. Jenny said all right, to the woman (whose name was Nancy, and who spoke with a faint trace of Spanish accent) and to me, and to Roger Gore when she called him for the money.
She said all right.
But Roger Gore said no.
He also said she was a whore. He also said she was a harpy and a blackmailer and a tramp and slept with dogs in the streets and if she had as many sticking out of her as she'd probably had sticking in her, she'd look like a porcupine. He concluded his chivalrous polemic with the comment that she could go peddle her ass on First and Main in downtown L.A. and raise the action that way. His parting line was, "Even if you charge what you're worth, you shouldn't have to make it with more than two or three hundred guys to raise the money."
When she repeated the conversation, I felt my jaw muscles turn to concrete, and I must have scraped a hall-dozen layers of enamel off my back teeth. Frankly, I wanted to kill the bastard!
"I'll talk to him," I said.
I took a drive and stopped off at a phone booth in a gas station; while they were putting in a couple of bucks of hi-test I called Roger Gore.

"Is Roger there?"
"Who's this?"
"Ken Markham."
"He's not here."
"You won't he here for long, Gore, if you don't start acting like a man."
"I'll tell him when he comes in."
"Shape up, Gore. The kid's in trouble, and you'd damned well better be ready to take the responsibility."
"Screw you." Click.
I walked back to the car. "You save Blue Chip Stamps?" the gas jockey asked.
"Yeah. I'm saving up."
He grinned pleasantly. Make conversation. Build the clientele. "Oh? For what?"
"A hydrogen bomb."
He was still staring as I tooled out of the lot.
I was right, of course. He was trying to split. I drove up his driveway just as he was driving down. He screeched and stalled the Impala, and I slewed the Magnette crosswise across his path. I left the motor running and the emergency brake on, and I was out of the car, dashing toward him, fast as a wad of spit, before he could get coordinated. He was rolling up the windows and locking the doors as I pulled open the rear door on the side away from him. With four doors, four windows, he could only get to so many before I got to him. Logic. Wham!
I yanked open the door and plunged into the rear seat before he could turn around.
My arm went around his neck and yanked him half-out of the driver's seat. I used my free hand to slam the door handle beside him, and flung the front door open. Still holding him, I punched open my door, and reached around. I grabbed the sonofabitch by his jacket and yanked him sidewise. He went sprawl-assing out of the car, and I was on him.
"Let's go see your house," I said tightly.
I took the car keys, and using a bring-along I'd learned at jolly old Fort Benning while doing my two for Uncle Sam, we dogtrotted back to the house. I unlocked the door and shoved him just enough ahead of me to plant my foot in the middle of his butt. I jacked my foot forward as hard as I could and Beau Brummel went flailing across the room, headfirst into the genuine imitation mahogany portable bar. Glassware went in all directions, his right hand swept an ornate cocktail shaker against the wall, and he knocked the caster-mounted shell on its side. He fell in a very untidy heap, and I slammed the door behind me as I moved toward him. His eyes were like a pair of Rolls Royce foglamps.
"Four hundred dollars," I said, very gently, lifting him by his jacket front and his Jay Sebring twelve-dollar razor-cut.
"No, I, listen--" he started ...
"Curettage," I recited, from reading I had recently done, "is a French word meaning to scrape out. This is the simplest operation performed upon the uterus and consists of scraping the lining of the cavity." I let go of his jacket, still holding him up by the hair, and cocked back my fist. "It is performed under a light general anesthesia." I hit him as hard as I could, just under the left eye. "The normal uterus is a pear-shaped, muscular organ, about three inches long, two inches wide and one inch thick, lying in the midportion of the pelvis." He sagged sidewise, and the skin burned, blued, went gray and he started to bleed from a small cut. His eyes misted.
"The uterus," I continued, slapping him back and forth across the bridge of the nose to revive him, "consists of three layers--a thin, outer, sheathlike coat, a thick muscular layer, and a membranous lining to the cavity which is located in the center of the organ." He came back from wherever he'd fled, and there was a fear of the Furies gibbering in his blue eyes. His tongue peeked out of his mouth, and I slammed him with the palm of my hand, and he bit the tip, screeching at me something I couldn't understand. I cuffed him in the right ear, then the left, and his head bobbled like the top scoop of an unsteady ice cream cone.
"Simply stated, the function of the uterus is to receive the fertilized egg (which travels from the ovary through the Fallopian tubes), nourish and contain the egg as it develops through pregnancy and"--I hit him with everything I had, flush in the mouth--"expel the fully developed embryo. Four hundred dollars, Roger." The lower lip tore, teeth bit through the upper, and he went far away again.
Softly, "Four hundred, Roger baby." I let him slip back down on his side. He lay there looking frightened.
I went into the kitchen and drew myself a glass of cold water. He was a lousy housekeeper; I had to rinse my own glass.
It had not been the most methodical of jobs, but then neither was I a schooled pistolero. It had

been informed, however, by a classic frenzy and a degree of hatred/brutality I'd never known I contained. I sat there while he sponged off his face with the wet washcloth, and my knees were shaking. He looked as though someone had mistaken his face for ten pounds of dogmeat, and had tried to fry it. His left eye was swollen shut, with thick, red-blue puffy tissue that gleamed in the light. His mouth was raw and cut through by his teeth. He had smaller cuts and contusions all over, and frankly, it would be some time before the hatcheck girl at PJ's winked at him again. I handed him the phone. He looked at it, then at me. The eye was starting to drain blue into his cheek.

He called his father and mouthed some sort of nonsense about needing four hundred dollars to get him out of a very tight spot. I think he knew just how tight that spot was. His old man must have said okay, because I saw Roger Gore visibly brighten at one point midway in the conversation. There was a great deal of "Okay, Dad, this is the last time; I'll be turning over a new leaf, you'll see; you won't be sorry, Dad, thanks a million," and he racked the receiver. I looked at the kid just as hard as I could, and I said:

"It's a shame there's no law protecting girls like Jenny from their own stupidity. It's also a shame there's no law that punishes a guy for not being a gentleman. But anyhow, Roger friend, there are more serious pains than the ones I loaned you. I'm not telling you not to swear out an assault and battery on me. That'd be foolish, though; assault means to threaten battery, and since I didn't threaten you, I guess the best you could do would be battery, which might net me about five years in the slam, but there are more serious pains, Roger friend, and they are dispensed by much more unpleasant guys than me. I leave you with that thought.

"We'll be taking Jenny down to TJ on Thursday. Get the money to her before then." I stood up and made to leave.

He snarled at me from the floor. "Your Jenny is a tease and a bitch, man! She wanted it as much as I did, that Jenny of yours! So just who the hell you think you're helping? Your Jenny's a dummy and a tramp, and she hasn't got any honor to protect! So take your Jenny and shove--"

I planted my foot with carefully calculated force in his groin. Gently I added, "She is neither your Jenny nor mine. She is her own Jenny, and whatever is wrong there, fellah, she is still a human being.

"Which is a condition I doubt you possess."

He was sucking air like a beached bass when I left.

My engine was still running.

When I got back, Jenny was alone. Rooney had gone over to see her parents; they had bought a new dog, and Rooney was a flip when it came to babies or tiny dogs. It wasn't a vagrant thought: Jenny looked like a little of each. The washed-face pinkness and confusion of a baby; the anxiety and need to love or be loved a small dog wears like a second collar.

"Want to play some gin?" I asked her.

She nodded mutely and went to the sideboard to get the dog-eared deck. We sat down on the sofa, and she shuffled while I lit a cigarette. For a while we played, and didn't say anything. Finally, I knocked on four in a spade hand, caught her with about twenty-five points, and said, "I talked to Roger. He's changed his mind."

"You didn't hurt him!" That was the first thing to cross her mind. Not did I get the money, not was she going to be rescued, but was he all right. I had one of those moments of stomach-muscle-tensing disorientation, as though I had intruded on a personal fight between two people who knew each other better than any interlopers with inclinations of arbitration.

"He's okay. We just ... talked awhile. I convinced him you were his responsibility. He'll be getting the money to you before Thursday."

She dropped her arms, and I could see her gin hand. It wasn't so hot. "Thank God," she breathed. There was a pale milkiness about her then. As though some vital ingredient in her spirit had been hit by a catalytic agent, had vaporized in her system. She seemed just a little dead, at that moment.

She dropped the cards and lay back against the sofa with her eyes shut. Her hair was a natural blonde, somewhere between hard canary and yellow ocher, and she wore it in a ponytail, usually, a style few girls affect any more. But she wore it well, and there was a pleasantness to her youthfulness. I looked at her, resting there, and something turned over inside me.

She had said something.

I hadn't really heard it, had just imagined I'd heard it, but she had spoken, absently, without realizing what words had been selected to convey her fear and her insecurity, but she had said, "Oh, Kenny ..."

And it was someone else's voice from another time. I can't remember even now who it was. Another girl I had known, when I was young enough to be able to remember everyone who had said yes, and

count them on one hand. Perhaps it was that second girl I'd slept with. I can't recall who she was. There isn't anyone, man or woman, who can't recall the first. But the second ... ah, that's another matter. And perhaps it was her.

Whoever it had been, this was now, and Jenny had said, "Oh, Kenny ..." and I was holding her slim body very close to mine, and my hands were locked behind her back, still clutching the gin cards. Her face came up, and there were dust motes spinning in her eyes of whatever color those eyes might be.

I smelled her hair, and it was very clean. It was another reminder of things from before, but they were silly, irrelevant things, like a field of winter wheat I had run through once, on a picnic day, when there had been such things as days right for nothing but picnics. It was a stupid thought, and it passed quickly, but not before I recalled having run and run and finally fallen down on my back, and lain there, completely hidden from all but the sky, staring straight up and feeling sorry as hell for myself. I kissed Jenny, and her mouth was soft, precisely as a woman's mouth should be. I kissed her the way a gentle lover would kiss someone he revered.

"Not like that," she murmured, pulling my face down harshly. "Like this." She opened her lips and worked at me fiercely, as though it was something worth doing and hence, something worth doing well. It was possibly the grandmother of all Soul Kisses, and when she was done, I knew I'd been kissed. My hand was on her thigh, and she moved slightly, so my hand went over the rise, down where her slacks were tightest. I had a mad thought that someone was going to pop out of the clothes closet ant take movies of it all, but that thought passed, too, and in a moment we were wriggling with each other's clothes, trying to keep our mouths together, and yet get naked.

Jenny was young, but Jenny was expert. She took me the way Hillary and Tenzing Norgay took Everest: all the way, and chiefly because it was there. Anything worth doing was worth doing well. Midway, she arched up and there was a feral gleam on her face, a drawing back of the lips and an exposure of small teeth that reminded me of a timber wolf I'd shot up near North Bay. Sometimes, though, she was a flower, and sometimes she was a hot shower, and sometimes she was a pitch pipe whistling an elegant tune. She had a small habit of twisting her hips sidewise at special times.

When we were over the final hill, and the road behind seemed much too rough for anyone to have crossed alone, much less two people as strangely locked as we had been, I went into the bathroom and took a bath. Not a shower. A bath. I have taken showers since I was sixteen and had a bad back. Baths are a pain, and they leave a dirty ring around the tub.

I felt I needed a bath.

And I wanted to see that dirty ring around the tub.

Thursday was two hells and a decapitation away. Every time Rooney looked at me I could swear she knew. And when Jenny leaned over in a movie we three attended, with her hand on my leg, and whispered, "At least I know for sure you couldn't make me pregnant," I wanted to open my wrists with a beer can opener. What had I stumbled upon: a key to the depravity of the young? Or the key to my own yin and yang? I didn't feel guilty, I felt unclean, which was infinitely worse. I, Kenneth Duane Markham, became a case in point for myself. This, I thought angrily, is how we fool ourselves into thinking we're honorable men. Jenny's mere existence became a constant reminder of the other side of my nature; an ungovernable side that didn't even have the consistency, the decency or the stamina to be constant. I was a mealymouthed, smiling sinner who took his pleasures and pains as they comfortably fit into the regimented scene of everyday life. Dorian Gray be damned! There isn't one of us who isn't in that bag.

But finally we left. Our little caravanserai moved out onto the road with all the glee and aplomb of a New Orleans funeral that couldn't find a Preservation Hall Dixieland band.

We turned onto the Hollywood Freeway and sped straight down Route 101. Santa Ana Freeway, Pacific Coast Highway, El Camino Real; past Downey and its used car carnivals, past Disneyland and its ludicrous Matterhorn rising out of the surrounding squalor, past Tustin and the art bookstore that faces out on a highway going too fast to give a damn. San Juan Capistrano, and I've never seen a swallow yet, going or coming. San Clemente, Del Mar, Pacific Beach, and we were in San Diego. I once asked a resident if they minded the Navy calling it "Dago," and that worthy responded he didn't care if they called it dog-whoopee, as long as they kept spending their money. That, I feel, sums up the beauty and glory of San Diego, a helluva way to end a beautiful state. It is not, I hasten to add, a coincidence that Dago appears at what might metaphorically be termed the backside of the state. We pulled in at a one-arm joint on 101, just before National City, the other side of San Diego, and while Jenny went to phone, Rooney and I had cups of coffee; I worked my neck around, trying to unkink it.

"What's the matter with you today?" she asked, over the lip of the cup.

"What do you mean: what's the matter? Nothing. Why, does something look the matter?" I could feel my nose growing, like Pinocchio's.

"You've been awfully quiet the last forty miles or so."
I shrugged. "Tired. My back aches. That's all."
She didn't answer, but she knew I was lying.
"And this isn't really the pleasure trip of all time," I added. Keep talking, schmuck, I told myself. Dig it a little deeper.
"Well, it'll all be over soon enough," Rooney said, trying to cover her own awareness of my mood. She knew me too well. I knew we'd be splitting up soon. I couldn't let anyone get that close to the core of me; as long as it was froth and foam it was safe. But the encystment was too marked in me, at age thirty. I smiled across at her reassuringly.
Jenny came back. "Have a cup of coffee and a piece of pie," I told her. She shook her head no. "I'm not supposed to eat before the operation. His girl told me not to eat for about six hours beforehand. I haven't eaten since last night. I'm starving, but you know you're not supposed to eat before this kind of thing."
I hadn't known, but I saw no reason for her to make a big who-struck-John of the whole matter. I mumbled something about oh yeah, I knew. And that was that. She sat down next to Rooney, staring at me with open malevolence. Like I was the guy who'd knocked her up. In a philosophical sense, I suppose I was as guilty as Roger Gore, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to eat that particular humble pie. I had a feeling too many strange Jack Horners had already had their thumbs in it.
"Well, what did they say?" Rooney asked.
Jenny pulled her eyes away from me with difficulty. There was actually physical violence in her expression. I chalked it up to her fear and the fact that I was a man the same as Roger Gore, only he wasn't handy for hating.
"She said to drive across the border, into downtown Tijuana, and park behind the Woolworth's at 4:30, there'd be a fellow to meet us. She said his name is Louis--"
"Luis," I corrected her.
"So Loo-ees," she snapped back. "So what?" Then she went on, addressing herself to Rooney. I couldn't have cared less. "She said to dress poorly, not like tourists--"
"Turistas," I murmured, under my breath.
"Why don't you just shut up!" Jenny was screaming. A man at the counter turned to look at us, and the waitress paused on her way through the swinging doors to the kitchen.
I reached across and grabbed her wrist as hard as I could. "Listen, you little asshole, I've had about as much horseshit from you as I can take. I've had to listen to your miserable bellyaching and whining and complaining for the last week; you may not appreciate the fact that aiding someone in getting an abortion is a prison offense, and that Rooney and I are risking our necks to drag your butt down here, but the least you can do is be civil and keep from being a bigger pain in the ass than you already are." I shoved her wrist away violently and slumped back in the booth. Rooney was staring at us as though we'd both gone insane. Jenny was rubbing her goddam wrist and looking like a whipped spaniel. I drank coffee and pretended I was in Nome, Alaska.
After a long silence in which no one seemed to move, Rooney said, guardedly, "Let's go. It's three o'clock now. It'll probably take us a while to find the Woolworth's."
"I have a terrible headache," Jenny said, rubbing one hand up across her temple. "Do you have an aspirin?"
I threw a half dollar onto the table and slid out of the booth. As I stalked to the car, Jenny was bugging the waitress for an Empirin or somedamnthing. I got into the car and lit a cigarette. It tasted like dust, and so did the day.
Getting into Tijuana, unlike the crossover to Hell, involves no Stygian water-ride, and if one of the border guards be named Charon, at least he has had the good sense to have it Anglicized. At that point, all differences cease.
We drove up to the big white pass-through that stretched across the road. The parking lot on the American side was not filled. Had it been a weekend, with the jai alai, the dog and horse races at Caliente, the bullfights, the lots would have been banged to the fences; but this was Thursday, and midday was not too far advanced, and traffic was steady, but not a flood, as it would be the next day.
We were waved through without a passing glance from the patrolmen. Does no one smuggle anything into Mexico?
A few feet beyond the pass-through, the car told me we were in Mexico, and I knew why most people left their vehicles on the American side (a single reason out of three good ones). The pavement came to a halt, was replaced by a three-foot stretch of open dust-dirt, and then resumed as pavement again. But a return to pavement so marked I knew I had left the United States. The Mexican pavement was in chunks. It was pocked and upthrust as though a decade of cars had gone over it without the most minor attention by repair gangs. We bumped and jounced across the

passway, the Magnette clanging like a dinner gong.
(The other two reasons, incidentally, are that if you have an accident involving your car in Tijuana, whether you are right or wrong, struck or striker, the car is impounded, they throw you up under the jail, and only a feisty bribe will get you out; the third reason is that hubcaps, car seats, dash clocks, luggage racks, headlamps and other minor items have an uncanny habit of vanishing from the auto in question. Some contend it is the highly spiced atmosphere of the town.)
We passed through the Mexican side with even less event than the Yankee entrance. Fat chance they'd keep out a spendable dollar.
Once through the arch, and a left turn, it was an open scene from Hogarth. Perhaps Hieronymus Bosch. Possibly Dali. Definitely Dante.
Filth.
The word comes unbidden. A hundred, two hundred rickety taxis, all parked in rows, waiting for the turistas. The street hard-packed dirt and broken concrete. Dozens of barefoot urchins, scuddy in their dingy rags, clutching cigar boxes full of Chiclets to be sold at a dime or half dollar for a penny pack. Ramshackle buildings, swayleaning as though propped from behind with poles. A miasma of road dust rising turning in the sunbeaten air. A sense of hurry, of expectation, of fear and sickness and something about to happen. A faint electric stir of movement within the mass gibbering movement of dirty hack drivers and shawl-wrapped women hustling for the dollars. A tone of impending disaster, always omnipresent. Was this perhaps the stench that filled Pompeii before it dissolved in fire? Did Sodom or Gomorrah have to contend with that stink no Air-Wick could ever contain, that color of madness in the wind and in the very horizon line?
I gunned the Magnette and pulled out of the middle of the maelstrom. We banged down the street, between two untidy rows of temporary structures, all of which were selling car upholstery. Tuck and roll shops. Best bargains. Get it here, installed in ten minutes, satisfaction guaranteed. All misspelled.
Cover-up shops for stripping and repainting cars; hot cars; stolen cars; lost cars; impounded cars; and legitimate tucking and rolling, as well. Guaranteed to last at least till you recrossed the border.
A huge sign across the end of the road bellowed:
BIENVENIDAS AMIGOS!
Welcome, suckers. Unfurl your desires and let us see under which banners you skulk. We have it here, guaranteed, satisfaction 100 percent or we give you a dose of the clap free!
A clutch of buildings clogged the roadside on either hand. One of them said MARRIAGE DIVORCE CAR INSURANCE on a sloppily lettered sign. A second advised FULL COVER INSURANCE WHILE IN MEXICO GUARANTEED! A third reversed the order (or perhaps the owner was more of a cynic) by offering DIVORCES QUICK--MARRIAGES--NOTARY. Notary what, I never paused to inquire. We did a dog-leg and turned up another street, in as hideous a condition as the one we'd just left, following a white arrow-sign that said DOWNTOWN TI.
Someone had, perhaps, bitten off the remaining section of the sign. Maddogs, I am told, are not uncommon in such heavy climates.
Farther into TJ, the incredible poverty and squalor of the people struck us like a hammer blow. "It's unbelievable!" said Rooney, as a gaggle of barefooted, dirt-smeared children raced directly across our path, causing me to swerve into a huge chuckhole. They ran across the razor-edged rocks of the road as though their feet were wound with asbestos.
Slat-houses tottered at every curb. Porches boasted fat old women, whose only joys were watching the horrors the young girls had to endure. On every bit of habitable land, someone had thrown up a jury-rigged shack. Garbage cans lived more open lives than the people whose refuse they received. Every half-block there were one or more stores advertising LICORES.
I could understand it; the only way to live and stay sane in such a cesspool, was to stay liquored-up constantly. We drove on.
After what seemed a Minotaur's maze of twistings and turnings, through streets littered with animate and inanimate garbage, with the castoff and the downcast, with the vile and the pitiful, we saw a street of neon lights and brighter buildings. Traffic was incredible. The taxis moved as though their wheels were about to be revoked. Pedestrians leaped out--perhaps hoping they would be struck down by a rich gringo--and masses of humanity surged across at intersections which had never known the luxury of a stoplight.
We drove down past the old bullring, the Toreo de Tijuana. The new one was up on the hill overlooking the town, but the turistas go there, and for a real bloodbath corrida, the townsfolk go to the old ring, where the toreros must perform with more skill and passion. A bright, romantic poster outside the ring proclaimed: 6 LA TRASQUILA 6 THE GREATEST BULLFIGHTING FIGURES CARLOS ARRUZA (The Mexican Cyclone) FERMIN ESPINOZA MILLITA (The Master of Masters) AND SILVERIO PEREZ

(The Pharaoh from Texcoco) FIGHTING TO DEATH IMPASING BULLS FROM 6 LA TRASQUILA 6!!
I did not read this sign all at once, then. Much later l was to have painful opportunity to study it at my leisure, or a copy thereof, while lying on my back. At the time, all I saw was the bright poster color and the word ARRUZA. We continued driving toward what had to be the center of town. As we drove, seedy-looking men with rolled newspapers leaped out onto the street, trying to wave our car into whatever empty lot they had appropriated as a parking area. We drove straight down into the heart of town. The roads were a little better now, on a par with a neglected side street or country road in the States. I knew I'd have to have the Magnette completely overhauled when I got back. Every seam was sprung; every bolt was loose.
We cruised around, and finally I spotted the Woolworth's. It looked like any plastic-and-chrome eyesore from the States, but among the filthy, falling-down shops and bars and arcades of downtown Tijuana, it was shining, gleaming, sparkling, a reassurance that stability still existed. We rolled slowly toward the big store, and I saw an empty parking place on the street. "She said behind the Woolworth's, in their parking lot," Jenny said.
It was the first sentence out of her mouth since we'd left the coffee shop in National City.
I pulled around the side of the building, and started into the lot. An old Mexican with gold teeth came running out of a rickety guard-shack and tried to take a dollar from me. I asked if this was parking for Woolworth's. My Spanish was passingly understandable, but not enough to get elected mayor. He answered in English, almost. "Ess park for no-whan, no Wowlwort's, ees pay for aver'whan!" And he continued to shove his hand through the window. His hand looked as though the last time it had been introduced to soap was when Calvin Coolidge approved the World Court. "I'm waiting for someone, I'll only be here a few minutes," I tried to tell him. I should have known better; it was a stupid thing to say, a turista remark. He didn't give a damn if I was there for a minute or the decade. I backed up and found myself on the street, with the old man still screaming imprecations at me, possibly for running my nasty old car across his valuable dust.
The empty parking space was still there. I pulled into it, and as I negotiated the bumper of the car against the high curb, I realized I was being "navigated" from the sidewalk by a little boy of nine or ten. Unasked, he had taken me as his mark. A moment before he had not been there, but like some sort of perambulant plant he had sprung from the shadows or the sidewalk, and was hand-waving me into the slot. Then he reached into a cigar box he carried, pulled out a penny and leaped at the parking meter. He beat the other four kids to the meter by a split-instant. They were identical in a tragic, sorry way. Each was his own person, but each dwelled within a coat of the same Tijuana dirt, and so they looked alike. The kid that had thrust the penny into the meter was around the car and trying to get my door open before I'd turned off the motor.
Rooney reached across Jenny and unlocked the door Jenny had just locked. "They're just children, Jenny."
She looked as though she'd eaten a ripe persimmon. "But they're so filthy!" she squeamed. Her nose wrinkled.
"It comes from not bathing," I snapped. "And from having to sleep in a doorway. Offensive as hell, ain't it."
She didn't answer. By this time we had parted company for good and always, and for a second a wisp of thought crossed my mind how this adventure had altered all our relationships to one another.
Then the kid had my door open and was demanding I pay him for parking my car, for his having waved his hands to steer me in, for his having put a penny in the meter.
"Doe-lahr, Señor," he urged, "doe-lahr!"
I shook my head no. He would not be put off. "Gimme, gimme, gimme!" he kept saying, not shouting, just demanding, in a tone of righteous indignation that was guaranteed to intimidate the sternest soul. And in an instant there was another one beside him, and a third, and then a very little one, no more than five or six, with huge wet eyes like one of the hideously stylized Keane paintings, and all of them with the cigar boxes filled with small change, packets of Chiclets, a knife perhaps.
The tiny one managed to wiggle past me and would not budge; wedged in between the car seat and the door. I asked him and asked him again, tried, "Vamanaos," and it didn't work, so I lifted him bodily and set him outside the car, closing the door with my back. His body went rigidly limp, if such a thing makes sense. He was affronted. He demanded money; for what nebulous service I cannot guess.
We managed to elude the kids, and it only cost me a half dollar to the one who had invested his penny. It was a quarter to four. We had forty-five minutes. So we walked up the block.
In the space of two hundred yards, it was a toss-up which deal would be more to my advantage: taking one of the girls offered to me by the sidewalk hustlers, or sell the two I had, turning a tidy profit. Rooney's bemused stares canceled either possibility. We walked through the shops and

I decided I wanted to buy a set of steel-rim bongos. The opening price was thirteen dollars. When I left the shop, I had the bongos and was six dollars and fifty cents lighter.

Finally. it came around to 4:30 and we returned to the car. The fog lamps were gone from the front grille. I cursed eloquently, and Jenny mumbled something about replacing them, but I was in no mood for heroics, so I hustled them into the car, and we backed out of the parking slot. I pulled into the parking lot and here came the Old Man once more. I gave him the dollar and pulled into the back.

Jenny had been told to look for a 1962 Imperial, black.

We saw it parked at the other end of the lot, next to an old Ford with a man and woman in the front seat. Loafing against the rear of the Woolworth's was a trio of oily looking juvies overdressed and indolent. "I hope Luis isn't one of them," Jenny whispered. I didn't say anything; he probably was.

We pulled in next to the Ford, and I cut the engine. The man in the Ford was talking earnestly to the girl beside him. She was a wild-looking blonde, and I had the strange premonition that they were there for a familiar reason. "Let's get out, let them know who we are," I said. I got out and went around the car, and very ostentatiously helped Jenny from the car, as though she were an invalid. She looked at me peculiarly, but I didn't feel like explaining.

One of the young hoods detached himself from the group, waved good-bye to his fellow lounge-rats, and ambled across the lot toward us. "Uh-oh, here we go, gang," I said softly. The guy and the blonde got out of the Ford. She was wild. And I thought, Perhaps they're friends of his, cover sent along in case of trouble.

"Let's go," the kid said, walking up to the five of us. It was Luis. He had a memorable scar on his right cheek. I doubted he had come by it at Heidelberg.

He opened the doors of the black Imperial, and I helped Jenny and Rooney into the back seat. I started to get into the front seat, and he said, sharply, "In the back."

"I want to follow in my own car," I said. He shook his head. I stared at him for a long moment, and without uttering a sound Luis said, Do you want this thing done, or don't you? I got into the back seat. The blonde and her boy friend got in the front. He was carrying a copy of Kafka's IN THE PENAL COLONY, in a well-thumbed paperback edition, and while I wasn't dead certain, I was inclined to think my original estimate of the couple was correct. Why is it a corollary of being a college student that caution and common sense have been left out of the equation?

Luis backed out of the space, spun the wheel as I imagine he thought Fangio might have done it, and sped across the lot, out a side entrance, and down another street. He drove without saying a word, but flicked on the car radio, and in a moment we were inundated by yay-yay's and boom-boom's from a San Diego rock 'n' roll station. It was reassuring to know that bad taste was not strictly an American malady.

He drove for a long time, back and forth and around, and at one point stopped to buy a newspaper from a hawker standing on a deserted stretch of road. I surreptitiously glanced behind me as we whipped away down the road, and the newspaper vendor was moving quickly toward a small shack set off the road. I looked for, and found, the telephone lines running into the shack. Signal number one, apparently passing us through.

We drove a while longer, and Luis pulled in at a liquor store that also sold IMPORTED FRENCH PERFUME THE REAL STUFF! He got out, went inside, and I slow-counted to three hundred and eighty-five by thousandcount. He came back with a brown-paper sack twisted at the top, and I knew we'd come through phase two of the clearing process. He was assured--in some indefinable way--not only that we were not being followed, but that we were what we declared ourselves to be: waifs on the sea of intrigue. He roared out of the parking lot of the liquor store, and tooled the big Imperial toward the hills overlooking Tijuana. We roared past Caliente track; I relaxed, and Jenny looked more frightened.

It was a twisty-turny, and I went through a third of a pack of cigarettes. Finally, we pulled down a side street, turned left through an alley, and went right parallel to the street we had just come down. Luis whirled the wheel again, and pulled up into the driveway of an expensive-looking home surrounded by a high polished-wood fence. I could see the house through the close slats of the fence, and it was a big-money pad. Whoever lived there (and don't think for a second it wasn't obvious who lived there), lived well.

Luis braked to a halt before the inner gate, and honked twice, sharply, paused, then honked again. The gate went up, pulled on a chain by a skinny, underfed-looking Mexican youth perhaps a year or two younger than Luis, the pickup agent. He drove the car through, and the rickets case let the gate down again. We were in a narrow passage between the fence and the side of the house. Beyond the house, the passage opened into a large back area that ended in open-face garages. From where I sat, I could see a Bentley, a Thunderbird and what looked to be an Aston Martin roadster, each in

its own berth, each a current model, each gleaming and polished.
Luis got out, and I opened the door on my side.
There was just barely enough room to squeeze out, and be wedged against the side of the house. The college students in the front seat could not yet leave the car, the passage was so narrow. Luis came around the car and opened the door beside me, into the house. I stepped back and Jenny and Rooney slipped past me. Luis watched Jenny's legs as she slid out of the car. Eyes salivate, don't ever let them tell you otherwise. She caught him at it, and smiled coquettishly.
Luis ran a hand through his thick, glistening shock of hair. The Demon Lover strikes again!
We went inside, and were followed by the college students. There were three couples waiting. The girls were all exceptionally attractive, and all under twenty-one, I would have guessed.
It was an anteroom, with two sofas, several large borax modern chairs, and a tv set babbling a moron's guessing game. Something about trusting one another ...
We sat and waited. Luis vanished through the only door leading into the house. I looked around at the others, and they were all studiously directing their attentions to the two microcephalics vying for prizes on the tv screen. I didn't fool myself that they were interested in what was happening there; they were afraid, unsure of protocol, and suspicious that everyone else was a friend of the Doctor. (The name now had an ominous ring, though by the wealthy surroundings it should have been otherwise.)
Luis stuck his head in, motioned to Jenny, Rooney and myself, and to the college students. The five of us got up and followed him through the door, around a corner, and into a large living room walled with sofas, chairs, an electric heater purring on the floor, and another, larger tv set, tuned to the same channel.
There was another couple sitting close together on one of the sofas. The guy looked more frightened than the chick, and she was comforting him.
"Seedohn," Luis directed us, and vanished back into the hallway. I paced across the thick carpet to see where he had gone, but the hallway ended in another plain panel door. There was the door through which we had come from the anteroom, and a twin directly across from it. Three doors, the living room, and silence. It hung musty warm in the room, with the electric heater going, the spring sun outside but unseen in the windowless room, and the three table lamps trying to convince us there was neither day nor night.
I sat down on the sofa across from the tv set, and Jenny leaned across. "Are you nervous?"
"No," I answered. "I'm not the one going inside."
She sank back, looking morose. Rooney gave me another of those peculiar stares.
We waited three quarters of an hour, and Luis popped in and out like the changer on a record player. The boredom was starting to get to me. A rerun of The Lineup came and went on the tv screen under the name San Francisco Beat, and I wondered just how long Warner Anderson and Tom Tully had been in movies. Then a rerun of Yancy Derringer came on, and I had to sit through something about a Union officer who had it in for a New Orleans gentleman and had arranged for his early demise by firing squad. I was about to stick my thumb in my mouth, plug up my ears, and blow my brains out through my nose when a nurse in white came into the room. She motioned to the wild-looking blonde, and they went off together. Not a sound. The coward sat and watched the tv set with a whipped expression. Yancy Derringer faded into limbo and an early movie came on. It starred Tom Neal (without a moustache), Evelyn Keyes and Bruce Bennett, and had somethingorother to do with Officers' Candidate School in World War Two. It was a drag, but Evelyn Keyes was nice. I yawned perhaps eighty times. Luis did his imitation of a jack-in-the-box several times, and finally, the nurse came back. "Mees ... com plees..." She crooked a finger at Jenny.
Jenny got up reluctantly, clutching her purse with the four one-hundred dollar bills in it. She gave us each a sickly smile, and we smiled back, rather more bored and struck witless by the heat and the waiting than through any concern. By now my feelings had been assuaged about the Good Doctor's capabilities. A man doesn't live that high from bad butchery. Word of mouth works just as much in D&C as in PR.
Jenny went away, and we settled down alone in the room to wait. After a while I shut off the heater. Tom Neal was better-looking with the moustache.
These are the mechanics of the nightmare:
Doctor's office. Modern desk. Office chair. Straight chair in front of desk. Radio. Telephone with number disc removed. Very bare walls. Doctor Quintano: handsome, early thirties, middle thirties; gray eyes; very impersonal. "Is this the first time you've been pregnant?" Excellent English, no trace of accent. "What was the date of your most recent period? How do you feel?" Sit waiting, twenty minutes. He comes back. Takes some papers from the desk. Goes away. Twenty minutes waiting. See no one. Hear nothing. Sit straight in chair, feel clammy, hot, tired, headache. Nurse returns, asks, "Are you Nancy?" No answer. Nurse indicates without speaking, leave this room, go upstairs.

Another nurse waits at head of stairs, march directly into bathroom. Extraordinarily lovely bathroom, gleaming brass fixtures cast in the shapes of lions with open mouths, dolphins, seagulls. Pull off clothes, put on hospital gown open in back, tied with two strings. Down hall to private operating room. Lie down on observation table, light above glowing, eyes hurt. Twenty minutes. Nurse back again, quietly efficient, dark, does not speak. Quintano comes in, asks for money. Give him four crisp bills. Takes money, goes away. Comes back. Takes off underpants, places hand on female stomach. "Your stomach muscles are too tight; go to the bathroom, urinate, relax them." Goes, returns, tries again. "Now what you're going to have is a 'curettement,' a very simple operation. It will take about ten minutes, and I'll have to examine you before the operation, don't be afraid." Leaves room. Nurse comes in, follow her to other room. Halls empty, hear no sound. Lie down on another observation table. Quintano returns wearing rubber gloves. Internal pelvic examination. Gentle. Still wearing shoes. Quintano leaves again. Nurse: "Relax, he be right een." Thirty-five minutes. Nurse goes, returns, ties ankles into operating table stirrups with bands of white cloth. Heels in stirrups, uncomfortable angle. Quintano looms above table. "I want to be asleep, please." "That depends on you." "How?" "If you keep your breathing normal and relax." "I can't relax unless you put me to sleep." "Do you want this operation?" Pause, long pause, longest pause, fear, thinking, tottering at the decision's tip, flight, running, trembling, I must do it! "Okay. Go ahead." A great black creature coming down from the sky above. Black rubber inhalator mask. Over nose and mouth. Fear of gas, strong, smell to be avoided if encountered on a street, walk in opposite direction, don't die don't fight no sight out light might tight right if you close mouth breathe through nose hose slows goes rose ... Conversation interchange can't understand allwordsruntogetherlikejelly GO! In her, knowing, I'm not asleep, feel the first instrument, cry, make a sound, inhale gas and swoon in soft lather down gone deep right leap fight seeeeee thissss wayyyyyy they count in Spanish sweet anesthetist anesthesia anesthetic not sleeping words count in Spanish uno dos tres cuatro cinco seis siete ocho Ouch! Oh! Ah! there pain here pain know pain feel it up inside vaguest vaguely vagrant ain pain vain- nueve diez once doce dream great white square, huge insubstantial moving great square, cut in four parts, one section all black, the black moves first to one square, then another, then another, around and around and around as dr dr. dR DR. and nurse stand on right, as black square moves from one corner to the other to the other to the next to the next, all clocks stop all clocks silent, every room has a clock, every room in the place, every clock has no face just hands that move around and around teasingly teasing trece catorce ... soft scraping down there inside my softness, small creature seeks warm warm warm ... It's over. Come back up from the world of white squares and black. Quintano and nurse on the right, staring, "How do you feel?" "Dizzy ..." Pat on the arm. Sit up, naked body stretches out before, open, naked, moist. Cover with the hospital gown. Get off table. Walk out crookedly wobbling a tot on first feet. Into first examination room, lie down on table. Blanket over, warm. Light glowing overhead, "Can you turn that out?" "No." Forty-five minutes go by, one minute, sleep. Nurse comes back. "Get dressed." As door closes hear Quintano saying, "Word word wordword pain word wordword word." What was he saying, pain? Me? Was there trouble? I feel fine, don't l? Yes, a fine feeling. Empty. Nurse with two paper cups. One has water. The other has five pills: two big yellow ones, three small white ones. Take them with difficulty, need second cup of water. Wait again, ten minutes. Nurse and Quintano come back. "You were a fine patient. That damn blonde kept moving her hips, she was scared, nervous; but you were a good patient." Go downstairs with nurse. Other nurse waits at bottom. Hello.

I had tried to break out for a while, to get some air, to think about something other than nothing. And to wonder why this whole thing with Jenny had come to be so compelling, so involving for me, when I was really not the responsible party. I thought I knew why, but I wanted to think about it somewhere other than in the abortionist's front parlor.

I had tried to get out of the house, by the only door I knew for certain led outside, but Luis had been waiting in the outer passage, talking in Spanish with the rickets case. He motioned me back inside. I'd about had it with him. The operation Quintano ran was a clean one, but the scarred, oily appearance of Luis was bad policy. It made the trip to the doctor's home seem more suspicious than was necessary. He instilled no faith or security in the girls coming to get scraped. And his predilection for melodrama was a bit much.

"I want to take a walk," I told him, coming on toward the fence and gate.

"No. You go on back. You wait till she done," and he put his hand in his thigh-length car coat's pocket. I had a feeling the most dangerous item in that pocket was dust, but I saw no sense in hassling with him. I went back inside.

It was only four hours, but it seemed like forever.

I'd gone through my own pack and a half of Philip Morris and was down to smoking Rooney's goddamned Kents or Springs or Passion-flowers or whatever those hideous mentholated, perfumed

excuses for a self-respecting coffin-nail are called. My mouth tasted like they'd marched the entire Chinese Nationalist Army through it barefoot, with the Dalai Lama in the lead, wearing nothing but a Dr. Scholl's Zino-Pad.

Jenny came in, being helped by a nurse in white, the one we'd seen before, the one who wouldn't talk. I could tell at once something was wrong. Her face looked like a charcoal drawing on papyrus. I got up and moved to help her. She sat down on the sofa beside Rooney and ran her hand up across her temple and into her hair, in that characteristic gesture that meant she was out of it. "How do you feel?" I asked.

"Oh, okay, I guess. I'm glad it's over."

Rooney moved over beside her. "You look a little peaked, are you sure you feel all right?"

She nodded silently, almost numbly.

There was something wrong.

"Was there trouble in the operation?" I directed my question at the nurse. Her face froze over; she was a hard, cold bitch. I asked her again. She didn't answer.

"You feel be'er eef you put a li'l lisstick on," the Medusa said. Jenny mumbled something vague at that. I wanted to do something, but didn't know what.

The decision was taken over by Luis, who appeared magically from the anteroom. "Time to go," he said. The nurse disappeared back into one of the other doorways, and we stood up, helping Jenny between us. We moved out into the anteroom, and there was a waiting line of five new girls. I was amazed and staggered at the amount of business Quintano had accumulated. If he wasn't a millionaire, tax-free, he certainly needed a good business manager. The college kids were there, and the blonde looked just fine, just fine.

We left the house and got back in the car and the gate was raised and we drove away, in exact reverse order of the way we had made our entrance. And even though Hot-Rock Luis twisted and turned and drove us back to town by a different route, it didn't matter: I knew the way to Quintano's little do-it-yourselfery cold.

Luis left us off at the Woolworth's lot, and burned rubber getting away. The five of us stood there staring at each other and the cars. "How much was yours?" the college boy asked. "Four," I replied. He nodded. "Ours, too." It seemed to make him feel better.

"Can we go?" Jenny said, very softly, beside me. She was feeling weak and strange, I knew it, and so did Rooney. We got into the car and tooled out of Tijuana, heading for the border.

We never made it across.

That part of it happened so fast, it can be told fast. We drove down through the town, getting a noseful and a soulful of dirt and signed testaments to just how miserable the human condition can get to be. We pulled into the long line of cars heading for the check-out point at the border, and watched Jenny from the corner of our eyes. She was shaking slightly, and feeling worse. All I wanted to do was make the trip back to L.A. and get her to her own doctor.

Cars were being passed through one after another.

They stopped us, and the inspector leaned in, asked if I had anything to declare. I figured we were a shoo-in. "Not a thing, sir," I said. "We were just down looking around, didn't buy a thing."

He started to pass us through, when his eye caught the steel-rim bongos I'd bought. He looked from them to me. I looked into the back seat and saw them there. My laugh was as phony as a work of Art by Joseph E. Levine.

"Oh, except those, of course ha ha."

That was our undoing. He asked to see inside the trunk. I opened it and it was empty. Then he tried the glove compartment, under the back seats, and then the girls' handbags. Nothing. Just a bottle of pain-killer pills Jenny had had in her purse for weeks, labeled in Beverly Hills and signed with the name of her family doctor.

The inspector took the bottle, put it under my left windshield wiper, and directed me to pull out of line, into an inspection slot. I was hacked. Jenny was about to fall out. But I did as I was told.

I could hear a guy somewhere playing a soft lick on a guitar. It struck me how strange it was: all day in a land where music is supposed to be second nature, I hadn't heard any live music made by the people. A few bastardized notes out of a car radio, some organ background for a quiz show emanating from New York, and silence from the happy, smiling natives of this warm Valhalla. Now, as we were about to leave, a sound of reality from the other world. It was odd.

The inspector came out of his cubicle and examined us. He examined the bottle. Then he asked whose it was. Jenny said it was hers. He asked her to come into the station for a moment to talk to the head man. She looked at me. "I'll come with you," I said.

We followed him across the concrete walkway to the big glass-fronted office. I had to support

Jenny very surreptitiously. She was white as the sun at midday.
It went fast. The inspector knew what was happening. One look at her, and you could tell she had been aborted. She was sweating like a shower, hard and hot. He took her in to talk to her. I waited. After half an hour, I got worried. They told me I had to wait.
Rooney came in; she wanted to ask if there was trouble, but I motioned her to wait, I'd tell her later. An hour went by, and suddenly we heard a crash from the next room. The head man came out, panic on his stupid face, and yelled at his aide. "Call the hospital. Miguel Aleman. Have them send an ambulance. Quick!"
I was screaming at him, and was halfway over the counter, my hand tangled in his tie. "You bastard, you stupid fucking bastard! You could see she was sick, you had to pump her, you had to use her all up, didn't you? You bastard!"
Youth was not his attribute, intelligence was not his attribute, but strength was. He whipped his hands up between mine, breaking my hold, and gave me a fast one in the mouth. I went down, and he rushed back into the interrogation room to help Jenny. I crawled off the floor and Rooney helped me up. Through the open door, we could see Jenny's legs kicking as she lay on the floor.
The ambulance came and we rode along to Miguel Aleman Hospital. The waiting room was very clean and very white and Jenny died about four hours later. Blood loss. And it had been on its way to peritonitis.
I stood in the center of the waiting room when they came and told us, and suddenly all the memories I'd wanted to bury in the mud of my subconscious came back. Fran and the baby, sending my wife to the abortionist because I'd been "ill-equipped to handle a child right now, honey." The operation, the fear, and Fran growing to hate me, leaving me, the divorce. It all came back, and I knew then what Jenny had meant to me. Blackness pressed into my eyes.
I ran shrieking out of the hospital, a madman whose passage was unimpeded. They leaped out of my way. I may have been frothing at the mouth, I don't remember.
Then I was back in a dusty Tijuana street. and finding a taxi, and pointing up the hill toward Caliente track, saying, "Vamonos, vamonos!" I was waving bills under his nose and pointing, and he went ...
Fast ...
I directed him through a haze that was thick and red and whining with a high-pitched keen. When I saw the construction of steel and concrete, shaped like a geodesic dome, one of the landmarks I'd carefully noted on my first trip to Dr. Quintano's home, I made the cabbie pull over. Cab fare from any point to any other point in Tijuana is a flat fifty cents. I gave him four dollars, all the bills I had in my hand.
He sped away and I stood looking at the dome, at the sky, at my hands, and for the first time in my life I came to know sin.
I ran down the road, and down a side street, as unerringly as a hound on scent. I found Quintano's home without difficulty. It was one of the most formidable in that neighborhood, and the high fence surrounding it meant nothing to me. I don't know why I was there, what I wanted. Perhaps to hit him, or to get the money back for Jenny at the hospital--but she was gone, she was dead now, wasn't she? I didn't know.
I scaled the fence and hung at the top for a long moment, watching. The rickets case was down the line, near the gate. The door to the house opened and a man came out; he was tall with salt-and-pepper hair, and I thought he was Quintano. I climbed to the top, poised there, let myself go and caught the top of the fence with both hands. I hung for a second, then dropped. The two men saw me, and there was consternation on their faces.
"She died! She died! The baby and she died!" I yelled, and charged them. The older man stepped back, as though to flee into the house, but I went at him in a long flat dive and caught him around the ankles. He went face-forward into the side of the building, and slid sidewise, with my arms still locked around his calves. He was screaming in Spanish, and the rickets case wasn't about to help. He ran past us where we tumbled together on the ground, and into the house. The door was still open and I could hear him yelling for someone, but I was too busy trying to get at the older man's throat. I slid up his body, and locked one hand under his chin. He tried to fight me off and I pummeled him with my free fist. I was choking him, but not very well, and he was glaze-eyedly trying to fight free. I hit him as hard as I could on the side of the head, but he rolled with it, and then he dug his hand into my mouth, catching the soft flesh of my check, and he literally pried my head back. I lost my hold on his throat, and he jacked his knee up into my stomach. All the air went out of me and I flopped back, gasping like a heart case. Then, before I could defend myself, Luis was running through the anteroom, out the door, and was kicking me. His feet were big, and I saw each ripple-soled shoe descend, first right, then left, and he was stomping on my face as if I were a bug. I tried to grab his leg, and caught one pants cuff. I

pulled him across and tumbled him, and managed to crawl up his front and hit him once before someone grabbed me from behind, locked his hands around my face and yanked me forcibly back against a knee. My back cracked like an arthritic knuckle and everything bobbled, weaved, swam, dipped in front of me. I started to gray out, and stayed with it just long enough to see Luis and the older man and the rickets case bending down to work me over good.

I was lying on my back, my right hand was loose in a puddle of mud, and I was staring up at a wall that held a bullfight poster. I saw the colors, and the word ARRUZA, and then read the sign very carefully three times before I fainted again.

When I came up the second time, someone was going through my pockets. I didn't stop him. Not even when he pulled my watch off my wrist. I went under again, and when I came back the third time I was very cold, and shivering. I tried to get up, let my legs slide down the wall, where they rose above my head lying in the dirt, and tried to gain purchase on the brick wall. It turned to rubber and peanut butter.

I kept at it, and finally got to my feet.

The world was nowhere to be seen.

Then I realized both my eyes had swollen almost completely shut. I stumbled forward, my hands out before me like a blind man, and came out of the alley into the street. It was noisy and full of people. The lights hurt my eyes. I stared up, and caught a vista of the town, and it was an eye-numbing horizon of neon. I groaned.

A pair of overweight Mexican girls swinging huge purses went by, and tittered to each other, saying something gutty but soft in Spanish. I called them whores, putas!

I walked the streets for hours, seeing nothing, only feeling a pain far worse than the ache that threatened to split my head open. I must have looked hideous, because I came around a corner suddenly, and came face to face with a heavyset Mexican whose eyes opened wide in amazement. He got a sick look and walked around me. I didn't turn to see if he was still watching.

My pockets were empty, of course. All I knew was that I had to have a drink. My mouth was sandy and my stomach ached. Not entirely from the stomping I'd gotten. Oh, Jenny, oh, Fran!

I wandered into the Blue Fox, and there was a naked girl doing a nautch dance on the bar. Sailors in civvies were trying to grab her crotch. She kept twisting away from them. Then someone announced dinner was served and three broads came out, undressed, and lay down on the bar. Hors d'oeuvres. Three sickies jumped off their bar stools and went to fall down on the goodies. A bouncer tapped me on the shoulder and I left. I was sick.

I went into an alley and puked. Twice. When I was as empty as I was ever going to be, I tried to straighten myself up. I brushed off my clothes, raked my hair back out of my face with a hand, and went in search of a job.

There was a hustler looking for handbill boys at the Rancho Grande, a spieler for one nightclub told me, and I went over there. Three dollars and fifty cents for two hours' work handing out handbills, putting them under the windshield wipers of parked cars. I asked for a half dollar advance and was handed a stack of handbills instead. I went off down the street like a trained monkey, handing pieces of paper to people, pressing them into the hands of strangers. I was giving of myself. It felt wonderful. I wanted to puke again, but that was ridiculous. I knew I was empty.

Finally, all the handbills were gone, and I went back to get paid. The man was gone, and the people at the club didn't know where he could be found. I went looking for him. It took a long time, but I found another handbill-giver, a kid with wide, dark eyes, and told him the man was gone. He told me that was only because I was gringo. He grinned and told me where to find the man.

I went to the Bum-Bum and there he was, hiring more boys in the service of his cause. I approached him and said pay me. He looked like he didn't want to do it, but I started to make sandpaper noises and my hands became claws and l swear I'd have killed him right then if he'd refused. He'd have gone to his grave with my teeth in his throat. I was more than a little mad.

He pulled out a wad and started to peel off three singles. I reached in and took a ten, and walked away. He started to follow, and started to motion to another man, but I turned my bloody face to stare at them, and he shrugged.

I took the ten and went drinking. I bought a bottle of tequila. It seemed only fitting to drink the wine of the land. I finished the bottle almost by myself. The last dregs were taken by an old Mexican woman sitting in a doorway. She had her legs tied under her so she looked crippled, and her five-year-old son was selling pencils and switchblade knives just down the street while she begged. At one point a well-built but slovenly fifteen-year-old girl came hipping by, and the old woman told me in broken English that it was her pride, her daughter. "She make doce, twelf, doce doe-lahr night," she beamed. They lived good. I shared some chili beans with her, and went away.

I was in another place, I think. It was a club. There was a fight and sirens and I ran away. Then I was in the Mambo Rock, and someone was yelling FIRE FIRE FIRE and I turned to see the whole wall

blazing. An electrical short, and the whole block was in flames. Twelve feet in the air the flames ate the night sky, and I was helping a shopkeeper pull his bongos and wooden statues of Don Quixote and bead-shirts and serapes out into the street, and then there was a Mexican soldier, a member of the National Guard, a rurale, something... and he was spinning me around telling me to go away. They'd called in the army and half the town was on fire, and I was pulling a woman out of the flames, and her dress was on fire, and I gave her a feel as I beat out the flames with my bare hands. And then they were taking me to the infirmary, and swabbing my hands with cool, moist salve.

Then another place, and I was very drunk and sick and very tired. I walked up Avenida Constitución and saw 287 HOTEL CORREO DEL NORTE and bought a pack of Delicados for seven cents in the booth on the corner, and went back to the hotel.

My room was seventy-five cents for the night. The walls were plywood till they reached five feet, then chicken-wire to the ceiling. I slept with my shoelaces knotted together, so my shoes wouldn't get stolen. I'd have put them under the end-legs of the bed, but I was so tired I knew the bed could be lifted off the shoes and I wouldn't have known it. Someone tried to get in during the night and I screamed about death and snakes and they went away.

I dreamed of jackasses painted like zebras, and turistas getting their pictures taken in a cart pulled by the zebra-ass, on street corners, wearing sombreros with the name CISCO KID scrawled on the brim. It was a nice dream.

The sign said TELÉFONO PÛBLICO, and I stood on Avenida Revolución.

I called the hospital, and somehow they found Rooney. She had been looking for me all the day before. I told her where I was, and she came and got me. I was crying, I think. They released Jenny's body, and her parents came down to get it. I don't think I could have borne carrying it back in the Magnette ... not to Los Angeles. That was forever.

Rooney kept asking me where I'd been, but I couldn't tell her. I wasn't purged, for Christ's sake, but I was tired, and that was almost as good.

Jenny was gone, and Kenneth Duane Markham was gone, and soon enough Rooney would be gone from me. All I wanted to do was get back to Los Angeles and try to be someone else. The taste of tequila was still strong in my throat, and I knew that would help a little.

--Tijuana and Hollywood, 1963

THE UNIVERSE OF ROBERT BLAKE

And this is what Robbie Blake learned that day...

On the bus, an old man in an overcoat--so hot for July, that shapeless, whatcolor rag--sat mumbling to himself, next to the window. Occasionally he would rub his palms against stubbled cheeks, a sound like new sandpaper to Robbie's ears.

When the old man got up and left the bus, Robbie Blake saw a small dirty-white card thrust into the window-frame. He moved across the aisle and pulled the card out of its slot in the anodized aluminum frame. It said, very neatly:

BO BO THE CLOWN
Available for Picnics, Clubs

and there was a number, an address. Robbie Blake replaced the card precisely, for even at six years of age, he knew a man has a right to advertise.

Later that day, looking out from behind the billboard at the side of the clothing store, Robbie saw a fat woman with a mustache, carrying a shopping bag at the end of either meaty arm. One of the bags burst as the fat woman passed Robbie's waiting-place, and he watched carefully as she got down on her knees--in stages, like a great beast unhinging itself at a waterhole--puffing, sighing. He watched her as she retrieved the packages of frozen foods, the asparagus, the oranges. There was something very natural about the fat woman. Something essential. Robbie Blake watched, and remembered.

A big truck with EMPIRE HAULING on its side went past, and Robbie dashed out from behind the billboard to catch the truck as it stopped by the corner. He pulled himself up onto the lowered tailgate and grasped the anchor chain firmly in both hands as the truck moved with the changing traffic light. Robbie rode along with the smell of his world whipping past; the smell of the rotting gourds in the sidewalk markets; the smell of oil and grease, rainbow puddles among the bricks; the smell of chemicals from some tiny manufacturing company on a side street. He looked and looked and everywhere people dashed and walked, doing things with paper and leather and words. He smiled at the gray sky that promised rain, and he stuck his tongue out when a policeman made a short move to haul him off the fleeing truck as it whipped through an intersection.

Finally, Robert Blake tired of his truck ride, and slid to the edge of the tailgate. When the truck paused for breath at another traffic light, Robbie bounced down and dogtrotted away, in a new place, with wonderful things to see. He saw a shop with bright and coppery bracelets, and a

man in a great wide hat. The window of the shop said MEXICO ARTS and Robbie knew where Mexico was. It was someplace downtown, very far downtown in another country.

What it is, to be six years old, is to need to go to the bathroom frequently. That is part of it. Robbie Blade needed to go to the bathroom, because he had had three papaya juices at 'Nrico's stand, before he had stood behind the billboard, watching the fat woman who might have been his mother or somebody's mother, maybe. So he looked for a place to go.

He saw a group of people going into, and coming out of, a big restaurant called FELLOWS' RESTAURANT in red and blue neon lights that went on and off in the late afternoon gray. He decided if all those people were going in and coming out, that at least one of them must have had to go to the bathroom sometime or other, and if that was so, then there had to be a bathroom inside. (Never say "I have to go wee-wee"; always say "I have to wash my hands," Moms had said to Robbie.)

Robbie Blake, just like all those other people--well, not quite; shorter, perhaps, but pretty much the same--strode purposefully to the restaurant, and went through the revolving door. It was cool inside, and hard to see very well, but he walked around, and listened to the people eating and talking to each other. He stared over the shoulder of a man cutting a baked apple with a fork, and smiled when the man tried to get a piece too big into his mouth. The man half-turned as Robbie smiled (was it a sound, not a smile?) and gave a snort of annoyance. Robbie moved on.

This was a fine world; a fine, fine place to be a little boy, with people eating and talking and taking too big bites of baked apples.

The bathroom was still very important, but in a world as nice as this, well, such things can wait a few minutes longer. After all, one can always cross one's legs and stand hidden in a corner, waiting.

Robbie knew the words to look for, and when he saw the door that said GENTLEMEN, he recognized MEN and went inside. A man with a bow tie and a blue shirt was washing his hands, and he saw Robbie in the mirror, and he chuckled softly, saying, over his shoulder, "Pop, this one yours?" and Robbie saw another man, wearing a white jacket, with a towel ready to be handed to the man with the bow tie.

The man in the white jacket (oh, didn't he look nice and important dressed up that way) gasped, and laid the towel down on the sink next to the fellow with the bow tie. He came to Robbie very quickly, and took him by the shoulder, and dragged him out of the room that said GENTLEMEN. He pulled him through another door, and Robbie suddenly smelled all the wonderful brown and green and pink smells of food. Food that called to him and said I am meat! I am tossed greens! I am something you don't know, very nice! It was a kitchen, and Robbie wanted to faint with pleasure. Oh, such a grand world.

Then the man in the white jacket was kneeling in front of him, saying, "Boy, watchu doin' here? You crazy or somethin'? You know you can't come in here!"

Robbie did not understand. He smiled nicely at the man in the white jacket. "Hello," he said, politely as Moms had taught him to do.

"Don't be smilin' at me that way, chile! I'm tellin' you it's trouble for you in here. They don't allow it!"

Robbie was confused, but he mustered another, tinier smile, and said to the man in the white jacket, "I hadda use the bathroom."

The man took Robbie to the swinging door that led back into the restaurant, and he pulled it open a crack.

"Look." He pointed. "You see alla them people? They can use the bathroom, but not you. Now you g'wan get outta here befoah we all get hell!"

Robbie knew what was right. He was just like everyone here. He had a right to use the bathroom. He said so.

The man in the white jacket frowned and pulled the swinging door open again. "Now look, boy, I mean really look. You see them? They not the same's you. They white. Now look at you, look at me. Are we white?"'

Robbie looked at his hand. It wasn't white, that was true. He looked at the man in the white jacket. He wasn't white, either. But what did that have to do with the bathroom? Did it mean he wasn't ever allowed to go to the bathroom? It would be very unhappy and painful if that was so.

Then the man in the white jacket--who was very black and almost bald, except for a few curlicues of wispy whiteness that came out of his scalp--was hauling Robbie to the back door of FELLOWS' RESTAURANT, and opening it into the alley, and putting Robbie outside in the growing darkness. He paused, and bent down, and said, very softly, so the cooks and waiters and busboys rushing would not hear, "Boy, someway you haven't been brought up right; din't yoah parents tell you the way it is? You better learn, boy. You better learn."

And he pushed Robbie gently, out onto a loading dock, and closed the door, the light narrowing to

a splinter and then all gone, all gone. Robbie stood in the darkness and waited for something more to happen. But nothing more happened.
Then he turned, ran to the edge of the loading dock, jumped down, and walked very quickly to the end of the alley.
For a very long time Robbie stood in a doorway, nothing but his eyes seeing out, his body, his strange black body hidden. He watched everyone as they went by. He stared very carefully, as he had stared at the policeman, and the fat woman, and Bo Bo the Clown who was available (which seemed a nice thing to be).
After a very, very long time, he felt he understood.
Then he went home.
It had been a full day, a surprising day--and one filled with learning things. Robbie Blake had learned what it meant to know, and what it meant to watch, and what it meant to live. Somehow, his education till then had been love and kindness from Moms, and respect from his sister and his three brothers, and no one had mentioned the Difference. But now he knew.
Robbie Blake had learned many things that day. He had learned which colors were right, and which were wrong; he had learned what color hands must be to open certain doors, and what color thoughts must be employed to exist in the fine, fine nice world. He had learned when to lower his eyes.
And most of all he had learned what it meant to be a nigger.
And most of all he had learned:
It is not enough for a little boy to know his place in the Universe.
He must also know which Universe is his.
And that is what Robbie Blake learned that day.
--New York City, 1962

G.B.K. -- A MANY-FLAVORED BIRD
So garbled was my secretary's mind, that early in the morning, that I had to call Western Union later in the day, and have them read me the telegram again; even then, in the clarity of a monotoned operator's recitation, the message barely made sense. It read:
CAMPAIGN MATERIALIZING TO ROCKET YOUR
FORTHCOMING MOVIE "THE LATTER LIFE OF GOD" INTO
INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL GOLD MINE.
I had her read it again, and then asked if they would deliver the telegram itself to my hotel. She said Western Union would be pleased to accommodate, and then she said, "This telegram was sent from here in town, by night letter last night, sir." I asked her if it was signed, and she said, "Yes, it's signed G. Barney Kantor, American Association of Fan Clubs."
More bewilderedly than I had any right to feel, I thanked the operator and racked the receiver. I sat there on the edge of the bed in my hotel room in Cleveland, and I tried to make some sense out of the histrionically phrased nonsense I had just heard.
True, one of my magazine short stories, "The Latter Life of God," had been picked up by an independent outfit for production ... but the script hadn't even been written yet, which was why I was on my way to the Coast, having stopped off in Cleveland merely to see my sister and brother-in-law. Who the hell was G. Barney Kantor, and what the hell was the "American Association of Fan Clubs"?
"Bernice," I yelled into the adjoining room, "do I know a G. Barney Kantor?"
Bernice, secretarialy attired in sheaves of press releases and a pencil behind each ear, emerged from the other room and stood poised in the doorway, cocked onto one hip, thinking. "Not that I know. Is that the business with the telegram this morning?" I nodded. "Dumb sonofabitch whoever he is," she snarled, "waking me up at eight jeezus o'clock! I'd like to get my hands on his throat!"
She went back to her room, the extension of her right hand, the telephone, and arrangements for a local interview show I was going to do over Cleveland television.
It wasn't that important, really, because I knew it had to be a gag, but the peculiar manner of phrasing struck a dim note in my mind, and though I had other things to worry about--the local tv appearances, finishing an article long overdue, the final payment of the option money--for some inexplicable reason my thoughts kept worrying the telegram and the name of G. Barney Kantor, like a dog with a rag doll.
And finally, it came back to me, who he was, and how I'd met him, and what image of him I'd relegated to the back part of my of my memories. And despite myself, I was forced to smile. After all this time, that he should remember me; I'd been just a kid when I'd met him, however briefly; I'd been perhaps sixteen, seventeen. Now, ten--no, thirteen--years later, Kantor was back in my life.
If anything had saved me from becoming a real flip, from wasting my life and what little talent I

had, after my father died and my mother and I moved to Cleveland, it was the science fiction people. I had bought a pulp magazine whose cover had shown a huge robot firing bolts of flame (or something) from its fingertips, and almost immediately had become an aficionado. In due course I met the other science fiction fans in Cleveland, and we formed a club, the Solarians. Not only were they good people, and kind people, but there was a swirl of wonder about them, an unpredictability of imagination that turned my world of mourning sadness and widow's tears into a golden time and space of hyperspatial rocket ships, alien life-forms and concepts of the universe that I'd never even suspected existed.

Inevitably, one of the Cleveland newspapers came to the club rooms to do a feature on us. It was the usual cheapjack yellow pap, tongue firmly in cheek and ridicule replacing reportage. The article appeared in all the editions of that day's paper, and we were more mortified than flattered. Someone suggested iron filings in the reporter's coffee cake. Saner heads prevailed, scolding me for such an uncharitable thought.

All of this was background, however, for the new magic soon to enter our lives, in the person of G. Barney Kantor.

Al Watson, in whose apartment we held meetings, reported a phone conversation he had had earlier in the day, one meeting night. He seemed enthused and genuinely pleased. "So he said his name was Kantor, with a 'K,' and that he was prepared to, uh, how did he put it, 'Lift us from the realm of mediocrity and anonymity to the heights of public awareness.' "

We all stared at Al, and Al beamed back at us. (We sometimes cocked a quizzical eyebrow at Al; he was a member of the Fortean Society, as well as a practitioner of dianetics.) "Isn't that swell?" he asked. "This guy says he has contacts all over the world, and he's coming over this evening to meet us and find out our potentialities for greatness."

Ben Jason, one of the more lucid minds present, had the intemperate presence to ask, "Our potentialities for what? Is that another of his remarks?" Al nodded.

We stared at one another, prepared to believe the wildest things.

None of this prepared us, as it turned out, for the actual physical presence of G. Barney Kantor. At nine-thirty the doorbell rang, and we scurried, rearranging ourselves into positions of respectability and sober world-view sanity, as Al went to answer the door. All we could see when the door was opened was Al, standing there with his hand outstretched in greeting, and then a convulsive widening of the eyes, and the tiniest gasp of disbelief and consternation. We heard Al mumble welcoming words, and then he stepped aside, and for the first time I saw G. Barney Kantor.

As a writer I am affronted by the sterility of imagination and talent that forces some authors to describe their characters as "looking exactly like Gregory Peck, with bigger ears." This recourse to mass consumption identity has always struck me as highly suspect and just short of auctorial bankruptcy. Yet I am compelled, in describing G. Barney Kantor, to take the shortest route to toal recognition, by stating simply that G. Barney Kantor looked, looks, will always look, precisely like Groucho Marx.

Kantor entered the room, and for an instant I thought his brothers would follow him. He stalked, not walked, in that indescribable half-crouch Marx has patented for the "Captain Spaulding, the African explorer" number (did someone call him schnorer?); his moustache was a black, rectangular brush, his hair was wild and manelike. He wore glasses. He smoked a thick, obscene-looking black hawser of a cigar. He was midway between massively impressive and downright comical.

After the first shocking moment wore off, it was possible to detect small ways in which G. Barney Kantor was not Groucho Marx, but so studiedly had Kantor sought to mock the Brother's appearance, at no time during the fantastic evening were we free of the impulse to burst into laughter.

(I was later to learn that the RKO Palace Theater in Cleveland occasionally hired Kantor as a sandwich man, strictly on his appearance.)

"A decidedly good evening to you, fellow roamers of the vast, unchartered Universe!"

No bull, no flummery, that is the way G. Barney Kantor talked. Silver fleeting words of sometimes meaning that were here and gone before you could assemble them in precisely their proper order. Flamboyant phrases slapped together to give a general impression of garrulity, pompousness, absolute phoniness. It has always confused me how people could be gullible enough to be taken in by Kantor, for in the first words from his mouth, it has seemed to me, any rational person could detect sham and the quicksilver maneuverings of the born con man.

Stunned as we all were by this brash and obviously hammy individual from out of nowhere, Ben Jason again made his mark by stepping forward, shaking Kantor's hand and introducing himself. Then he led Kantor around the room, introducing him to Honey Steel, Frank Andrasovsky, Earl Simon and after all the others, finally, me.

"This is Walter Innes," Ben said. "Walter, Mr. Kantor." I took his hand. It was the handshake of the man who is testing the flesh of your body to see if you have worked for a living, or are

subsisting on gratuities from a wealthy family. A fleeting thought passed me, and I was glad I wasn't wearing any rings. "Walter is the editor of our club magazine,"--Ben beamed at me; Walter, the mascot--"and quite a promising little writer, too."
Kantor's deep blue eyes stared down at me and he deluged me with words. "A remarkable young man, Mr. Jason. Remarkable. I can tell he has an intuitive grasp of matters both cosmical and naturalistic from the glint of supernine awareness in his lustrous eyes. Remarkable! A man to watch, indeed, a man to watch."
Then he passed on, leaving me stunned to the core, and awash in words whose meanings I was only barely able to fathom.
And so it went all that evening. Kantor the monologist, Kantor the financier, Kantor the bon vivant waving his silver-headed walking stick. Amused, bemused, confused and nonplused we sat and listened to his meandering reminiscences of the world in which he had moved, his aspirations, his love of science fiction (and his total unawareness of even the leading writers in the field) ... and we waited for the kicker.
Finally, it came. When we were all wasted and spent by the mere effort of listening to him.
"Fellow Solarians," he blurted, during a three-second lull in what had been entirely his conversation, "and I hope I am of a full-hearted enough nature, borne up with camaraderie and effusion for you good people of the stars and the night, to call myself so ... fellow Solarians, I am prepared to make you well-known, nay, say responsive to the plucked chords of public sentiment, as you have long waited to be! Why should men and women of your ilk, men and women with so much to give to a world pleading for light and guidance, be relegated to positions of obscurity and idle activity? You are the brave new future of this land, and I am prepared--for a small fee--to hoist you by the petards of your own magnificence and--"
We were readers of Startling Stories, where the hell was he getting this saviors of mankind crap from?
Eventually, we told him we would get back in touch with him, watched his exeunt flourishing, and fell back as a group, in absolute exhaustion.
Earl Simon it was, who very simply said it, in a quiet voice, as we all slumped there, drained and confused. "Hey, that guy's a crook."
No one bothered to disagree. We were too exhausted.
And now, thirteen years later, after I had gone my way, the Solarians had gone theirs, and G. Barney Kantor had, presumably, gone his, I was the recipient of a telegram, like a rainbow voice out of the past, like a many-flavored bird of passage that once every thousand years lights and casts its gay gloom over anyone lucky enough to be around.
I put Kantor and his officious, nonsensical 'gram out of my mind till later that night, when we were at one of the local nightclubs, one of the few left in Cleveland's now-ghost-towned downtown. I was with Bernice, my sister Beverly and her husband Jerold, the optician, and we had been joined by the headliner of the show (a well-known male singer who prefers I do not use his name), and three girls out of the go-go chorus.
How Kantor came up, I don't recall now, but I told them of our meeting thirteen years before, when I had been in high school and had not yet written the first book. "And you know, every once in a while," I told them, "when I'd be downtown, I'd see him on the street. He was a sidewalk photographer most of the time. I suppose that's where he made his living."
One of the go-go girls, memory piqued by my comparison of Kantor to Groucho Marx, told me how he had been a sandwich man.
Then my brother-in-law, who is frankly too nice a guy to be married to my sister, added, "You bet your life he remembers you, Walt. When you were in town three years with your book, uh, which one was that--"
"NO MORE FLAMES," I reminded him, always ready to tout my own work.
"Right. NO MORE FLAMES. Well, when you were at that autograph party at Burrows', he found the write-up in the Press, with my name in it, and he came around to the shop, and introduced himself. Said he was a good friend, and really came on with me. I managed to get him out of the store, I had a couple of patients, and he was yelling and making an ass of himself."
I grinned, imagining G. Barney Kantor's capers in mild, good-natured Jerry's optical shop.
"But now every time he sees me on the street," Jerry Rabnick continued, "he follows me for blocks with that damned camera of his, yelling at the top of his lungs, 'HEY, THERE GOES DOCTOR RAB, THE BROTHER-IN-LAW OF AMERICA'S FINEST NOVELIST! HEY, DOCTOR RAB, HOW GOES IT?' "
Jerry's voice had climbed in imitation of Kantor's yowl, and heads were turning toward us in the club. He flushed and fell silent. I found myself laughing, at just the mental picture of that colossal fraud, that monstrous charlatan, G. Barney Kantor.
Then my sister chimed in, "We were having a Temple benefit, and he called me, offering something

or other, I don't remember what it was now, but I called the Better Business Bureau to check on him and so help me, when I mentioned his name, the girl groaned and flashed the switchboard and said, 'Refer this call to the Kantor Department.' " I broke up completely, then. The singer--who had been listening carefully--also got his jollies, and we sat there for at least a minute till the tears ran down our face, we were laughing so hard.

"He sounds like a real creep," one of the go-go girls commented. "He musta been in an' outta jail a million times. He sounds like a real crook."

I was reminded of Earl Simon's remark so many years before, and it started the juices flowing.

"Perhaps not," I replied. "Perhaps G. Barney Kantor lives in his little world of pretense and tomfoolery, believing he is a press agent extraordinaire. Perhaps he's fooled himself into thinking he's a big man, and these little hangups with the police and people shunning him are just the stupidity of the mass. People who don't recognize his greatness."

I thought that was damned perceptive of me.

Then Bernice shook me by saying, "I think he's pathetic. I feel sorry for him."

"Now what the hell brought that on?" I said, the big-time writer who was on his way to Hollywood. "You're the one who wanted to kill him for waking you in the middle of the night."

"It wasn't the middle of the night, it was the early morning, and I feel sorry for the poor little guy."

I snorted. "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, for Christ's sake. Do you take in stray cats and puff adders, too?"

Bernice stuck her tongue out at me. "You've just become too big a deal to remember people like him. Not everybody makes it. This little guy apparently lives a lie, but it's all he's got. I think you stink."

And that was what formed my decision. "All right, Miss Humanitarian, I'll tell you what let's do: let's find out where he lives and go pay him a visit. You'll see him for himself, as he really is, stripped of all the sadness and tarnished glory. He probably lives in some fleabag hotel on Prospect, with crotch shots out of Playboy on the walls, and a card file on how to fleece suckers like you."

So we looked it up, and it was in the phone book, but it was an address out on the West Side, in a not too pleasant section of the depressed area. A section getting Poverty Program money.

There were ten of us by the time our cavalcade got to Kantor's street. We had picked up two of the musicians from the combo that backed the Well-Known Male Singer, and all ten of us, in three cars, had turned it into quite a little party. We were all pretty smashed by the time we got out there and it was four or five in the morning.

The street was dark and the houses were paint-peeling, sad-faced, a bit too grim for us really to laugh much. But so intent were we--all of us except Bernice--on revealing G. Barney Kantor as a fraud and a poltroon, that not even the slim neighborhood could really dampen us.

We found the house, and stopped in front. "Here, let me get a couple of my books out of the glove compartment," I said. We had brought them along for the tv show earlier in the day, and I'd shoved them in the compartment when the director of the show said he already had them. "I'll use them to reestablish our 'friendship.' After all, it has been thirteen years." The others in the car all smiled and egged me on. All except Bernice.

We got out of the car and walked up the weed-spotted walk, the tiles of the pavement thrust up and cracked from too many changes in temperature, too few repairs.

I rang the bell and didn't really pay any attention to the fact that it was five o'clock in the morning and the house was black. A light came on somewhere inside, and after a moment the door opened a trifle. I looked down at a woman's face. "Yes?" she asked, half-frightened.

"We're friends of G. Barney Kantor. Is he here?"

I thought it must surely be a rooming house.

The door opened a little wider.

"Barney? No, he's out this evening. May I help you? I'm Mrs. Kantor."

She was built like a muffin, and had her hair up around her head in a large braid. She was wearing a faded housecoat ant a pair of bedroom slippers from which the fuzz had departed. Another figure, a young girl, came to stand behind the older woman.

I suddenly felt very foolish.

"Well, uh, my name is Walter Innes. I'm a writer, and, uh, a friend of Barney's; I--uh--I thought I'd drop by to--uh--" I looked around at the nine others, trying to find some help. They had suddenly developed Little Orphan Annie's Disease: blank eyeballs.

"Oh, Mr. Innes!" the little woman chirped. "Oh, my gosh, yes! Barney has spoken of you many times, won't you come in, it's so cold out there."

She opened the door wide and admonished the young girl to, "Gwen, run and turn on the lights and

put on some coffee!"
We came in and she led us into the living room. It was furnished in Early Squalor. I wanted to get out of there very badly.
And yet, at the same time, I was really angry at G. Barney Kantor, really infuriated. Here was his wife and what was apparently his daughter, living in a dump and consigned to a life of poverty, while he ran around Cleveland wasting money sending night letters and playing the poseur. I wanted to tell her what I thought of her blasted husband and his ridiculous antics. I was perhaps a bit too drunk.
"Oh, Mr. Innes, it's such a pleasure to meet you at last. Barney has told us many times how he gave you your start. I'm just sorry he can't be here to see you; he's out on a very big promotion tonight."
I was too amazed by having learned G. Barney Kantor had given me my start to say anything. But the daughter, Gwen, chimed in, "Daddy always said you were his finest hour. Daddy always talks like that." Coffee was apparently on.
I nodded dumbly, and beside me I heard Bernice moving up to whisper, "You bastard!" in my ear.
"Well, uh," I said, apropos of absolutely nothing.
"Please sit down, won't you all," G. Barney Kantor's wife said. I then realized no one had introduced the small army she had let into her living room this wee small hour. As I went around introducing everyone, telling who they were, the two women's faces lit up. They recognized The Singer, immediately, and when he said, "I'm sorry we missed Barney, Mrs. Kantor. He's been a great help to me whenever I play Cleveland," she practically erupted in joy.
Well, it was an agonizing hour and a half. We sat there and heard what a great man G. Barney Kantor was, how this was only a temporary accommodation, how they were going to hit the big time soon, how Barney had connections in Hollywood, how the mayor was thinking of citing him for civic contributions, and on and on and on.
Finally, we made ready to depart. I took out my pen and signed the two books: To my dear friend, G. Barney Kantor, for all his invaluable help and for showing me a special part of the universe. Walter Innes.
I gave them to her, and she stood on tiptoe to kiss my cheek. She said good-bye to us all, and we left.
Bernice didn't say anything all the way back to the hotel, but when we left the car with the doorman, and he said, "We watched you on tv today, Mr. Innes. You were great," Bernice snorted and gave me a knowing grin that told me I'd either have to fire her or marry her.
--Cleveland, 1962

RIDING THE DARK TRAIN OUT
The freight car was cold, early in the morning.
He wore a filthy, ripped suit jacket, with pieces of newspaper and magazines stuffed against his skin, for extra protection; but the chill found him just the same, uncaring.
Feathertop Ernie Cargill brushed a trembling hand back through the silky, almost white baby-hair that tumbled over his forehead. Hair that was smooth, and the slightest breeze picking its way through the shuddering freight made it toss and rise. He cursed dimly, finger-raking it back for the thousandth time. He touched the bottle in his pocket, hut did not remove it.
The cotton bales were soft, but the smell of pig shit was strong. He moved gently, making a deeper depression among the stocked bales.
He was a young man, an ex-musician, and down as down could get on his luck.
"No luck, no buck," he would say, hugging himself tightly, shoving his fisted hands into his armpits to keep himself warm. His teeth chattered gently.
He was thin and tall, with a nose that skewed sidewise from a clarinet case across the kisser during his thirty-five-minute gig with a symphony orchestra once. "Bastards," he would say, "all I did was nice; I syncopated Vivaldi and the first chair clobbered me!"
Since then, and since the panther sweat had gotten him divorced from every decent--and even indecent--group from Greenwich Village to the Embarcadero, he had become a sucker-rolling freighter-jumper.
"There ain't nothin' faster, or lonelier, or more direct than a cannonball freight when you wanna go someplace," Feathertop would say. "The accommodations may not be the poshest, but man, there ain't nobody askin' for your ticket stub, neither."
He had been conning the freights for a long, long time now. Ever since the hootch, and the trouble with the Quartet, and Midge and the child. Ever since all that. It had been a very long time that had no form and no end.
He was--as he told himself in the vernacular of a trade no longer his own--riding the dark train

out. Out and out and never return again. Till one day the last freight had been jumped, the last pint had been killed, the last measure had been rapped. That was the day it ended. No reprise.
The occasion of Feathertop Ernie Cargill's first killing was an interesting story.
The freight car was cold, early in the morning.
He was pressed far back into the corner of the car on his cotton bales, the rattling and tinning of the wheels striking at the rails almost covering the sound of his ocarina.
He held his elbows away from his body, and the little sweet potato trilled neatly and sweetly as he tickled its tune-belly.
The train slowed at a road crossing, and the big door slid open.
The boy lifted the girl by the waist and slid her into the freight car. She pulled her legs up under her, to rise, her full peasant skirt drawing up her thighs, and Feathertop's music pffft-ed away. "Now that is a very nice, a very nice," he murmured to himself, back in his corner.
He took in the girl, in one sharp all-seeing look.
A little thing, but the right twist for the action that counted. Hot, that was the word, hot! Hair like a morning-frightened sparrow's wings, with the sun shining down over them. A poet, yet! His thoughts for the swanlike neck, the full, high breasts, the slim waist, and the long legs were less than poetic, however.
Then the boy straight-armed himself up, twisting at the last moment so he landed sitting, where she had sat.
He was less to see, but Feathertop took him in, too, just to keep the records straight.
Curly hair, high cheekbones, wide gnomelike mouth, a pair of drummer's blocky hands, and a body that said well, maybe I can wrestle you for ten minutes--hut then I'm finished. Feathertop went back to the girl. With no regrets.
"We made it, Cappy," the girl said sweetly.
A brilliant observation, thought Feathertop.
"Yeah, seems so, don't it." The boy laughed, hugging her close.
"Ah-ah!" Feathertop interrupted, standing up, brushing the pig shit from his dirty pants. "None of that. We run a respectable house here."
They whirled and saw him, standing there dim in the slatted light from the boarded freight wall. He was big, and filthy, and his toes stuck out of the flapping tops of his shoes. He held the black plastic kazoo lightly.
"Who are you?" The boy's voice trembled.
He was scared birdless.
"Come sit," said Feathertop, motioning them toward him. "The crap is softer over here."
The girl smiled, and started forward. The boy yanked her back hard, tugging her off her feet. She landed with a stumbling plop next to him, and he gathered her into the crook of his arm, as he must have seen it done on the cover of some cheap detective magazine.
"Now stay with me, Kitty!" He sounded snappish. "I vowed to take care of you--and that's what I'm gonna do. We don't know this guy."
"Oooo, square bit." Feathertop screwed his face up. This guy was really out of it. But nowhere!
"What is with this vow jazz?" Feathertop smiled, lounging against the freight's vibrating wall.
"We--we eloped," Cappy said. His head came up and he said it defiantly. He stared at Feathertop, daring him to object.
"Well, congratulations." Feathertop made an elaborate motion with his hand. These two were going to be easy pickings. They couldn't have much dough, but then none of the freight-bums Feathertop rolled had much. And besides, the chick had a little something the others didn't have. That was gonna be fun collecting!
But not just yet. Feathertop was a connoisseur. He liked to savor his meat before he tasted it.
"Come sit," he repeated, motioning to the piled cotton bales, over the pig leavings. "I'm just a poor ex-jazz man, name of--uh--Boyd Smith." He grinned at them wolfishly.
"That ain't your name, Mister," the boy said accusingly.
"And you know--you're right!" Feathertop aimed a finger at him. "That gets you the blue ribbon banana. But it's safer for anyone riding the redball to know someone else as somethin' other than what he is. Makes it easier all around." He winked.
"Oh, come on, Cappy," the girl said. "He's okay. He's a nice guy." She started to move toward the cotton bales, dragging the reluctant Cappy behind her.
Feathertop watched the smooth scissoring of her slim, trim legs as she walked to the bales. She sat down, tucked her legs beneath her, smoothing the skirt out in a wide circle. He cleared his throat; it had been a long, hot while since he'd seen anything as nice as this within grabbin' distance.
He had it all clocked, of course. Slug the kid, grab his dough--at least enough to get him to

Philadelphia--and then have a ball with the doll.
"Where'd you come from, Mr.--uh--Mr. Smith?" Kitty inquired politely, as she maneuvered on the cotton bales. She smoothed the peasant skirt around her again, shaking it off at the same time.
"Where from?" He thought about it. "Out. I been riding the dark train out for a ways now."
"Yes, but--"
Her boy friend cut her off peremptorily. "He doesn't want to tell us, Kitty. Leave him be."
She looked piqued and stepped-on, so Ernie cut in: "I came from Jersey originally. Been a long time, though."
They lapsed into silence, and the freight wallowed up a hill, and scooted down the other side, shaking and clanking to itself like a hypochondriac.
After a while, Kitty murmured something to Cappy, and he held her close, answering, "We'll just have to wait till we pull into Philly, honey."
"What's the matter, she wanna go the toilet?" Ernie found it immensely funny.
The boy scowled at him, and the girl looked shocked.
"No! Certainly not, I mean, no, that isn't what I said!" She snapped at him. "I only said I was hungry. We haven't had anything to eat all day."
Joviality suffused Feathertop Ernie Cargill's voice as he reached behind him, pulling out a battered carpetbag, with leather handles. "Whyn't ya say so, fellow travelers! Why we got dinner right here. C'mon, buddy, help me set up the kitchen and we'll have food in a minute or two."
Cappy looked wary, but he moved off the floorboards and followed the dirty ex-musician to the center of the refuse-littered boxcar.
Ernie crouched and opened the carpetbag. He took out a small packet filled with bits of charcoal, a deep pot of thin metal, some sheets of newspaper, a book of matches and a wrinkled and many-times folded piece of tinfoil with holes in it. He put the charcoal in the pot, lit the paper with the matches, and carefully stretched the tinfoil across the top of the pot.
"A charcoal pit, man," he said, indicating the slightly smoking makeshift brazier. "Fan it," he told Cappy, handing him a still-folded sheet of newspaper.
"Yeah, but what're we gonna eat? Charcoal?"
"Fellah," Ernie said, waggling a dirty finger at the younger man, "you try my mutherin' patience."
He reached into the carpetbag once more and brought up a cellophane-wrapped package of weiners.
"Hot dogs, man. Not the greatest, but they stick to your belly insides."
He ripped down the cellophane carefully, and laid three dogs on the tinfoil. Almost immediately they began to sizzle. He looked up and grinned with a toothiness that belied his thoughts. Fattening them up for the kill. He blew through puckered lips and his baby hair flew up, only to fall back over his eyes again.
"A Krogers's self-serve," he explained. "I self-served."
Kitty grinned and a small, musical laugh fell from her cupid's bow lips. The boy scowled again; it was getting to be a habit.
When they had licked the last of the weiner's taste from their fingers, they settled back, and Cappy offered Ernie a cigarette. Nice kid, Ernie thought. Too bad.
"How come you're riding the rods, kids like you?" Ernie asked. "There's damned little of that done these days, even by old stiffs like me. Most kids today never even been on a train."
Cappy looked at his wide hands, and did not reply. But surprisingly, Kitty's face came up and she said, "My father. He didn't want us to get married. So we ran away."
"Why din't he want you to get hitched?"
This time even she did not answer. She looked down at her hands, too. After a few seconds, she said, "Dad didn't like Cappy. It was my fault."
Cappy's head came around sharply. "Your fault, hell! It was all my fault. If I'd been careful it never woulda--" He stopped abruptly.
Ernie's eyebrows went up. "What's the matter?"
The girl still did not raise her eyes, but she added simply, "I'm pregnant."
Cappy raged at himself. "Oh he was stupid, her old man! You never heard nothin' like it: Kitty's gonna go have an abortion, and Kitty's gonna go away to a convent, and Kitty's this and Kitty's that ... like he was nuts or somethin', y'know?"
Ernie nodded. This was a slightly different matter. He remembered Midge, and the child. But that had been a time before all this, a time he didn't think about. A time before the white lightning and the bumming had turned him inside out. But these kids weren't like him.
Oh, crap! he thought. Pull out of it, old son. These are just another couple of characters to roll. What they got, you get. Now forget all this other.
"Wanna drink?" Ernie pulling the pint of Sweet Lucy from his jacket pocket.
"Yeah. Now that you offer." The answer came from the open door of the boxcar. From the man who had

leaped in from the high bank outside, as the train had slowed on the grade.
Ernie stared at the man. He was big. Real big, with shoulders out to here, and hair all over him like a grizzly. Road gang, Ernie thought, staring at the great, pulpy muscles of the man's arms and neck.
"You gonna give me a drink, fellah?" the big man asked again, taking a step into the boxcar.
Ernie hesitated a moment. This character could break him in half. "Sure," he said, and lifted the pint to his own lips. He guzzled down three-quarters of the strong home-blend and proffered the remainder. The man stalked toward them, his big boots heavy on the wooden flooring. He took the bottle with obvious belligerence, and making sucking noises with his thick lips, drained it completely.
He threw back his head, closed his eyes, and belched ferociously. He belched again, and opening his eyes, threw the bottle out through the open door.
"Well, now," he said, and reached into his pocket. "I didn't know I was gonna have company in this box."
"We're going to Philadelphia," Kitty said, pulling her skirt down around her legs all the more.
"No, I don't think so," said the big man, and it was the final clincher for Ernie. He had suspected this guy was trouble, and now he was sure of it, with the first verbal assurance the man had given.
"Maybe you and me will, girlie, but these two bums ain't goin' nowhere but out that door."
He advanced on them, and abruptly there was a shocked electricity in the car. Ernie was screaming inside himself: No, damn you, you ain't gonna take my meal ticket away from me! I been milkin' 'em for fifty miles. Get outta here, you lousy sonofabitch!
Usurpation on the high road. He had planned to boot the guy out the door in a few miles when they got to the next little town. That way he wouldn't have far to walk to get to civilization, but far enough so they would be near Philly and he could have enjoyed himself at his leisure with the broad. But now this! Damn you!
The newcomer stalked toward them, and Kitty shied back, her hand to her mouth. Her scream split up the silence of the car, accompanied by the rattling of the freight, and then Cappy came off the floor, his legs driving him hard. The kid hit the bigger man with an audible thwump! and carried him backward in a linebacker's tackle. They went down in a heap amid the pig scum, and for a long minute there was nothing to see but flailing arms and legs.
The kid showed for an instant, and his arm was cocked back. The fist went down into the pile of flesh, and Ernie heard the bigger man's deep voice: "Aaawww!"
Then they were tumbling again, and the big man reached into the same pocket he had gone for earlier, and came up with a vicious switchblade.
He held the knife aloft an instant--an instant enough to press the stud. The blade came out with a snick; he fisted the knife overhand, and drew back to plunge it into the kid's throat.
Kitty screamed insanely, over and over again, and her face was white as maggot's flesh. She grabbed at Feathertop's sleeve and shrieked in his ear, "Help him! Help him! Do something!"
Do? Do? Feathertop Ernie Cargill was plastered to the cotton bales with fright. He wasn't gonna do a thing. It was the kid's fight. He should of known better than to bring a girl on the freights. It was his own--
The kid grabbed the wrist as it came down, bringing the rusty death with it, and he twisted the arm back back back as far as he could. The big man was off-balance, and at that instant the train hit a curve. The big man fell over, and the kid was on top of him. In one flashing, lightning movement Cappy had the knife in his own hand, and he did not hesitate.
He brought it up and down and up and down again, and there was red on the blade, and red on the big man's shirt, and red on his chest, and red on the floorboards.
Kitty shrieked maddeningly, and fainted.
The kid got off the corpse, and dropped the knife with stunned disbelief. "He--he's d-dead.
"OhmiGod ..." the kid murmured. "Who'll believe me? I been in trouble before, but never like this. What'll I do?"
Kitty moaned, and the kid rushed to her side, cradling her head in his lap. "Kitty, we--we gotta get outta here ... we gotta get away before we get to a town or someth--"
"We're in a town now." Ernie pointed to the rail yards that had taken form around them. His hand froze where it was pointing. It was aimed dead at a railroad switchman who was staring in at them through the open door of the boxcar, who was cupping his hands, who was screeching at a group of gandy dancers farther down the tracks. The men glanced at the freight train slowing to a stop, and they began hopping the tracks, running for the boxcar in a group.
"Rail dicks!" Ernie screamed, and leaped to run.
The kid was rocking back and forth with Kitty's head in his lap, whispering, "Good-bye, honey,

good-bye ..."
Ernie stopped as he pulled open the sliding door on the other side of the boxcar. He stopped, and a strange feeling came over him. He looked at the kids, and memories crowded in on him. He remembered Midge, and the child, and the years in the bands, and all the freights and all the booze, and there was a choking in his throat.
He bent down and lifted the knife from the floor. He wiped the handle--but not the blade--clean on his jacket, and then gripped it firmly.
Stooping, he lifted the boy by his underarms, and stood him on his feet. Then he helped Kitty to rise.
"Go out the other door, and don't stop running till you're a long ways from here. You understand?"
"But I--" Cappy began, looking from Ernie to the body of the big man.
"Go on!" Ernie hit him in the arm. "Go on, and be good to her! You stupid son of a bitch!" He shoved them toward the open door on the opposite side of the boxcar, and as the train came to a shuddering halt, they leaped free, and ran off across the rail yards.
The yard bulls and linemen were running up to the boxcar as Ernie sat down on the cotton bales.
It wasn't so bad. He could holler self-defense. It might be okay. But either way, his time had passed. He was a young man, but so old, and so tired. It wouldn't of been right for them kids. Not right at all.
Some people are meant to ride the dark train out, and others not. That's the way it's got to be.
He pushed the feathery hair from his eyes.
He was tired, and the dead guy had polished off the last of the Sweet Lucy, damn him. And he smelled of pig shit. But not permanently.
--Elizabethtown, Kentucky, 1959

VALERIE: A TRUE MEMOIR
Here's one I think you'll like. In this one I come off looking like a schmuck, and don't we all love stories in which the invincible hero, the all-knowing savant, the omnipotent smartass is condignly flummoxed? It's about Valerie.
Begins around 1968: I knew this hanging-out, El-lay photographer named Phil. He wasn't the world's most terrific human being (in point of fact, he was pretty much what you'd call your garden-variety creep), but he somehow or other wormed his way into my life and my home--I believe wormed is the right word--and occasionally used my residence as the background locale for sets of photos of young ladies in the nude. Phil would show up at my house in the middle of my workday, all festooned with lights and reflectors and camera boxes... and a pretty girl, whom he would usher into one of the bathrooms and urge to divest herself of her clothing, vite vite!
Now I realize this may ring tinnily on the ears of those of you who spend the greater part of your off-hours lurching after your gonads, but having edited a men's magazine in Chicago some years ago, the sight of a lady in deshabille does not cause sweat to break out on my palms. What I'm saying is that after two years of examining transparencies framed in a light-box, while wearing a loupe to up their magnification, all saidtransparencies of the world's most physically-sensational women, all stark naked ... one develops a sense of proportion about such things. One begins looking for more exotic qualities--such as the ability on the part of the ladies to make you laugh or cry or feel as though you've learned something. (As an aside: nothing serves better to kill ingrained sexism than an overdose of flesh in living color; very quickly one differentiates between images on film and living, breathing human beings. I commend it to all you gentlemen who still use the words broad and chick.)
Consequently, it was not my habit to skulk around the house while Phil was snapping the ladies. When they'd take a break, I'd often sit with them and have a cup of coffee and we'd enter into a conversation, but apart from that I'd generally sit in my office and bang the typewriter. This may seem to have been the wrong thing to be banging, but, well, there you are. (Because of this attitude, Phil drew the wholly erroneous conclusion that I was gay, and had occasion, subsequently, to pass along his lopsided observation, sometimes to young ladies with whom I had become intimate. What a nasty thing to say, particularly from a man who lures six-year-old boys into the basements of churches and then defiles, kills and eats them, not necessarily in that order. Isn't idle gossip a wonderful thing!)
This use of my home and myself by The Demon Photographer went on for about a year, and I confess to permitting the inconvenience because on several of these shooting dates I did meet women with whom I struck up relationships. One such was Valerie.
(Of course I know her last name, you fool. I'm not giving it here out of deference to her family and what comes later in this saga.)
The Demon Photographer--squat, ginger-haired, insipid--arrived one afternoon with her, and I was

zonkedfrom the moment I saw her. She was absolutely lovely. A street gamine with a smile that could melt Jujubes, a warm and outgoing friendliness, a quick wit and lively intelligence, and a body that I would have called dynamite during my chauvinist period. We hit it off immediately, and when Phil slithered away at the end of the session, Valerie stayed on for a while.

It didn't last all that long, to be frank. I can't recall all the specifics of disenchantment, but attrition set in--it's happened to all of you, so you know what I mean--and after a short while we parted: as friends.

Over the next few years, Valerie popped back into my life at something like six month intervals, and if I wasn't involved with anyone we'd get it on for a few days, and then away she'd fly once more. There was always a kind of bittersweet tone to our liaisons: the scent of mimosa (and mimesis, had I but known), dreams half glimpsed, the memories of special touches. There was always the feeling that something lay unspoken between us, and a phrase from Sartre's THE REPRIEVE persisted: "It was as if a great stone had fallen in the road to block my path." In a way, I believe I was in love with Valerie.

Time passed. In mid-May of 1972 I was scheduled to speak at the Pasadena Writers' Week, and early the day of the appearance, I received a call from Valerie. I hadn't heard from her in almost a year.

After the hellos and my unconfined pleasure at hearing her voice, I asked, "What are you doing tonight?"

"Going out with you," she said.

(Witness, gentle readers: the desiccated ego of The Author, suddenly pumped full of self-esteem and jubilation, merely refractions of adoration at the perceptivity and swellness of a bright, quick lady saying, "You're fine." What asses we machismo buffoons can be.)

"Listen, I'm slated to go out and speak in Pasadena to a gaggle of literary types. Why don't you go with me and watch how I turn the crowd into a lynch mob."

"That's where I am," she said. "In Pasadena. At my mother's house. You can pick me up and I'll stay with you for a couple of days."

"I'll buy that dream," I said, and we set up ETA and coordinates.

That evening, in company with Edward Winslow Bryant, Jr. (dear friend, sometime house guest, outstandingly talented young writer and author of the Macmillan collections, AMONG THE DEAD, CINNABAR and co-author of PHOENIX WITHOUT ASHES), I drove out to Pasadena to pick up Valerie. When she answered the door she paused momentarily, framed in the opening, wearing a dress the shade of a bruised plum. I said: a body that should have been on permanent exhibition in the Smithsonian. Wearing nothing under it.

Oh, Cupid, you pustulant twerp! One of these days some nether god is going to jam that entire quiver of crossbow bolts right up your infantile ass!

I went down like a bantamweight in an auto chassis crusher.

Carrying her overnight case, her hair dryer and curlers, her suitcase, her incredibly sweet-smelling clothes on wire hangers, I took her to the car, and was rewarded by the sight of Ed Bryant's eyes as they turned into Frisbies. Not to mention the unsettling memories of the hugs and kisses and liftings off the floor and spinnings around I'd just received inside the house.

We did the speaking gig, and Valerie sat in the front row displaying a thoroughly unnerving expanse of leg and thigh. I may have fumfuh'd a bit.

Afterward, Valerie, Ed and I went to have a late dinner at the Pacific Dining Car. Sitting over beefsteak tomatoes and the thickest imported Roquefort dressing in the Known World,Valerie started whipping numbers on me like this:

"I've always had a special affection for you. I should have moved in with you three years ago. Boy, was I a fool."

I mumbled things of little sense or import.

"Maybe I'll move in with you now ... if you want me."

The next day, a girl from Illinois was to have flown in for an extended weekend. "Give me a minute to make a phone call," I said, and sprinted. I made the call. Bad vibes. Harsh language. Dead line.

"Yeah, why don't you move in with me," I said, slipping back into the booth. Everyone smiled.

When she went to the loo, Ed--whose perceptions about people are keen and reserved--leaned over and said, "Hang onto this one. She's sensational."

Opinion confirmed. By a sober outside observer.

So I took her home with me. The next day, Ed split for his parents' home in Wheatland, Wyoming, beaming at Harlan for his good luck and prize catch. That left, in the household, myself, Valerie, and Jim Sutherland: young author of STORMTRACK, occasional house guest and ex-student of your humble storyteller at the Clarion Writers' Workshop in SF & Fantasy.

Later that day, Valerie asked me if she could use the telephone to make a long distance call to San Francisco. I said of course. She had told me, by way of bringing me up to date on her peregrinations, that since last she'd seen me she had been working in San Francisco, mostly as a topless waitress at the Condor and other joints; that she had been rooming with another girl; that she had been seeing a guy pretty steadily, but he was into a heavy dope scene and she wanted to get away from it; and she loved me.

After the call, she came into my office in the house and said she was worried. The guy, whom she'd called to tell she was not coming back, hadgotten rank with her. The words bitch and cunt figured prominently in his diatribe.

She said she wanted to fly up to San Francisco that day, to clean out her goods before he could get over there and rip them off or bust them up. She also said, very nicely, that if she went up, she wanted to buy a VW minibus from a guy she knew. It would only cost $100 plus taking over the payments, and she'd need a car if she was going to come back here to live. "I want to work and pay my way," she said.

Or in the words of Bogart as Sam Spade, "You're good, shweetheart, really good." Remember, friends, no matter how fast a gun you are, there's always someone out there who's faster. And how better to defuse the suspicions of a cynical writer than to establish individuality and a plug-in to the Protestant Work Ethic.

She asked me for the hundred bucks.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the hundred at that moment, even though I said credit-card-wise I'd pay for her plane ticket to San Francisco.

She said that was okay, she'd work it out somehow. Then she went to pack an overnight bag, leaving all the rest of her goods behind, and promised she'd be driving back down the very next day.

Jim Sutherland offered to drive her to the airport--I was on a script deadline and had to stay at the typewriter--and she left with many kisses for me and deep looks into my na·ã·ve eyes, telling me she was all warm and squishy inside at having finally found me, Her White Knight.

It wasn't till Jim returned, young, innocent, a college student with very little bread, that I found out she had asked him for the hundred bucks, too. And he'd loaned it to her, with the promise of getting it back the next day.

The worm began to gnaw at my trust:

Valerie, the Golden Girl, the Little Wonder of the Earth, having fun-danced her way into my life again, had now cut out for San Francisco with a hundred dollars of Jim's money. Butshe'd said she could manage somehow without the hundred ...

If she'd needed it that badly, after I'd said I didn't have it, why didn't she ask me again, rather than come on with a kid she'd just met a day earlier? How the hell had Jim come up with that much bread on the spur of the moment?

"We stopped off at my bank on the way to the airport," he said. I was very upset at that information.

"Listen, man," I said, "I've known her a few years and she's not even in the running as the most responsible female I've ever known. I mean, she's a sensational lady and all, but I don't really know where she's been the last few years."

Jim suddenly seemed disturbed. That hundred was about all he had to his name. He'd earned it assisting me in the teaching of a six-week writing workshop sponsored by Immaculate Heart College, along with Ed Bryant; and he'd worked his ass off for it. "She said she'd borrow it from a friend in San Francisco and get it back to me tomorrow."

"You shouldn't have done it. You should've called me first."

"Well, I figured she was your girl, and she was going to live here. And she said there wasn't time to call if she was going to make the plane, so ..."

"You shouldn't have done it."

I felt responsible. He'd been trusting, and kind, and I had a flash of uneasiness. The old fable about the Country Mouse and the City Rat scuttled through my mind. Valerie had been known to vanish suddenly. But ... not this time ... not after her warmth and protestations of love for me ... that was unthinkable. It would work out. But if it didn't ...

"Listen, anything happens, I'll make good on the hundred," I told him.

And we settled down to wait for Val's return the next day.

Two days later, we reached a degree of concern that prompted me to call her mother. The story I got from her mother did not quite synch with what Valerie had told me. Valerie had said she'd told her mother she was moving in with me; the mother knew of no such thing. Valerie had told her she was working in Los Angeles; Valerie had told me she would try and get a job when she returned from San Francisco. The worm of worry burrowed deeper.

Using the phone number of Valerie's alleged apartment in San Francisco, I got a disconnect. No

word. No Valerie, no word of any kind. Had her ex-boy friend murdered her? Had she bought the VW bus and run off the road?

Students of the habit patterns of the lower forms of animal life will note that even the planarian flatworms learn lessons from unpleasant experiences. I was no stranger to ugly relationships with (a few, I assure you, a very few) amoral ladies. But homo sapiens, less intelligent than the lowest flatworm, the merest paramecium, repeats its mistakes, again and again. Which explains Nixon. And also explains why I was so slow to realize what was happening with Valerie. It took a sub-thread of plot finally to shine the light through my porous skull. Like this:

In company with Ray Bradbury, I was scheduled to make an appearance at the Artasia Arts Festival in Ventura, on May 13th. That was the Saturday following Valerie's leavetaking. Ray and I were riding up to Ventura together, and though I'm the kind of realist who considers cars transportation, hardly items of sensuality or beauty, and for that reason never wash my 1967 Camaro with the 148,000 miles on it, I felt a magic man of Bradbury's stature should not be expected to arrive in a shitwagon. So I asked Jim to take my wallet with the credit cards, and the car, and go down to get the latter doused. I was still chained to the typewriter on adeadline, or I would have done it myself.

Jim took it to a car wash, brought it back, and returned my wallet to the niche in my office where it's kept at all times. Aside from this one trip out of the house, the wallet (with all cards present) had not been out of my possession for a week.

The next day, Saturday, Ray came over and I drove us up to Ventura. After checking in, we went to get something to eat. At the table, I opened my wallet to get something--the first time I'd opened the wallet in a week--and suddenly realized some of the glassine windows that held my credit cards were empty. After the initial panic, I grew calm and checked around the table, covered the route back to the car, inspected the map-cubby where I always keep the wallet, looked under the seats ... and instantly called Jim in Los Angeles to tell him I'd been ripped off.

Since the wallet had only been out of the house once in the last week, the cards had to have been boosted at the car wash. Do you see how long it takes the planarian Ellison to smell the stench of its own burning flesh?

I called Credit Card Sentinel, the outfit that cancels missing or stolen cards, advised them of the numbers of the cards (I always keep a record of this kind of minutiae handy), and asked them to send the telegrams that would get me off the hook immediately. There's a law that says you can't get stuck for over fifty bucks on any one card, but there were five cards missing--Carte Blanche, BankAmericard, American Express, Standard Chevron Oil and Hertz Rent-A-Car--and that totaled two hundred and fifty dollars right there; with Sentinel, the effective lead time for use of the cards is greatly reduced.

Having deduced ·á la Nero Wolfe that the thief had to have been the dude who swabbed out the interior of the car at the washatorium, I called the West L.A. police, detectivedivision, the area where the car wash was located, and put them on to it. I called the owners of the car wash and relayed the story, and tried to coordinate them with the detective who was going to investigate, advising them that they should check out the guys who'd worked interiors that previous Friday, noting especially any who hadn't shown up for work.

My detective work was flawless ... aside from the sheer stupidity of my emotional blindness.

You all know what happened.

But I didn't, until five days later, when I received a call from the BankAmericard Center in Pasadena asking me to verify a very large purchase of flowers sent to Mrs. Ellison in the Sacramento, California Medical Center. I assured them there was no Mrs. Ellison, I was single, and the only Mrs. Ellison was my mother, in Miami Beach.

The charge, of course, was on my stolen card.

Then the light blinded me.

The next day, I received a bill for forty-three dollars from the Superior Ambulance Service in Sacramento, a bill for having carted someone from a Holiday Inn to the Sacramento Medical Center on May 13th. The name of the patient was "Ellison Harlan" and the charge had been made to my home address.

In rapid succession came the BankAmericard reports of huge purchases of toilet articles, men's clothing, women's sportwear, hair dryers, and other goodies. Of course, I knew what had happened.

At this point, pause with me, and join in a Handel chorus of O What a Schmuck is Thee!

Care to relive with me the last time you were fucked-over? The feeling that your stomach is an elevator, and the bottom is coming up on you fast. That peculiar chill all over, approximated only by the morning after you've stayed up all night on No-Doz and hot, black coffee. The grainy feeling in the eyes, the uncontrollable clenching of the hands, the utter frustration, thewanting to board a plane to ... where? ... to there! ... to the place where something that can be hit

exists. It's one thing to be robbed, it's quite another to be taken. Okay, no argument, it's all ego and crippled masculine pride, but God it burns!
I pulled my shit together and dropped back into my Sam Spade, private eye, mode. First I called the Sacramento Medical Center and checked if there was a Valerie B. checked in. There wasn't. Then I asked for a Mrs. Ellison Harlan. There wasn't. Then I asked for Mrs. Harlan Ellison.
There was.
Then I called the Security station of the Sacramento Sheriff's Department, there at the Medical Center. I spoke to the officer in charge, laid the entire story on him, and asked him to coordinate with Officer Karalekis of the West L.A. Detective Division, as well as Dennis Tedder at the BankAmericard Center in Pasadena. I advised him--and subsequently advised the Administrative Secretary of the Center--that there was a fraud in progress, and that I would not be held responsible for any debts incurred by the imposter posing as "Ellison Harlan," "Harlan Ellison," or "Mrs. Harlan Ellison." Both of these worthies said they'd get on it at once.
Then I called Valerie. She was in the orthopedic section. They got her to the phone. Of course, she answered: the only one (as far as she knew) who had any idea she was there was the man who had purchased the flowers.
Is the backstory taking shape finally, friends? Yeah, it took me a while, too. And I'm dumber than you.
That was May 23rd, ten days after the ambulance had removed her from the Holiday Inn and she'd been admitted to the Center.
"Hello?"
"Valerie?"
Pause. Hesitant. Computer running on overload.
"Yes."
"Harlan."
Silence.
"How's San Francisco?"
"How did you find me here?"
"Doesn't matter. I get spirit messages. All you need to know is I found you, and I'll find you wherever you go."
"What do you want?"
"The cards, and the hundred bucks you conned off Jim Sutherland."
"I haven't got it."
"Which?"
"Any of it."
"Your boy friend has the cards."
"He split on me. I don't know where he is."
"Climb down off it, Princess. If I'm a patsy once, that makes me a philosopher. Twice and I'm a pervert."
"I'm hanging up. I'm sick."
"You'll be sicker when the Sacramento Sheriff's Department there in the hospital visits you in a few minutes."
No hangup. Silence.
"What do you want?"
"I said what I wanted. And I want it quick. Jim's too poor to sustain a hundred buck ripoff. I can handle the rest, but I want it all returned now."
"I can't do anything while I'm in here."
"Well, you're on a police hold as of ten minutes ago, so figure a way to do it, operator."
"God, you're a chill sonofabitch! How can you do this to me?"
There is a moment when one watches beloved Atlantis sink beneath the waves, and resigns oneself. There is a moment when one decides to cut the Devil loose because you can't pay the dues. That's the moment when one toughs-up and decides to let the fire consume the tabernacle, the holy icons and the fucking temple itself!
"I'm the only one who can press charges against you at this point,Valerie. Try to wriggle and I'll chew on your eyes, so help me God."
There was silence at the other end.
"Give me a minute to think; it's all too fast," she said. I could just conjure up a picture of a rat in a maze, looking for a wall to chew through.
"Sure. Take a minute. I'll wait."
And while I waited, I tried to piece together the off-camera action that I'd refused to believe had happened. I'd needed that final punch in the mouth, the sound of her voice across the line

from Sacramento, actually to accept what a jerk I was. But now I'd gotten the shock, and I started piecing it all together.

All the facts were there ... only someone afraid to find out what a patsy he'd been could have missed it. She had either met up with her boy friend at the Burbank Airport--a guy described in the police report from his purchase of the flowers sent to Valerie as "Mrs. Ellison" in the hospital as a "dark, swarthy guy," a description that tallied with Valerie's mother's recollection of him as "a Latin of some kind, maybe Cuban"--or had had him fly to Sacramento from San Francisco. They had shacked up at the Holiday Inn and something had happened to Valerie. Something serious enough for her to have to be rushed by ambulance to the Medical Center, at which point the boy friend had checked out on her, with my credit cards.

Now I had her on (I thought) a police hold.

"I can't do anything while I'm in here," she said, finally.

"You're not getting out." I was firm about that.

"Then I can't get the money."

"Then you'll go to jail. I'll press charges."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I'm just a rotten sonofabitch, that's why."

A few more words were exchanged, then she rang off. I turned to Jim Sutherland and said, "I may have to fly up to Sacramento. It looks resolved, but I've got bad feelings about the sloppy way the BankAmericard people and the cops are going at this thing. Besides ... I want to look at her face."

What I was saying was that I wanted to see if I could detect the stain of duplicity in her expression. What I was saying was I'd become a man with an ingrown hair that needed digging and tweezing; like all self-abuse, I needed to put myself in the line of pain, to relive the impact, to see what it was that had made me go for the okeydoke, what had made me such a willing sucker, so late in my life of relationships, making a mistake of placing such heavy emotions in such an unworthy receptacle. I was consumed with the need to understand, not merely to stumble on through life thinking my perceptions about people were so line-resolution perfect that I could never be flummoxed. She had taken me, and with such perfection that even after I had spoken to her in the hospital, even after I knew I'd been had, some small part of my brain kept telling me her expressed affection and attention could not all have been feigned.

Thus do we perpetuate our folly.

Fifteen minutes later, she called back, collect.

"What did you tell them?" she demanded.

"Tell who?"

"The cops. A cop just came up to talk to me."

"I told you what I told them. That you were a thief and you were registered under an alias and I wasn't going to be responsible for any bills you ran up and they'd better hold onto your pretty little ass till the Laws had decided what to do with you."

"Are you going to press charges?"

"Give me reasons not to."

"I'll get the money back for Jim."

"That's a start."

"I can't do anything else."

"The cards."

"I don't have them." And she named her boy friend, who she said had kited off with them. That didn't bother me; I'd already had the cards stopped. Larry Lopes (pronounced LO-pez) was his name. It comes back to me now.

"Okay. You get the hundred back to Jim and as far as I'm concerned you can move on to greener pastures."

She rang off, and I sat in the dwindling light of the sunset coming over the Valley to my hilltop, thinking furiously. Getting no answers.

I heard nothing further for several days, and when I checked with Dennis Tedder at the BankAmericard Center in Pasadena, I was informed Valerie was no longer at the Sacramento Medical Center.

They'd let her skip on the 23rd of May.

She was gone, leaving behind a bill, in my name, for over a thousand dollars' worth of treatments. My feelings toward Mr. Tedder, Officer Karalekis of the West L.A. fuzz, and the nameless Sacramento Sheriff who had not only spoken to me, but had confronted Valerie and gotten an admission of guilt ... were not particularly warm. Kindly note: I have just made an understatement.

Things progressed from miserable to ghastly. The Superior Ambulance Service in Sacramento, despite several long letters explaining what had happened, and backing it up with Xerox documentation of the fraud, continued to dun me for the forty-three bucks Valerie's passage from the Holiday Inn to the hospital had incurred. They finally turned it over to the Capital Credit and Adjustment Bureau. My attorney, the Demon Barrister Barry Bernstein, sent them a harsh note, and they finally cleared the books of my name. But the time spent, the aggravation when the nasty little pink notes came in the mail... And the hospital bill. It kept getting run through the computer and kept bouncing back to me. Finally, I called the head of the business office at the hospital and laid it all out (again) in detail. As of this writing, that goodie is struck.

And Valerie was gone.

In speaking to Tedder at BankAmericard, I discovered, to the horror of my sense of universal balance, that Bank of America really didn't care about bringing her and Mr. Lopes to book. They apparently don't expend any effort on cases under five hundred dollars. BofA can sustain innumerable ripoffs at that level without feeling it. (This I offer as incidental intelligence on two counts: first, to permit those of you who are planning scams against BofA to understand better the limits of revenge of that peculiar institution, a limit that scares me when I think of how much they must gross to permit such a cavalier attitude; and second, to slap BofA's pinkies for their corporate posture on such matters; at once similar to that of the great insurance conglomerates that permit ripoffs, thereby upping premiums; a posture that encourages dishonesty and chicanery. A posture that has aided in the decay of our national character. It occurs to me, when I say things like that--though I genuinely believe them--that they sound hideously messianic, and I blush. So ignore it, if you choose.)

Valerie was gone, as I said. When I called her mother, to inform her of the current status, she sounded very upset and offered to give Jim back his hundred dollars. I thought that was a helluva nice gesture. Yet when the check arrived, it was only for fifty. Poor Jim. I would have made good the other fifty, on the grounds that he'd laid the money on her because he thought we were a scene, but it never came to that.

Two or three months later, Valerie called again.

I had tracked her through my own nefarious contacts, to Pacifica, a community near San Francisco. She had been hanging out with a ratpack of losers and unsavory types, and I knew where she was virtually all the time. But I'd told her mother if the money came back to Jim and the cards weren't used again, I would have no further interest in seeing her cornered, and I held to that. Then she called. Out of the blue, to snag a fresh phrase.

"Hello?"

"Who's this?"

"Valerie."

Terrific. What're you selling this week, cancer?

"Are you there?"

"I'm here. What do you want?"

"I want my stuff. My clothes and electric curlers and stuff."

They were all packed in the bottom of Jim's closet ... waiting. For what, we'd never stopped to consider. Maybe the Apocalypse.

"Sure, you can have your stuff," I said.

"How do I get it? Will you drive it out to my Mom's in Pasadena, she doesn't have a car."

I have heard of chutzpah, I have witnessed incredible gall and temerity, but for sheer bravado, Valerie had a corner on the product.

"I'll tell you how you get it," I said. "We're like a good pawn shop here. You come up with the fifty bucks for Jim, the fifty you still owe him, and we release your goods. Just redeem your pawn ticket, baby."

"I don't have fifty."

"Ask Larry Lopes for it."

"I don't know where he is."

"Ah, but I know where you is. Have your friends boost somebody's hubcaps and get the fifty."

"Go to hell!" And she hung up.

I shrugged. Ain't life teejus, mah baby.

Later that day, Valerie's mother called and offered to unhock Valerie's goods for the fifty remaining. She made it clear she had no idea where Valerie was on the lam, but I don't think anyone will consider me cynical for believing that may not have been the strict truth.

So Jim took the clothes out to Pasadena, picked up the fifty, and the Sacramento Medical Center canceled the bill as unrecoverable, and that's as much as I know, to this point.

Well ... not quite.

I know one more thing. And it's this:
In every human being there is only so large a supply of love. It's like the limbs of a starfish, to some extent: if you chew off a chunk, it will grow back. But if you chew off too much, the starfish dies. Valerie B. chewed off a chunk of love from my dwindling reserve ... a reserve already nibbled by Charlotte and Lory and Sherri and Cindy and others down through the years. There's still enough there to make the saleable appearance of a whole creature, but nobody gets gnawed on that way without becoming a little dead. So, if Cupid (that perverted little motherfucker) decides his lightning ought to strike this gnarly tree trunk again, whoever or whatever gets me, is going to get a handy second, damaged goods, something a little dead and a little crippled.

Having learned that, all I can advise is an impossible stance for all of you: utter openness and reasonable caution. Don't close yourself off, but jeezus, be careful of monsters with teeth. And just so you know what they look like when they come clanking after you, here is a photo of one. The package is so pretty, one can only urge you to remember Pandora. Be careful which boxes you open, troops.
--Los Angeles, 1972

THE RESURGENCE OF MISS ANKLE-STRAP WEDGIE
(Dedicated to the Memory of Dorothy Parker)
HANDY

In Hollywood our past is so transitory we have little hesitation about tearing down our landmarks. The Garden of Allah where Benchley and Scott Fitzgerald lived is gone; it's been replaced by a savings and loan. Most of the old, sprawling 20th lot has been converted into shopping center and beehive-faceted superhotel. Even historic relics of fairly recent vintage have gone under the cultural knife: the Ziv television studios on Santa Monica, once having been closed down, became the eerie, somehow surrealistic, weed-overgrown and bizarre jungle in which tamed cats that had roamed sound stages became cannibals, eating one another. At night, passing the studio, dark and padlocked, you could hear the poor beasts tearing each other apart. They had lived off the film industry too long, and unable to survive in the streets, lost and bewildered, they had turned into predators.
That may be an apocryphal story. It persists in my thoughts when I remember Valerie Lone.
The point is, we turn the past into the present here in Hollywood even before it's finished being the future. It's like throwing a meal into the Disposall before you eat it.
But we do have one recently erected monument here in the glamour capital of the world.
It is a twenty-three-foot-high billboard for a film called Subterfuge. It is a lighthearted adventure-romance in the James Bond tradition and the billboard shows the principal leads--Robert Mitchum and Gina Lollobrigida--in high fashion postures intended to convey, well, adventure and, uh, romance.
The major credits are listed in smaller print on this billboard: produced by Arthur Crewes, directed by James Kencannon, written by John D. F. Black, music by Lalo Schifrin. The balance of the cast is there, also. At the end of the supplementary credits is a boxed line that reads:
ALSO FEATURING MISS VALERIE LONE as Angela.
This line is difficult to read; it has been whited-out.
The billboard stands on a rise overlooking Sunset Boulevard on the Strip near King's Road; close by a teenie-bopper discothèque called Spectrum 2000 that once was glamorous Ciro's. But we tear down our past and convert it to the needs of the moment. The billboard will come down. When the film ends its first run at the Egyptian and opens in neighborhood theaters and drive-ins near you. At which point even that monument to Valerie Lone will have been removed, and almost all of us can proceed to forget. Almost all of us, but not all. I've got to remember ... my name is Fred Handy. I'm responsible for that billboard. Which makes me a singular man, believe me.
After all, there are so few men who have erected monuments to the objects of their homicide.
1

They came out of the darkness that was a tunnel with a highway at the bottom of it. The headlights were animal eyes miles away down the flat roadbed, and slowly slowly the sound of the engine grew across the emptiness on both sides of the concrete. California desert night, heat of the long day sunk just below the surface of the land, and a car, ponderous, plunging, straight out of nowhere along a white centerline. Gophers and rabbits bounded across the deadly open road and were gone forever.

Inside the limousine men dozed in jump seats and far in the rear two bull-necked cameramen discussed the day's work. Beside the driver, Fred Handy stared straight ahead at the endless stretch of State Highway 14 out of Mojave. He had been under the influence of road hypnosis for the better part of twenty minutes, and did not know it. The voice from the secondary seats behind him jarred him back to awareness. It was Kencannon.

"Jim, how long till we hit Lancaster or Palmdale?"

The driver craned his head back and slightly to the side, awkwardly, like some big bird, keeping his eyes on the road. "Maybe another twenty, twenty-five miles, Mr. K'ncannon. That was Rosamond we passed little while ago."

"Let's stop and eat at the first clean place we see," the director said, thumbing his eyes to remove the sleep from them. "I'm starving."

There was vague movement from the third seats, where Arthur Crewes was folded sidewise, fetuslike, sleeping. A mumbled, "Where are we what time izit?"

Handy turned around. "It's about three forty-five, Arthur. Middle of the desert."

"Midway between Mojave and Lancaster, Mr. Crewes," the driver added. Crewes grunted acceptance of it.

The producer sat up in sections, swinging his legs down heavily, pulling his body erect sluggishly, cracking his shoulders back as he arched forward. With his eyes closed. "Jeezus, remind me next time to do a picture without location shooting. I'm too old for this crap." There was the murmur of trained laughter from somewhere in the limousine.

Handy thought of Mitchum, who had returned from the Mojave location earlier that day, riding back in the air-conditioned land cruiser the studio provided. But the thought only reminded him that he was not one of the Immortals, one of the golden people; that he was merely a two-fifty-a-week publicist who was having one helluva time trying to figure out a promotional angle for just another addle-witted spy-romance. Crewes had come to the genre belatedly, after the Bond flicks, after Ipcress, after Arabesque and Masquerade and Kaleidoscope and Flint and Modesty Blaise and they'd all come after The 39 Steps so what the hell did it matter; with Arthur Crewes producing, it would get serious attention and good play dates. If. If Fred Handy could figure out a Joe Levine William Castle Sam Katzman Alfred Hitchcock shtick to pull the suckers in off the streets. He longed for the days back in New York when he had had ulcers working in the agency. He still had them, but the difference was now he couldn't even pretend to be enjoying life enough to compensate for the aggravation. He longed for the days of his youth writing imbecile poetry in Figaro's in the Village. He longed for the faintly moist body of Julie, away in the Midwest somewhere doing Hello, Dolly! on the strawhat circuit. He longed for a hot bath to leach all the weariness out of him. He longed for a hot bath to clean all the Mojave dust and grit out of his pores.

He longed desperately for something to eat.

"Hey, Jim, how about that over there ... ?"

He tapped the driver on the forearm, and pointed down the highway to the neon flickering off and on at the roadside. The sign said SHIVEY'S TRUCK STOP and EAT. There were no trucks parked in front.

"It must be good food," Kencannon said from behind him. "I don't see any trucks there; and you know what kind of food you get at the joints truckers eat at."

Handy smiled quickly at the reversal of the old road-runner's myth. It was that roundabout sense of humor that made Kencannon's direction so individual.

"That okay by you, Mr. Crewes?" Jim asked.

"Fine, Jim," Arthur Crewes said, wearily.

The studio limousine turned in at the diner and crunched gravel. The diner was an anachronism. One of the old railroad car style, seen most frequently on the New Jersey thruways. Aluminum hide leprous with rust. Train windows fogged with dirt. Lucky Strike and El Producto decals on the door. Three steps up to the door atop a concrete stoop. Parking lot surrounding it like a gray pebble lake, cadaverously cold in the intermittent flashing of the pale yellow neon EAT off EAT off EAT ...

The limousine doors opened, all six of them, and ten crumpled men emerged, stretched, trekked toward the diner. They fell into line almost according to thepecking order. Crewes and Kencannon; Fred Handy; the two cameramen; three grips; the effeminate makeup man, Sancher; and Jim, the driver.

They climbed the stairs, murmuring to themselves, like sluggish animals emerging from a dead sea of sleep. The day had been exhausting. Chase scenes through the rural town of Mojave. And Mitchum in his goddam land cruiser, phoning ahead to have escargots ready at La Rue.

The diner was bright inside, and the grips, the cameramen and Jim took booths alongside the smoked windows. Sancher went immediately to the toilet, to moisten himself with 5-Day Deodorant Pads.

Crewes sat at the counter with Handy and Kencannon on either side of him. The producer looked ancient. He was a dapper man in his middle forties. He clasped his hands in front of him and Handy saw him immediately begin twisting and turning the huge diamond ring on his right hand, playing with it, taking it off and replacing it. I wonder what that means, Handy thought.

Handy had many thoughts about Arthur Crewes. Some of them were friendly, most were impartial. Crewes was a job for Handy. He had seen the producer step heavily when the need arose: cutting off a young writer when the script wasn't being written fast enough to make a shooting date; literally threatening an actor with bodily harm if he didn't cease the senseless wrangling on set that was costing the production money; playing agents against one another to catch a talented client unrepresented between them, available for shaved cost. But he had seen him perform unnecessary kindnesses. Unnecessary because they bought nothing, won him nothing, made him no points. Crewes had blown a tire on a freeway one day and a motorist had stopped to help. Crewes had taken his name and sent him a three thousand dollar color television-stereo. A starlet ready to put out for a part had been investigated by the detective agency Crewes kept on retainer at all times for assorted odd jobs. They had found out her child was a paraplegic. She had not been required to go the couch route, Crewes had refused her the job on grounds of talent, but had given her a check in the equivalent amount had she gotten the part.

Arthur Crewes was a very large man indeed in Hollywood. He had not always been immense, however. He had begun his career as a film editor on "B" horror flicks, worked his way up and directed several productions, then been put in charge of a series of low-budget films at the old RKO studio. He had suffered in the vineyards and somehow run the time very fast. He was still a young man, and he was ancient, sitting there turning his ring.

Sancher came out of the toilet and sat down at the far end of the counter. It seemed to jog Kencannon. "Think I'll wash off a little Mojave filth," he said, and rose.

Crewes got up. "I suddenly realized I haven't been to the bathroom all day."

They walked away, leaving Handy sitting, toying with the sugar shaker.

He looked up for the first time, abruptly realizing how exhausted he was. There was a waitress shaking a wire basket of french fries, her back to him. The picture was on schedule, no problems, but no hook, no gimmick, no angle, no shtick to sell it; there was a big quarterly payment due on the house in Sherman Oaks; it was all Handy had, no one was going to get it; he had to keep the job. The waitress turned around for the first time and started laying out napkin, water glass, silverware, in front of him. You could work in a town for close to nine years, and still come away with nothing; not even living high, driving a '65 Impala, that wasn't ostentatious; but a lousy forty-five-day marriage to a clip artist and it was all in jeopardy; he had to keep the job, just to fight her off, keep her from using California divorce logic to get that house; nine years was not going down the tube; God, he felt weary. The waitress was in the booth, setting up the grips and cameramen. Handy mulled the nine years, wondering what the hell he was doing out here: oh yeah, I was getting divorced, that's what I was doing. Nine years seemed so long, so ruthlessly long, and so empty suddenly, to be here with Crewes on another of the endless product that got fed into the always-yawning maw of the Great American Moviegoing Public. The waitress returned and stood before him.

"Care to order now?"

He looked up.

Fred Handy stopped breathing for a second. He looked at her, and the years peeled away. He was a teenage kid in the Utopia Theater in St. Louis, Missouri, staring up at a screen with gray shadows moving on it. A face from the past, a series of features, very familiar, were superimposing themselves.

She saw he was staring. "Order?"

He had to say it just right. "Excuse me, is, uh, is your name Lone?"

Until much later, he was not able to identify the expression that swam up in her eyes. But when he thought back on it, he knew it had been terror. Not fear, not trepidation, not uneasiness, not wariness. Terror. Complete, total, gagging terror. She said later it had been like calling the death knell for her ... again.

She went stiff, and her hand slid off the counter edge. "Valerie Lone?" he said, softly, frightened by the look on her face. She swallowed so that the hollows in her cheeks moved liquidly. And she nodded. The briefest movement of the head.

Then he knew he had to say it just right. He was holding all that fragile crystal, and a wrong phrase would shatter it. Not: I used to see your movies when I was a kid or: Whatever happened to you or: What are you doing here. It had to be just right.

Handy smiled like a little boy. It somehow fit his craggy features. "You know," he said gently, "many's the afternoon I've sat in the movies and been in love with you."

There was gratitude in her smile. Relief, an ease of tensions, and the sudden rush of her own memories; the bittersweet taste of remembrance as the glories of her other life swept back to her. Then it was gone, and she was a frowzy blonde waitress on Route 14 again. "Order?"
She wasn't kidding. She turned it off like a mercury switch. One moment there was life in the faded blue eyes, the next moment it was ashes. He ordered a cheeseburger and french fries. She went back to the steam table.
Arthur Crewes came out of the men's room first. He was rubbing his hands. "Damned powdered soap, almost as bad as those stiff paper towels." He slipped onto the stool beside Handy.
And in that instant, Fred Handy saw a great white light come up. Like the buzz an acid-head gets from a fully drenched sugar cube, his mind burst free and went trembling outward in waves of color. The shtick, the bit, the handle, ohmigod there it is, as perfect as a bluewhite diamond.
Arthur Crewes was reading the menu as Handy grabbed his wrist.
"Arthur, do you know who that is?"
"Who who is?"
"The waitress."
"Madame Nehru."
"I'm serious, Arthur."
"All right, who?"
"Valerie Lone."
Arthur Crewes started as though he had been struck. He shot a look at the waitress, her back to them now, as she ladled up navy bean soup from the stainless steel tureen in the steam table. He stared at her, silently.
"I don't believe it," he murmured.
"It is, Arthur, I'm telling you that's just who it is."
He shook his head. "What the hell is she doing out here in the middle of nowhere. My God, it must be, what? Fifteen, twenty years?"
Handy considered a moment. "About eighteen years, if you count that thing she did for Ross at UA in forty-eight. Eighteen years and here she is, slinging hash in a diner."
Crewes mumbled something.
"What did you say?" Handy asked him.
Crewes repeated it, with an edge Handy could not place. "Lord, how the mighty have fallen."
Before Handy could tell the producer his idea, she turned, and saw Crewes staring at her. There was no recognition in her expression. But it was obvious she knew Handy had told him who she was. She turned away and carried the plates of soup to the booth.
As she came back past them, Crewes said, softly, "Hello, Miss Lone." She paused and stared at him. She was almost somnambulistic, moving by rote. He added, "Arthur Crewes ... remember?"
She did not answer for a long moment, then nodded as she had to Handy. "Hello. It's been a long time."
Crewes smiled a peculiar smile. Somehow victorious. "Yes, a long time. How've you been?"
She shrugged, as if to indicate the diner. "Fine, thank you."
They fell silent.
"Would you care to order now?"
When she had taken the order and moved to the grill, Handy leaned in close to the producer and began speaking intensely. "Arthur, I've got a fantastic idea."
His mind was elsewhere. "What's that, Fred?"
"Her. Valerie Lone. What a sensational idea. Put her in the picture. The comeback of ... what was it they used to call her, that publicity thing, oh yeah ... the comeback of 'Miss Ankle-Strap Wedgie.' It's good for space in any newspaper in the country."
Silence.
"Arthur? What do you think?"
Arthur Crewes smiled down at his hands. He was playing with the ring again. "You think I should bring her back to the industry after eighteen years."
"I think it's the most natural winning promotion idea I've ever had. And I can tell you like it."
Crewes nodded, almost absently. "Yes, I like it, Fred. You're a very bright fellow. I like it just fine."
Kencannon came back and sat down. Crewes turned to him. "Jim, can you do cover shots on the basement scenes with Bob and the stunt men for a day or two?"
Kencannon bit his lip, considering. "I suppose so. It'll mean replotting the schedule, but the board's Bernie's problem, not mine. What's up?"
Crewes twisted the ring and smiled distantly. "I'm going to call Johnny Black in and have him do a rewrite on the part of Angela. Beef it up."

"For what? We haven't even cast it yet."
"We have now." Handy grinned hugely. "Valerie Lone."
"Valerie--you're kidding. She hasn't even made a film in God knows how long. What makes you think you can get her?"
Crewes turned back to stare at the sloped shoulders of the woman at the sizzling grill. "I can get her."
HANDY

We talked to Valerie Lone, Crewes and myself. First I talked, then he talked; then when she refused to listen to him, I talked again.
She grabbed up a huge pan with the remains of macaroni and cheese burned to the bottom, and she dashed out through a screen door at the rear of the diner.
We looked at each other, and when each of us saw the look of confusion on the other's face, the looks vanished. We got up and followed her. She was leaning against the wall of the diner, scraping the crap from the pan as she cried. The night was quiet.
But she didn't melt as we came through the screen door. She got uptight. Furious. "I've been out of all that for over fifteen years, can't you leave me alone? You've got a lousy sense of humor if you think this is funny!"
Arthur Crewes stopped dead on the stairs. He didn't know what to say to her. There was something happening to Crewes; I didn't know what it was, but it was more than whatever it takes to get a gimmick for a picture.
I took over.
Handy, the salesman. Handy, the schmacheler, equipped with the very best butter. "It isn't fifteen years, Miss Lone. It's eighteen plus."
Something broke inside her. She turned back to the pan. Crewes didn't know whether to tell me to back off or not, so I went ahead. I pushed past Crewes, standing there with his hand on the peeling yellow paint banister, his mouth open. (The color of the paint was the color of a stray dog I had run down in Nevada one time. I hadn't seen the animal. It had dashed out of a gully by the side of the road and I'd gone right over it before I knew what had happened. But I stopped and went back. It was the same color as that banister. A faded lonely yellow, like cheap foolscap, a dollar a ream. I couldn't get the thought of that dog out of my mind.)
"You like it out here, right?"
She didn't turn around.
I walked around her. She was looking into that pan of crap. "Miss Lone?"
It was going to take more than soft-spoken words. It might even take sincerity. I wasn't sure I knew how to do that any more. "If I didn't know better ... having seen all the feisty broads you played ... I'd think you enjoyed feeling sorry for your--"
She looked up, whip-fast, I could hear the cartilage cracking in her neck muscles. There was a core of electrical sparks in her eyes. She was pissed-off. "Mister, I just met your face. What makes you think you can talk that way ..." it petered out. The steam leaked off, and the sparks died, and she was back where she'd been a minute before.
I turned her around to face us. She shrugged my hand off. She wasn't a sulky child, she was a woman who didn't know how to get away from a giant fear that was getting more gigantic with every passing second. And even in fear she wasn't about to let me manhandle her.
"Miss Lone, we've got a picture working. It isn't Gone with the Wind and it isn't The Birth of a Nation, it's just a better-than-average coupla million dollar spectacular with Mitchum and Lollobrigida, and it'll make a potful for everybody concerned ..."
Crewes was staring at me. I didn't like his expression. He was the bright young wunderkind who had made Lonely in the Dark and Ruby Bernadette and The Fastest Man, and he didn't like to hear me pinning his latest opus as just a nice, money-making color puffball. But Crewes wasn't a wunderkind any longer, and he wasn't making Kafka, he was making box-office bait, and he needed this woman, and so dammit did I! So screw his expression.
"Nobody's under the impression you're one of the great ladies of the theater; you never were Katherine Cornell, or Bette Davis, or even Pat Neal." She gave me that core of sparks look again. If I'd been a younger man it might have woofed me; I'm sure it had stopped legions of assistant gophers in the halcyon days. But--it suddenly scared me to realize it--I was running hungry, and mere looks didn't do it. I pushed her a little harder, my best Raymond Chandler delivery. "But you were a star, you were someone that people paid money to see, because whatever you had it was yours. And whatever that was, we want to rent it for a while, we want to bring it back."
She gave one of those little snorts that says very distinctly You stink, Jack. It was disdainful. She had my number. But that was cool; I'd given it to her; I wasn't about to shuck her.

"Don't think we're humanitarians. We need something like you on this picture. We need a handle, something that'll get us that extra two inches in the Wichita Eagle. That means bucks in the ticket wicket. Oh, shit, lady!"
Her teeth skinned back.
I was getting to her.
"We can help each other." She sneered and started to turn away. I reached out and slammed the pan as hard as I could. It spun out of her hands and hit the steps. She was rocked quiet for an instant, and I rapped on her as hard as I could. "Don't tell me you're in love with scraping crap out of a macaroni dish. You lived too high, too long. This is a free ride back. Take it!"
There was blood coursing through her veins now. Her cheeks had bright, flushed spots on them, high up under the eyes. "I can't do it; stop pushing at me."
Crewes moved in, then. We worked like a pair of good homicide badges. I beat her on the head, and he came running with Seidlitz powders. "Let her alone a minute, Fred. This is all at once, come on, let her think."
"What the hell's to think?"
She was being rammed from both sides, and knew it, but for the first time in years something was happening, and her motor was starting to run again, despite herself.
"Miss Lone," Crewes said gently, "a contract for this film, and options for three more. Guaranteed, from first day of shooting, straight through, even if you sit around after your part is shot, till last day of production."
"I haven't been anywhere near a camera--"
"That's what we have cameramen for. They turn it on you. That's what we have a director for. He'll tell you where to stand. It's like swimming or riding a bike: once you learn, you never forget ..."
Crewes again. "Stop it, Fred. Miss Lone ... I remember you from before. You were always good to work with. You weren't one of the cranky ones, you were a doer. You knew your lines, always."
She smiled. A wee timorous slippery smile. She remembered. And she chuckled. "Good memory, that's all."
Then Crewes and I smiled, too. She was on our side. Everything she said from here on out would be to win us the argument. She was ours.
"You know, I had the world's all-time great crush on you, Miss Lone," Arthur Crewes, a very large man in town, said. She smiled a little-girl smile of graciousness.
"I'll think about it." She stooped for the pan.
He reached it before she did. "I won't give you time to think. There'll be a car here for you tomorrow at noon."
He handed her the pan.
She took it reluctantly.
We had dug Valerie Lone up from under uncounted strata of self-pity and anonymity, from a kind of grave she had chosen for herself for reasons I was beginning to understand. As we went back inside the diner, I had The Thought for the first time:
The Thought: What if we ain't doing her no favors?
And the voice of Donald Duck came back at me from the Clown Town of my thoughts: With friends like you, Handy, she may not need any enemies.
Screw you, Duck.
2

The screen flickered, and Valerie Lone, twenty years younger, wearing the pageboy and padded shoulders of the Forties, swept into the room. Cary Grant looked up from the microscope with his special genteel exasperation, and asked her precisely where she had been. Valerie Lone, the coiffed blonde hair carefully smoothed, removed her gloves and sat on the laboratory counter. She crossed her legs. She was wearing ankle-strap wedgies.
"I think the legs are still damned good, Arthur," Fred Handy said. Cigar smoke rose up in the projection room. Arthur Crewes did not answer. He was busy watching the past.
Full hips, small breasts, blonde; a loveliness that was never wispy like a Jean Arthur, never chill like a Joan Crawford, never cultured like a Greer Garson. If Valerie Lone had been identifiable with anyone else working in her era, it would have been with Ann Sheridan. And the comparison was by no means invidious. There was the same forceful womanliness in her manner; a wise kid who knew the score. Dynamic. Yet there was a quality of availability in the way she arched her eyebrows, the way she held her hands and neck. Sensuality mixed with reality. What had broken that spine of self-control, turned it into the fragile wariness Handy had sensed? He studied the film as the story unreeled, but there was none of that showing in the Valerie Lone of

twenty years before.
As the deep, silken voice faded from the screen, Arthur Crewes reached to the console beside his contour chair, and punched a series of buttons. The projection light cut off from the booth behind them, the room lights went up, and the chair tilted forward. The producer got up and left the room, with Handy behind him, waiting for comments. They had spent close to eight hours running old prints of Valerie Lone's biggest hits.
Arthur Crewes's home centered around the projection room. As his life centered around the film industry. Through the door, and into the living room, opulent beneath fumed and waxed, shadowed oak beams far above them; the two men did not speak. The living room was immense, only slightly smaller than a basketball court in one corner where Crewes now settled into a deep armchair, before a roaring walk-in fireplace. The rest of the living room was empty and quiet; one could hear the fall of dust. It had been a merry house many times in the past, and would be again, but at the moment, far down below the vaulting ceiling, their voices rising like echoes in a mountain pass, Arthur Crewes spoke to his publicist.
"Fred, I want the full treatment. I want her seen everywhere by everyone. I want her name as big as it ever was."
Handy pursed his lips, even as he nodded. "That takes money, Arthur. We're pushing the publicity budget now."
Crewes lit a cigar. "This is above-the-line expense. Keep it a separate record, and I'll take care of it out of my pocket. I want it all itemized for the IRS, but don't spare the cost."
"Do you know how much you're getting into here?"
"It doesn't matter. Whatever it is, however much you need, come and ask, and you'll get it. But I want a real job done for that money, Fred."
Handy stared at him for a long moment.
"You'll get mileage out of Valerie Lone's comeback, Arthur. No doubt about it. But I have to tell you right now it isn't going to be anything near commensurate with what you'll be spending. It isn't that kind of appeal."
Crewes drew deeply on the cigar, sent a thin streamer of blue smoke toward the darkness above them. "I'm not concerned about the value to the picture. It's going to be a good property, it can take care of itself. This is something else."
Handy looked puzzled. "Why?"
Crewes did not answer. Finally, he asked, "Is she settled in at the Beverly Hills?"
Handy rose to leave. "Best bungalow in the joint. You should have seen the reception they gave her."
"That's the kind of reception I want everywhere for her, Fred. A lot of bowing and scraping for the old queen."
Handy nodded, walked toward the foyer. Across the room, forcing him to raise his voice to reach Crewes, still lost in the dimness of the living room, the fireplace casting spastic shadows of blood and night on the walls, Fred Handy said, "Why the extra horsepower, Arthur? I get nervous when I'm told to spend freely."
Smoke rose from the chair where Arthur Crewes was hidden. "Good night, Fred."
Handy stood for a moment; then, troubled, he let himself out. The living room was silent for a long while, only the faint crackling of the logs on the fire breaking the stillness. Then Arthur Crewes reached to the sidetable and lifted the telephone receiver from its cradle. He punched out a number.
"Miss Valerie Lone's bungalow, please ... yes, I know what time it is. This is Arthur Crewes calling ... thank you."
There was a pause, then sound from the other end.
"Hello, Miss Lone? Arthur Crewes. Yes, thank you. Sorry if I disturbed you ... oh, really? I rather thought you might be awake. I had the feeling you might be a little uneasy, first night back and all."
He listened to the voice at the other end. And did not smile. Then he said, "I just wanted to call and tell you not to be afraid. Everything will be fine. There's nothing to be afraid of. Nothing at all."
His eyes became light, and light fled down the wires to see her at the other end. In the elegant bungalow, still sitting in the dark. Through a window, moonlight lay like a patina of dull gold across the room, tinting even the depressions in the sofa pillows where a thousand random bottoms had rested, a vaguely yellow ocher.
Valerie Lone. Alone.
Misted by a fine down of Beverly Hills moonlight--the great gaffer in the sky working behind an amber gel keylighting her with a senior, getting fill light from four broads and four juniors,

working the light outside in the great celestial cyclorama with a dozen sky-pans, and catching her just right with a pair of inky-dinks, scrims, gauzes. and cutters--displaying her in a gown of powdered moth-wing dust. Valerie Lone, off-camera, trapped by the lens of God, and the electric eyes of Arthur Crewes. But still in XTREME CLOSEUP.

She thanked him, seeming bewildered by his kindness. "Is there anything you need?" he asked.

He had to ask her to repeat her answer, she had spoken so softly. But the answer was nothing, and he said good night, and was about to hang up when she called him.

To Crewes it was a sound from farther away than the Beverly Hills Hotel. It was a sound that came by way of a Country of Mildew. From a land where oily things moved out of darkness. From a place where the only position was hunched safely into oneself with hands about knees, chin tucked down, hands wrapped tightly so that if the eyes with their just-born-bird membranes should open, through the film could be seen the relaxed fingers. It was a sound from a country where there was no hiding place.

After a moment he answered, shaken by her frightened sound. "Yes, I'm here."

Now he could not see her, even with eyes of electricity.

For Valerie Lone sat on the edge of the bed in her bungalow, not bathed in moth-wing dust, but lighted harshly by every lamp and overhead in the bungalow. She could not turn out those lights. She was petrified with fear. A nameless fear that had no origin and had no definition. It was merely there with her; a palpable presence.

And something else was in the room with her.

"They ..."

She stopped. She knew Crewes was straining at the other end of the line to hear what followed.

"They sent your champagne."

Crewes smiled to himself. She was touched.

Valerie Lone did not smile, was incapable of a smile, was by no means touched. The bottle loomed huge across the room on the glass-topped table. "Thank you. It was. Very. Kind. Of. You."

Slowly, because of the way she had told him the champagne had arrived, Crewes asked, "Are you all right?"

"I'm frightened."

"There's nothing to be frightened about. We're all on your team, you know that ..."

"I'm frightened of the champagne ... it's been so long."

Crewes did not understand. He said so.

"I'm afraid to drink it."

Then he understood.

He didn't know what to say. For the first time in many years he felt pity for someone. He was fully conversant with affection, and hatred, and envy, and admiration and even stripped-to-the-bone lust. But pity was something he somehow hadn't had to deal with, for a long time. His ex-wife and the boy, they were the last, and that had been eight years before. He didn't know what to say.

"I'm afraid, isn't that silly? I'm afraid I'll like it too much again. I've managed to forget what it tastes like. But if I open it, and taste it, and remember . . I'm afraid ..."

He said, "Would you like me to drive over?"

She hesitated, pulling her wits about her. "No. No, I'll be all right. I'm just being silly. I'll talk to you tomorrow." Then, hastily: "You'll call tomorrow?"

"Yes, of course. Sure I will. I'll call first thing in the morning, and you'll come down to the Studio. I'm sure there are all sorts of people you'll want to get reacquainted with."

Silence, then, softly: "Yes. I'm just being silly. It's very lonely here."

"Well, then. I'll call in the morning."

"Lonely ... hmmm? Oh, yes! Thank you. Good night, Mr. Crewes."

"Arthur. That's first on the list. Arthur."

"Arthur. Thank you. Good night."

"Good night, Miss Lone."

He hung up, still hearing the same voice he had heard in darkened theaters rich with the smell of popcorn (in the days before they started putting faintly rancid butter on it) and the taste of Luden's Menthol Cough Drops. The same deep, silken voice that he had just this moment past heard break, ever so slightly, with fear.

Darkness rose up around him.

Light flooded Valerie Lone. The lights she would keep burning all night, because out there was darkness and it was so lonely in here. She stared across the room at the bottle of champagne, sitting high in its silver ice bucket, chipped base of ice melting to frigid water beneath it.

Then she stood and took a drinking glass from the tray on the bureau, ignoring the champagne glasses that had come with the bottle. She walked across the room to the bathroom and went inside,

without turning on the light. She filled the water glass from the tap, letting the cold faucet run for a long moment. Then she stood in the doorway of the bathroom, drinking the water, staring at the bottle of champagne, that bottle of champagne.
Then slowly, she went to it and pulled the loosened plastic cork from the mouth of the bottle. She poured half a glass.
She sipped it slowly.
Memories stirred.
And a dark shape fled off across hills in the Country of Mildew.
3

Handy drove up the twisting road into the Hollywood Hills. The call he had received an hour before was one he would never have expected. He had not heard from Huck Barkin in over two years. Haskell Barkin, the tall. Haskell Barkin, the tanned. Haskell Barkin, the handsome. Haskell Barkin, the amoral. The last time Fred had seen Huck, he was busily making a precarious living hustling wealthy widows with kids. His was a specialized con: he got next to the kids--Huck was one of the more accomplished surf-bums extant--even as he seduced the mother, and before the family attorney knew what was happening, the pitons and grapnels and tongs had been sunk in deep, through the mouth and out the other side, and friendly, good-looking, rangy Huck Barkin was living in the house, driving the Imperial, ordering McCormick's bourbon from the liquor store, eating like Quantrill's Raiders, and clipping bucks like the Russians were in Pomona.
There had been one who had tried to saturate herself with barbiturates when Huck had said, "À bientot."
There had been one who had called in her battery of attorneys in an attempt to have him make restitution, but she had been informed Huck Barkin was one of those rare, seldom "judgment-proof" people.
There had been one who had gone away to New Mexico, where it was warm, and no one would see her drinking.
There had been one who had bought a tiny gun, but had never used it on him.
There had been one who had already had the gun, and she had used it. But not on Huck Barkin.
Fearsome, in his strangeness; without ethic. Animal.
He was one of the more unpleasant Hollywood creeps Handy had met in the nine Hollywood years. Yet there was an unctuous charm about the man; it sat well on him, if the observers weren't the most perceptive. Handy chuckled, remembering the one and only time he had seen Barkin shot down. By a woman. (And how seldom any woman can really put down a man, with such thoroughness that there is no comeback, no room to rationalize that it wasn't such a great zinger, with the full certainty that the target has been utterly destroyed, and nothing is left but to slink away. He remembered.)
It had been at a party thrown by CBS, to honor the star of their new ninety-minute Western series. Big party. Century City Hotel. All the silkies were there, all the sleek, well-fed types who went without eating a full day to make it worthwhile at the barbecue and buffet. Barkin had somehow been invited. Or crashed. No one ever questioned his appearance at these things; black mohair suit is ticket enough in a scene where recognition is predicated on the uniform of the day.
He had sidled into a conversational group composed of Handy and his own Julie, Spencer Lichtman the agent and two very expensive call girls--all pale silver hair and exquisite faces; hundred and a half per night girls; the kind a man could talk to afterward, learn something from, probably with Masters earned in photochemistry or piezoelectricity; nothing even remotely cheap or brittle about them; master craftsmen in a specialized field--and Barkin had unstrapped his Haskellesque charm. The girls had sensed at once that he was one of the leeches, hardly one of the cruisable meal tickets with wherewithal. They had been courteous, but chill. Barkin had gone from unctuous to rank in three giant steps, without saying, "May I?"
Finally, in desperation, he had leaned in close to the taller of the two silver goddesses, and murmured (loud enough for all in the group to overhear) with a Richard Widmark thinness: "How would you like me down in your panties?"
Silence for a beat, then the silver goddess turned to him with eyes of anthracite, and across the chill polar wastes came her reply. "I have one asshole down there now ... what would I want with you?"
Handy chuckled again, smugly, remembering the look on Barkin as he had broken down into his component parts, re-formed as a puddle of strawberry jam sliding down one of the walls, and oozed out of the scene, not to return that night.
Yet there was a roguish good humor about the big blond beach-bum that most people took at face value; only if Huck's back was put to the wall did the façade of affability drop away to reveal the granite foundation of amorality. The man was intent on sliding through life with as little

effort as possible.
Handy had spotted him for what he was almost immediately upon meeting him, but for a few months Huck had been an amusing adjunct to Handy's new life in the film colony. They had not been in touch for three years. Yet this morning the call had come from Barkin. Using Arthur Crewes's name. He had asked Handy to come to see him, and given him an address in the Hollywood Hills.
Now, as he tooled the Impala around another snakeback curve, the top of the mountain came into view, and Handy saw the house. As it was the only house, dominating the flat, he assumed it was the address Barkin had given him, and he marveled. It was a gigantic circle of a structure, a flattened spool of sandblasted gray rock whose waist was composed entirely of curved panels of dark-smoked glass. Barkin could never have afforded an Orwellian feast of a home like this.
Handy drove up the flaring spiral driveway and parked beside the front door: an ebony slab with a rhodium-plated knob as big as an Impala headlight.
The grounds were incredibly well-tailored, sloping down all sides of the mountain to vanish over the next flat. Bonsai trees pruned in their abstracted Zen artfulness, bougainvillea rampant across one entire outcropping, banks of flowers, dichondra everywhere, ivy.
Then Handy realized the house was turning. To catch the sun. Through a glass roof. The front door was edging past him toward the west. He walked up to it, and looked for a doorbell. There was none.
From within the house came the staccato report of hardwood striking hardwood. It came again and again, in uneven, frantic bursts. And the sound of grunting.
He turned the knob, expecting the gigantic door to resist, but it swung open on a center-pin, counterbalanced, and he stepped through into the front hall of inlaid onyx tiles.
The sounds of wood on wood, and grunting, were easy to follow. He went down five steps into a passageway, and followed it toward the sound, emerging at the other end of the passage into a living room ocean-deep in sunshine. In the center of the room Huck Barkin and a tiny Japanese, both in loose-fitting ceremonial robes, were jousting with sawed-off quarterstaffs--shoji sticks.
Handy watched silently. The diminutive Japanese was electric. Barkin was no match for him, though he managed to get in a smooth rap or two from moment to moment. But the Oriental rolled and slid, barely seeming to touch the deep white carpet. His hands moved like propellers, twisting the hardwood staff to counter a swing by the taller man, jabbing sharply to embed the point of the staff in Barkin's ribs. In and out and gone. He was a blur.
As Barkin turned in almost an entrechat, to avoid a slantwise flailing maneuver by the Oriental, he saw Handy standing in the entranceway to the passage. Barkin stepped back from his opponent.
"That'll do it for now, Mas," he said.
They bowed to one another, the Oriental took the staffs, and left through another passageway at the far end of the room. Barkin came across the rug liquidly, all the suntanned flesh rippling with the play of solid muscle underneath. Handy found himself once again admiring the shape Barkin kept himself in. But if you do nothing but spend time on your body, why not? he thought ruefully. The idea of honest labor had never taken up even temporary residence in Huck's thoughts. And yet one body-building session was probably equal to all the exertion a common laborer would expend in a day.
Handy thought Huck was extending his hand in greeting, but halfway across the room the robed beach-bum reached over to a Saarinen chair and snagged a huge, fluffy towel. He swabbed his face and chest with it, coming to Handy.
"Fred, baby."
"How are you, Huck?"
"Great, fellah. Just about king of the world these days. Like the place?"
"Nice. Whose is it?"
"Belongs to a chick I've been seeing. Old man's one of the big things happening in some damned banana republic or other. I don't give it too much thought; she'll be back in about a month. Till then I've got the run of the joint. Want a drink?"
"It's eleven o'clock."
"Coconut milk, friend buddy friend. Got all the amino acids you can use all day. Very important."
"I'll pass."
Barkin shrugged, walking past him to a mirrored wall that was jeweled with the reflections of pattering sunlight streaming in from above. He seemed to wipe his hand over the mirror, and the wall swung out to reveal a fully stocked bar. He took a can of coconut milk from the small freezer unit, and opened it, drinking straight from the can. "Doesn't that smart a bit?" Handy asked.
"The coconut mil--oh, you mean the shoji jousting. Best damned thing in the world to toughen you up. Teak. Get whacked across the belly half a dozen times with one of those and your stomach muscles turn to leather."

He flexed.
"Leather stomach muscles. Just what I've always yearned for." Handy walked across the room and stared out through the dark glass at the incredible Southern California landscape, blighted by a murmuring, hanging pall of sickly smog over the Hollywood Freeway. With his back turned to Barkin, he said, "I tried to call Crewes after you spoke to me. He wasn't in. I came anyway. How come you used his name?" He turned around.
"He told me to."
"Where did you meet Arthur Crewes!" Handy snapped, sudden anger in his voice. This damned beach stiff, it had to be a shuck; he had to have used Handy's name somehow.
"At that pool party you took me to, about--what was it--about three years ago. You remember, that little auburn-haired thing, what was her name, Binnie, Bunny, something ... ?"
"Billie. Billie Landewyck. Oh, yeah, I'd forgotten Crewes was there."
Huck smiled a confident smile. He downed the last of the coconut milk and tossed the can into a wastebasket. He came around the bar and slumped onto the sofa. "Yeah, well. Crewes remembered me. Got me through Central Casting. I keep my SAG dues up, never know when you can pick up a few bucks doing stunt or a bit. You know."
Handy did not reply. He was waiting. Huck had simply said Arthur Crewes wanted him to get together with the beach-bum, so Handy had come. But there was something stirring that Barkin didn't care to open up just yet.
"Listen, Huck, I'm getting to be an old man. I can't stand on my feet too long any more. So if you've got something shaking, let's to it, friend buddy friend."
Barkin nodded silently, as though resigned to whatever it was he had to say. "Yeah, well. Crewes wants me to meet Valerie Lone."
Handy stared.
"He remembered me."
Handy tried to speak, found he had nothing to say. It was too ridiculous. He turned to leave.
"Hold it, Fred. Don't do that, man. I'm talking to you."
"You're talking nothing, Barkin. You've gotta be straight out of a jug. Valerie Lone, my ass. Who do you think you're shucking? Not me, not good old friend buddy friend Handy. I know you, you deadbeat."
Barkin stood up, unfurled something over six feet of deltoid, trapezius and bicep, toned till they hummed, and planted himself in front of the passageway. "Fred, you continue to make the mistake of thinking I'm a hulk without a brain in it. You're wrong. I am a very clever lad, not merely pretty, but smart. Now if I have to drop five big ones into your pudding-trough, lover, I will do so."
Handy stopped moving toward him. Barkin was not fooling. He was angry. "What is all this, Barkin? What are you trying to climb onto? No, forget it, don't answer. What I want to know is why?"
Barkin spread hands as huge as catcher's mitts. The fingers were oddly long and graceful. And tanned. "She is a lovely woman who finds the company of handsome young men refreshing. Mr. Crewes, sir, has decided I will brighten her declining years."
"She is a scared creature who doesn't know where it's at, not right now she doesn't. And turning you loose on her would be a sudden joy like the Dutch Elm Blight."
Barkin smiled thinly. It was a mean smile. For the time it took the smile to vanish, he was not handsome. "Call Arthur Crewes. He'll verify."
"I can't get through to him, he's in a screening."
"Then go ask him. I'll be here all day."
He stepped aside. Handy waited, as though Barkin might surprise him and leap back suddenly, with a fist in the mouth. Huck stood grinning like a little boy. Ain't I cute.
"I'll do that."
Handy moved past and entered the passageway. As he walked hurriedly down the length of the corridor, he heard Barkin speak again. He turned to see the giant figure framed in the blazing sunlight rectangle at the other end of the dark tunnel. "You know, Fred chum, you need a good workout. You're gettin' flabbier than hell."
Handy fled, raising dust as he wheeled the Impala out of the driveway and down the mountainside. There was the stink of fusel oil rising up from the city. Or was it the smell of fear?

4

When he burst into Arthur Crewes's office at the studio, the reception room was filled with delight. All that young stuff. A dozen girls, legs crossed high to show off the rounded thigh, waiting to be seen. As he slammed in, Twiggyeyes blinked rapidly.
He careened through the door and brought up short, turning quickly to see an unbroken panorama of

gorgeous young-twenties starlets. Roz, fifty and waspish, behind the desk, snickered at his double-take. Handy recognized the tone of the snicker. He was a man periodically motivated from somewhere low in his anatomy, and Roz never failed to hold it against him. He had never asked her out.
"Hello, Fred," one of the girls said. He had to strain to single her out. They all looked alike. Teased; long flat blonde hair; freaky Twiggy styles; backswept bouffant; short mannish cuts; all of them, no matter what mode, they all looked alike. It was Randi. She had had a thing about touching his privates. It was all he could remember about her. Not even if she'd been good. But a publicist must remember names, and with the remembrance of her touching his penis and drawing in her breath as though it had been something strange and new and wonderful like the Inca Codex or one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the name of Randi popped up like the NO SALE clack on a cash register.
"Hi, Randi. How's it going?"
He didn't even wait for an answer. He turned back to Roz. "I want to see him."
Her mouth became the nasty slit opening of a mantis. "He's got someone in with him now."
"I want to see him."
"I said, Mr. Handy, he has someone in there now. We are still interviewing girls, you know ..."
"Bloody damn it, lady, I said get your ass in there and tell him Handy is coming through that door, open or not, in exactly ten seconds."
She drew herself up, no breasts at all, straight lines and Mondrian sterility, and started to huff at him. Handy said, "Fuck," and went through into Crewes's office.
He said it softly, but he made noise entering the office.
Another of the pretties was showing Arthur Crewes her 8x10 glossies, under plastic, out of an immense black leather photofolio. Starlets. Arthur was saying something about their needing a few more dark-haired girls, as Handy came through the door.
Crewes looked up, surprised at the interruption.
The starlet smiled automatically.
"Arthur, I have to talk to you."
Crewes seemed puzzled by the tone in Handy's voice. But he nodded. "In a minute, Fred. Why don't you sit down. Georgia and I were talking."
Handy realized his error. He had gone a step too far with Arthur Crewes. Throughout the industry, one thing was common knowledge about Crewes's office policy: any girl who came in for an interview was treated courteously, fairly, without even the vaguest scintilla of a hustle. Crewes had been known to can men on his productions who had used their positions to get all-too-willing actresses into bed with promises of three-line bits, or a walk-on. For Handy to interrupt while Crewes was talking to even the lowliest day-player was an affront Crewes would not allow to pass unnoticed.
Handy sat down, ambivalent as hell.
Georgia was showing Crewes several shots from a Presley picture she had made the year before. Crewes was remarking that she looked good in a bikini. It was a businesslike, professional tone of voice, no leer. The girl was standing tall and straight. Handy knew that under other circumstances, in other offices where the routine was different, if Crewes had been another sort of man and had said, why don't you take off your clothes so I can get a better idea of how you look in the nude shots we're shooting for the overseas market, this girl, this Georgia, would be pulling the granny dress with its baggy mini material over her head and displaying herself in bikini briefs and maybe no brassiere to hold up all that fine young meat. But in this office she was standing tall and straight. She was being asked to be professional, to take pride in herself and whatever degree of craft she might possess. It was why there were so few lousy rumors around town about Arthur Crewes.
"I'm not certain, Georgia, but let me check with Kenny Heller in Casting, see what he's already done, and what parts are left open. I know there's a very nice five- or six-line comedy walk-on with Mitchum that we haven't found a girl for yet. Perhaps that might work. No promises, you understand, but I'll check with Kenny and get back to you later in the day."
"Thank you, Mr. Crewes. I'm very grateful."
Crewes smiled and picked of one of the 8xlO's from a thin sheaf at the rear of the photofolio.
"May we keep one of these here, for the files ... and also to remind me to get through to Kenny?"
She nodded, and smiled back at him. There was no subterfuge in the interchange, and Handy sank a trifle lower on the sofa.
"Just give it to Roz, at the desk out there, and leave your number ... would you prefer we let you know through your agent, or directly?"
It was the sort of question, in any other office, that might mean the producer was trying to wangle the home number for his own purposes. But not here. Georgia did not hesitate as she said, "Oh, either way. It makes no difference. Herb is very good about getting me out on interviews. But

if it looks possible, I'll give you my home number. There's a service on the line that'll pick up if I'm out."
"You can leave it with Roz, Georgia. And thank you for coming in." He stood and they shook hands. She was quite happy. Even if the part did not come through, she knew she had been considered, not merely assayed as a possible quickie on an office sofa. As she started for the door, Crewes added, "I'll have Roz call one way or the other, as soon as we know definitely."
She half-turned, displaying a fine length of leg, taut against the baggy dress. "Thank you. 'Bye."
"Good-bye."
She left the office, and Crewes sat down again. He pushed papers around the outer perimeter of his desk, making Handy wait. Finally, when Handy had allowed Crewes as much punishment as he felt his recent original sin deserved, he spoke.
"You've got to be out of your mind, Arthur!"
Crewes looked up then. Stopped in the midst of his preparations to remark on Handy's discourtesy in entering the office during an interview. Crewes waited, but Handy said nothing. Then Crewes thumbed the comm button on the phone. He picked up the receiver and said, "Roz, ask them if they'll be kind enough to wait about ten minutes. Fred and I have some details to work out." He listened a moment, then racked the receiver and turned to Handy.
"Okay. What?"
"Jesus Christ, Arthur. Haskell Barkin, for Christ's sake. You've got to be kidding."
"I talked to Valerie Lone last night. She sounded all by herself. I thought it might be smart therapy to get her a good-looking guy, as company, a chaperone, someone who'd be nice to her. I remembered this Barkin from--"
Handy stood up, frenzy impelling his movement. Banging off walls, vibrating at supersonic speeds, turning invisible with teeth-gritting. "I know where you remembered this Barkin from, Arthur. From Billie Landewyck's party, three years ago; the pool party; where you met Vivvi. I know. He told me."
"You've been to see Barkin already?"
"He had me out of bed too much before I wanted to get up."
"An honest day's working time won't hurt you, Fred. I was here at seven thir--"
"Arthur, I frankly, God forgive my talking to my producer this way, frankly don't give a flying shit what time you were behind your desk. Barkin, Arthur! You're insane."
"He seemed like a nice chap. Always smiling."
Handy leaned over the desk, talking straight into Arthur Crewes's cerebrum, eliminating the middleman. "So does the crocodile smile, Arthur. Haskell Barkin is a crud. He is a slithering, creeping, crawling, essentially reptilian monster who slices and eats. He is Jack the Ripper, Arthur. He is a vacuum cleaner. He is a loggerhead shark. He hates like we urinate--it's a basic bodily function for him. He leaves a wet trail when he walks. Small children run shrieking from him, Arthur. He's a killer in a suntan. Women who chew nails, who destroy men for giggles, women like that are afraid of him, Arthur. If you were a broad and he French-kissed you, Arthur, you'd have to go get a tetanus shot. He uses human bones to bake his bread. He's declared war on every woman who ever carried a crotch. This man is death, Arthur. And that's what you wanted to turn loose on Valerie Lone, God save her soul. He's Paris green, he's sump water, he's axle grease, Arthur! He's--"
Arthur Crewes spoke softly, looking battered by Handy's diatribe. "You made your point, Fred. I stand corrected."
Handy slumped down into the chair beside the desk.
To himself: "Jeezus, Huck Barkin, Jeezus ..."
And when he had run down completely, he looked up. Crewes seemed poised in time and space. His idea had not worked out. "Well, whom would you suggest?"
Handy spread his hands.
"I don't know. But not Barkin, or anyone like him. No Strip killers, Arthur. That would be lamb to slaughter time."
Crewes: "But she needs someone."
Handy: "What's your special interest, Arthur?"
Crewes: "Why say that?"
Handy: "Arthur ... c'mon. I can tell. There's a thing you've got going where she's concerned."
Crewes turned in his chair. Staring out the window at the lot, a series of flat-trucks moving scenery back to the storage bins. "You only work for me, Fred."
Handy considered, then decided what the hell. "If I worked for Adolph Eichmann, Arthur, I'd still ask where all them Jews was going."
Crewes turned back, looked levelly at his publicist. "I keep thinking you're nothing more than a

flack-man. I'm wrong, aren't I?"
Handy shrugged. "I have a thought of my own from time to time."
Crewes nodded, acquiescing. "Would you just settle for my saying she once did me a favor? Not a big favor, just a little favor, something she probably doesn't even remember, or if she does she doesn't think of it in relation to the big producer who's giving her a comeback break. Would you settle for my saying I mean her nothing but good things, Fred? Would that buy it?"
Handy nodded. "It'll do."
"So who do we get to keep her reassured that she isn't ready for the dustbin just yet?"
Again Handy spread his hands. "I don't know, it's been eighteen years since she had anything to do with--hey! Wait a bit. What's his name ... ?"
"Who?"
"Oh, hell, you know ..." Handy said, fumbling with his memory, "... the one who got fouled up with the draft during the war, blew his career, something, I don't remember ... aw, c'mon Arthur, you know who I mean, used to play all the bright young attorney defending the dirty-faced delinquent parts." He snapped his fingers trying to call back a name from crumbling fan magazines, from rotogravure coming attraction placards in theater windows.
Crewes suggested, "Call Sheilah Graham."
Handy came around the desk, dialed 9 to get out, and Sheilah Graham's private number, from memory. "Sheilah? Fred Handy. Yeah, hi. Hey, who was it Valerie Lone used to go with?" He listened. "No, huh-uh, the one that was always in the columns, he was married, but they had a big thing, he does bits now, guest shots, who--"
She told him.
"Right. Right, that's who. Okay, hey thanks, Sheilah. What? No, huh-uh, huh-uh; as soon as we get something right, it's yours. Okay, luv. Thanks. 'Bye."
He hung up and turned to Crewes. "Emery Romito."
Crewes nodded. "Jeezus, is he still alive?"
"He was on Bonanza about three weeks ago. Guest shot. Played an alcoholic veterinarian."
Crewes lifted an eyebrow. "Type casting?"
Handy was leafing through the volume of the PLAYERS DIRECTORY that listed leading men. "I don't think so. If he'd been a stone saucehound he'd've been planted long before this. I think he's just getting old, that's the worst."
Crewes gave a sharp, short bitter laugh. "That's enough."
Handy slammed the PLAYERS DIRECTORY closed. "He's not in there."
"Try character males," Crewes suggested.
Handy found it, in the R's. Emery Romito. A face out of the past, still holding a distinguished mien, but even through the badly reproduced photo that had been an 8x10 glossy, showing weariness and the indefinable certainty that this man knew he had lost his chance at picking up all the marbles.
Handy showed Crewes the photo. "Do you think this is a good idea?" Handy looked at him.
"It's a helluva lot better idea than yours, Arthur."
Crewes sucked on the edge of his lower lip between clenched teeth. "Okay. Go get him. But make him look like a knight on a white charger. I want her very happy."
"Knights on white chargers these days come barrel-assing down the streets of suburbia with their phalluses in hand, blasting women's underwear whiter-than-white. Would you settle for merely mildly happy?"
5

Cotillions could have been held in the main drawing room of the Stratford Beach Hotel. Probably had been. In the days when Richard Dix had his way with Leatrice Joy, in the days when Zanuck had his three rejected scenarios privately published as a "book" and sent them around to the studios in hopes of building his personal stock, in the days when Virginia Rappe was being introduced to the dubious sexual joys of a fat kid named Arbuckle. In those days the Stratford Beach Hotel had been a showplace, set out on the lovely Santa Monica shore, overlooking the triumphant Pacific. Architecturally, the hotel was a case in point for Frank Lloyd Wright's contention that the Sunshine State looked as though "someone had tipped the United States up onits east coast, and everything that was loose went tumbling into California." Great and bulky, sunk to its hips in the earth, with rococo flutings at every possible juncture, portico'd and belfry'd, the Stratford Beach had passed through fifty years of scuffling feet, spuming salt-spray, drunken orgies, changed bed-linen and insipid managers to end finally in this backwash eddy of a backwash suburb. In the main drawing room of the Stratford Beach, standing on the top step of a wide, spiraling staircase of onyx that ran down into a room where the dust in the ancient carpets rose at each

step to mingle with the downdrifting film of shattered memories, fractured yesterdays, mote-infested yearnings and the unmistakable stench of dead dreams, Fred Handy knew what had killed F. Scott Fitzgerald. This room, and the thousands of others like it, that held within their ordered interiors a kind of deadly magic of remembrance; a pull and tug of eras that refused to give up the ghost, that had not the common decency to pass away and let new times be born. The embalmed forevers that never came to be ... they were here, lurking in the colorless patinas of dust that covered the rubber plants, that settled in the musty odor of the velvet plush furniture, that shone dully up from inlaid hardwood floors where the Charleston had been danced as a racy new thing.

This was the terrifying end-up for all the refuse of nostalgia. Hooked on this scene had been Fitzgerald, lauding and singing of something that was dead even as it was born. And so easily hooked could anyone get on this, who chose to live after their time was passed.

The words tarnish and mildew again formed in Handy's mind, superimposed as subtitles over a mute sequence of Valerie Lone shrieking in closeup. He shook his head, and not a moment too soon. Emery Romito came down the stairs from the second floor of the hotel, walking up behind Handy across the inlaid tiles of the front hall. He stood behind Handy, staring down into the vast living room. As Handy shook his head, fighting to come back to today.

"Elegant, isn't it?" Emery Romito said.

The voice was cultivated, the voice was deep and warm, the voice was histrionic, the voice was filled with memory, the voice was a surprise in the silence, but none of these were the things that startled Handy. The present tense, isn't it. Not: wasn't it, isn't it.

Oh my God, Handy thought.

Afraid to turn around, Fred Handy felt himself sucked into the past. This room, this terrible room, it was so help him God a portal to the past. The yesterdays that had never gone to rest were all here, crowding against a milky membrane separating them from the world of right here and now, like eyeless soulless wraiths, hungering after the warmth and presence of his corporeality. They wanted ... what? They wanted his au courant. They wanted his today, so they could hear "Nagasaki" and "Vagabond Lover" and "Please" sung freshly again. So they could rouge their knees and straighten their headache bands over their foreheads. Fred Handy, man of today, assailed by the ghosts of yesterday, and terrified to turn around and see one of those ghosts standing behind him.

"Mr. Handy? You are the man who called me, aren't you?"

Handy turned and looked at Emery Romito.

"Hello," he said, through the dust of decades.

HANDY

Jefferson once said people get pretty much the kind of government they deserve, which is why I refuse to listen to any bullshit carping by my fellow Californians about Reagan and his gubernatorial gang-banging--what I chose to call government by artificial insemination when I was arguing with Julie, a registered Republican, when we weren't making love--because it seems to me they got just what they were asking for. The end-product of a hundred years of statewide paranoia and rampant lunacy. That philosophy--stripped of Freudian undertones--has slopped over into most areas of my opinion. Women who constantly get stomped on by shitty guys generally have a streak of masochism in them; guys who get their hearts eaten away by rodent females are basically self-flagellants. And when you see someone who has been ravaged by life, it is a safe bet he has been a willing accomplice at his own destruction.

All of this passed through my mind as I said hello to Emery Romito. The picture in the PLAYERS DIRECTORY had softened the sadness. But in living color he was a natural for one of those billboards hustling Forest Lawn pre-need cemetery plots. Don't get caught with your life down.

He was one of the utterly destroyed. A man familiar to the point of incest with the forces that crush and maim, a man stunned by the hammer. And I could conceive of no one who would aid and abet those kind of forces in self-destruction. No. No one.

Yet no man could have done it to himself without the help of the Furies. And so, I was ambivalent. I felt both pity and cynicism for Emery Romito, and his brave foolish elegance.

Age lay like soot in the creases of what had once been a world-famous face. The kind of age that means merely growing old, without wistfulness or delight. This man had lived through all the days and nights of his life with only one thought uppermost: let me forget what has gone before.

"Would you like to sit out on the terrace?" Romito asked. "Nice breeze off the ocean today."

I smiled acquiescence, and he made a theatrical gesture in the direction of the terrace. As he preceded me down the onyx steps into the living room, I felt a clutch of nausea, and followed him. Cheyne-Stokes breathing as I walked across the threadbare carpet, among the deep restful furniture that called to me, suggested I try their womb comfort, sink into them never to rise again. Or if I

did, it would be as a shriveled, mummified old man. (And with the memory of a kid who grew up on movies, I saw Margo as Capra had seen her in 1937, aging horribly, shriveling, in a matter of seconds, as she was being carried out of Shangri-La. And I shuddered. A grown man, and I shuddered.)

It was like walking across the bottom of the sea; shadowed, filtered with sounds that had no names, caught by shafts of sunlight from the skylight above us that contained freshets of dust-motes rising tumbling surging upward, threading between sofas and Morris chairs like whales in shoal, finally arriving at the fogged dirty French doors that gave out onto the terrace.

Romito opened them smoothly, as if he had done it a thousand times in a thousand films--and probably had--for a thousand Anita Louises. He stepped out briskly, and drew a deep breath. In that instant I realized he was in extremely good shape for a man his age, built big across the back and shoulders, waist still trim and narrow, actually quite dapper. Then why did I think of him as a crustacean, as a pitted fossil, as a gray and wasted relic?

It was the air of fatality, of course. The superimposed chin-up-through-it-all horseshit that all Hollywood hangers-on adopted. It was an atrophied devolutionary extension of the Show Must Go On shuck; the myth that owns everyone in the Industry: that getting forty-eight minutes of hack clich·é· situation comedy filmed--only the barest minimally innervating--to capture the boggle-eyed interest of the Great Unwashed sucked down in the doldrum mire of The Great American Heartland, so they will squat there for twelve minutes of stench odor poison and artifact hardsell, is an occupation somehow inextricably involved with advancing the course of Western Civilization. A myth that has oozed over into all areas of modern thought, thus turning us into a "show biz culture" and spawning such creatures as Emery Romito. Like the cats in the empty Ziv Studios, nibbling at the leftover garbage of the film industry, but loath to leave it. (Echoes of the old saw about the carnival assistant whose job it was to shovel up elephant shit who, when asked why he didn't get a better job, replied, "What? And leave show biz?") Emery Romito was oneof the clingers to the underside of the rock that was show biz, that dominated like Gibraltar the landscape of Americana.

He had forfeited his humanity in order to remain "with it." He was dead, and didn't know it. What, and leave show biz?

The terrace was half the size of the living room, which made it twice as large as the foyer of Grauman's Chinese. Gray stone balustrades bounded it, and earthquake tremors had performed an intricate calligraphy across the inlaid and matched flaggings. It was daylight, but that didn't stop the shadowy images of women with bobbed hairdos and men with pomaded glossiness from weaving in and around us as we stood there, staring out at the ocean. It was ghost-time again, and secret liaisons were being effected out on the terrace by dashing sheiks (whose wives [married before their men had become nickelodeon idols] were inside slugging the spiked gin-punch) and hungry little hopefuls with waxed shins and a dab of alum in their vaginas, anxious to grasp magic.

"Let's sit down," Emery Romito said. To me, not the ghosts. He indicated a conversation grouping of cheap tubular aluminum beach chairs, their once-bright webbing now hopelessly faded by sun and sea-mist.

I sat down and he smiled ingratiatingly.

Then he sat down, careful to pull up the pants creases in the Palm Beach suit. The suit was in good shape, but perhaps fifteen years out of date.

"Well," he said.

I smiled back. I hadn't the faintest idea what "well" was a preamble to, nor what I was required to answer. But he waited, expecting me to say something.

When I continued to smile dumbly, his expression crumpled a little, and he tried another tack.

"Just what sort of part is it that Crewes has in mind?"

Oh my God, I thought. He thinks it's an interview.

"Uh, well, it isn't precisely a part in the film I'm here to talk to you about, Mr. Romito." It was much too intricate a syntax for a man whose heart might attack him at any moment.

"It isn't a part," he repeated.

"No, it was something rather personal ..."

"It isn't a part." He whispered it, barely heard, lost instantly in the overpowering sound of the Santa Monica surf not far beyond us.

"It's about Valerie Lone," I began.

"Valerie?"

"Yes. We've signed her for Subterfuge and she's back in town and--"

"Subterfuge?"

"The film Mr. Crewes is producing."

"Oh. I see."

He didn't see at all. I was sure of that. I didn't know how in the world I could tell this ruined shell that his services were needed as escort, not actor. He saved me the trouble. He ran away from me, into the past.
"I remember once, in 1936 I believe ... no, it was '37, that was the year I did Beloved Liar ..."
I let the sound of the surf swell inside me. I turned down the gain on Emery Romito and turned up the gain on nature. I knew I would be able to get him to do what needed to be done--he was a lonely, helpless man for whom any kind of return to the world of glamour was a main chance. But it would take talking, and worse ... listening.
"... Thalberg called me in, and he was smiling, it was a very unusual thing, you can be sure. And he said: 'Emery, we've just signed a girl for your next picture,' and of course it was Valerie. Except that wasn't her name then, and he took me over to the Commissary to meet her. We had the special salad, it was little slivers of ham and cheese and turkey, cut so they were stacked one on top of the other, so you tasted the ham first, then the cheese, then the turkey, all in one bite, and the freshest green crisp lettuce, they called it the William Powell Salad ... no, that isn't right ... the William Powell was crab meat ... I think it was the Norma Talmadge Salad ... or was it ..."
As I sat there talking to Emery Romito, what I did not know was that all the way across the city, at the Studio, Arthur was entering the lot with Valerie Lone, in a chauffeured Bentley. He told me about it that night, and it was horrible. But it served as the perfect counterpoint to the musty warm monologue being delivered to me that moment by the Ghost of Christmas Past.
How lovely, how enriching, to sit there in sumptuous, palatial Santa Monica, Showplace of the Western World, listening to the voice from beyond reminisce about tuna fish and avocado salads. I prayed for deafness.
6

Crewes had called ahead. "I want the red carpet, do I make my meaning clear?" The studio public relations head had said yes, he understood. Crewes had emphasized the point: "I don't want any fuckups, Barry. Not even the smallest. No gate police asking for a drive-on pass, no secretary making her wait. I want every carpenter and grip and mail boy to know we're bringing Valerie Lone back today. And I want deference, Barry. If there's a fuckup, even the smallest fuckup, I'll come down on you the way Samson brought down the temple."
"Christ, Arthur, you don't have to threaten me!"
"I'm not threatening, Barry, I'm making the point so you can't weasel later. This isn't some phony finger-popping rock singer, this is Valerie Lone."
"All right, Arthur! Stop now."
When they came through the gate, the guards removed their caps, and waved the Bentley on toward the sound stages. Valerie Lone sat in the rear, beside Arthur Crewes, and her face was dead white, even under the makeup she had applied in the latest manner: for 1945.
There was a receiving line outside Stage 16.
The Studio head, several members of the foreign press, the three top producers on the lot, and half a dozen "stars" of current tv series. They made much over her, and when they were finished, Valerie Lone had almost been convinced someone gave a damn that she was not dead.
When the flashing red gumball light on its tripod went out--signifying that the shot had been completed inside the sound stage--they entered. Valerie took three steps beyond the heavy soundproof door, and stopped. Her eyes went up and up, into the dim reaches of the huge barnlike structure, to the catwalks with their rigging, the lights anchored to their brace boards, the cool and wonderful air from the conditioners that rose to heat up there, where the gaffers worked. Then she stepped back into the shadows as Crewes came up beside her, and he knew she was crying, and he turned to ask the others if they would come in later, to follow Miss Lone on her visit. The others did not understand, but they went back outside, and the door sighed shut on its pneumatic hinges.
Crewes went to her, and she was against the wall, the tears standing in her eyes, but not running down to ruin the makeup. In that instant Crewes knew she would be all right: she was an actress, and for an actress the only reality is the fantasy of the sound stages. She would not let her eyes get red. She was tougher than he'd imagined.
She turned to him, and when she said, "Thank you, Arthur," it was so soft, and so gentle, Crewes took her in his arms and she huddled close to him, and there was no passion in it, no striving to reach bodies, only a fine and warm protectiveness. He silently said no one would hurt her, and silently she said my life is in your hands.
After a while, they walked past the coffee machine and Willie, who said hello Miss Lone it's good to have you back; and past the assistant director's lectern where the shooting schedule was tacked onto the sloping board, where Bruce del Vaille nodded to her, and looked awed; and past the extras

slumped in their straight-backed chairs, reading Irving Wallace and knitting, waiting for their calls, and they had been told who it was, and they all called to her and waved and smiled; and past the high director's chair which was at that moment occupied by the script supervisor, whose name was Henry, and he murmured hello, Miss Lone, we worked together on suchandsuch, and she went to him and kissed him on the cheek, and he looked as though he wanted to cry, too. ForArthur Crewes, in the sound stage somewhere, a bird twittered gaily. He shrugged and laughed, like a child.

Someone yelled "Okay, settle down! Settle down!"

The din fell only a decibel. James Kencannon was talking to Mitchum, to one side of the indoor set that was decorated to be an outdoor set. It was an alley in a Southwestern town, and the cyclorama in the background had been artfully rigged to simulate a carnival somewhere in the middle distance. Lights played off the canvas, and for Valerie Lone it was genuine; a real carnival erected just for her. The alley was dirty and extremely realistic. Extras lounged against the brick walls that were not brick walls, waiting for the call to roll it. The cameraman was setting the angle of the shot, the big piece of equipment on its balloon tires set on wooden tracks, ready to dolly back when the grips pulled it. The assistant cameraman with an Arriflex on his shoulder was down on one knee, gauging an up-angle for action shooting.

Del Vaille came onto the set and Kencannon nodded to him. "Okay, roll--" Kencannon stopped the preparations for the shot, and asked the first assistant director to measure off the shot once more, as Mitchum stepped into the position that had, till that moment, been held by his stand-in. The first assistant unreeled the tape measure, announced it; the cameraman gave a turn to one of the flywheels on the big camera, and nodded ready to the assistant director, who turned and bawled, "Okay! Roll it!"

A strident bell clanged in the sound stage and dead silence fell. People in mid-step stopped. No one coughed. No one spoke. Tony, the sound mixer, up on his high platform with his earphones and his console, announced, "Take thirty-three Bravo!" which resounded through the cavernous set and was picked up through the comm box by the sound truck outside the sound stage. When it was up to speed, Tony yelled, "Speed!" and the first assistant director stepped forward into the shot with his wooden clackboard bearing Kencannon's name and the shot number. He clacked the stick to establish sound synch and get the board photographed, and there was a beat as he withdrew, as Mitchum drew in a breath for the action to come, as everyone poised hanging in limbo and Kencannon--like all directors--relished the moment of absolute power waiting for his voice to announce action.

Infinite moment.

Birth of dreams.

The shadow and the reality.

"Action!"

As five men leaped out of darkness and grabbed Robert Mitchum, shoving him back up against the wall of the alley. The camera dollied in rapidly to a closeup of Mitchum's face as one of the men grabbed his jaw with brutal fingers. "Where'd you take her ... tell us where you took her!" the assailant demanded with a faint Mexican accent. Mitchum worked his jaw muscles, tried to shove the man away. The Arriflex operator was down below them, out of the master shot, purring away his tilted angles of the scuffling men. Mitchum tried to speak, but couldn't with the man's hand on his face. "Let'm talk, Sanchez!" another of the men urged the assailant. He released Mitchum's face, and in the same instant Mitchum surged forward, throwing two of the men from him, and breaking toward the camera as it dollied rapidly back to encompass the entire shot. The Arriflex operator scuttled with him, tracking him in wobbly closeup. The five men dived for Mitchum, preparatory to beating the crap out of him as Kencannon yelled, "Cut! That's a take!" and the enemies straightened up, relaxed, and Mitchum walked swiftly to his mobile dressing room. The crew prepared to set up another shot.

The extras moved in. A group of young kids, obviously bordertown tourists from a yanqui college, down having a ball in the hotbed of sin and degradation.

They milled and shoved, and Arthur found himself once again captivated by the enormity of what was being done here. A writer had said: ESTABLISHING SHOT OF CROWD IN ALLEY and it was going to cost about fifteen thousand dollars to make that line become a reality. He glanced at Valerie beside him, and she was smiling, a thin and delicate smile part remembrance and part wonder. It really never wore off, this delight, this entrapment by the weaving of fantasy into reality.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asked softly.

"It's as though I'd never been away," she said.

Kencannon came to her, then. He held both her hands in his, and he looked at her: as a man and as a camera. "Oh, you'll do just fine ... just fine." He smiled at her. She smiled back.

"I haven't read the part yet," she said.
"Johnny Black hasn't finished expanding it yet. And I don't give a damn. You'll do fine, just fine!" They stared at each other with the kind of intimacy known only to a man who sees a reality as an image on celluloid, by a woman confronting a man who can make her look seventeen or seventy. Trust and fear and compassion and a mutual cessation of hostilities between the sexes. It was always like this. As if to say: what does he see? What does she want? What will we settle for? I love you.
"Have you said hello to Bob Mitchum yet?" Kencannon asked her.
"No. I think he's resting." She was, in turn, deferential to a star, as the lessers had been deferential to her. "I can meet him later."
"Are there any questions you'd like to ask?" he said. He waved a hand at the set around him. "You'll be living here for the next few weeks, you'd better get to know it."
"Well ... yes ... there are a few questions," she said. And she began getting into the role of star once more. She asked questions. Questions that were twenty years out of date. Not stupid questions, just not quite in focus. (As if the clackboard had not been in synch with the sound wagon, and the words had emerged from the actors' mouths a micro-instant too soon.) Not embarrassing questions, merely awkward questions; the answers to which entailed Kencannon's educating her, reminding her that she was a relic, that time had not waited for her--even as she had not waited when she had been a star--but had gathered its notes in a rush and plunged panting heavily past her. Now she had to exercise muscles of thought that had atrophied, just to try and catch up with time, dashing on ahead there like an ambitious mailroom boy trying to make points with the Studio executives. Her questions became more awkward. Her words came with more difficulty. Crewes saw her getting--how did Handy put it?--uptight.
Three girls had come onto the set from a mobile dressing room back in a dark corner of the sound stage. They wore flowered wrappers. The assistant director was herding them toward the windows of a dirty little building facing out on the alley. The girls went around the back of the building--back where it was unpainted pine and brace-rods and Magic Marker annotated as SUBTER'GE 115/144 indicating in which scenes these sets would be used.
They appeared in three windows of the building. They would be spectators at the stunt-man's fight with the assailants in the alley ... Mitchum's fight with the assailants in the alley. They were intended to represent three Mexican prostitutes, drawn to their windows by the sounds of combat. They removed their wrappers.
Their naked, fleshy breasts hung on the window ledges like Dali-esque melting casabas, waiting to ripen. Valerie Lone turned and saw the array of deep-brown nipples, and made a strange sound, "Awuhhh!" as if they had been something put on sale at such a startlingly low price she was amazed, confused and repelled out of suspicion.
Kencannon hurriedly tried to explain the picture was being shot in two versions, one for domestic and eventual television release, the other for foreign marketing. He went into a detailed comparison of the two versions, and when he had finished--with the entire cast of extras listening, for the explication of hypocrisy is always fascinating--Valerie Lone said:
"Gee, I hope none of my scenes have to be shot without clothes ..."
And one of the extras gave a seal-like bark of amusement. "Fat chance," he murmured, just a bit too loud.
Arthur Crewes went around in a fluid movement that was almost choreography, and hit the boy--a beach-bum with long blond hair and fine deltoids--a shot that traveled no more than sixteen inches. It was a professional fighter's punch, no windup, no bolo, just a short hard piston jab that took the boy directly under the heart. He vomited air and lost his lower legs. He sat down hard.
If Crewes had thought about it, he would not have done it. The effect on the cast. The inevitable lawsuit. The Screen Extras Guild complaint. The bad form of striking someone who worked for him. The look on Valerie Lone's face as she caught the action with peripheral vision. The sight of an actor sitting down in pain, like a small child seeking a sandpile.
But he didn't think, and he did it, and Valerie Lone turned and ran ...
Questions that were not congruent with a film that has to take into account television rerun, accelerated shooting schedules, bankability of stars, the tenor of the kids who make up the yeoman cast of every film, the passage of time and the improvement of techniques, and the altered thinking of studio magnates, the sophisticated tastes and mores of a new filmgoing audience.
A generation of youth with no respect for roots and heritage and the past. With no understanding of what has gone before. With no veneration of age. The times had conspired against Valerie Lone. Even as the times had conspired against her twenty years before. The simple and singular truth of it was that Valerie Lone had not been condemned by a lack of talent--though a greater talent might

have sustained her--nor by a weakness in character--though a more ruthless nature might have carried her through the storms--nor by fluxes and flows in the Industry, but by all of these things, and by Fate and the times. But mostly the times. She was simply, singularly, not one with her world. It was a Universe that had chosen to care about Valerie Lone. For most of the world, the Universe didn't give a damn. For rare and singular persons from time to time in all ages, the Universe felt a compassion. It felt a need to succor and warm, to aid and bolster. That disaster befell all of these "wards of the Universe" was only proof unarguable that the Universe was inept, that God was insane.

It would have been better by far had the Universe left Valerie Lone to her own destiny. But it wouldn't, it couldn't; and it combined all the chance random elements of encounter and happenstance to litter her path with roses. For Valerie Lone, in the inept and compassionate Universe, the road was broken glass and dead birds, as far down the trail as she would ever be able to see.

The Universe had created the tenor of cynicism that hummed silently through all the blond beach-bums of the Hollywood extra set ... the Universe had dulled Valerie Lone's perceptions of the Industry as it was today ... the Universe had speeded up the adrenaline flow in Arthur Crewes at the instant the blond beach-bum had made his obnoxious comment ... and the Universe had, in its cockeyed, simple-ass manner, thought it was benefiting Valerie Lone.

Obviously not.

And it would be this incident, this rank little happening, that would inject the tension into her bloodstream, that would cause her nerves to fray just that infinitesimal amount necessary, that would bring about metal fatigue and erosion and rust. So that when the precise moment came when optimum efficiency was necessary ... Valerie Lone would be hauled back to this instant, this remark, this vicious little scene; and it would provide the weakness that would doom her.

From that moment, Valerie Lone began to be consumed by her shadow. And nothing could prevent it. Not even the wonderful, wonderful Universe that had chosen to care about her.

A Universe ruled by a mad God, who was himself being consumed by his shadow.

Valerie Lone turned and ran ...

Through the sound stage, out the door, down the studio street, through Philadelphia in 1910, past the Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan, around a Martian sand-city, into and out of Budapest during the Uprising (where castrated Red tanks still lay drenched in the ash-drunkenness of Molotov cocktails), and through Shade's Wells onto a sun-baked plain where the imbecilically gaping mouth of the No. 3 Anaconda Mine received her.

She dashed into the darkness of the Anaconda, and found herself in the midst of the Sringhill Mine Disaster. Within and without, reality was self-contained.

Arthur Crewes and James Kencannon dashed after her.

At the empty opening to the cave, Crewes stopped Kencannon. "Let me, Jim."

Kencannon nodded, and walked slowly away, pulling his pipe from his belt, and beginning to ream it clean with a tool from his shirt pocket.

Arthur Crewes let the faintly musty interior of the prop cave swallow him. He stood there silently, listening for murmurings of sorrow, or madness. He heard nothing. The cave only went in for ten or fifteen feet, but it might well have been the entrance to the deepest pit in Dante's Inferno. As his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he saw her, slumped down against some prop boulders.

She tried to scuttle back out of sight, even as he moved toward her.

"Don't." He spoke the one word softly, and she held.

Then he came to her, and sat down on a boulder low beside her. Now she wasn't crying.

It hadn't been that kind of rotten little scene.

"He's an imbecile," Crewes said.

"He was right," she answered. There was a sealed lock-vault on pity. But self-realization could be purchased over the counter.

"He wasn't right. He's an ignorant young pup and I've had him canned."

"I'm sorry for that."

"Sorry doesn't get it. What he did was inexcusable." He chuckled softly, ruefully. "What I did was inexcusable, as well. I'll hear from SEG about it." That chuckle rose. "It was worth it."

"Arthur, let me out."

"I don't want to hear that."

"I have to say it. Please. Let me out. It won't work."

"It will work. It has to work."

She looked at him through darkness. His face was blank, without features, barely formed in any way. But she knew if she could see him clearly that there would be intensity in his expression.

"Why is this so important to you?"
For many minutes he did not speak, while she waited without understanding. Then, finally, he said, "Please let me do this thing for you. I want ... very much ... for you to have the good things again."
"But, why?"
He tried to explain, but it was not a matter of explanations. It was a matter of pains and joys remembered. Of being lonely and finding pleasure in motion pictures. Of having no directions and finding a future in what had always been a hobby. Of having lusted for success and coming at last to it with the knowledge that movies had given him everything, and she had been part of it. There was no totally rational explanation that Arthur Crewes could codify for her. He had struggled upward and she had given him a hand. It had been a small, a tiny, a quickly forgotten little favor--if he told her now she would not remember it, nor would she think it was at all comparable to what he was trying to do for her. But as the years had hung themselves on Arthur Crewes's past, the tiny favor had grown out of all proportion in his mind, and now he was trying desperately to pay Valerie Lone back.
All this, in a moment of silence.
He had been in the arena too long. He could not speak to her of these nameless wondrous things, and hope to win her from her fears. But even in his silence there was clarity. She reached out to touch his face.
"I'll try," she said.
And when they were outside on the flat, dry plain across which Kencannon started toward them, she turned to Arthur Crewes and she said, with a rough touch of the wiseacre that had been her trademark eighteen years before, "But I still ain't playin' none of your damn scenes in the noood, buster."
It was difficult, but Crewes managed a smile.
HANDY

Meanwhile, back at my head, things were going from Erich von Stroheim to Alfred Hitchcock. No, make that from Fritz Lang to Val Lewton. Try bad to worse.
I'd come back from Never-Never Land and the song of the turtle, and had called in to Arthur's office. I simply could not face a return to the world of show biz so soon after polishing tombstones in Emery Romito's private cemetery. I needed a long pull on something called quiet, and it was not to be found at the studio.
My apartment was hot and stuffy. I stripped and took a shower. For a moment I considered flushing my clothes down the toilet: I was sure they were impregnated with the mold of the ages, fresh from Santa Monica.
Then I chivvied and worried the thought that maybe possibly I ought just to send myself out to Filoy Cleaners, in toto. "Here you go, Phil," I'd say. "I'd like myself cleaned and burned." You need sleep, Handy, I thought. Maybe about seven hundred years' worth.
Rip Van Winkle, old Ripper-poo, it occurred to me, in a passing flash of genuine lunacy, knew precisely where it was at. I could see it now, a Broadway extravaganza
RIP!
starring Fred Handy
who will sleep like a mother stone log for seven hundred years right before your perspiring eyes, at $2.25 / $4.25 / and $6.25 for Center Aisle Orchestra Seats.
The shower did little to restore my sanity.
I decided to call Julie.
I checked her itinerary--which I'd blackmailed out of her agent--and found that Hello, Dolly! was playing Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I dialed the O-lady and told her all kindsa stuff. After a while she got into conversations with various kindly folks in the state of Pennsylvania, who confided in her, strictly entre-nous, that my Lady of the moist thighs, the fair Julie Glynn, née Rowena Glyckmeier, was out onna town somewheres, and O-lady 212 in Hollywood would stay right there tippy-tap up against the phone all night if need be, just to bring us two fine examples of Young American Love together, whenever.
As I racked the receiver, just as suddenly as I'd gotten into the mood, all good humor and fancy footwork deserted me. I realized I was sadder than I'd been in years. What the hell was happening? Why this feeling of utter depression; why this sense of impending disaster?
Then the phone rang, and it was Arthur, and he told me what had happened at the Studio. I couldn't stop shuddering.
He also told me there was an opening at the Coconut Grove that night, and he thought Valerie might like to attend. He had already called the star--it was Bobby Vinton, or Sergio Franchi, or Wayne

Newton, or someone in that league--and there would be an announcement from the stage that Valerie Lone was in the audience, and a spontaneous standing ovation. I couldn't stop shuddering.
He suggested I get in touch with Romito and set up a date. Help wash away the stain of that afternoon. Then he told me the name of the extra who had insulted Valerie Lone--he must have been reading it off a piece of paper, he spoke the name with a flatness like the striking a trajectory of a cobra--and suggested I compile a brief dossier on the gentleman. I had the distinct impression Arthur Crewes could be as vicious an enemy as he was cuddly a friend. The blond beach-bum would probably find it very hard getting work in films from this point on, though it was no longer the antediluvian era in which a Cohen or a Mayer or a Skouras could kill a career with a couple of phone calls. I couldn't stop shuddering.
Then I called Emery Romito and advised him he was to pick up Valerie Lone at six-thirty at the Beverly Hills. Tuxedo. He fumphuh'd and I knew he didn't have the price of a rental tux. So I called Wardrobe at the Studio and told them to send someone out to Santa Monica ... and to dress him au courant, not in the wing-collar style of the Twenties, which is what I continued to shudder at in my mind.
Then I went back and took another shower. A hot shower. It was getting chilly in my body.
I heard the phone ringing through the pounding noise of the shower spray, and got to the instrument as my party was hanging up. There was a trail of monster wet footprints all across the living room behind me, vanishing into the bedroom and thence the bath, from whence I had comce.
"Yeah, who?" I yelled.
"Fred? Spencer."
A pungent footnote on being depressed. When you have just received word from the IRS that an audit of your returns will be necessary for the years 1956-66 in an attempt to pinpoint the necessity for a $13,000 per year entertainment exemption; when the ASPCA rings you up and asks you to come down and identify a body in their cold room, and they're describing your pet basset hound as he would look had he been through a McCormick reaper; when your wife, from whom you are separated, and whom you screwed last month only by chance when you took over her separation payment, calls and tells you she is with child--yours; when World War Nine breaks out and they are napalming your patio; when you've got the worst summer cold of your life, the left-hand corner of your mouth is cracked and chapped, your prostate is acting up again and oozing shiny drops of a hideous green substance; when all of this links into one gigantic chain of horror threatening to send you raving in the direction of Joe Pyne or Lawrence Welk, then, and only then, do agents named Spencer Lichtman call.
It is not a nice thing.
New horrors! I moaned silently. New horrors!
"Hey, you there, Fred?"
"I died."
"Listen, I want to talk on you."
"Spencer, please. I want to sleep for seven hundred years."
"It's the middle of a highly productive day."
"I've produced three asps, a groundhog and a vat of stale eels. Let me sleep, perchance to dream."
"I want to talk about Valerie Lone."
"Come over to the apartment." I hung up.
The wolf pack was starting to move in. I called Crewes. He was in conference. I said break in. Roz said fuckoff. I thanked her politely and retraced my monster wet footprints to the shower. Cold shower. Cold, hot, cold: if my moods continued to fluctuate, it was going to be double pneumonia time. (I might have called it my manic-depressive phase, except my moods kept going from depressive to depressiver. With not a manic in sight.)
Wearing a thick black plastic weight-reducing belt--compartments filled with sand--guaranteed to take five pounds of unsightly slob off my drooling gut--and a terry cloth wraparound, I built myself an iced tea in the kitchen. There were no ice cubes. I had a bachelor's icebox: a jar of maraschino cherries, an opened package of Philadelphia cream cheese with fungus growing on it, two tv dinners--Hawaiian shrimp and Salisbury steak--and a tin of condensed milk. If Julie didn't start marrying me or mothering me, it was certain I would be found starved dead, lying in a comer, clutching an empty carton of Ritz crackers, some fateful morning when they came to find out why I hadn't paid the rent in a month or two.
I went out onto the terrace of the lanai apartments, overlooking the hysterectomy-shaped swimming pool used for the 1928 Lilliputian Olympics. There were two slim-thighed creatures named Janice and Pegeen lounging near the edge. Pegeen had an aluminum reflector up to her chin, making sure no slightest inch of epidermis escaped UV scorching. Janice was on her stomach, oiled like the inside of a reservoir-tip condom. "Hey!" I yelled. "How're you fixed for ice cubes?" Janice turned over,

letting her copy of Kahlil Gibran's THE PROPHET fall flat, and shaded her eyes toward me.
"Oh, hi, Fred. Go help yourself."
I waved thanks and walked down the line to their apartment. The door was open. I went in through the debris of the previous evening's amphetamine frolic, doing a dance toavoid the hookah and the pillows on the floor. There were no ice cubes. I filled their trays, reinserted them in the freezer compartment, and went back outside. "Everything groovy?" Janice yelled up at me.
"Ginchy," I called back, and went into my apartment.
Warm iced tea is an ugly.
I heard Spencer down below, shucking the two pairs of slim thighs. I waited a full sixty-count, hoping he would pass, just once. At sixty, I went to the door and yowled. "Up here, Spencer."
"Be right there, Fred," he called over his shoulder, his moist eyeballs fastened like snails to Pegeen's bikini.
"The specialist tells me I've only got twenty minutes to live, Spencer. Get your ass up here."
He murmured something devilishly clever to the girls, who regarded his retreating back with looks that compared it unfavorably to a haunch of tainted venison. Spencer mounted the stairs two at a time, puffing hideously, trying desperately to do a Steve McQueen for the girls.
"Hey, buhbie." He extended his hand as he came through the door.
Spencer Lichtman had been selected by the monthly newsletter and puff-sheet of the Sahara Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada, U.S.A., in their August 1966 mailing, as Mr. Charm. They noted that he was charming whether he won or lost at the tables, and they quoted him as saying, after picking up eleven hundred dollars at craps, "It's only money." The newsletter thought that was mighty white of Spencer Lichtman. The newsletter also thought it was historically clever of him to have said it, and only avoided adding their usual editorial (Ha! Ha! Isn't old Spencer a wow!) with a non-Vegas reserve totally out of character for the "editor," a former junior ad exec well into hock to the management of the hotel, working it off by editing the puff-sheet in a style charitably referred to as Hand-Me-Down Mark Hellinger.
Spencer Lichtman was, to me, one of the great losers of all time, eleven hundred Vegan jellybeans notwithstanding. That he was a brilliant agent cannot be denied. But he did it despite himself, dear God let me have it pegged correctly otherwise my entire world-view is ass-backwards, not because of himself.
He was a tall, broad-shouldered, well-fried, blue-eyed specimen, handsomely cocooned within a Harry Cherry suit. Light-blue button-down shirts (no high-rise collars for Spencer, he knew his neck was too thick for them), black knee-length socks, highly polished black loafers, diminutive cuff links, and a paisley hankie in the breast pocket. He might have sprung full-blown like Adolph Menjou from the forehead of Gentleman's Quarterly.
Then tell me this: if Spencer Lichtman was good-looking, mannerly, talented, in good taste, and successful, why the hell did I know as sure as Burton made little green Elizabeths, that Spencer Lichtman was a bummer?
It defied analysis.
So I shook hands with him.
"Jesus, it's hot," he wheezed, falling onto the sofa, elegantly. Even collapsing, he had panache.
"Can I impose on you for something cold?"
"I'm out of ice cubes."
"Oh."
"My neighbors are out of ice cubes, too."
"Those were your neighbors--"
"Right. Out there. The girls."
"Nice neighbors."
"Yeah. But they're still out of ice cubes."
"So I suppose we'd better talk. Then we can go over to the Luau and get something cold."
I didn't bother telling him I'd rather undergo intensive Hong Kong acupuncture treatments with needles in my cheeks, than go to the Luau for a drink. The cream of the Hollywood and Beverly Hills show biz set always made the Luau in the afternoons, hustling secretaries from the talent agencies who were, in actuality, the daughters of Beverly Hills merchants, the daughters of Hollywood actors, the daughters of Los Angeles society, the daughters of delight. The cream. That is the stuff that floats to the top, isn't it? Cream?
No, Spencer, I am not going with you to the Luau so you can hustle for me, and get me bedded down with one of your puffball-haired steno-typists, thereby giving you an edge on me for future dealings. No, indeed not, Spencer, my lad. I am going to pass on all those fine trim young legs exposed beneath entirely too inflammatory minis. I am probably going to go into the bedroom after you've gone and play with myself, but it is a far far better thing I do than to let you get your

perfectly white capped molars into me.
"You talk, Spencer. I'll listen." I sat down on the floor. "That's what I call cooperation."
He wanted desperately to undo his tie. But that would have been non-Agency. "I was talking to some of the people at the office ..."
Translation: I read in the trades that Crewes has found this alta-cockuh, this old hag Valerie Whatshername, and at the snake-pit session this morning I suggested to Morrie and Lew and Marty that I take a crack at maybe we should rep her, there might be a dime or a dollar or both in it, so what are the chances?
I stared at him with an expression like Raggedy Andy.
"And, uh, we felt it would be highly prestigious for the Agency to represent Valerie Lone ..."
Translation: At least we can clip ten percent off of this deal with Crewes, and she ought to be good for a second deal with him at the Studio, and if anything at all happens with her, there're two or three short-line deals we can make, maybe at American-International for one of those Baby Jane/Lady in a Cage horrorifics; shit, she'd sit still for any kind of star billing, even in a screamer like that. Play her right, and we can make thirty, forty grand before she falls in her traces.
I seguéd smoothly from Raggedy Andy into Lenny: Of Mice and Men. Except I didn't dribble.
"I think we can really move Valerie, in the field of features. And, of course, there's a lot of television open to her ..."
Translation: We'll book the old broad into a guest shot on every nitwit series shooting now for a September air-date. Guest cameos are perfect for a warhorse like her. It's like every asshole in America had a private tube to the freak show. Come and see the Ice Age return! Witness the resurrection of Piltdown Woman! See the resurgence of Miss Ankle-Strap Wedgie! Gape and drool at the unburied dead! She'll play dance hall madams on Cimarron Strip and aging actresses on Petticoat Junction; she'll play a frontier matriarch on The Big Valley and the mother of a kidnapped child on Felony Squad. A grand per day, at first, till the novelty wears off. We'll book her five or six deep till they get the word around. Then we'll make trick deals with the network for multiples. There's a potload in this.
Lenny slowly vanished to be replaced by Huck Finn.
"Well, say something, Fred! What do you think?"
Huck Finn vanished and in his stead Spencer Lichtman was staring down at Captain America, bearing his red-white-and-blue shield, decked out in his patriotic uniform with the wings on the cowl, with the steely gaze and the outthrust chin of the defender of widows and orphans.
Captain America said, softly, "You'll take five percent commission and I'll make sure she signs with you."
"Ten, Fred. You know that's standard. We can't--"
"Five." Captain America wasn't fucking around.
"Eight. Maybe I can swing eight. Morrie and Lew--"
Captain America shifted his star-studded shield up his arm and pulled his gauntlet tighter. "I'll be fair. Six."
Lichtman stood up, started toward the door, whirled on Captain America. "She's got to have representation, Handy. Lots of it. You know it. I know it. Name me three times you know of, when an agent took less than ten? We're working at twelve and even thirteen on some clients. This is a chancy thing. She might go, she might not. We're willing to gamble. You're making it lousy for both of us. I came to you because I know you can handle it. But we haven't even talked about your percentage."
Captain America's jaw muscles jumped. The inference that he could be bought was disgusting. He breathed the sweet breath of patriotic fervor and answered Spencer Lichtman--alias the Red Skull--with the tone he deserved. "No kickback for me, Spencer. Straight six."
Lichtman's expression was one of surprise. But in a moment he had it figured out, in whatever form his cynicism and familiarity with the hunting habits of the scene allowed him best and most easily to rationalize. There was an angle in it for me, he was sure of that. It was a sneaky angle, it had to be, because he couldn't find a trace of it, which meant it was subtler than most. On that level he was able to talk to me. Not to Captain America, never to old Cap; because Lichtman couldn't conceive of a purely altruistic act, old Spence couldn't. So there was a finagle here somewhere; he didn't know just where, but as thief to thief, he was delighted with the dealing.
"Seven."
"Okay."
"I should have stuck with eight."
"You wouldn't have made a deal if you had."
"You're sure she'll sign?"

"You sure you'll work your ass off for her, and keep the leeches away from her, and give her a straight accounting of earnings, and try to build the career and not just run it into the ground for a fast buck?"
"You know I--"
"You know I, baby! I have an eye on you. Arthur Crewes will have an eye on you. And if you fuck around with her, and louse her up, and then drop her, both Arthur and myself will do some very heavy talking with several of your clients who are currently under contract to Arthur, such as Steve and Raquel and Julie and don't you forget it."
"What's in this for you, Handy?"
"I've got the detergent concession."
"And I thought I was coming up here to hustle you."
"There's only one reason you're getting the contract, Spencer. She needs an agent, you're as honest as most of them--excluding Hal and Billy--and I believe you believe she can be moved."
"I do."
"I figured it like that."
"I'll set up a meet with Morrie and Lew and Marty. Early next week."
"Fine. Her schedule's pretty tight now. She starts rehearsals with the new scene day after tomorrow."
Spencer Lichtman adjusted his tie, smoothed his hair, and pulled down his suit jacket in the back. He extended his hand. "Pleasure doing business, Fred."
I shook once again. "Dandy, Spencer."
Then he smirked, suggesting broadly that he knew I must have a boondoggle only slightly smaller than the Teapot Dome going. And, so help me God, he winked. Conspiratorially.
Tonstant weader fwowed up.
When he left, I called Arthur, and told him what I'd done, and why. He approved, and said he had to get back to some work on his desk. I started to hang up, but heard his voice faintly, calling me back. I put the receiver up to my ear and said, "Something else, Arthur?"
There was a pause, then he said, gently, "You're a good guy, Fred." I mumbled something and racked it.
And sat there for twenty minutes, silently arguing with Raggedy Andy, Lenny, Huck and old Captain America. They thought I was a good guy, too. And I kept trying to get them to tell me where the sleazy angle might be, so I could stop feeling so disgustingly humanitarian.
Have you ever tried to pull on a turtleneck over a halo?
7

Valerie Lone had only been told she would be picked up at six-thirty, for dinner and an opening at the Grove. The flowers arrived at five-fifteen. Daisies. Roses were a makeout flower, much too premeditated. Daisies. With their simplicity and their honesty and their romance. Daisies. With one rose in the center of the arrangement.
At six-thirty the doorbell to Valerie Lone's bungalow was rung, and she hurried to open the door. (She had turned down the offer of a personal maid. "The hotel is very nice to me; their regular maid is fine, Arthur, thank you.")
She opened the door, and for a moment she did not recognize him. But for her, there had only been one like him; only one man that tall, that elegant, that self-possessed. The years had not touched him. He was the same. Not a hair out of place, not a line where no line had been, and the smile--the same gentle, wide pixie smile--it was the same, unaltered. Soft, filtered lights were unnecessary. For Valerie Lone he was the same.
But in the eye of the beheld ...
Emery Romito looked across the past and all the empty years between, and saw his woman. There had been gold, and quicksilver, and soft murmurings in the night, and crystal, and water as sweet as Chablis, and velvet and plumes of exotic birds ... and now
there was arthritis, and difficult breathing, and a heaviness in the air, and perspiration and nervousness, and stale rum cake, and the calling of children far away across the misty landscape, and someone very dark and hungry always coming toward him.
Now there was only now. And he lamented all the days that had died without joy. Hope had sung its song within him, in reverie, on nights when the heat had been too much for him and he had gone to sit at the edge of the ocean. Far out, beyond the lights of the amusement park at Lick Pier, beyond the lights of the night, the song had been raised against dark stars and darker skies. But had never been heard. Had gone to tremolo and wavering and finally sighed into the silent vacuum of despair, where sound can only be heard by striking object against object. And in that nowhere, there was no object for Emery Romito.

"Hello, Val ..."
Tear loneliness across its pale surface; rend it totally and find the blood of need welling up in a thick, pale torrent. Let the horns of growth blare a message in rinky-tink meter. Turn a woman carrying all her years into a sloe-eyed gamine. Peel like an artichoke the scar-tissue heart of a lost dream, and find in the center a pulsing golden light with a name. She looked across yesterday and found him standing before her, and she could do no other than cry.
He came through the door as she sagged in upon herself. Her tears were soundless, so desperate, so overwhelming; they made her helpless. He closed the door behind him and gathered her to himself. Shrunken though he was, not in her arms, not in her eyes. He was still tall, gentle Emery, whose voice was silk and softness. Collapsed within the eternity of his love, she beat back the shadows that had come to devour her, and she knew that now, now she would live. She spoke his name a hundred times in a second.
That night, her name was spoken by a hundred voices in a second; but this time, as she stood to applause for the first time in eighteen years, she did not cry. Emery Romito was with her, beside her, and she held his hand as she rose. Fred Handy was there; with the girl Randi, from the office that afternoon. Arthur Crewes was there; alone. Smiling. Jubilant. Radiating warmth for Valerie Lone and the good people who had never forgotten her. Spencer Lichtman was there; with Miss American Airlines and an orange-haired girl of pneumatic proportions starring in Joseph E. Levine's production of Maciste and the Vestal Virgins. ("You've got a better chance of convincing the public she's Maciste than a virgin," Handy muttered, as they passed in the lobby of the Ambassador Hotel.)
Valerie Lone! they cried. Valerie Lone!
She stood, holding Romito's hand, and the dream had come full circle.
Like the laocoönian serpent, swallowing its own tail. Ouroboros in Clown Town.
The next day John D. F. Black delivered the rewritten pages. The scenes for Valerie were exquisite. He asked if he might be introduced to Valerie Lone, and Fred took him over to the Beverly Hills, where Valerie was guardedly trying to get a suntan. It was the first time in many years that she had performed that almost religious Hollywood act: the deep-frying. She rose to meet Black, a tall and charming man with an actor's leathery good looks. In a few minutes he had charmed her completely, and told her he had been delighted to write the scenes for her, that they were just what she had always done best in her biggest films, that they gave her room to expand and color the part, that he knew she would be splendid. She asked if he would be on the set during shooting. Black looked at Handy. Handy looked away. Black shrugged and said he didn't know, he had another commitment elsewhere. But Valerie Lone knew that things had not changed all that much in Hollywood: the writer was still chattel. When his work on the script was done, it was no longer his own. It was given to the Producer, and the Director, and the Production Manager, and the Actors, and he was no longer welcome.
"I'd like Mr. Black to be on the set when I shoot, Mr. Handy," she said to Fred. "If Arthur doesn't mind."
Fred nodded, said he would see to it; and John D. F. Black bent, took Valerie Lone's hand in his own, and kissed it elegantly. "I love you," he said.
Late that night, Arthur and Fred took Valerie to the Channel 11 television studios on Sunset, and sat offstage as Valerie prepared for her on-camera live-action full-living-color interview with Adela Seddon, the Marquesa of Malice. A female counterpart of Joe Pyne, Adela Seddon spoke with forked tongue. She was much-watched and much-despised. Impartial voters learned their politics from her show. Wherever she was at, they were not. If she had come out in favor of Motherhood, Apple Pie and The American Way, tens of thousands of noncommitted people would instantly take up the banners of Misogyny, Macrobiotics and Master Racism. She was a badgerer, a harridan, a snarling viper with a sure mouth for the wisecrack and a ready fang for the jugular. Beneath a Tammy Grimes tousle of candy-apple red hair, her face was alternately compared with that of a tuba player confronting a small child sucking a lemon, and a prize shoat for the first time encountering the butcher's blade. She had been married six times, divorced five, was currently separated, hated being touched, and was rumored in private circles to have a long-since gone mad from endless masturbation. Her nose job was not entirely successful.
Valerie was justifiably nervous.
"I've never seen her, Arthur. Working out there in the diner, nights you know, I've never seen her."
Handy, who thought it was lunacy to bring Valerie anywhere near the Seddon woman, added, "To see is to believe."
Valerie looked at him, concern showing like a second face upon the carefully drawn mask of cosmetics the Studio makeup head had built for her. She looked good, much younger, rejuvenated by

the acclaim she had received at the Ambassador's Coconut Grove. (It had been the Righteous Brothers. They had come down into the audience and belted "My Babe" in her honor, right at her.)
"You don't think much of her, do you, Mr. Handy?"
Handy expelled air wearily. "About as charming as an acrobat in a polio ward. Queen of the Yahoos. The Compleat Philistine. Death warmed over. A pain in the--"
Crewes cut him off.
"No long lists, Fred. I had one of those from you already today. Remember?"
"It's been a long day, Arthur."
"Relax, please. Adela called me this afternoon, and asked for Valerie. She promised to be good. Very good. She's been a fan of Valerie's for years. We talked for almost an hour. She wants to do a nice interview."
Handy grimaced. Pain. "I don't believe it. The woman would do a Bergen-Belsen on her own Granny if she thought it would jump her rating."
Crewes spoke softly, carefully, as if telling a child. "Fred, I would not for a moment jeopardize Valerie if I thought there was any danger here. Adela Seddon is not my idea of a lady, either, but her show is watched. It's syndicated, and it's popular. If she says she'll behave, it behooves us to take the chance."
Valerie touched Handy's sleeve. "It's all right, Fred. I trust Arthur. I'll go on."
Crewes smiled at her. "Look, it's even live, not taped earlier in the evening, the way she usually does the show. This way we know she'll behave; they tape it in case someone guests who makes her look bad, they can dump the tape. But live like this, she has to be a nanny, or she could get killed. It stands to reason."
Handy looked dubious. "There's a flaw in that somewhere, Arthur, but I haven't the strength to find it. Besides," he indicated a flashing red light on the wall above them, "Valerie is about to enter the Valley of the Shadow ..."
The stage manager came and got Valerie, and took her out onto the set, where she was greeted with applause from the studio audience. She sat in one of the two comfortable chairs behind the low desk, and waited patiently for Adela Seddon to arrive from her offstage office.
When she made her appearance, striding purposefully to the desk and seating herself, and instantly shuffling through a sheaf of research papers (presumably on Valerie Lone), the audience once again transported itself with wild applause. Which Adela Seddon did not deign to acknowledge. The signals were given, the control booth marked, and in a moment the offstage announcer was bibble-bibbling the intro. The audience did its number, and Camera No. 2 glowed red as a ghastly closeup of Adela Seddon appeared on the studio monitors. It was like a microscopic view of a rotted watermelon rind.
"This evening," Adela Seddon began, a smile that was a rictus stretching her mouth, "we are coming to you live, not on tape. The reason for this is my very special guest, a great lady of the American cinema, who agreed to come on only if we were aired live, thus ensuring a fair and unedited interview ..."
"I told you she was a shit!" Handy hissed to Crewes. Crewes shushed him with a wave of his hand.
"... not been seen for eighteen years on the wide-screens of motion picture theaters, but she is back in a forthcoming Arthur Crewes production, Subterfuge. I'd like a big hand for Miss Valerie Lone!"
The audience did tribal rituals, rain dances, ju-ju incantations and a smattering of plain and fancy warwhooping. Valerie was a lady. She smiled demurely and nodded her thankyous. Adela Seddon seemed uneasy at the depth of response, and shifted in her chair.
"She's getting out the blowdarts," Handy moaned.
"Shut up!" Crewes snarled. He was not happy.
"Miss Lone," Adela Seddon said, turning slightly more toward the nervous actress, "precisely why have you chosen this time to come back out of retirement? Do you think there's still an audience fur your kind of acting?"
OhmiGod, thought Handy, here it comes.
EDITED TRANSCRIPT OF SEDDON
"LOOKING IN" / 11-23-67
(... indicates deletion)
VALERIE LONE: I don't know what you mean, "my kind of acting"?
ADELA SEDDON: Oh, come on now, Miss Lone.
VL: No, really. I don't.
AS: Well, I'll be specific then. The 1930s style: overblown and gushy.
VL: I didn't know that was my style, Miss Seddon.
AS: Well, according to your latest review, which is, incidentally, eighteen years old, in

something called Pearl of the Antilles with Jon Hall, you are, quote, "a fading lollipop of minuscule talent given to instant tears and grandiose arm-waving." Should I go on?
VL: If it gives you some sort of pleasure.
AS: Pleasure isn't why I'm up here twice a week, Miss Lone. The truth is. I sit up here with kooks and twistos and people who denigrate our great country, and I let them have their say, without interrupting, because I firmly believe in the First Amendment of the Constitution of these United States of America, that everyone has the right to speak his mind. If that also happens to mean they have the right to make asses of themselves before seventy million viewers, it isn't my fault.
VL: What has all that to do with me?
AS: I don't mind your thinking I'm stupid, Miss Lone; just kindly don't talk to me as if I were stupid. The truth, Miss Lone, that's what all this has to do with you.
VL: Are you sure you'd recognize it?
(Audience applause)
AS: I recognize that there are many old-time actresses who are so venal, so egocentric, that they refuse to acknowledge their age, who continue to embarrass audiences by trying to cling to the illusion of sexuality.
VL: You shouldn't air your problems so openly, Miss Seddon.
(Audience applause)
AS: I see retirement hasn't dampened your wit.
VL: Nor made me immune to snakebites.
AS: You're getting awfully defensive, awfully early in the game.
VL: I wasn't aware this was a game. I thought it was an interview.
AS: This is my living room, Miss Lone. We call it a game, here, and we play it my way.
VL: I understand. It's not how you play, it's who wins.
AS: Why don't we just talk about your new picture for a while?
VL: That would be a refreshing change.
...
AS: Is it true Crewes found you hustling drinks in a roadhouse?
VL: Not quite. I was a waitress in a diner.
AS: I suppose you think slinging hash for the last eighteen years puts you in tip-top trim to tackle a major part in an important motion picture?
VL: No, but I think the fifteen years I spent in films prior to that does. A good actress is like a good doctor, Miss Seddon. She has the right to demand high pay not so much for the short amount of time she puts in on a picture, but for all the years before that, years in which she learned her craft properly, so she could perform in a professional manner. You don't pay a doctor merely for what he does for you now, but for all the years he spent learning how to do it.
AS: That's very philosophical.
VL: It's very accurate.
AS: I think it begs the question.
VL: I think you'd like to think it does.
...
AS: Wouldn't you say actresses are merely self-centered little children playing at make-believe?
VL: I would find it very difficult to say anything even remotely like that. I'm surprised you aren't embarrassed saying it.
AS: I'm hard to embarrass, Miss Lone. Why don't you answer the question?
VL: I thought I had answered it.
AS: Not to my satisfaction.
VL: I can see that not being satisfied has made you an unhappy woman, so I--
(Audience applause)
--so, so I don't want to dissatisfy you any further; I'll answer the question a little more completely. No, I think acting at its best can be something of a holy chore. If it emerges from a desire to portray life as it is, rather than just to put in a certain amount of time in front of the cameras for a certain amount of money, then it becomes as important as teaching or writing, because it crystallizes the world for an audience; it preserves the past; it lets others living more confined lives, examine a world they may never come into contact with ...
AS: We have to take a break now, for a commercial--
...
VL: I'd rather not discuss my personal life, if you don't mind.
AS: A "star" has no personal life.
VL: That may be your opinion, Miss Seddon, it isn't mine.
AS: Is there some special reason you won't talk about Mr. Romito?

VL: We have always been good friends--
AS: Oh, come on, Valerie dear, you're starting to sound like a prepared press release: "We're just friends."
VL: You find it difficult to take yes for an answer.
AS: Well, I'll tell you, Miss Lone, I had a phone call today from a gentleman who volunteered to come into our dock tonight, to ask you a few questions. Let's go to the dock ... what is your name, sir?
HASKELL BARKIN: My name is Barkin. Haskell Barkin.
AS: I understand you know Miss Lone.
HB: In a manner of speaking.
VL: I don't understand. I don't think I've ever met this gentleman.
HB: You almost did.
VL: What?
AS: Why don't you just let Mr. Barkin tell his story, Miss Lone.
She came offstage shaking violently. Romito had seen the first half of the interview, at his hotel in Santa Monica. He had hurried to the studio. When she stumbled away from the still-glaring lights of the set, he was there, and she almost fell into his arms. "Oh God, Emery, I'm so frightened ..."
Crewes was furious. He moved into the darkness offstage, heading for Adela Seddon's dressing room/office. Handy had another mission.
The audience was filing out of the studio. Handy dashed for the side exit, came out in the alley next to the studio, and circled the building till he found the parking lot. Barkin was striding toward a big yellow Continental.
"Barkin! You motherfucker!" Handy screamed at him.
The tall man turned and stopped in mid-step. His long hair had been neatly combed for the evening television appearance, and in a suit he looked anachronistic, like King Kong in knickers. But the brace of his chest and shoulders was no less formidable.
He was waiting for Handy.
The little publicist came fast, across the parking lot. "How much did they pay you, you sonofabitch? How much? How much, motherfucker!"
Barkin began to crouch, waiting for Handy, fists balled, knees bent, the handsome face cold and impassive, anticipating the crunch of knuckles against face. Handy was howling now, like a Confederate trooper charging a Union gun emplacement. At a dead run he came down on Barkin, standing between a Corvette and a station wagon parked in the lot.
At the last moment, instead of breaking around the Corvette, Handy miraculously leaped up and came across the bonnet of the Corvette, still running, like a decathlon hurdler. Barkin had half-turned, expecting Handy's rush from the front of the sports car. But the publicist was suddenly above him, bearing down on him like a hunting falcon, before he could correct position.
Handy plunged across the Corvette, denting the red louvered bonnet, and dove full-out at Barkin. Blind with fury, he was totally unaware that he had bounded up onto the car, that he was across it in two steps, that he was flying through the air and crashing into Barkin with all the impact of a human cannonball.
He took Barkin high on the chest, one hand and wrist against the beach-bum's throat. Barkin whooshed air and sailed backward, into the station wagon. Up against the half-lowered radio antenna, which bent under his spine, then cracked and broke off in his back. Barkin screamed, a delirious, half-crazed spiral of sound as the sharp edge of the antenna cut through his suit jacket and shirt, and ripped his flesh. The pain bent him sidewise, and Handy slipped off him, catching his heel on the Corvette and tumbling into the narrow space between the cars. Barkin kicked out, his foot sinking into Handy's stomach as the publicist fell past him. Handy landed on his shoulders, the pain surging up into his chest and down into his groin. His rib cage seemed filled with nettles, and he felt for a moment he might lose control of his bladder.
Barkin tried to go for him, but the antenna was hooked through his jacket. He tried wrenching forward and there was a ripping sound, but it held. He struggled forward toward Handy awkwardly, bending from the waist, but could not get a hold on the publicist. Handy tried to rise, and Barkin stomped him, first on the hand, cracking bones and breaking skin, then on the chest, sending Handy scuttling backward on his buttocks and elbows.
Handy managed to get to his feet and pulled himself around the station wagon. Barkin was trying frantically to get himself undone, but the antenna had hooked in and out of the jacket material, and he was awkwardly twisted.
Handy climbed up onto the hood of the station wagon and on hands and knees, like a child, came across toward Barkin. The big man tried to reach him, but Handy fell across his neck and with

senseless fury sank histeeth into Barkin's ear. The beach-bum shrieked again, a woman's sound, and shook his head like an animal trying to lose a flea. Handy hung on, bringing the taste of blood to his mouth. His hand came across and dug into the corner of Barkin's mouth, pulling the lip up and away. The fingers spread, he poked at Barkin's eye, and the beach-bum rattled against the car like a bird in a cage. Then all the pains merged and Barkin sagged in a semiconscious boneless mass. He hung against the weight of Handy and the hooking antenna. The strain was too great, the jacket ripped through, and Barkin fell face-forward hitting the side of the Corvette, pulling Handy over the top of the station wagon. Barkin's face hit the sports car; the nose broke. Barkin fainted with the pain, and slipped down into a Buddha-like position, Handy tumbling over him and landing on his knees between the cars.

Handy pulled himself up against the station wagon, and without realizing Barkin was unconscious, kicked out with a loose-jointed vigor, catching the beach-bum in the ribs with the toe of his shoe. Barkin fell over on his side, and lay there.

Handy, gasping, breathing raggedly, caromed off the cars, struggling to find his way to his own car. He finally made it to the Impala, got behind the wheel and through a fog of gray and red managed to get the key into the ignition. He spun out of the parking lot, scraping a Cadillac and a Mercury, his headlights once sweeping across a row of cars in which a station wagon and a Corvette were parked side by side, seeing a bleeding bag of flesh and fabric inching its way along the concrete, trying to get to its feet, touching softly at the shattered expanse of what had been a face, what had once been a good living.

Handy drove without knowing where he was going.

When he appeared at Randi's door twenty minutes later--having left her off from their date only a few hours before--she was wearing a shortie nightgown that ended at her thighs. "Jesus, Fred, what happened?" she asked, and helped him inside. He collapsed on her bed, leaving dark streaks of brown blood on the candy-striped sheets. She pulled his clothes off him, managing to touch his genitals as often as possible, and tended to his needs, all sorts of needs.

He paid no attention. He had fallen asleep.

It had been a full day for Handy.

8

The columns had picked it up. They said Valerie Lone had carried it off beautifully, coming through the barrage of viciousness and sniping with Adela Seddon like a champ. Army Archerd called Seddon a "shrike"' and suggested she try her dictionary for the difference between "argument" and "controversy," not to mention the difference between "intimidation" and "interview." Valerie was a minor folk heroine. She had gone into the lair of the dragon and had emerged dragging its fallopians behind her. Crewes and Handy were elated. There had been mutterings from Haskell Barkin's attorney, a slim and good-looking man named Taback who had seemed ashamed even to be handling Barkin's complaint. When Handy and Crewes and the Studio battery of lawyers got done explaining precisely what had happened, and Taback had met Handy, the attorney returned to Barkin and advised him to use Blue Cross to take care of the damage it would cover, get his current paramour to lay out for the facial rebuilding, and drop charges: no one would believe that a hulk the size of Haskell Barkin could get so thoroughly dribbled by a pigeonweight like Handy.

But that was only part of the Crewes-Handy elation. Valerie had begun to be seen everywhere with Emery Romito. The fan magazines were having a field day with it. To a generation used to reviling their elders, with no respect for age, there was a kind of sentimental Albert Payson Terhune loveliness to the reuniting of old lovers. No matter where Valerie and Emery went, people beamed on them. Talk became common that after all those years of melancholy and deprivation, at long last the lovers might be together permanently.

For Emery Romito it was the first time he had been truly alive since they had killed his career during the draft-dodging scandal. But that was all forgotten now; he seemed to swell with the newfound dignity he had acquired squiring the columns' hottest news item. That, combined with his rediscovery of what Valerie had always meant to him, made him something greater than the faded character actor the years had forced him to become. The fear was still there, but it could be forgotten for short times now.

Valerie had begun rehearsals with her fellow cast-members, and she was growing more confident day by day. The Seddon show had served to fill her once again with fear, but its repercussions--demonstrated in print--had effectively drained it away. These rises and fallings in temperament had an unconscious effect on her, but it was not discernible to those around her.

On the night of the second day of rehearsals, Emery came to pick her up at the Studio, in a car the Studio had rented for him. He took her to dinner at a small French restaurant near the Hollywood Ranch Market, and after the final Drambuie they drove up to Sunset, turned left, and

cruised toward Beverly Hills.
It was a Friday night.
The hippies were out.
The teenie-boppers. The flower children. The new ones. The long hair, the tight boots, the paisley shirts, the mini-skirts, the loose sexuality, the hair vests, the shirts with the sleeves cut off, the noise, the jeering. The razored crevasse that existed between their time, when they had been golden and fans had pressed up against sawhorses at the premieres, to get their autographs, and today, a strange and almost dreamlike time of Surrealistic youth who spoke another tongue, moved with liquid fire and laughed at things that were painful. At a stoplight near Laurel Canyon, they stopped and were suddenly surrounded by hippies hustling copies of an underground newspaper, the L.A. Free Press. They were repelled by the disordered, savage look of the kids, like barbarians. And though the news vendors spoke politely, though they merely pressed up against the car and shoved their papers into the windows, the terror their very presence evoked in the two older people panicked Romito and he floored the gas pedal, spurting forward down Sunset, sending one beaded and flowered news-hippie sprawling, journals flying.
Romito rolled up his window, urging Valerie to do the same. It was something Kafka-esque to them as they whirled past the discothèques and the psychedelic book shops and the outdoor restaurants where the slim, hungry children of the strobe age languished, turned on, grooving heavy behind meth or grass.
He drove fast. All the way out Sunset to the Coast Highway and out the coast to Malibu.
Finally, Valerie said softly, "Emery, do you remember The Beach House? We used to go there all the time for dinner. Remember? Let's stop there. For a drink."
Romito smiled, the lines around his eyes gathering, in gentle humor. "Do I remember? I remember the night Dick Barthelmess did the tango on the bar with that swimmer, the girl from the Olympics ... you know the one ..."
But she didn't know the one. That particular memory had been lost. He had had the time to nurse the old memories--she had been slinging hash. No, she didn't remember the girl. But she did remember the old roadhouse that had been so popular with their set one of those years.
But when they came to the spot, they found the old roadhouse--predictably--had been razed. In its stead was a tiny beach-serving shopping center, and on the spot where Dick Barthelmess had danced the tango on the bar with that swimmer from the Olympics, there was an all-night liquor store, with a huge neon sign.
Emery Romito drove a few miles down the Coast Highway, past the liquor store, more by reflex than design. He pulled off on a side road paralleling the ocean, and there, on a ridge that sloped quickly down into darkness and surf somewhere below them, he stopped. They sat there silently together, the car turned off, their minds turned off, trapped in the darkness of loneliness, the landscape and their past.
Then, in a rush, all of it came back to Valerie Lone. The rush of thoughts waiting to be reexamined after twenty years. The reasons, the situations, the circumstances.
"Emery, why didn't we get married?"
And she answered her own question with a smile he could not see in the darkness. It was possible he had not even heard her, for he did not answer. And in her mind she ticked off the answers, all the deadly answers.
It was the dreams each of them had substituted for reality; the tenacity with which they had tried to clutch smoke and dream-mist; the stubborn refusal of each of them to acknowledge that the dream-mist and the smoke were bound to become ashes. And when each had been swallowed whole by the very careers they had thought would free them, they had become strangers. They were frightened to commit to one another, to anyone really, to anything but the world that stood and called their names a hundred times in a second, and beat hands in praise.
Then Emery spoke. As though his thoughts had been tracking similarly to her own, heading on a collision course for her mind and her thoughts hurtling toward him.
"You know, darling Val, you always made more money than me. Your name was always star-billing ... at best, mine was always 'Also Featuring.' It wouldn't have worked."
She was nodding agreement, at the complete validity of it, and then, in an instant, the shock of what she was accepting without argument, believing again as she had the first time, the insanity of it hit her. Twenty years ago, in the fantasy-world, yes, those might have been real reasons--in the lunatic way that blasted and twisted logic seems rational in nightmares--but she had spent almost two decades in another life, and now she knew they were false, as specious as the life that claimed her on the screen.
But for a moment, for a long moment she had accepted it all again. It was the town, the industry, the way the show biz life sucked one under. For those in the industry it had rapidly become that

way, as they had fallen under the spell of their own weird and golden lives; it had taken more than twenty years to catch on completely, to permeate the culture. But now it was possible never to come up from under that thick fog of delusion. Because it hung like a Los Angeles smog across the entire nation, perhaps the world.

But not for Valerie Lone. Never again for her.

"Emery, listen to me ..."

He was talking softly to himself, the sound of moths in the fog. Talking about screen credits and money and days that had never really been alive, and now had to be put to death fully and finally.

"Emery! Darling! Please, listen to me!"

He turned to her. She saw him, then. Even dimly, only by moonlight, she saw him as he really was, not as she had wished him to be, standing there in the doorway of the bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel that first night of her new life with him. She saw what had happened to the man who had been strong enough to deny war and say he would lose everything rather than fight against his fellow man. Emery Romito had become a willing prisoner of his own show biz life. He had never escaped.

She knew she had to explain it all to him, to unlearn him, and then teach him anew. An infinite sadness filled her as she readied her arguments, her coercion, her explanations of what the other world was like ... the world he had always thought of as dull and empty and wasted.

"Darling, I've been out in the desert, out in nowhere, for almost twenty years. You've got to believe me when I tell you, none of this matters. The billing, the money, the life at the studios, it doesn't matter! It's all make-believe, we always said it was that, but we let it get us, grab hold of us. We have to understand there is a whole world without any of it. What if the show doesn't go on? What then? Why worry? We can do other things, if we care about each other. Do you understand what I'm saying? It doesn't matter if your picture is in the PLAYERS DIRECTORY, as long as you come home at night and turn the key in the door and know there's someone on the other side who cares whether or not you were killed in the traffic on the Freeway. Emery, talk to me!"

Silence. Straining on her part, toward him. Silence. Then, "Val, why don't we go dancing ... like we used to do?"

The shadow came again to devour her. It showed its teeth and it prodded her, looking for the most vulnerable places, the places still filled with the juice of life, which it would eat to the bone, and then suck the marrow from the bone, till it collapsed into despair as had the rest of her.

She fought it.

She talked to him.

Her voice was the low, insistent voice she had cultivated in the star years. Now she turned it to its full power, and used it to win the most important part of her career.

We have a chance to make it together at last.

God has given us a second chance.

We can have what we lost twenty years ago.

Please, Emery, listen.

Emery Romito had been falling for many years. A great, shrieking fall down a long tunnel of despair. Her voice came to him down the length of that tunnel, and he clutched for it, missed, clutched again and found it. He let it hold him, swaying above the abyss, and slowly pulled himself back up that fragile thread.

Pathetically, he asked her, "Really? Do you think we can? Really?"

No one is more convincing than a woman fighting for her life. Really? She showed him, really. She told him, and she charmed him, and she gave him the strength he had lost so long ago. With her career burgeoning again it was certain they would have all the good things they had lost on the way to this place, this night.

And finally, he leaned across, this old man, and he kissed her, this tired woman. A shy kiss, almost immature, as though his lips had never touched all the lips of starlets and chorus girls and secretaries and women so much less important than this woman beside him in a rented car on a dark oceanside road.

He was frightened, she could feel it. Almost as frightened as she was. But he was willing to try; to see if they could dredge up something of permanence from the garbage-heaps of the love they had spent twenty years wasting.

Then he started the car, backed and filled and started the return to Hollywood.

The shadow was with her, still hungry, but it was set to waiting. She was no less frightened of the long-haired children and the sharp-tongued interviewers and the merciless lights of the sound stages, but at least now there was a goal; now there was something to move toward.

A gentle breeze came up, and they opened the windows.

HANDY

My first premonition of disaster to come was during the conversation Crewes had with Spencer Lichtman. It was two days before he was to shoot her initial scenes for the film. Spencer had made an appointment to discuss Valerie, and Crewes had asked me to be present.
I sat mute and alert. Spencer made his pitch; it was a good one, and a brief one. A three-picture deal with Crewes and the Studio. Sharpel, the Studio business head, was there, and he did some of the finest broken-field running I've ever seen. He suggested everyone wait to see how Valerie did in Subterfuge.
Spencer looked terribly disturbed at the conversation as he left. He said nothing to me. Neither did Sharpel, who seemed uneasy that I'd been in the room at all.
When they'd gone, I sat waiting for Arthur Crewes to say something. Finally, he said, "How's the publicity coming?"
"You've got the skinnys on your desk, Arthur. You know what's happening." Then I added, "I wish I knew what was happening."
He played dumb. "What would you like to know, Fred?"
I looked at him levelly. He knew I was on to him. There was very little point in obfuscation. "Who's got the pressure on you, Arthur?"
He sighed, shrugged as if to say wellllll, y'found me out, and answered me wearily. "The Studio. They're nervous. They said Valerie is having trouble with the lines, she's awkward, the usual succotash."
"How the hell do they know? She hasn't even worked yet; only rehearsing. And Jimmy's kept the sessions strictly closed off."
Crewes hit the desk with the palm of his hand, then again. "They've got a spy in the crew."
"Oh, c'mon, you're kidding!"
"I'm not kidding. They've got a pile tied up in this one. That ski troops picture Jenkey made is bombing. They won't get back negative costs. They don't want to take any chances with this one. So they've got a fink in the company."
"Want me to sniff him out?"
"Why bother. They'll only plant another one. It's probably Jeanine, the assistant wardrobe mistress ... or old Whatshisname ... Skelly, the makeup man. No, there's no sense trying to pry out the rotten apple; it won't help her performance any."
I listened to all of it with growing concern. There was a new tone in Crewes's voice. A tentative tone, one just emerging for the first time, trying its flavor in the world. I could tell he was unhappy with the sound of it, that he was fighting it. But it was getting stronger. It was the tone of amelioration, of shading, of backing-off. It was the caterpillar tremble of fear that could metamorphose easily into the lovely butterfly of cowardice.
"You aren't planning on dumping her, are you, Arthur?" I asked.
He looked up sharply, annoyed. "Don't be stupid. I didn't go all through this just to buckle when the Studio gets nervous. Besides, I wouldn't do that to her."
"I hope not."
"I said not!"
"But there's always the chance they can sandbag you; after all, they do tend the cash register."
Crewes ran a nervous hand through his hair. "Let's see how she does. Shooting starts in two days. Kencannon says she's coming along. Let's just wait... and see how she does ..."
How she did was not good.
I was on the set from the moment they started. Valerie's call was for seven o'clock in the morning. For makeup and wardrobe. The Studio limo went to get her. She was in makeup for the better part of an hour. Johnny Black showed up as she was going into Wardrobe. He kissed her on the cheek and she said, "I hope I do justice to your lines. It's a very nice part, Mr. Black." We walked over to the coffee truck and had a cup each. Neither of us spoke. Finally, Black looked down at me and asked--a bit too casually--"How's it look?"
I shrugged. No answer. I didn't have one.
Kencannon came on the set a few minutes later, and got things tight. The crew was alert, ready, they'd been put on special notice that these scenes were going to be tough enough, so let's have a whole gang of cooperation. Everyone wanted her to make it.
It was bright-eyed/bushy-tailed time.
She came out of Wardrobe and walked straight to Jim Kencannon. He took her aside and whispered to her in a dark corner for fully twenty minutes.
Then they started shooting.
She knew her lines, but her mannerisms were strictly by rote. There was an edge of fear in even the simplest of movements. Kencannon tried to put her at ease. It only made her more tense. She

was locked into fear, a kind of fear no one could penetrate deeply enough to erode. She had lived with it unconsciously for too long. There was too much at stake for her here. The only defense she had was what she knew instinctively as an actress. Unfortunately, the actress who remembered all of it, and who put it to use, almost somnambulistically, was an actress of the Forties. Miss Ankle-Strap Wedgie. An actress who had not really been required to act ... merely to look good, snap out her lines and show a lot of leg.

They ran through the first shot again and again. It was horrible to watch. Repetition after repetition, with Kencannon trying desperately to get a quality out of her that gibed with the modern tone of the film as a whole. It simply was not there.

"Scene eighty-eight, take seven, Apple!"

"Scene eighty-eight, take seven, Bravo!"

"Scene eighty-eight, take seven, China!"

"Scene eighty-eight, take fifteen, Hotel!"

"Scene ninety-one, take three, X-ray!"

Over and over and over. She blew it each time. The crew grew restless, then salty, then disgusted. The other actors began making snotty remarks off-camera. Kencannon was marvelous with her, but it was a disaster, right from speed and roll it. Finally, they got something shot.

Kencannon wandered off into the darkness of the sound stage. Valerie went to her dressing room. Presumably to collapse. The crew started setting up the next shot. I followed Kencannon back into the corner.

"Jim?"

He turned around, the unlit pipe hanging from the corner of his mouth. It was still before-lunch, early in the day, and he looked exhausted.

"Will it be all right?" I asked him.

He started to turn away. He didn't need me bugging him. I guess the tone of concern in my voice stopped him. "Maybe I can cut it together so it'll work."

And he walked away from me.

That afternoon Kencannon got a visit from Crewes on the set, and they talked quietly for a long time, back by the prop wagon. Then they began pruning Valerie's part. A line here, a reaction shot there. Not much at first, but enough to let her know they were worried. It only served to deepen her nervousness. But they had no choice. They were backed against a wall.

But then, so was she.

The remainder of the shooting, over the next week, was agony. There was no doubt from the outset that she couldn't make it, that the footage was dreadful. But we always harbored the secret hope that the magic of the film editor could save her.

The dailies were even more horrifying, for there, up on the projection room screen we could see the naked failure of what we had tried to do. The day's footage went from flat and unnatural to genuinely inept. Kencannon had tried to cover as much as he could with two and three angles or reaction shots by supporting actors, by trick photography, by bizarre camerawork. None of it made it. There was still Valerie in the center of it, like the silent eye of a whirling dervish. Technique could not cover up what was lacking: a focus, a central core, a soul, a fire. Her scenes were disastrous.

When the lights came up in the projection room, and Crewes and myself were alone--we wouldn't allow anyone else to see the dailies, not then we wouldn't--we looked at each other, and Arthur breathed heavily, "Oh God, Fred! What are we going to do?"

I stared at the blank projection screen. There was such a helplessness in his voice, I didn't know what to say. "Can we keep the Studio from finding out, at least till Kencannon cuts it together?"

He shook his head. "Not a chance."

"They move along behind you?"

"Close as they can. I think they've got the labs printing up duplicate sets of dailies. They've probably already run what we just saw here."

Why? I asked myself. Why?

And the answer ran through my head the way those dailies had been run. Behold, without argument, self-explanatory. The answer was simple: Valerie Lone had never been a very good actress, not ever. The films she had made were for an audience hungry for any product, which was why Veda Ann Borg and Vera Hruba Ralston and Sonja Henie and Jeanne Crain and Rhonda Fleming and Ellen Drew and all the other pretty, not-particularly-talented ones had made it. It was a nation before teevee, that had theaters to fill, with "A" features starring Paul Muni and Spencer Tracy and John Garfield and Bogart and Ingrid Bergman; but those theaters also needed a lower half to the bill, the "B" pictures with Rory Calhoun and Lex Barker and Ann Blyth and Wandra Hendrix. They needed product, not Helen Hayes.

So all the semi-talented had made fabulous livings. Anything sold. But now, films for theatrical release were budgeted in the millions, for even the second-class product, and no one could risk the semi-talented. Oh, there were still the pretty ones who got in the films without the talent to get themselves arrested, but they were in the minority, in the quickie flicks. But Subterfuge was no quickie. It was a heavy sugar operation into which the Studio had poured millions already, not to mention unspoken but desperate needs and expectations.

Valerie Lone was one of the last of that extinct breed of "semi-stars" who were still vaguely in the public memory--though the new generations, the kids, didn't know her from a white rabbit--but she didn't have the moxie to cut it the way Bette Davis had, or Joan Crawford, or Barbara Stanwyck. She was just plain old Valerie Lone, and that simply wasn't good enough.

She was one of the actresses who had made it then, because almost anyone who could stand up on good legs could make it ... but not now, because now it took talent of a high order, or a special something that was called "personality." And it wasn't the same kind of "personality" Valerie had used in her day.

"What're you going to do, Arthur?"

He didn't look at me. He just stared straight ahead, at the empty screen. "l don't know. So help me God, I just don't know."

They didn't sign her for a multiple.

At the premiere, held at the Egyptian, Valerie showed with Emery Romito. She was poised, she was elegant, she signed autographs and, as Crewes remarked under his breath to me, as she came up to be interviewed by the television emcee, she was dying at the very moment of what she thought was her greatest triumph. We had not, of course, told her how much Kencannon had had to leave on the cutting-room floor. It was, literally, a walk-on.

When she emerged from the theater, after the premiere, her face was dead white. She knew what was waiting for her. And there was nothing we could say. We stood there, numbly shaking hands with all the well-wishers who told us we had a smash on our hands, as Valerie Lone walked stiffly through the crowd, practically leading the dumbfounded Romito. Their car came to the curb, and they started to get into it. Then Mitchum emerged from the lobby, and the crowd behind their ropes went mad.

There had not been a single cheer or ooh-ahhh for Valerie Lone as she had stood waiting for the limousine to pull up. She was dead, and she knew it.

I tried to call Julie that night, after the big party at the Daisy. She was out. I took a bottle of charcoal Jack Daniels and put it inside me as quickly as I could.

I fell out on the floor. But it wasn't punishment enough. I dreamed.

In the dreams I was trying to explain. My tongue was made of cloth, and it wouldn't form words. But it didn't matter, because the person I was trying to talk to couldn't hear me. It was a corpse. I could not make out the face of the corpse.

9

This was the anatomy of the sin against Valerie Lone:

The Agency called. Not Spencer Lichtman; he was in Florida negotiating a contract for one of their female clients with Ivan Tors for his new Everglades pilot. He wouldn't be back for six weeks. It was a difficult contract: the pilot, options for the series if it sold, billing, transportation, and Spencer was screwing her. So the Agency called. A voice of metallic precision that may or may not have had a name attached to it, informed her that they were reorganizing, something to do with the fiscal debenture cutback of post-merger personnel concerned with bibble-bibble-bibble. She asked the voice of the robot what that meant, and it meant she did not have a contract with the Agency, which meant she had no representation.

She called Arthur Crewes. He was out.

The Beverly Hills Hotel management called. The Studio business office had just rung them up to inform them that rent on the bungalow would cease as of the first of the month. Two weeks away.

She called Arthur Crewes. He was out.

She called long distance to Shivey's Diner. She wanted to ask him if he had gotten a replacement for her. Shivey was delighted to hear from her, hey! Everybody was just tickled pink to hear how she'd made good again, hey! Everybody was really jumping with joy at the way the papers said she was so popular again, hey! It's great she got back up on top again, and boy, nobody deserved it better than their girl Val, hey! Don't forget your old friends, don't get uppity out there just because you're a big star and famous again, doncha know!

She thanked him, told him she wouldn't forget them and hung up. Hey!

She could not go back to the desert, to the diner.

She had tasted the champagne again, and the taste of champagne lingers.

She called Arthur Crewes. He was in the cutting room and could not be disturbed.
She called Arthur Crewes. He was in New York with the promotion people, he would be back first of the week.
She called Handy. He was with Crewes.
She called Emery Romito. He was shooting a Western for CBS. His service said he would call back later. But when he did, it was late at night, and she was half-asleep. When she called him the next day, he was at the studio still shooting. She left her name, but the call did not get returned.
The hungry shadow came at a dead run.
And there was no place to hide.
Disaster is a brush-fire. If it reaches critical proportions, nothing can stop it, nothing can put out the fire. Disaster observes a scorched earth policy.
She called Arthur Crewes. She told Roz she was coming in to see him the next morning.
There was no Studio limousine on order. She took a taxi. Arthur Crewes had spent a sleepless night, knowing she was coming, rerunning her films in his private theater. He was waiting for her.
"How is the picture doing, Arthur?"
He smiled wanly. "The opening grosses are respectable. The Studio is pleased."
"I read the review in Time. They were very nice to you."
"Yes. Ha-ha, very unexpected. Those smart alecks usually go for the clever phrase."
Silence.
"Arthur, the rent is up in a week. I'd like to go to work."
"Uh, I'm still working on the script for the new picture, Valerie. You know, it's been five months since we ended production. The Studio kept up the rent on the bungalow through post-production. Editing, scoring, dubbing, the works. They think they've done enough. I can't argue with them, Valerie ... not really."
"I want to work, Arthur."
"Hasn't your agent been getting you work?"
"Two television guest appearances. Not much else. I guess the word went out about me. The picture ..."
"You were fine, Valerie, just fine."
"Arthur, don't lie to me. I know I'm in trouble. I can't get a job. You have to do something."
There was a pathetic tone in her voice, yet she was forceful. Like someone demanding unarguable rights. Crewes was desolate. His reaction was hostility.
"I have to do something? Good God, Valerie, I've kept you working for over six months on three days of shooting. Isn't that enough?"
Her mouth worked silently for a moment, then very softly she said: "No, it isn't enough. I don't know what to do. I can't go back to the diner. I'm back here now. I have no one else to turn to, you're the one who brought me here. You have to do something, it's your responsibility."
Arthur Crewes began to tremble. Beneath the desk he gripped his knees with his hands. "My responsibility," he said bravely, "ended with your contract, Valerie. I've extended myself, even you have to admit that. If I had another picture even readying for production, I'd let you read for a part, but I'm in the midst of some very serious rewrite with the screenwriter. I have nothing. What do you want me to do?"
His assault cowed her. She didn't know what to say. He had been fair, had done everything he could for her, recommended her to other producers. But they both knew she had failed in the film, knew that the word had gone out. He was helpless.
She started to go, and he stopped her.
"Miss Lone." Not Val, or Valerie now. A retreating back, a pall of guilt, a formal name. "Miss Lone, can I, uh, loan you some money?"
She turned and looked at him across a distance.
"Yes, Mr. Crewes. You can."
He reached into his desk and took out a checkbook.
"I can't afford pride, Mr. Crewes. Not now. I'm too scared. So make it a big check."
He dared not look at her as she said it. Then he bent to the check and wrote it in her name. It was not nearly big enough to stop the quivering of his knees. She took it, without looking at it, and left quietly. When the intercom buzzed and Roz said there was a call, he snapped at her, "Tell 'em I'm out. And don't bother me for a while!" He clicked off and slumped back in his deep chair.
What else could I do? he thought.
If he expected an answer, it was a long time in coming.
After she told Emery what had happened (even though he had been with her these last five months, and knew what it was from the very tomb odor of it) she waited for him to say don't worry, I'll

take care of you, now that we're together again it will be all right, I love you, you're mine. But he said nothing like that.
"They won't pick up the option, no possibility?"
"You know they dropped the option, Emery. Months ago. It was a verbal promise only. For the next film. But Arthur Crewes told me he's having trouble with the script. It could be months."
He walked around the little living room of his apartment in the Stratford Beach Hotel. A depressing little room with faded wallpaper and a rug the management would not replace, despite the holes worn in it.
"Isn't there anything else?"
"A Western. TV. Just a guest shot, sometime next month. I read for it last week, they seemed to like me."
"Well, you'll take it, of course."
"I'll take it, Emery, but what does it mean ... it's only a few dollars. It isn't a living."
"We all have to make do the best we can, Val--"
"Can I stay here with you for a few weeks, till things get straightened away?"
Formed in amber, held solidified in a prison of reflections that showed his insides more clearly than his outside, Emery Romito let go the thread that had saved him, and plunged once more down the tunnel of despair. He was unable to do it. He was not calloused, merely terrified. He was merely an old man trying to relate to something that had never even been a dream--merely an illusion. And now she threatened to take even that cheap thing, simply by her existence, her presence here in this room.
"Listen, Val, I've tried to come to terms. I understand what you're going through. But it's hard, very hard. I really have to hurry myself just to make ends meet ..."
She spoke to him then, of what they had had years ago, and what they had sensed only a few months before. But he was already retreating from her, gibbering with fear, into the shadows of his little life.
"I can't do it, Valerie. I'm not a young man any more. You remember all those days, I'd do anything; anything at all; I was wild. Well, now I'm paying for it. We all have to pay for it. We should have known, we should have put some of it aside, but who'd ever have thought it would end. No, I can't do it. I haven't got the push to do it. I get a little work, an 'also featuring' once in a while. You have to be hungry, the way all the new ones, the young ones, the way they're hungry. I can barely manage alone, Valerie. It wouldn't work, it just wouldn't."
She stared at him.
"I have to hang on!" he shouted at her.
She pinned him. "Hang on? To what? To guest shots, a life of walk-ons, insignificant character bits, and a Saturday night at the Friars Club? What have you got, Emery? What have you really got that's worth anything? Do you have me, do you have a real life, do you have anything that's really yours, that they can't take away from you?"
But she stopped. The argument was hopeless.
He sagged before her. A tired, terrified old man with his picture in the PLAYERS DIRECTORY. What backbone he might have at one time possessed had been removed from his body through the years, vertebra by vertebra. He slumped before her, weighted down by his own inability to live. Left with a hideous walking death, with elegance on the outside, soot on the inside, Valerie Lone stared at the stranger who had made love to her in her dreams for twenty years. And in that instant she knew it had never really been the myth and the horror of the town that had kept them apart. It had been their own inadequacies.
She left him, then. She could not castigate him. His was such a sordid little existence, to take that from him would be to kill him.
And she was still that much stronger than Emery Romito, her phantom lover, not to need to do it.
HANDY

I came home to find Valerie Lone sitting at the edge of the pool, talking to Pegeen. She looked up when I came through the gate, and smiled a thin smile at me.
I tried not to show how embarrassed I was.
Nor how much I'd been avoiding her.
Nor how desperately I felt like bolting and running away, all the way back to New York City.
She got up, said good-bye to Pegeen, and came toward me. I had been shopping; shirt boxes from Ron Postal and bags from de Voss had to be shifted so I could take her hand. She was wearing a summer dress, quite stylish, really. She was trying to be very light, very inoffensive; trying not to shove the guilt in my face.
"Come on upstairs, where it's cooler," I suggested.

In the apartment, she sat down and looked around.
"I see you're moving," she said.
I grinned, a little nervously, making small talk. "No, it's always this way. I've got a house in Sherman Oaks, but at the moment there's a kindofa sorta ex-almost ex-wife nesting there. It's in litigation. So I live here, ready to jump out any time."
She nodded understanding.
The intricacies of California divorce horrors were not beyond her. She had had a few of those, as I recalled.
"Mr. Handy--" she began.
I did not urge her to call me Fred.
"You were the one who talked to me first, and ..."
And there it was. I was the one responsible. It was all on me. I'd heard what had happened with Crewes, with that rat bastard Spencer Lichtman, with Romito, and now it was my turn. She must have had nowhere else to go, no one else to impale, and so it was mea culpa time.
I was the one who had resurrected her from the safety and sanctity of her grave; brought her back to a world as transitory as an opening night. She looked at me and knew it wouldn't do any good, but she did it.
She laid it all on me, word by word by word.
What could I do, for Christ's sake? I had done my best. I'd even watched over her with Haskell Barkin, carried her practically on my shoulders through all the shitty scenes when she'd arrived in town. What more was there for me to do ... ?
I'm not my brother's goddam keeper, I yelled inside my head. Let me alone, woman. Get off my back. I'm not going to die for you, or for anyone. I've got a job, and I've got to keep it. I got the publicity Subterfuge needed, and I thank you for helping me keep my job, but dammit I didn't inherit you. I'm not your daddy, I'm not your boy friend, I'm just a puffman in off the street, trying to keep the Dragon Lady from grabbing his house, the only roots I've ever had. So stop it, stop talking, stop trying to make me cry, because I won't.
Don't call me a graverobber, you old bitch!
"I'm a proud woman, Mr. Handy. But I'm not very smart. I let you all lie to me. Not once, but twice. The first time I was too young to know better; but this time I fell into it again knowing what you would do to me. I was one of the lucky ones, do you know that? I was lucky because I got out alive. But do you know what you've done to me? You've condemned me to the kind of life poor Emery leads, and that's no life at all."
She didn't talk any more.
She just sat there staring at me.
She didn't want excuses, or escape clauses, or anything I had to give. She knew I was helpless, that I was no better and no worse than any of them. That I had helped kill her in the name of love.
And that the worst crimes are committed in the name of love, not hate.
We both knew there would be an occasional tv bit, and enough money to keep living, but here, in this fucking ugly town that wasn't living. It was crawling like a wounded thing through the years, till one day the end came, and that was the only release you could pray for.
I knew Julie would not be coming back to me.
Julie knew. She was on the road because she couldn't stand the town, because she knew it would tear open and throw her insides on the street. She had always said she wasn't going to go the way all the others had gone, and now I knew why I hadn't been able to reach her on the road. It was Good-bye, Dolly.
And the Dragon Lady would get the house; and I would stay in Hollywood, God help me.
Until the birds came to pick out my eyes, and I wasn't Handy the fair-haired boy any longer, or even Handy the old pro, but something they called Fred Handy? oh, yeah, I remember him, he was good in his day. Because after all, what the hell did I have to offer but a fast mouth and a few ideas, and once the one was slowed and the other had run out like sand from an hourglass, I was no better off than Valerie Lone or her poor miserable Emery Romito.
She left me standing there, in my apartment that always looked as though I was moving. But we both knew: I wasn't going anywhere.

10

In a very nice little restaurant-bar on Sunset Boulevard, as evening came in to Hollywood across the rim of the bowl, Valerie Lone sat high on a barstool, eating a hot roast beef sandwich with gravy covering the very crisp french fries. She sipped slowly from a glass of dark ale. At the far end of the bar a television set was mumbling softly. It was an old movie, circa 1942.

None of the players in the movie had been Valerie Lone. The Universe loved her, but was totally devoid of a sense of irony. It was simply an old movie.
Three seats down from where Valerie Lone sat, a hippie wearing wraparound shades and seven strings of beads looked up at the bartender. "Hey, friend," he said softly.
The bartender came to him, obviously disliking the hairy trade these people represented, but unable to ignore the enormous amounts of money they somehow spent in his establishment. "Uh-huh?"
"Howzabout turning something else on ... or maybe even better turn that damn thing off, I'll put a quarter in the jukebox." The bartender gave him a surly look, then sauntered to the set and turned it off. Valerie Lone continued to eat as the world was turned off.
The hippie put the quarter in the jukebox and pressed out three rock numbers. He returned to his barstool and the music inundated the room.
Outside, night had come, and with it, the night lights. One of the lights illuminated a twenty-three-foot-high billboard for the film Subterfuge starring Robert Mitchum and Gina Lollobrigida; produced by Arthur Crewes; directed by James Kencannon; written by John D. F. Black; music by Lalo Schifrin.
At the end of the supplementary credits there was a boxed line that was very difficult to read: it had been whited-out.
The line had once read:
ALSO FEATURING MISS VALERIE LONE as Angela.
Angela had become a walk-on. She no longer existed.
Valerie Lone existed only as a woman in a very nice little restaurant and bar on the Sunset Strip. She was eating. And the long shadow had also begun to feed.
--Hollywood and Montclair, N.J., 1967

DANIEL WHITE FOR THE GREATER GOOD
Begin with absolute blackness. The sort of absolute blackness that does not exist in reality. A black as deep and profound as the space directly under a hell pressed to the ground; a black as all-encompassing as blindness from birth; a black that black. The black of a hallway devoid of light, and a black--advancing down that hallway--going away from you. At the end of a hallway as black as this, a square of light painfully white. A doorway through which can be seen a window, pouring dawn sunlight in a torrent into the room, through the doorway, and causing a sunspot of light at the end of the pitch-black hallway.
If this were a motion picture, it would be starkly impressive, the black so deep, and the body moving away from the camera, down the hall toward the square of superhuman white. The body clinging to the right-hand wall, moving down the tunnel of ebony, slowly, painstakingly, almost drunkenly. The body is a form, merely a form, not quite as black as the hallway mouth that contains it, but still without sufficient contrast to break what would be superlative camera work, were this a motion picture. But it is not a motion picture. It is a story of some truth.
It is a story, and for that reason, the effect of superlative cinematography must be shattered as the body pulls itself to the door, lurches through, and stumbles to grasp at the edge of a chest-high wooden counter.The camera angles (were this a motion picture) would suddenly shift and tilt, bringing into immediate focus the soft yet hard face of a police desk sergeant, his collar open and sweat beading his neck and upper lip. We might study the raised bushy eyebrows and the quickly horrified expression just before the lips go rigid. Then the camera would pan rapidly around the squad room; we would see the Georgia sunrise outside that streaming window, and finally our gaze would settle on the face of a girl.
A white girl.
With a smear of blood at the edge of her mouth, with one eye swollen shut and blue-black, with her hair disarrayed and matted with blood, leaves and dirt ... and an expression of pain that says one thing:
"Help ... me ..."
The camera would follow that face as it sinks slowly to the floor.
Then, if this were a movie, and not reality, in a town without a name in central Georgia, the camera would cut to black. Sharp cut, and wait for the next scene.
It might have been simpler, had he been a good man. At least underneath; but he wasn't. He was, very simply, a dirty nigger. When he could not cadge a free meal by intimidation, he stole. He smelled bad, he had the morals of a swamp pig, and as if that were not enough to exclude him from practically every stratum of society, he had bad teeth, worse breath and a foul mouth. Fittingly, his name was Daniel White.
They had no difficulty arresting him, and even less difficulty proving he was the man who had raped and beaten Marion Gore. He was found sleeping exhausted in a corner of the hobo jungle at

the side of the railroad tracks on the edge of the town. There was blood on his hands and hair under his fingernails. Police lab analysis confirmed that the blood type and follicles of hair matched those of Marion Gore.

Far from circumstantial, these facts merely verified the confession Daniel White made when arrested. He was not even granted the saving grace of having been drunk. He was surly, obscene and thoroughly pleased with what he had done. The fact that Marion Gore had been sixteen, a virgin, and had gone into a coma after making her way from the field where she had been attacked to the police station, seemed to make no impression on Daniel White.

The local papers tagged him--and they were conservative at best--a conscienceless beast. He was that. At least.

It was not unexpected, then, to find a growing wave of mass hatred in the town. A hatred that continually emerged in the words, "Lynch the bastard."

At first, the word black was not even inserted between the and bastard. It wasn't needed. It came later, when the concept of lynching gave way to a peculiar itch in the palms of many white hands. An itch that might well be scratched by a length of hemp rope.

It had to happen quickly, or it would not happen at all. The chief of police would call the mayor, the mayor would get in touch with the governor, and in a matter of hours the National Guard would truck in. So it had to happen quickly, or not at all.

And it was bound to happen. There was no doubt of that. There had been seeds planted--the school trouble, darkie rabble-rousers from New Jersey and Illinois down talking to the nigras in Littletown, that business at the Woolworth's counter--and now the crop was coming in.

Daniel White was safe behind bars, but outside, it was getting bad:

... the big-mouth crowd that hung out in Peerson's Bowling and Billiard Center caught Phil the clean-up boy, and badgered him into a fight. They took him out back and worked him over with three-foot lengths of bicycle chain; the diagnosis was double concussion and internal hemorrhaging.

... a caravan of heavies from the new development near the furniture factory motored down into Littletown and set fire to The Place, where thirty-five or forty of the town's more responsible Negro leaders had gathered for a few drinks and a discussion of what their position might be in this matter. Result: fifteen burned, and the bar scorched to the ground.

... Willa Ambrose, who washed and kept house for the Porters, was fired after a slight misunderstanding with Diane Porter; Willa had admitted to once taking in a movie with Daniel White.

... the Jesus Baptist Church was bombed the same night Daniel White made his confession. The remains of the building gave up evidence that the job had been done with homemade Molotov cocktails and sticks of dynamite stolen from the road construction shed on the highway. Pastor Neville lost the use of his right eye: a flying spiked shard from the imported stained glass windows.

So the chief of police called the mayor, and the mayor called the governor, and the governor alerted his staff, and they discussed it, and decided to wait till morning to mobilize the National Guard (which was made up of Georgia boys who didn't much care for the idea of Daniel White, in any case). At best, ten hours.

A long, hot, dangerous ten hours.

Daniel White slept peacefully. He knew he wasn't going to be lynched. He also knew he was going to become a cause célèbre and might easily get off with a light sentence, this being an election year, and the eyes of the world on his little central Georgia town.

After all, the NAACP hadn't even made an appearance yet. Daniel White slept peacefully.

He knew he didn't deserve to die for Marion Gore.

She hadn't really been a virgin.

The NAACP man's name was U. J. Peregrin and he was out of the Savannah office. He was tall, and exceedingly slim in his tailored Ivy suit. He was nut-brown and had deep-set eyes that seemed veiled like a cobra's. He spoke in a soft, cultivated voice totally free of drawl and slur. He had been born in Matawan, New Jersey, had attended college at the University of Chicago and had gone into social work out of a mixture of emotions. This assignment had come to him chiefly because of his native familiarity with the sort of culture that spawned Daniel White--and a lynch mob.

He sat across from Henry Roblee (who had been picked by the terror-stricken Negro residents of that little central Georgia town as their spokesman) and conversed in three A.M. tones. Seven hours until the National Guard might come, seven hours in which anything might happen, seven hours that had forced the inhabitants of Littletown to douse their lights and crouch behind windows with 12-gauges ready.

"We've never had anything like this here," Henry Roblee admitted, his square face cut with worry.He rubbed his blocky hands over the moist glass. A thin film of whiskey colored the bottom

of the glass. A bottle stood between them on the table.
Peregrin drew deeply on his cigarette and stared into Roblee's frightened eyes. "Mr. Roblee," he said softly, "you may never have had anything like this before, but you've certainly got it now, and the question is, 'What do we intend to do about it?' " He waited. Not so much for an answer as for a realization on the other man's part of just what the situation meant.
"It's not White we're worried about," Roblee added hastily. "That jail is strong enough, and I don't suppose the Chief is going to let them come by without doing something to stop them. It's what's happening all over town that's got us frightened. We never seen the people 'round here actthis way. Why, they in a killing frame of mind!"
Peregrin nodded slowly.
"How is your pastor?" he asked.
Roblee shrugged. "He's gone be blind in the one eye, maybe both, but that's what I mean. That man was respected by everybody 'round here. They thought most highly of him. We got to protect ourselves."
"What do you propose?" Peregrin asked.
Roblee looked up from the empty glass suddenly. "What do we propose? Why, man, that's why we asked for help from the N-double A-CP. Don't you understand? Something terrible's gone happen in this town unless we decide what to do to stop it. Even the sensible folks 'round here are crazy mad with wanting to lynch that Daniel White."
"I can only make suggestions, that's my job. I can't tell you what to do."
Roblee fondled the glass, then filled it half full with uneven movements. He tipped it up and drank heavily. "What about if we just all moved on out for a few days?"
Peregrin shook his head.
Roblee looked away, said softly, ironically, "I didn't think so." He moved his tongue over his thick, moist lips. "Man, I am scared!"
Peregrin said, "Do you think the Chief would let me in to speak to White tonight?"
The other man shrugged. "You can try. Want me to give him a call?"
Peregrin nodded agreement, and added, "Let me speak to him. The organization might carry a little weight."
It was decided, after the call, that Peregrin and Roblee would both go to see Daniel White. The chief of police advised them to come by way of the police emergency alley, where the chance of their being seen and stopped would be less.
In the cell block, Peregrin stood for several minutes watching Daniel White through the bars. He studied the face, the attitude of relaxation, the clothing the man wore.
He mumbled something lightly. Roblee moved up next to him, asked, "What did you say?"
Peregrin repeated the words, only slightly louder, yet distinctly. "Sometimes I wonder if it's worth it. Sometimes I think there are too many fifth columnists."
Roblee shook his head without understanding what Peregrin had said.
"Should we talk to him?" the Georgia Negro said to the Ivy-tailored visitor.
Peregrin nodded resignedly. "Not much bother, but we might as well. We're here."
Roblee stepped up to the bars. He called in to Daniel White. The man woke suddenly, but without apprehension. He sat up on the striped tick mattress and looked at his two callers. He smiled, a gap-toothed grin that was at once charming, disarming, frightful and painful. "How there, y'all." He stood up and walked to the bars with a lazy, rolling strut.
"You the man from the N-double A-CP I bet," he ventured, the words twisted Georgia-style. Peregrin nodded.
"Glad t'meetcha. You gone to keep them sonofabitches from hangin' my black ass?" He continued to grin, a self-assured, cocky grin that rankled Peregrin.
The tall Negro moved his face very close to the bars. "You think I should?"
Daniel White made a wry face. "Why, man, you and me is brothers. We the same, fellah. You can't let them string up no brother of yours. Got to show that damn Mistuh Charlie we as good as him any day."
Peregrin's face momentarily wrenched with distaste. "Are we the same, White? You and me? You and Mr. Roblee here? Are we all the same?" He paused, and leaned his forehead against the bars. "Perhaps we are, perhaps we are," he murmured.
Daniel White stared at him for some time, without speaking. But he grinned. Finally, "I gone beat this thing. Mister NAACP, you just wait an' see. I gone get outta this."
Peregrin raised his eyes slowly. "You don't even feel any remorse, do you?"
White stared at him uncomprehending. "Whatch'ou mean?"
Peregrin's face raised to the ceiling, helplessly, as though drawn on invisible wires. "You really don't know, do you?" he said to himself.

Daniel White grunted and bared rotten teeth. "Listen to me, Mister NAACP you. I gone tell you somethin'. That little white bitch that Gore child, she a bum from a long way back; Jim, I seen her in the woods with half a dozen boys from time on time. She not such a hot piece, I tell you that."
Peregrin turned to Roblee. "Let's go," he said, slowly. "We've done all we can here."
They moved back down the cell block; the empty cell block from which the three drunks and the vag had been removed when the first rumors of lynch had begun circulating.
Outside, it was not so quiet. There were mutterings from dark corners of the central Georgia town. Murmurings, unrests, fear, and rising voices.
In his cell, Daniel White returned to sleep. He knew what was going to happen. He had it locked. He was a poor darkie who was going to get all the benefits so long overdue his people.
The man from the NAACP would tend to all that ...
... even if he was a fruity-looking cat in a funny suit.
"What the hell you mean, for the greater good? Are you crazy or something, Mister? You can't let that mob take him and lynch him?" Roblee's face was a mask of horror. "Are you crazy or what?"
Peregrin's forehead was a crisscross of weaving shadow, caught in the flickering light of the candle. They sat at the table once more, joined by five others, all hidden in the gray and black of the room. The shades were drawn, and behind the shades, curtains had been pulled. And they sat staring at the man from the NAACP, Peregrin, who had just told them, without preamble, that they must not only let the whites lynch Daniel White, but they must do everything in their power to aid the act.
"Say, listen, Mister Peregrin, I think you out of your mind. That's murder, man!" The speaker was a stout, balding man with coffee-color skin and a wart at the side of his wide nose.
"Just what do you mean 'For the greater good'?" Roblee sank a hand heavily on Peregrin's sleeve.
Peregrin continued to sit silently, having said what he felt he must say.
Roblee shook him. "Dammit, fellah, you gone answer me! What'd you mean by that?"
Peregrin looked up at them, then. His eyes caught the candlelight and threw it back in two bright lines. His face was shattered; there was conflict and fear and desperation in it. But a determination. "All right," he said, finally.
They stared at him as he dry-washed his cheekbones and temples with moist hands. "Daniel White is sleeping up in that jail, and he doesn't care what happens to any of you. He had his fun, and now he wants to capitalize on all the work we've done for so long, to escape punishment. He's banking on everyone making such a hue and cry that no one will dare hurt the poor nigger being taken advantage of, down in rotten Georgia."
Roblee continued to watch the tall man, impassively, waiting. There was confusion in the cant of his head, in the frozen hand on Peregrin's sleeve.
"Those people out there," Peregrin waved a fist at the shaded window, "they're stretched as tight as piano wires. They've been told that everything they've believed for hundreds of years is a lie. They've been told the Negro is as good as them, they've been told their white sons and daughters are going to have to move over and share five-and-ten-cent store seats with them, and schools with them, and buses with them, and movies with them ..."
His breath came labored. He ground his teeth together and went on with difficulty.
"They've had the rug pulled out from under them, and they're still falling. They'll be falling for a long time. Done slowly, they could adjust to it. But then Daniel White rapes a sixteen-year-old girl and they've got a reason to hate, they've got something to focus their hate on. So they start taking out their fear and confusion in any way they can.
"Look what has happened in just the few hours since the girl was found. Your church has been bombed, brothers have been fired and ostracized, some have been beaten up and perhaps that boy they stomped will die. Your homes and that bar have been burned. This isn't going to stop here. It's going to get worse. And it's not even going to stop with your town. It's going to march like a wave to the beach, washing all the work we've done before it.
"If Daniel White goes free."
He paused.
Roblee made to interrupt, "But to let them haul him out of there and lynch him, that's ..."
"Don't you understand, man?" Peregrin turned on Roblee with fury. "Don't you hear what I'm telling you? That man up there isn't merely a poor sonofabitch who got loaded and pawed a white girl. He's a cold-blooded miserable animal, and if anyone deserved to die, it's him. But that has nothing to do with it. I'm talking to you about the need for that man to die. I'm telling you, Roblee, and all of you, that if you don't take their minds off the Negro community as a whole, you're going to set back the cause of equality in this country fifty years. And if you think I'm making this up you'd better realize that it's already happened once before, just this way."

They stared at him.
"Yes, dammit, it happened once before. And though we didn't have anything to do with the way it turned out--and thank God it turned out as it did--we would have told them to do it just the way they did."
They stared, and suddenly, one of them knew.
"Emmett Till," he breathed, softly.
Peregrin turned on the speaker. "That's right. They didn't even know for sure what the circumstances had been, but the trouble was starting up--not even as bad as here--and they hauled Till out and killed him. And it stopped the trouble like that!" he snapped his fingers.
"But lynching ..." Roblee said, horrified.
"Don't you understand? Are you stupid or something, like they say we are? Monkeys? Can't you see that Daniel White dead can be more valuable than a hundred Daniel Whites alive? Don't you see the horror that Northerners will feel, the repercussions internationally, the demands for justice, the swift advance of the program ... can't you see that Daniel White can serve the greater good? The good of all his people?
"What he never was in life, that miserable bastard up there can be in death!"
Roblee shrank away from Peregrin. The taller man had not spoken with fanaticism, had only delivered with desperate and impassioned tones what he knew to be true. They had heard him, and now each of them, where there was no room for anyone else's opinions, was thinking about it. It meant murder ... or rather, the toleration of murder. What they were deliberating, was the necessity of lynching. Therewas no doubt that the trouble could be much worse in the town, that more homes would be burned and more people hurt, perhaps killed. But was it enough to know that to sacrifice up a man to the mob madness, to the lynch rope? Was it enough to know that you might be saving hundreds of lives in the long run by sacrificing one life hardly worth saving to begin with?
It might have been easier, had Daniel White been a man with some qualities of decency. But he wasn't. He was just what the White Press had called him, a beast. That made it the more difficult; for had he been easier to identify with, they could have said no. But this way ...
There were murmurs from around the room, and the murmurs were, "I ... don't ... know ... I just don't know ..."
It meant more than just saving the skins of the people in Littletown--though men had been sacrificed to save less lives--it meant saving generations of children to come, from sitting in the backs of movie houses, of allowing them to grow up without the necessity of knowing squalor and prejudice and the words "shine," "nigger," "Jim Crow."
It meant a lot of things, that thin thread of life that was Daniel White. That thin thread that might be stretched around Daniel White's neck.
It meant a lot.
It was a double-edged sword that slicing one way would tame the wrath of the mob beast, and slicing the other would make a path for more understandingly by use of shame and example.
But could they do it ...?
Were this a motion picture, and not a story of some truth, the camera might play about the darkened room, candlelit and oppressive. It might play about the gaunt, hardening faces of the men, and mirror their decisions. If this were a motion picture. And the emphasis on memorable closeups. But it is not a motion picture, and when they threw uptheir hands saying they could not decide, Peregrin had to say, "Let's go talk to someone who knows this mob."
So they agreed, because the decision was not one that men could make about another man.
When they opened the door of the house on the edge of Littletown, and stepped out, they did not see the mass of moving dark shadows. The first warning they had was the heat-laden voice snarling, "You goin' tuh save that nigger rape bastard, Savannah man? Like hell you are!"
Then they jumped.
At first they used the lead pipes and the hammers, but after the first flurry they spent their fury and went on to fists and boots. Peregrin caught a blow in the face that spun him around, sent him crashing into the wall of the house. Off in the darkness he could hear Roblee screaming and the wet, regular syncopation of someone kicking at bloody flesh.
Later, much later, when all the lights had stopped whirling, and all the strange new could had become merely reds and greens and blues, they dragged themselves to their feet.
Roblee's face looked like something sold across a meat counter. He daubed at the ruined expanse of skin and said very defiantly. "It's that White's fault. All this. All this, it's his fault. We don't hafta take it for him."
Peregrin said nothing. It hurt too much merely to breathe. His rib cage had been crushed. He lay against the house, listening, hearing what they had to say.

The others joined in, between sobs and rasps of breath. "Let them lynch him. Let them do it."
They knew who to see ... they knew the men with the ropes ... the men who would start to hit them when they appeared, but who would listen when they said they had come to give up Daniel White. They knew who to see.
They told Peregrin: "We'll be back. You rest there. We'll do it." And they moved off into the night, to make their vengeance.
Peregrin lay up against the building, and he began to cry. His voice was soft and deep as he said to the sky, "Oh God, they're doing it, but they're doing it for the wrong reasons. They're hating, and that isn't right. They'll give him up, and that's what we need, Lord, but why do they have to do it this way?"
Then after a while, when he had fainted several times, and had the visions of the men storming the jail, and striking the guards and dragging the snarling, defiant Daniel White from his cell, his thought became clearer.
It was worth it. It had to be worth it. What they did, what they allowed, it had to be worth something in the final analysis. For the greater good, he had said. It had to be that. Because if it wasn't, surely there could be no hell deep enough to receive him.
If it was worth it, the end had to be in sight.
And had this been a motion picture, with a happy ending desirable--instead of a grubby little story out of central Georgia--then the man called Peregrin would have considered the inscription they must carve on the statue of the martyr, Daniel White.
--Evanston, Illinois, 1961

BLIND BIRD, BLIND BIRD, GO AWAY FROM ME!
Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
William Ernest Henley, Invictus

There is a sound in that darkness. A soft, mewling sound, far out in the black, a small creature in pain, crying; vapors of night and distance obscure it, but that sound is terrible; a child afraid of the dark; yes, that sound no other sound can approach for pain and terror. The child, lost in the forest of the night, blind, hands out before his face, afraid to move, afraid to remain still, trapped, trembling, help me, help me! But if you go toward that pitiful pleading, somehow the voice seems deeper, older, more strangled by a darkness from within than the darkness without.
There. Up there, look up that flight of basement stairs, barely dimly seen by the crack of light shining under the door. A child crouched against the wooden panels, scratching feebly at the locked door, looking back over his shoulder, down into the basement. Another sound, tinny rasping counterpoint to the child's pathetic sobbing; a scuttling, furry sound, little claws against concrete, fearful gray creatures with snake-tails twitching, wire-thin whiskers moving spastically, bullet bodies moving quickstart and stop in the basement, coming to feed. With each new wave of movement from below, the child plunging deeper into hysteria, the voice rising shrilly, pleading with the mother beyond the locked door...
"Mommy, pl-please Mommy, let me in, let me in, Mommy, b-be guh-good, beee gooood, Mommmee!"
Chittering shriek from below in the absolute darkness, the child flinging himself against the unyielding door, "Mommmmmmee!"
But the door remains closed, the child flattened against it, a painting on wood, terror contorting the small features into a gargoyle's insane face, and the blind darkness filling his mind till it bubbles froths churns like molten lava, searing the inside of his skull, running over and destroying all reason, coherence; pathetic infant, condemned to horror in the darkness; capital punishment, living death, entombment in fear; crime now lost in the mist of childhood, forgotten, tiny sin whose punishment razor-slashes the delicate lining of memory. This child will sleep with the lights on for many years.
Listen. The voice is deeper, down more in the throat, softer, more controlled by time, and the face alters, melts, shifts, runs like hot wax, that face framed by darkness ... and comes to focus in time, another face.
MSgt. Arnott T. Winslow, US51403352, thirty-one years old, face pressed tightly against the rough plank door of a two-storey residence in the center of Bain-de-Bretagne, midway between Rennes and Nantes on the spearhead salient of General George S. Patton's 3rd Army. MSgt. Arnott T. Winslow, US Infantry, July 1944, hurled forward from his own past to press his face against the splintery

dun-colored wood of a door in a waystop town midway between somewhere and nowhere. MSgt. Arnott T. Winslow, "Arnie" to his friends, formerly of Willoughby, Iowa, now wishing he were taffy that could slip between the slats of the unyielding barrier to his safety, a middling-warm day in July, in the midwest of lovely France.

Softly: "Let me in, let me in, let me in ..." as a rattle of machine-gun fire preceded, by an instant, the bite of masonry across the back of his neck. The Kraut gunner in the bell-tower was still chipping for an angle at him, but a ricochet might accomplish his mission for him.

Across the narrow cobblestoned street Arnie Winslow heard a tinkle of breaking window glass, and the muzzle of an M-1 rifle poked out, firing down the passage at the German troops spaced out in alleys, doorways, upstairs windows, rooftops. The rest of the patrol was in that building, cut off from escape on three sides by thick stone walls, and on the fourth by a town full of Elite Corps killers intent on keeping Winslow's patrol from getting back. With the intelligence that Bain-de-Bretagne was not--as the quisling had reported--empty of the enemy, evacuated in panic two days before. Twelve men were in that warehouse. Twelve of the fifteen who had come out on the patrol. Winslow made thirteen. Fourteen and fifteen lay sprawled in the weak, failing light of a French sundown. He could just see the inward-turned feet of Pfc. Coopersmith around the edge of the doorway, felled without murmur by a burst from a Schmizer burp-gun, loosed from a courtyard down the street. 2nd Lt. Thomas G. Benbow, formerly intercollegiate high-diving champion from the University of Utah, sprawled idiotically half-across a milk cart parked near the side of the warehouse. Idiotically, for the same covey of shots that had taken out Pfc. Coopersmith had done corrective surgery on Benbow's infectious grin, widening it from ear to ear, from nose to chin, in a bloody mash, leaving him with a Pagliacci resemblance to a circus clown. From where he was flattened against the door, Arnie could not see the bone-shattered cavern that opened the rear of Benbow's skull to the fresh air.

When they had cautiously slipped into the town, moved in two lines of skirmishers down the streets, it had seemed precisely as the little Vichy traitor had reported it: empty of all save the infirm and aged, left behind by not only the Germans, but by the collaborationist French who had fled from some inexplicable fear of the retribution Yanks were supposed to inflict on them. It had seemed a shoo-in. And then they had entered the passage between buildings; the first burst had dropped Pfc. Coopersmith and hurled Benbow like a Raggedy Andy doll against the warehouse, dumping him bloodily on the milk cart ... and the patrol had dived--almost as one man--through the half-open door of the warehouse.

All but Winslow. MSgt. Arnott T. Winslow, US51403352, whose reflexes had hurled him in the opposite direction; brought him up short against the locked door of a house facing across the narrow street to the warehouse where his buddies now sporadically returned fire on the hordes of Nazi troops fly-specked through the town. They were ambushed. Trapped. Boxed in. But they were at least safe behind stone, while Arnie Winslow trembled flat against a locked door, murmuring softly to be let in, out of the light and out of the death.

"Arnie! You out there, Arnie!"

It was Truck. The push-faced Polack from Hoboken who had soldiered as corporal beside Winslow, all the way in from the spiked beach at Normandy. The voice was Truck, but the tone was Fear. Rabbit-warren Fear. Truck was inside the warehouse, and his shouts brought a cascade of hard-fire from a dozen concealed Kraut positions. Winslow could not afford to answer. The machine-gunner in the bell-tower of the church at the end of the passage knew where he was, but it was doubtful any of the others had him pegged. Otherwise he would have by now joined Coopersmith and Benbow. He remained silent.

He had to get inside that house. It was only a matter of time till the bell-tower assassin dusted that doorway effectively enough to pick him off. But the door was locked. He could not step back to blast the bolt through the door, for that would put him in plain sight from the street. He bumped his weight heavily against the door twice, three times. It bowed, but did not give.

There was only one way. If there were more ways, they weren't registering, and he had been in the doorway for almost two minutes now. He had to take the chance.

He hop-jumped half a dozen paces out into the street, a timorous creature, and then hurled himself like a battering ram back into the doorway and against the slabbed door. The machine-gunner was a moment too slow. By the time he had tracked the big .30 caliber J-34 to the new target, Arnie was on his return trip. The bigbeast rattle of spraying shots overrode the thwack! of Arnie's shoulder hitting the door, and puffs of dirt, chips of cobblestone exploded harmlessly as he slammed full against the bolted door. The door gave and splintered inward off its bolt as a fresh shower of shots ripped into the edge of the building, chasing him, seeking him, but not locating him.

Then, as the big air-cooled machine gun went berserk, firing hysterically at the empty doorway, he fell inside; with a fluid, almost instinctive movement, he slammed the door closed again, and

fumbled for the bolt. It was half-torn from its screws, but it held, rattling into place as he palmed it home. Then he turned--

Into darkness.

That suddenly, that abruptly. The electricity of what had filled the past few moments had held light within his eyes, but now that he was momentarily safe, tension and fear and preoccupation were used up and the mind--magician master of misdirection--came fully to bear on what was inside that house. What was inside that house:

Darkness.

Nothingness.

Black chilled pressing-in heavy midnight blindness, a coalsack filled with dust; nothingness weighing down on his eyes, filming them with ink-shadows, flitting dimnesses ...

Slowly his legs collapsed under him. Standing in quicksand, he began to sink with exaggerated slowness to the dirty floorboards of the anonymous hovel. A puppet whose usefulness has passed, his unseen manipulator snipped his strings and he fluttered into a heap, bundled in dark shrouds of fear, and a vagrant vision he had had for many years (and never remembered upon awakening) crawled back to him:

Thick winds, like ropes of sand, tore at him, the sound like tortured metal shrieking as it was rent. Arms flung up to the nightmare sky, whipped into cloud-and-dark froth, he stood on a barren plain. He was a scarecrow, or something very much like a scarecrow; an imbecile relation to a scarecrow. In the middleground of an empty plain, beaten by sound and hurricane winds, he was crucified on a shaft of night, under a gibbering sky. And as he stood unmoving, from out of that sky--riding a trough of shouting black wind--the blind bird plummeted toward him. It was an ink bird, a domino bird, a soot bird; blind and small and very frightened out in its storm; but he could not help it, could not bring it peace or security or comfort, and he had nothing to say to that blind bird, save to tell it to go away, to fly back up into the darkness. Blind bird, blind bird, go away from me! But it was a shivering, frightened little bird, and over his head it circled, all through that night, until at last he admitted he was afraid, too.

The vision came with extraordinary clarity, for the first time in his life while he was awake, and he suddenly realized how many nights he had trembled in his bed, shivering with that pathetic, circling blind bird. And the question came to him unbidden, there in the pitch-darkness of that house, Why do I remember it now?

Why, indeed? Again, an answer leapt unbidden.

Less than a month before, the offensive had struck south from Normandy, leaving the flesh and the metal piled high in the fields, on the beaches, in the sea. He had been trotting along behind a deuce-and-a-half stacked high with cartridge cases, using the truck for cover across a two-mile open stretch currently in favor with the German mortar batteries. He had slung his M-1 over his shoulder and was folded down in upon himself, lighting the roach of his last cigarette, when the truck rolled its right front wheel across the exact center of an antitank mine. He had been a few paces farther behind (having ceased to dogtrot, trying to get the butt lit) and only that had saved him. All he knew was that the truck rose up in majestic fury, like a featherweight prop, sprouted blossoms of metal and flame, and exploded like a thousand fire-lilies. The concussion rather rudely hoisted him by the ass and shot-put him three hundred feet across the field and into a drainage ditch, without his once complaining. He was unconscious before he hit turf. He came to rest upside-down, legs twisted under his body (but, miraculously, unbroken), his back lofted in an aesthetic arch by his pack and the rifle which had whirled along with him. When the medics found him, he was sleeping as peacefully as any classic example of shock and shrapnel and whiplash and concussion and blast-burn could sleep. He was trundled back to the evacuation hospital and when the slight burns and flesh wounds had been treated, they had waited patiently for him to come out of the coma, hoping APCs would do the job and he could be trundled back into the line, because there was still much trouble out front. Every man was needed.

Arnie came out of it nicely, and sat up one morning as though refreshed from an extended snooze. Stretching his arms over his head and grunting with pleasure, he had heard the doctor ask, "Well, how do you feel?" and had gotten off the classic line, "What time is it?" The doctor had said, "About ten thirty," and Arnie had said, "Blackout?" and the doctor had looked heavenward, because it was ten thirty in the morning, not the evening, and Arnie's eyes were wide open.

They had bandaged his eyes, and he had lain there for close to a week, trapped in stifling darkness, and the soreness had passed, but the pools of thought had bubbled.

Memory within a memory:

Stealing dimes from his mother's purse. His father had gone to work, and she lay in bed, catching an extra hour before starting the housework. Silent Willoughby, Iowa morning. He knew at just what level of weariness her mind floated, and like a soldier in a movie he had stealthily opened the

bedroom door just enough to slip through, had gone to his stomach on the rug, and pull-crawled himself across the room. Her big brown handbag stood on the dressing table bench, and smoothly he had lifted it down, dragged it noiselessly across the floor to the foot of the bed. (If she wakes up and looks out of the bedclothes, I'll be hidden by the foot of the bed and quiet; she'll go back to sleep.) Seven years old. Already accomplished. He had stolen forty cents in dimes. (She never inspects her change, never knows how much she has.) Always "she," seldom by name, why?
He had replaced the purse and turned to start the crawl back to the door, downstairs, outside to his bike, to Woolworth's for things worth forty cents he didn't really need. He had turned.
His mother was staring at him.
Breath clogged like the vacuum cleaner when it's full. Dust in his mouth, a haze through his brain, unbelievable fear. Her face was a mixture of fury and pity, sorrow and revenge.
Before he could move, she was out of the bed, the heels of her feet bed-red and horny, hitting the floor, and her soft hand sliced air and caught him across the cheek. "Why do you do it!" she moaned. He had hurt her, he knew it. That made it all the worse. He didn't know why! And she wasn't really asking. Then dragged by the collar to Daddy's clothes closet, poised on the lip of the mothball-smelling cavern, and the pit of his stomach turned to ice. "No, please, Mommy. nonono--"
Whipped inside, garbage hidden from view, door slammed and you'll stay in there till I find out what your father wants me to do with you I can't control you I don't know what to do with you, door slammed. Lock clicked as the skeleton key--maintained in that never-needed-to-be-locked door for just this purpose--turned turned quickly turned.
Back in there. Darkness. Oppressive, stuffed like a wad of cotton inside the toe of a sock. Ceiling invisible up there, pressing down, ready to flatten him. His little fist went into his mouth, cries floated to the surface of his mind but were never loosed; he was busy listening to someone else in the closet moaning piteously, whelp-cries for help, to be let out. He knew it was himself, but he could not feel himself making the muscular contractions needed for the sounds.
What fear in the Pit, in the darkness. Sounds of sightlessness, of terror at being closed in, unable to see. Indescribable. One memory melded to a thousand others, of basements (primarily! the most terrible of all!), of the trunk of the Plymouth once, of eyes open yet unseeing ... memories ... of other closets, of tiny hotel rooms where he slept better because the great neon OTE flashed on OTE and off OTE at regular intervals, metronomically, soothing him ... memories ... of beds with women in them, sometimes laughing, sometimes surly, sometimes uneasy, because he made love in the light, not in the faceless darkness they had come to trust, when their bodies and their egos were stripped naked for pleasure.
All of these memories, swirling: a paperweight globe of a pristine town that never existed. ankle-deep in snow, turned upside-down. shaken: thoughts swirling, memories like snow, cold, chilling, swirling.
Back from a memory within a memory, to merely a memory:
As Arnie had lain in that bed, the floodgates of his fears had been pried open. After years of having troweled the mud of forgetfulness over the scars, after years of subconsciously sinking the traumas in the silt of other experiences, maturity, pleasures, more pertinent fears ... now freed, they thundered forth, and locked inside the bandages, he knew terror once more. He was blind!
The darkness that was deeper than darkness engulfed him, swallowed him whole, destroyed his senses and his reason, left him trembling and moaning like the child who had begged to be let out of the closet, who had pleaded to be taken out of that basement where the rats chittered below him.
And then one day, after a week in the evacuation hospital, the blindness had passed. That simply. They had removed the bandages when he had said he felt a prickling, and without any refocusing or salty tears, his eyesight had come back. It had been some sort of minor miracle. The doctor, less prone to muddy semantics, felt it was more temporary shock and psychosomatic than miraculous. But either way, he was pleased: with Arnie repple-deppled back into the line, it left the bed open for some new pile of human hamburger.
Arnie had been returned to his company and, so minor were the visible reminders of his wounds, within a few days he had almost totally forgotten the madness he had known while lying helpless without his eyes. Almost forgotten. Not quite, but almost.
Then the assault had consumed his attentions, and the simple business of remaining alive became vastly more menacing than any bolts of darkness from the past. The assault, the capture of the collaborationist, the order to dust out the town, the ambush, a burst of hacking fire from a Schmizer ...
Another burst of hacking fire from the Schmizer down the street hauled him back to this moment in which he sat on his knees, legs collapsed under him like the segments of a carpenter's folding ruler, on the floor of the little French maison de ville. Back to this instant of absolute

sightlessness, utter darkness, no-sight so much like the memories he had just flashed through. And fear was reborn.

Consuming fear. Paralyzing fear. Stomach-numbing fear that left him crouched on the floor a mass of putty and milk. Whimpering. Soft tissue-paper whorls of sound from his chest. They came regularly, incapable of being captured in true fidelity by any human mechanism. They were the vocalizations of petrifying terror.

A floorboard creaked.

His whimpering halted, momentarily. A floorboard had creaked, but he had been stone-immobile. He listened, the blood pounding in his ears. A slight rasp, as of shoe sole against bare floor. It came from over his head.

He was not alone in the house.

(And why should he have thought he was? Every other building in this town seemed to be stinking with Nazi troops; why should he think this one was a sanctuary for lost Iowans?)

He could not move. The paralysis he felt at being trapped in the dark. It left him unable to function. He was shaking. Shivering. And the sound came again from above him. One man ... two ... a patrol ... a barracks-full ... he wanted to run ...

The footsteps came again, gently. He sat in the middle of the room, looking up, the weight of the M-1 unfelt in his hands, and he could not protect himself. If there had been a sliver of light, a gleam, anything, he might have been able to pull himself together ... but there was nothing. If there were windows in that room, they were boarded or bricked up. If there had been a smoldering sun dying on the horizon, it might have cast rays through the slats of the door, but (how long had he been there, remembering?) the sun had vanished and taken with it the day. Now it was night. Outside. Inside. Within his mind. He was alone with that other, Up there, in the dark.

Sound. Again. The other was coming for him. One? Two? How many? It had to be only one--he wrenched his mind forcibly from his terror to consider the logistics of the situation--and he was coming downstairs.

The one upstairs had to know he was here. The noise Arnie had made coming through the locked door would have given him all the warning he'd needed. But time had elapsed, and Arnie had made no sound, until he had begun whimpering, and the one (two, nine, nine hundred?) upstairs had waited, trying to ascertain how many had come through that door. Now the waiting was over, it was ended, and the stalking had begun.

The footsteps (yes, now he could tell, it was only one moving; perhaps there were more up there, but only one was moving toward him) reached the head of the stairs, lost to Arnie's right in the darkness. They began moving down, and there was the clank of metal on wood. The weapon striking the banister. Arnie tried to move his fingers, found them cold and unresponsive. He had to get under cover, not just sit there like a child in the middle of a playpen. He was sure meat, a lamb staked out for some hungry beast.

The footsteps descended, and Arnie could not even tell if the man was in sight. It was that dark. Or was most of the darkness behind his eyes, not really in the room? Had he gone blind again? Could the German see everything? He sat there waiting, and the steps came nearer, nearer, stopped. A snap-bolt was thrown. It made a hard, unyielding sound in the room. Then there was a chuckle.

The burp-gun opened up at waist-level and slugs marched across the room in a straight line. Back and forth. The spray was a thorough one. It bit chunks out of the wooden walls, thundered into the door, sent flakes of wallpaper and debris cascading through the air. The German turned left and right in stately maneuver, cutting the room in half at the height any normal man would be standing. The fusillade seemed to go on indefinitely, and the crimson-flash of the muzzle brought a glare that revealed who was firing. Arnie stared across the room as the bullets snarled over his head. He did not move. He could not move. And as the trooper brought his burp-gun back and forth methodically, the muzzle flash showed Arnie a thickheaded, saturnine man with the top of his skull crammed tightly into a steel helmet, the pot down almost to the thick, unattractive eyebrows. The Nazi was grinning impishly. Chuckling. While the slugs thrummed and screamed overhead harmlessly.

Abruptly, the last slug tore through the wall of the house, and the last casing hit the bottom step on which the Nazi stood, and the room went silent. A sprinkle of plaster-dust made a fine, sifting noise. But it was silent. And dark again.

The rifle shot was a million times louder than anything ever heard in the world before. It had been silent, then the silence had been torn to shreds with a burp-gun's depredations, then silence again. And now the rifle shot.

The Nazi choked once; there was a watery gurgle as if someone had forgotten to turn a faucet off tightly, and with a metallic clatter of equipment and body, he fell forward, caught the edge of the banister and was whirled sidewise, tumbled the one step to the floor, and fell flat on his stomach.

Arnie suddenly realized he could feel the bucking of the M-1 in his hands, moments after the recoil had faded. He had killed the Nazi. Somehow. Without trying. Instinct, perhaps. Maybe it was someone else entirely. A reflex.

"Jeezus," he murmured, gently. The body at the foot of the stairs moved softly. Arnie got to his feet and blindly stumbled toward the sound. His right boot met an obstacle, and he reached down into that pit of shadow to touch the body. His hand encountered the face. His fingertip lay in one of the open eyes. It was dry. The man was dead.

Click! Just that exactly, a switch of thought was turned off in Arnie Winslow's mind, and all his mouth-gagging fear came to asphyxiating proportions; the darkness built into a massive wave that swept over him; the wide-eyed shivering he had done as the hundreds of burp-gun slugs thundered just over his head; the death of this stranger; all built into an electrical current that turned off the switch; and the hammer that had been poised in his mind--suddenly struck!

Arnie Winslow fell forward across the body of the dead Nazi, unconscious. Blissfully, thankgod unconscious. His teeth were so tightly clenched, the enamel of one incisor chipped.

When he came up from the depths, breast-stroking with all his strength, he came awake in pieces. First his hands that held the rifle--under him, resting on something soft--and he tried to move them. They were under him. They would not move. But the soft something moved, it gave with the pressure. Then his legs, which bent at the knees, and he slid off the Nazi to the floor. Then his heart and his lungs and his chest, all went pumping back into action. Then his head. But his eyes remained dead. It was still dark all around him. But the fear had become a new creature, with new attributes; it had metamorphosed, and the paralysis was gone. He could move well enough--which he proved by standing up, supporting himself on the rifle and the banister which brushed him, which he grabbed--but he was trembling uncontrollably. He was locked in the hideous embrace of a twitching that threatened to shake his body apart. His head ached terribly. His mouth was dry, and it hurt.

The sound of rifle-fire from outside brought him to sudden awareness that nothing had changed. Truck and the others were still pinned down in that goddam warehouse, and the Krauts were intent on filling the building with corpses.

He knew there was nothing he could do, personally, to take the heat off them. Too many Germans. His only thought was of getting back to the lines, letting the main force know Bain-de-Bretagne was a deathtrap, and trying to send back a larger force to pry the patrol out of their bind. He thought of all this haphazardly, with stops and starts in his processes for the fear that gnawed at him. And all of it was afterthought. His first thought was: It'll be lighter outside.

Of such stuff are heroes made.

But when he had found his way back to the front door, and stuck his head out, a sense of impending doom had warned him and he had ducked back in just as a burst of automatic fire whined across the doorway. His friend in the bell-tower had taken no coffee breaks. He slammed the door. And was alone in the hole of black. The fear slammed him once more. Visions dark and terrible came and went. He was in the dark. The blind bird, the blind blind bird!

In a gesture he had long since stopped using, his fist went to his mouth. The child habit, back again. The man a child once more. Help me ...

He began searching the house for other exits. There were no other doors. It was a town house, backed on three sides by the rear walls of other homes. The windows were bricked up. There was no skylight. The street was a cemetery waiting to receive his bones.

He lit a match. It was all the good and warm and fine and golden in the universe. His tongue came out of his mouth in pleasure at the sight of it, flickering there in his hand. He had not thought of it before, why, he didn't know. But here it was and here he was, and the light was all around him, washing him, laving him, reassuring him, and ... he burned his fingers. He dropped the match and it went out.

There were three more in the folder. He wanted to light them all, all at once, and start a bonfire that would drive away the fears and the sharp-fanged things that lived in his fears of the dark. But that was insane. He struck another, brightly, quickly.

(And he suddenly realized he was just a bit mad.) The match burned out ...

At which point he saw the metal ring in the floor, attached to the trapdoor. Trapdoor, basement, drainpipe, sewer, river, outlet, freedom, the American lines, freedom, light light light! A Chinese box within a box within a box within a great fog of darkness. He lit another match, and slinging the rifle across his back, he pulled the trapdoor ring. The huge wooden slab came up heavily, and he let it fall back with a crash. The pit opened before him. Darker than the darkness above. Most black of all hells. Infernally devoid of the slightest hint of light. That basement. There could be ... anything ... down there.

He stumbled back, the fear a great clot in his brain.

Black!
Black!
Oh, God how black! He could never go down there, could never never go down there! Madness waited, the fears of his childhood, damn you damn you, damn you the one I called "she," damn you!
Trembling!
Stumbling!
Incapable of halting himself, he stepped forward, his foot encountered emptiness and with a shriek he fell into the hole. He hit the stairs five times on his way to the bottom, and brought up short lying tangled, crying like an infant, at the bottom of the flight. He was down there in the pit. He was alone at the bottom. Silence. Darkness. Fearful empty!
He lay there for moments without duration, hours without relation to time, centuries ripped whole from the fabric of forever. He lay there, and knew this was the way it was going to be. There was no other way, so this was the way it would finally be. He listened.
Silence.
But the sound of water. Young fears came to join their elders. Water. The sewers ran under this house, under those streets, under this town, and down in those sewers he could find a way out, a way back. If he could become human enough to try it. But he was not a human, he was something named Arnie Winslow, six years old, maybe seven, and deathly afraid of the horrors that lurked in basements. He was crying. Tears burned his eyes, red burned, and ran down his cheeks, over his lips so he could taste the shame of them, and he was a boy of six, seven once more. He was a boy playing soldier, and as for those men in that warehouse, their names were already engraved on headstones. Because Arnie Winslow was not going down into the sewers. Oh, God, the very thought made his flesh pucker and wilt. The sewers.
The rattle of machine guns came distantly, down the stairwell. He could hear them dying. He could hear their bones decaying, their flesh rotting, the maggots eating their vitals. He could know what it was, and it meant nothing.
Given the choice of heroism and sanity, there is no man so brave that he will willingly plunge into death or madness. Heroes are made on the instant, quick men who don't reason that the darkness waits to swallow them. They are men unlike Arnie Winslow, lying at the bottom of the flight of stairs, dumped in sightlessly where monsters of the mind sit poised ready to spring, to feast on flesh of the soul.
He began scrabbling across the floor, toward the sound of the water. Fear was the Old Man of the Sea, riding him with hideous cackles and an unbreakable promise of death.
Time ... does it crawl, too? Perhaps.
He found the lid of the water drain, and it was large enough to slip down through. It should have been too small, it should have been a tiny hole allowing only cellar water to escape; it should have been bolted shut by a large grille, it should have been a false entrance. It should have been, he wanted it to be. But it was large enough to allow him entrance without discomfort. Bodily discomfort. It should not have been so eager to swallow him. But it smiled and opened its maw, and he went down, and hung there above nothing, the rifle heavy across his shoulders, and fingertips left the edge of stone floor, and he dropped. It was less than two feet, but he fell for an eternity, and when he hit the water he screamed.
The knives slashed at his legs, and the cold steel pierced his tender six-, seven-year-old flesh and he screamed. It was a high, whining wail, carrying in its tone the erosive Doppler Effect of a train whistle whipping away into the night. Into this dreadful night that surrounded him.
Waaaaaaaaaaa!
He crashed against the wall of the sewer main, and fell away from it as if it were molten. He tried to run, but the water had guillotined his coordination. He bumbled forward, and tried to find the matches in his pocket and got them out and just as simply dropped them. They were gone in an instant.
Now was forever down here.
He tried to walk forward, his hands out before him.
But it was no good. He was incapable of motion that made any sense. He was lost now. Out of the world and out of the light and doomed to rot down here in the filthy water that smelled of brackish remains. Urine, decaying vegetation, muck, sickly sweet smells of marshmallow and jacaranda that made his throat wheeze with the effort to keep the vomit down. The smell beat at him, and intermingled with the cold of the water, the flow of the stream, the darkness the ungodly all-pervasive darkness.
One foot moved out in front, then another slipping movement of the same foot in the mire under the water, then the other foot, and he was going. The tunnel sloped sharply downward, and the water climbed higher up his body. It lapped at his thighs, his groin, his waist, chest, shoulders, and

suddenly the slope was too much for him, and he was slipping. The slime covering the bottom of the tunnel was thicker, slipperier, and before he could stop himself, he was moving forward against his own speed, and in an instant he'd lost balance. His arms flailed wildly, and he barely managed to get the M-1 over his head before he went under. He was struggling in a grotesque wet world, with grabless holds on nothing. He hand-over-handed to the surface, soaking the rifle in the process, and went under again. Garbage filled his mouth, and he was sick immediately, the weight of it ripping loose in his chest and thundering up into his mouth, just as he broke the surface. The drain was fouled a bit more by his own refuse, and then he was under again. Water filled his nose, his mouth, and he sputtered, gasped fighting to stay erect. The foul scummy water swirled around him, and he grew hysterical trying to free himself.

Then, in a moment, his feet touched bottom once more, and he came up. His head swam with the pounding ache of having vomited, and the smell that would not quit. He moved forward again, then paused as he thought he heard a sound.

Listening, ear cocked into the darkness ...

Rasping little voices. Hundreds of little voices. The ones who lived here. He could hear their chittering metallic voices. They were all around him, up ahead, behind. Then something slick and wet and fast glided past him in the dark, and touched his hand. His mouth flew open and air bellowed up in his throat, and he screamed. So loud his ears popped, so long his throat went raw, so completely that he was left standing there empty of all but terror. The thing had giggled tinnily as it had passed him. Taunting him.

He wanted to flee, but there was no way out, no way to go but on. And then he heard the roar of a vehicle going overhead, and he knew he was under the street, and if he could hear them ... could they not hear him?

He knew he could not howl again.

It had to be dammed up inside.

No escape valve.

So he moved forward. Pace after murky pace. His feet weighed half a ton each with the mud and clinging tendrils of nameless slimy things that clung to his barracks boots. But he moved on. He was incapable of thinking why he was moving forward, and the how was an enigma he would never solve.

But he went on, and it was a nightmare without end. It was forever wet and forever cold and forever dark, and he knew for certain that he would be in that stinking chill limbo forever and ever and ever.

And the voices all around him. He could not even see their eyes in the dark, but they were there. And then one of them landed with a heavy plop! on his shoulder.

He froze. Not voluntarily. He was smashed in the face by a numbing chunk of steel, and all movement left him. But he was not limp. He was brick-rigid. He could not move, could not even twitch, his body was frozen solid. The water rat moved idly about his shoulder, its thick, massive body a weight that bent him slightly. Its tail lashed at his shirt as its vile length hung down his back. The bullet-pointed face moved nearer Arnie's cheek, and he could feel the icy wire of its whiskers. The stench from it was incredible. It smelled like a thousand corpses rotting in a mass grave. The creature came nearer Arnie's face, and the fur was matted, stinking. Arnie could not have brushed the water rat off if he had had a thousand hands. The beast had its way. It was master of this nice, fine dry island.

Then, its head came up sharply, and it sniffed at Arnie's face. And it poised itself, as though to strike at something, but the whine wail shriek moan stopped it. The huge rat listened for a moment, as the shriek grew in intensity, and as it mounted to fill the cavern, the rat leaped high and arched out, disappearing in terror, into the water, and gone.

Arnie had no idea what the sound had been, but he was eternally grateful for its having come at that precise moment of absolute terror. But he never knew what it had been.

He hurried on down the tunnel, leaving his sound of fear where it had saved him.

There was more. Much more. Through miles of drainage sewer, among the floating schools of rats whose voices mingled so high he was deafened. Slipping and drinking the scum-clouded water. And always in darkness, always pounded by his fear that had grown to such proportions an entire section of his brain was closed off, numbed by the constant electrical level of horror and nausea.

Then he came to a tunnel-end, and he could hear the water rush to plunge over a precipice. It was a brief drop, but it was sufficient to tell him he'd found an outlet. When he came to the end of the passage, he found a huge metal grille, partially rusted, and in a frenzy of desperation he slammed it again and again with his hip, his shoulders, his back, till it broke away and dropped out.

He fell, gasping, into the murky stream, went under, came up and struck off spastically for the

opposite side. When his feet could touch bottom, he dragged himself erect and hauled one foot after another, till he bumped against the far bank, and hauling himself like a sack of soaked meal, he fell face forward onto the thankgod ground. It was moist and cool, and he blessed it, blessed it, kissed the earth with his garbage-tainted lips.

There was more. Much more.

A sprint through a forest, crashing into trees, falling a hundred times, running full tilt into a thick limb that caught him full in the mouth and knocked him unconscious. When he came back to consciousness, his mouth was full of blood and two teeth had been shattered. His face felt like a pound of dogmeat. He stumbled erect, walked into the limb a second time, felt his head reverberate like a church bell and managed somehow to go on.

There was more. Much more. A crawl across a shelled no-man's-land littered with dead trucks and dead weapons and softer things that were attached to nothing at all. And once, yes, he was sure of it, once he heard a voice calling out to him in the darkness, "Help me ... help me ... I'm ... where are m-my arms ... help me ..." but the voice was too much like no other voice he'd ever heard (he told himself) and he crawled on.

More. Into a mine field. He knew it was a mine field because the entrance to it was guarded by what had been a man. The left half of his face had been pushed in as though it were a paper cup, and in his outstretched hand, still clenched in the mannerprescribed by the manual, was his bayonet, that he had been using to probe the ground for antipersonnel mines. It had probed too deeply, and now the hand would seek no more. The body with the pushed-in face was not too far from the hand for Arnie to know this was a mine field.

So he slid forward cautiously on his belly, probing with his own bayonet as the pushed-face Cerberus guarding the field had done. Somehow, he slid through. Darkness. All around.

And then, without his even realizing he had done it, he saw a body looming up out of the darkness, and he was crying again, letting it all out, holding nothing back, crying like the child inside all men. It was a sentry, and so pathetic were MSgt. Arnott T. Winslow's sobs that he never bothered to challenge him. He merely went forward and helped him to his feet. There could be no danger in an enemy who sounded like that.

He was in a company area, he didn't know which one, and someone said, "Hey, fellah, can you open your eyes?" and he realized he had crawled all the way from that sewer with his eyes so tightly closed they throbbed with pain. His eyes came unstuck slowly, and he was insane with delight to see a soft pink haze opening the sky like a brilliant blossom. It was daylight. It was rebirth. It was the world once more.

There was a lister bag hanging from a tripod, and he stumbled forward, managed to slump to his knees before it, and drank thirstily from the tap. They watched him, wondering what horrors had turned this man into little more than an animal. He could never tell them, they could never know, for perhaps their devils were spiders or snakes or hypodermic needles or some more nameless subliminal terror they would never have to face, if they were very very lucky. As lucky as Arnie Winslow had been unlucky.

It was not till much later, when the doctor had shaken his head and marveled at the stamina of this man who had crawled God only knew how far, to return to his own lines. With a broken jaw, with two teeth missing, with staved-in rib cage, with thousands of minor cuts, abrasions, holes in his flesh and loss of blood, with extreme shock shaking him like a high-tension wire in a hurricane, with exposure and loss of control of his hands. This was a remarkable creature, this creature the dog tags called MSgt. Arnott T. Winslow, US51403352.

And when the interrogation officer came to him in the field hospital, lying twitching and wide-eyed (as though he wanted to miss nothing of what went on in the light of day), only then did he remember why he had crawled all this way.

Truck and the patrol.

He told the G-2 and the man went away, and a while later he came back with another officer and they said things to Arnie Winslow.

"We don't have very accurate intelligence on that area."

"We're an advance spear of the front. We'd need at least a regiment out there..."

"Or a guide who could take us back the way you came."

Booming echoes of what they were saying cascaded back and forth in his skull. He could not believe he was hearing them correctly. All the pain and fear had been for nothing.

"Or at least a guide who knew the way. But we can't start till tonight. They'd shell our asses to bits if we tried it in daylight."

Arnie heard himself saying, "I'll take you back."

Through the darkness again. All the way back. Through the horror of the pit a second time.

The doctor interrupted. "This man isn't going anywhere. He's suffering from shock and three broken

ribs and more minor afflictions than I have time to list. He's staying right here."
"I'll take you back ..."
"Will he be able to travel by tonight, Doc?"'
"I strongly advise against it."
"I'll take you ... I can do it ..."
And they left him there, to sleep through the day, to give his mind and his body what little peace they could gather for the long night ahead.
Arnie Winslow closed his eyes and slept. He slept and dreamed of blind birds in a pitch sky. But he was able to help the bird now. It was not necessary to rid himself of fear, if he could merely learn to exist, to function with the fear.
He was still frightened, but he slept. There would always be the daylight.
--Hollywood, 1963

WHAT I DID ON MY VACATION THIS SUMMER
BY LITTLE BOBBY HIRSCHHORN, AGE 27
He had begun to smell really rank; and standing there at the side of US Route 1, covered with dust and small bugs, Robert Hirschhorn had begun to suspect There Is No God. All around him the incredible Fairchild Desert sang with mind-frying heat, and the watery horizon devils twittered in the corners of his vision like mad things. Beside him--and on which his good right foot rested--the black sturdyboard suitcase (which he had used to mail home his dirty college laundry) was equally filthy. Yet its binding cords were not as frayed as his nerve ends; and only a close second to his shoelaces, which bulged with knots where they had been rejoined.
Like three eggs basting in a shallow pan, his brains were being steadily fried; his mouth tasted brown, and funky; he was hungry; he had sweated so much it felt like ants on his flesh; his eye sockets flamed from the hundred-watt bulbs burning behind his retinas; he was sick and unhappy.
And a jack rabbit bdoinged! across his path.
It took seventeen leaps and was very much gone.
"You are very much gone," Robert said, mostly to the puffs of dust that moved when he spoke. "And I am not far behind you."
His ears went up like the rabbit's, as the Cadillac zoomed out of nowhere on the terribly flat highway, and his thumb went halfway into the air, and the Cadillac whispered away down behind him, toward Reno, toward San Francisco, toward the Pacific Ocean and all that cool muthuh water.
"Good-bye," he murmured, and fainted.
They had stopped the car almost directly over him--or perhaps had rolled it to him--so that as he fluttered awake, he found himself staring directly up at the canvas water bag hanging from the front fender. A great, chill drop of perspiration water hung precariously from the underside of the bag, and as he watched, it sucked itself free and plummeted down. It struck him directly under the nose. It was tepid.
"Hey, Teddy," a voice came out of the sky, "the yo-yo's comin' to." Robert looked up past the fender. There were three pairs of legs rising directly up out of his vision, continuing, he supposed, to Heaven. "Help him up," said another voice, presumably Teddy's.
Hands reached down, one pair covered by black soft-leather driving gloves, with flex-holes cut in their backs. Robert was drawn unsteadily to his feet, and his eyes focused on the three young men. The one with the Italian driving gloves supported him. "You okay, fellah?" he asked Robert.
"Szmmll." Robert mouthed a cheekful of road dust. He had fallen face-forward; they'd turned him over on his back. He extended his dust-coated tongue and swiped at it with his fingertips. They came away muddy.
"Well? You okay huh?" asked the shortest of the three, and Robert recognized the voice as Teddy's. He found himself nodding yes, he was all right. But he wanted a drink of water, badly. He motioned to the canvas bag, making feeble finger movements in its direction.
"Hey, man," Teddy said to the tallest of the trio, the one with the driving gloves, "dig him out that thermos." The boy reached into the back seat of the car and rummaged through wads of clothing and luggage, till he came up with a thermos bottle. He unscrewed the top, pulled the cork and poured the red plastic cuptop full of a light yellow fluid. He handed it across to Robert, saying, "Lemonade."
Robert took it with both hands, and gulped. The first few swallows were coated with dust and mud, but after that it went down smoothly, and it tasted wonderful.
"Where uh where you headin'?" asked the third boy, a medium-tall, freckle-spotted item with the free-swinging egocentricity that expressed itself in manner before a word could be spoken. The kind of arrogance of personality best connoted by wealthy young men from good families who are Big Men on Campus.

"San Francisco," Robert answered. "I was hitchhiking; I thought it would be a good background experience." He grimaced, and felt the tip of his nose. It was raw where he had scraped it on the ground.
"You scraped it," the one with the driving gloves said. "But it's not bleeding; it just looks funky."
Robert murmured something pointless about how it didn't matter. The three young men stood around nervously. until Teddy said, "Listen, we're going to Frisco, too, and if you don't mind a few stops along the way, you can jump in with us." Robert could not quite believe he was hearing properly. It was the sweet chariot, come from beyond the pearly gates to rescue him.
"Robert Hirschhorn," he said, sticking out his hand.
"Theodore Breedlow," said the short boy, returning the gesture. He indicated the tallest boy: "Cole Magnus, and," turning to the third young man, "George Young. They call me Teddy Bear." He smiled sheepishly at his own sophomorism.
They threw his sturdyboard case into the trunk of the big black Lincoln, and hollowed out a place for Robert among the clothes and packages tossed helter-skelter across the back seat.
And then they were off down the road.
They were from an entirely different social stratum than Robert had known. While he had come from genteel and mildly Puritanical Middlewestern conformity, the three young men in the front seat had been spawned by the harsh, black-and-white hustling of Detroit. Where he chose his words for maximum effect and clarity, they bumbled and shotgunned through the language with rimfire "ain'ts" and copper-jacketed "goddams" and frequent double-barreled scattergunned "muthuh-fuckers." It was not entirely new to Robert, but in such close quarters, and for such a protracted length of time down the road, it became almost a heady experience. They were refugees from an assembly line in Dearborn, ferrying the big black Lincoln to a buyer in San Francisco, and they were GoToHells this week and next. Then, pilot another car hack to Detroit, and the lathes and conveyor belts of their waking hours. But this week and next!
"Man, I pushed more'a them goddam Fords down'a line than I got hairs on my head. Sheet, man, it's good to be outta that racket and in the fresh air." And Teddy Bear turned up the air-conditioning in the hermetically sealed Lincoln another notch.
"If my parents could see me now!" George Young chirruped. "They'd crap!" He bounced in his seat.
His laughter began slowly, like a dynamo winding up, and in a moment had become so much a part of the charged air, that all four of them were laughing together. "Th-they ... they ... think l'm, they think I'm ... buh ... back in Dearborn sweating on that fuckin' line an' an' an' here I am out in the m-muh-muh-iddle of Nevaaaaduh ... !" and he rocked back and forth like an old Yiddish man dovening over his Talmud, the tears streaming down his freckled face. Cole Magnus was forced to pull over on the shoulder, as they all capered tightly in the Lincoln. It was a madhouse for a moment.
When they were going again, Cole said suddenly, "Hey, you remember what Roger Sims told us ... ?"
Teddy Bear and George Young looked at him questioningly. "You remember: about Winnemucca, Nevada!"
The lights shone out abruptly from their eyes, and Teddy Bear went, "Whoo-eeeee, sheeeet, man! Yeahhh! Now I remember, yeah! Winnemucca, Nevada!"
And George Young clapped his hands together like a delighted child. "Hoo hoo hoo, boy, I'm gonna get me a piece'a'tail ... hoo hoo hoo!"
Cole, without turning around from the wheel, pulled his right shoulder forward allowing his head to move sidewise, as he spoke to Robert. "We got this buddy back in Detroit"--he pronounced it Dee-troyt--"and he's almost as big a swordsman as George-O over there, and he took this trip out to Frisco--"
"The natives hate the name Frisco, I understand," Robert stuck in without meaning to be rude. "They prefer it to be called San Francisco ..."
"Yeah, well," Cole went on without hearing him, "Roger came back and said he stopped off in some little burg called Winnemucca, Nevada, just this side of Reno, and he says they got the next best thing to legalized prostitution there." He pronounced it proz-ti-toosh-un. "Wanna stop off there for a little diddly-doo?"
"Aw, that was probably one of Roger's goddam wet dreams," Teddy Bear denigrated the idea. "You know he lies, man. If he says he got laid the night before, it prob'ly means he said hello to some chick on the street and followed her till she called the laws."
"Yeah, well ..."
George Young stuck in, "No, I think he was shooting straight. He had a ball, I could tell from the way he was talking. Hell, it can't hurt, can it? Just to stop and see. It's on the way, ain't it?"
They pulled out the map and ran fingers down US #1 till they located it. "Right on the way," Teddy Bear said cheerfully. "I guess it can't hurt to try. It'll probably be one of them wet dreams, but

what the hell ..."
"What about you?" Cole asked Robert.
Robert had never been with a whore. In fact, at the age of twenty--perhaps two years older than these three wandering minstrels--he had had only one girl. Sally Gleeson, who had been as virgin as himself, until they had discovered each other the year before. Now Sally had gone off to Radcliffe and was making time with Robert's ex-friend Dave, who had met Sally on a visit to Robert's home, from New Jersey where the family had moved. He was not at all sure he wasn't terrified by the idea. But he could not expose the twitching raw end of that fiber of fear without denying everything he had decided was true of himself:
Robert Hirschhorn came from a small town outside a larger town in central Ohio. He hated the town. Hated it because it did not know what to do with him. He was the one who read Proust and Edward Gorey and MIDDLEMARCH and Ronald Searle and Hobbes and Ian Fleming, and who ignored Morris West and Leon Uris and Daphne Du Maurier and Harry Golden and Irving Wallace and Time magazine. He was something other than what everyone else was in town; he knew it, and they knew it, and there was something more for him than the softly moldering inside of the cocoon called Starkey, Ohio.
He had decided he wanted to be a writer. It came to him not entirely unbidden, for he had contributed a seven-part serial to a kiddies' column in the now-defunct Cleveland News when he was still in grade school. He had won a National Scholastic writing award for a short story about a robot that had taken over the world (which he had cribbed in concept from Capek's famous R.U.R.). And he had decided that college would be of no use to him if what he needed to know was the world.
So Robert Hirschhorn, at the age of twenty, had taken to the road with his black sturdyboard suitcase, and a determination to taste of life in all its sherbet flavors. Which offered, this week, the tantalizing, fraudulent favorite, Cheap Whore. It was a combination of peach, rocky road and lemon. And to turn it away, back to the cooler chest, in return for a triple-dip of the pallidly familiar vanilla on which he had been subsisting for so long, would be to deny all that he had decided about himself.
"I'm game if you are." He grinned widely. Perhaps a trifle too widely.
"Hell, how should I know?" said Teddy Bear. "I suppose you ask a cabbie. Ain't that the way they do it?"
George shook his head. "Listen, stupid, you got to be more uh more undercover, more--"
"Surreptitious?" offered Robert.
"--whatever." George refused to accept the word. "But you can't just go around town asking any dumb hick where the hoo-er-houses are. That's stupid."
"Oh, hell, this isn't Detroit," Cole said. He suddenly braked to a stop by a general store, and leaned out to an old man sitting in a straight-back chair propped against the wall. "Hey, Mister!"
The old man looked up disinterestedly. He closed one eye to focus better with the other. "Where's the whorehouses, huh?" Cole asked blatantly.
"Straight down this street till you come to Main, take a left and keep going till you see the veteran's trailer camp. There's a big wood fence behind it. Th'other side is Littletown. That's it, can't miss it." He went back to picking his nose.
Cole rolled the window back up and turned to his companions with a superior grin on his boyish young face. "Morons," he gibed. He slipped the big black Lincoln into D and pulled out.
"I saw it, but I don't believe it. I heard it, but it ain't true," George Young said, amazed.
They followed the old man's instructions and came down the far side of Winnemucca till they saw a cluster of silver trailers, all hunkered together like poor animals in a warren. It was a scene of somehow surpassing squalor, though everything seemed neat and clean. Perhaps it was the lack of grass--just deep brown dirt streets--or the gray and leprous garbage cans tilted and rusting and staved in, right at the edge of the road.
"Helluva place to live, right next'a the cat houses," Teddy Bear remarked. Robert stared out the window as they passed. Yes, it seemed a helluva place to live, and the silent sadness of the little trailer camp abruptly wore down on his spirit. What was he doing here? Going to a house of prostitution, having left college, bumming around the country in search of something intangible, something so remote even that he had no name for it, no way to call it, or think of it. His thoughts leaped bounded fled away.
And he thought of his father.
Was that the reason? Was it his father, who seemed so silent and distant, now that he was away? So importantly silent and distant, without love between them, without communication between them ...
He knew his mother, perhaps knew her too well. That fine sensitive woman who had to go to Florida every winter for her cough, who took him everywhere, who said: "Wait till your father comes home, will you get it!" His mother, who knew she had something strange in the house. The soft, gentle beast that had given birth to the tiger. Where was she now, with his father? The man who went his

hurried way, his gray fedora perched on his head with the brim turned up, his face quiet behind his glasses and the thin little sandy moustache, smoking his endless cigars, where were they now?
He wanted very much to go to them, no, to him, to talk to him, and try to make some connection between them. Before it was too late. He had to talk to that man, to find out who he was, to find out not only who his father was, but who he--Robert, me--was also. He wanted simply to ... simply to talk to him, to get the answers.
He wanted to leap from the car, and go to a phone.
"This's gotta be it," said George Young from another world. Robert's thoughts slithered back to him, moaning.
He wrenched himself alert, and stared out the window at the scene in Littletown. They parked at the end of a street. Dirt. It was a long street of dirt. They got out of the Lincoln, and the three Detroiters bunched together as they moved away from the car. Robert stood silently watching them, taking in every facet of the street.
It was an exact replica of some B Western street. Dirt down the center, rutted from cars. Clapboard buildings on either side, with hitching rails for horses in front, and slat porches raised a foot off the street.
The buildings ran down either side, and at the far end of the street was a row of the same buildings, identical in their weather-beaten weariness.
The nearest building on his left had a painted sign on its roof-front. It said: THE COMBINATION BAR and under the big red letters it said: DRINKS MUSIC ROMANCE.
He felt ill, but he followed them.
They sauntered down the street, with George Young actually swaggering. He knew his way around. He was the swordsman of the group. And Cole Magnus seemed unsure, but there was breeding in him, some kind of breeding, and it carried him. Teddy Bear had bluff, little-guy bluff, feisty, cocky, and the three of them knew where they were going, knew what they were going to do with their bodies.
Robert closed with them. He was afraid, suddenly; more afraid than he had ever been before. More afraid than the night he had not wanted his parents to go to the party and had sneaked out of the house in his pajamas and ridden on the back bumper of the old green Plymouth, till honking cars had stopped his parents, and he had run away in the dark, and hit the stop sign with his face and neck and chest, and fallen down crying; more afraid than when he had quit college; more afraid than when they had said they were going to the whorehouses. He was bitterly, shiveringly, completely terrified, and he walked with them because they were the only things he had from the past. From before this time.
But they were another kind of boys.
They knew!
They knew it, the secret, and he knew none of it. They were younger, but they knew, and he did not.
The group walked down the street, and suddenly women began to appear in the windows of the buildings. They leaned over the sills, so their breasts rested on the sills, and they wore ballerina outfits of silk and bright colors, and their meaty arms were resting on the sills, also.
"Hey, sweetie, in here!"
"C'mon boys, we know what you want, hey, we'll give it to you. Hey!"
"I can be had, baby, I can be had!"
"Over here, lover ... c'mon over here, the best THE BEST!"
They walked down the length of the street. In the only lighted building (and suddenly Robert realized it was almost night, the dusk had fallen so swiftly) in the line facing them, at right angles to the main thoroughfare, there was a woman sitting in a large window. She was knitting. She was naked.
They turned around and started back up the street.
Perhaps, Robert prayed, perhaps we won't go in at all. He wanted to be somewhere else. With all his soul and spirit he wanted to be somewhere else, far away from this place.
"Well, whaddaya think?" asked George.
"I dunno," said Teddy Bear, "which one?"
"I think that Combination Bar back there's the best one," Cole said. "It looks bigger than the rest, we can probably all get taken care of in there."
"How about you?" Teddy Bear looked at Robert.
He shrugged nervously. "Any one of them's okay, I suppose."
"You got any bread?"
"Huh? What?" Robert was mystified.
"Bread, man, you got any money?"
"Oh, yeah. Yeah, sure, a few bucks." He pulled three silver dollars from his right-hand pants

pocket. Teddy Bear nodded. "Okay, let's make it." They walked back down to The Combination Bar and up onto the front porch. Robert suddenly found himself shouldering past the other three, and he was the first to enter.

There was a seedy bar on the right-hand wall, and a dead jukebox against the far wall facing them as they came in, and several doors on the left and right, and off to the far left of the entrance, sitting in the window, was an old, fat woman in a rocking chair. She, like the naked woman at the end of the street, was knitting. Rocking back and forth in a bizarre rhythm, she was knitting. She did not look up as the boys entered, but the girls erupted from the back of the room, and came toward them gladly.

"Must'a been a quiet time," Robert heard Teddy Bear say. Then the girls were on them.

Three of them were fat, bursting out of the silk and satin ballerina costumes that looked ridiculous on them. Their fleshy arms were wattled with excess flesh, and their hair was teased and back-combed into outlandish styles. Two of them had tattoos on their arms. One of them had a black beauty mark, in the shape of a heart, on her cheek. They instantly made fur Cole, George and Teddy Bear, but Robert was drawn almost against his will to a smaller, dark-haired girl just coming out of a door on the right, near the bar.

She was exquisite. Really. I'm ugly, miGod am I ugly, thought Robert. I used to have braces, and I still need my glasses for seeing things far away. Oh God! That fast.

"Hi, sweetie," the girl said, and Robert's terror leaped out of his head through his eyes, like a living creature, and turning, fastened itself claw and fang in his neck.

She had a mass of ebony black hair, piled atop her head. Her features were small, delicate and finely drawn. Her eyes were as dark as her hair, but they gleamed with an inner light. She wore a ballerina costume, like the others, yet somehow it fit her perfectly, was right for her, was proper. She took his arm and led him to the bar. Robert found himself suddenly filled with a great enthusiasm for what was happening. She was lovely. Really.

"How about dancing," he said irrelevantly, turning to the jukebox, "what about it?" She stopped him.

"We can't, sweet baby; it's against the law. We haven't got an entertainment license."

She bounced up onto a stool, and pulled Robert up beside her. "Hey, Jerry," she hailed a tall and red-necked man in a white apron, who had been slumped on a three-legged stool behind the bar, "I'd like a beer." Jerry roused himself, bent down the corner of the page of the double-crostic book he had been working in, and started toward the cooler. The other three girls were at the bar, as well, and they chimed in with Robert's girl. Jerry began pulling splits from the cooler, eight in all, and setting them up for opening. Robert felt put-upon. He didn't want to be hustled; though he had no way of phrasing it to himself. He felt something for this girl, and he didn't want to buy her a beer, like any common patron of The Combination Bar might do.

"No," he said.

"Huh?"

"No. I don't want to buy you a beer."

"Uh."

"Where do we go?"

"Uh, back there, back in uh in my room."

"You don't want to dance, huh?"

"No, we can't, no license."

"Entertainment."

"Yeah, that's right."

"Okay, let's go see your room."

"Yeah huh?"

"Yeah, your room."

"Okay, sweet baby, just follow me."

George looked across from where he was being smothered by his obese tattooed companion. "Lucky Bastard," he said, grimacing. Teddy Bear and Cole Magnus stared after Robert as he followed the girl from the bar room. "She was cute," Cole said.

"You just pay attention to me, dahlin'!" said Cole's girl, dragging his head around. Her gold tooth glinted in the light of the Schlitz Beer sign on the back bar.

Robert followed the girl down a short hall, and waited as she took a key from inside her bodice to unlock the door. He looked at her rounded hindquarters as she bent over the keyhole, and was amazed to find that he had never really noticed the way the buttocks joined to the legs of a woman. It was sensually thrilling to him, and he wondered why he had never looked at Sally Gleeson in the light. They had always made love in the dark--she had wanted it that way--and in the light she had always been re-dressed.

Now she was in the dark with his friend Dave, from New Jersey. It didn't seem fair, somehow, that he had never seen her naked.
"After you, sweet baby." The girl stood aside for Robert to enter the room.
"Oh no, after you," Robert said sincerely.
She gave a small skyward look and preceded him into the tiny room. Robert followed and stopped just within the door. The girl closed the door tightly and turned to his back. "That'll be four bucks. Now," she said firmly.
Without turning around, Robert pulled the three silver dollars from his right-hand pants pocket. and gathered a dollar's worth of change from his left-hand pocket. "On the bureau," she said, from behind him.
Robert placed it on the white lace doily, and was held on a point of fascination by the photographs stuck into the frame of the bureau's mirror. Tony Curtis. Steve McQueen. Steve Reeves. Vincent Edwards. Anthony Franciosa. Paul Newman. An unidentified man with a two-day stubble, a large ten-gallon hat worn at a rakish angle, and a pair of heavily tooled Western boots. A picture of a woman holding a baby holding a teddy bear. Robert thought of Teddy Bear, at the bar outside, pouring beer into the fat woman. A picture of two girls at a seashore, mugging ferociously.
He turned and looked at the rest of the room. There was a bed, with a metal frame. and a very clean. white bedspread. Three dolls, puffed in dirndl skirts, sat up frozen-faced on the pillow. The walls were gray, and covered with pictures in color, cut from movie magazines. There was a preponderance of Paul Newman and Vincent Edwards photos.
The bureau, a closet, a waist-high, overly long sink with rubber tubing connected to the spigot, internal machinery, female machinery, hoses, things without names, whose purposes he could only guess.
"Strip, sweet baby," the girl said, and pulled a zipper on the front of her ballerina costume. She let it fall from her breasts, and shoved it past her waist, over her hips. It fell to the floor and she carefully stepped out of it, being certain not to catch her high heels in it. Robert watched her. She was naked under the ballerina skirt. No bra, no underpants, just her flesh, her pale flesh that filled his vision. He wanted to reach out and touch her, there, or there, on her naked body, but he caught himself; she wasn't Sally Gleeson. She was someone else. He didn't even know her name, and he was going to do with her what he had done with Sally. "What's your name?" he asked her, softly.
"Terry," she said, and stooped to pick up the satin garment. He watched her as she turned, seeing all of her as she moved, every inch of her, all the dark places only suggested by the folds and wrinkles and postures of women's clothes. She went to the closet and hung the garment on a hanger. There were half a dozen more of other colors hanging there. She took a silver one out, closed the door, and laid the garment across the bureau, covering Robert's four dollars. She turned to him, then.
"Well, c'mon, sweet baby, I haven't got all night, you know." She kicked off her spike-heeled pumps and took a quick step to the bed. She pulled down the spread, carefully removing the dolls and placing them on the bureau. Then without looking at Robert she dumped herself back on the bed, flat on her back, her legs up.
An open cradle. The pillars of love spread to receive him. His thoughts were briefly of Sally Gleeson. They did not match up. This was a girl out of a vision; not his perhaps, but a vision nonetheless.
"Hey, c'mon," she said.
He started to strip, and she watched him as he slipped off his shoes, his socks, his pants. He was standing in his shirt when she said, "That's funny, y'know."
"What's funny?"
"Your pants. You took off your pants first."
"So? Doesn't everybody?"
She shook her head. "Uh-uh. They take off their shirt first, and they all suck in their bellies so they look like some kind of strong man, and they lay the clothes out real neat, like they were going to be here awhile, and then they take off the shoes, and then they turn around and unzip the fly and take off the pants, and lay them out real neat, and then they come over and get close before they take off their underpants. Most of them wear either jockey shorts or some kind of loud boxer things. But you took off your pants first. That's funny, y'know?"
It didn't mean much to Robert.
"And they usually come to the bed with their socks on. You ever see how silly a guy looks with nothing but his watch and his socks on?"
Robert unbuttoned his shirt and stripped off his underpants, and dumped them on the floor with his pants and socks. He came to the bed and looked down into the warm dark of her, and felt he should

say something: was this the feeling you always got? Was this the way for all men about to know women? He had no idea, but he felt he should do or say something that would set him apart from all the other men who had been inside this girl.
"What's, uh, I mean how uh long am I supposed to be in here for uh four dollars?"
She looked up incredulously.
"Sweet baby," she demanded, "just what the hell are you talking about ..."
"Well, I--"
"Now, look, will you just kindly lock on here and stop all this laughin' and scratchin'."
She grabbed him by the thigh, and tumbled him onto the bed. His left hand came down hard on her breast, and she went oooof softly, but started moving around till he was firmly positioned. He had the overwhelming urge to talk to her, to make some sort of conversation to keep her from what she was trying to do to him, what he was trying to do to her.
Then she found him, and his body betrayed him as she took him in her hand and guided him. It was like soft polyps, down a slim dank tunnel very smooth yet ruffled. It filled him with sensations he had never before known, and all he could think of was that Sally Gleeson, out there in the bushes with New Jersey Dave, his friend, was even a failure at this, as well as a failure at being real to him.
And then she was moving quickly, expertly, but he wanted it to go on and on for a long time. He propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at her lovely face. "Where are you from?" he asked, conversationally.
"Oh, shit! A nut."
"No, really, where are you from? Come on, tell me."
"Texas. West Texas. Okay?"
"How'd you get here?"
"How'd a nice girl like me wind up in a place like this? Oh, shit."
"No, now come on, don't make fun of me. I wouldn't ask you a clich·é· like that. I know better."
"Oh you do, huh?"
"Sure. I know a little."
"Like that prostitutes are usually dykes, and are all fallen girls from good families and never kiss their johns even if they'll screw them?"
"Well, yes, I've heard tha--"
She took his face in both hands and pulled him down to her and kissed him full on the mouth, prying open his lips with her soft, agile tongue, and running it inside hot and moist. She kissed him for a long time, for a very long time, moving her hips in an anticlockwise direction all the while. It was the most thorough kiss Robert Hirschhorn had ever had. In all his twenty years. It did the work of all the women who had come before, how very few there had been.
While she was still kissing him, there was a rude slam on the door, as though someone walking past had idly banged a fist against the panel.
"Oh, shit!" Terry said. "That's the Missus. Come on now, sweet baby, make your seed and let's get outta here before she howls holy hell at me."
So he started working again, drilling and moving as he was expected to do--according to Van de Velde in IDEAL MARRIAGE, which Sally had brought him from her father's library--with too much frenzy and not enough skill. And still he did not finish. On and on he went, in a seemingly endless repetition of the same movements, until Terry slapped him across the backside. "C'mon, sweet baby, do it already!"
And he remembered the screwing scene from James Jones's FROM HERE TO ETERNITY, and the endless conversation the hero had had with the whore, and he burst out laughing, falling across her so his face was buried in her deep, rich black hair. "What the hell's so funny?" she demanded.
"Nothing. Nothing. Not a single solitary ho thing." And he continued laughing till she slapped him on the backside again and urged him, "Pleeeese, sweet baby, she's gonna raise holy hell with me," so he tried very hard, and she did weird things with herself, moving tightly against him, and in a moment it was over.
Then she was up off the bed like a shot, and at the sink performing her rituals with the tubes of rubber. He got dressed quickly, feeling a great affection for her, and said, "Are you coming hack to the bar? I'd like to buy you that beer now."
"In a bit, in a bit," she said, without turning.
So he left the room, buttoning his shirt.
In the bar, George and Cole and Teddy Bear were already waiting. "Man, did you get your money's worth from that sweet piece!" George caroled. "Or couldn't you get it up, Tiger?" They all three laughed.
"How did you guys do with the tattooed ladies?" Robert sneered at them. They shut up. And turned

hack to their beers. At a dollar a split, they were leaving no dregs. The hogs with the tattoos were elsewhere. Robert decided to take a walk. There were other men in the barroom.
He walked outside and up toward the car, and received a half-dozen offers from the windows across the way. He waved at them in a friendly, magnanimous way. He was truly a man now. He had the secret. It was all warm and delightful, that's what it was. It was serene and lovely, with a lovely girl really. And then the idea hit him. He would ask her if she wanted to come with him to San Francisco.
She had to accept. A girl like that, with a sense of humor, couldn't really enjoy this life. He would tell her how he was writing a fine novel, and that he was twenty-four years old. No, better make that twenty-seven. Yes, he was Robert Hirschhorn, age twenty-seven, and he would marry her. All that black hair.
West Texas.
Lovely. Really.
He sprinted back to the street and to The Combination Bar. He was inside and running through the barroom and down the short hall before the three minstrels realized he was back. He opened the door and stepped through and said, "Hey, listen, Terry, I have a wild ideeeee--"
The word shrieked off thinly, as he watched them and he realized how foolish he must have looked doing the same thing. She looked out at him from around the huge, tanned shoulders, and her eyes grew wide.
"Oh, shit!" she exclaimed.
The man's head twisted on the thick red neck, and he yelled, "Say what the fuggin' hell you mean doin' there, boy!" And Robert's tongue balled in his mouth and he felt as though it were full of dust again. And he felt very gone, like the jack rabbit that had crossed his path. Had it been a black jack rabbit? And was that bad luck as well?
He turned and ran from the room, through the bar and out into the chill Nevada night. He kept running till he came out on the main street of Winnemucca, and didn't stop till he had found a phone booth.
Collect. Station. Starkey, Ohio.
"Mom, Mother, hey listen, Mom, let me speak to Dad, will you. It's terribly important, it's awfully important, I have to talk to him ..."
The sound of his mother's voice was clogged with trembling. "Your father died last night, Bobby."
He wouldn't listen to the words. He wouldn't.
It was foolish. "No, listen, Mom, let me talk to him ..."
"Our daddy died last night, Bobby. He was sitting right there in his red chair, he was smoking his cigar, and he died, Bobby. He just died."
He would not listen! He wouldn't! Screw it NO!
"--thrombosis, that's what Doctor Fisher said. A coronary throm--Bobby, are you there? Bobby darling, are you coming home now, please come home..."
"No! No, I'm not coming home now, not now ..." he cried helplessly, and hung up the receiver. He laid his face up alongside the cool glass of the phone booth and he cried a very private cry for a while.
Then he went outside and looked up at the clear black Nevada sky, as black as Terry's hair, and he said to the sky and whomever might be there listening: "We never really we never really talked! Just talked!"
Then he walked slowly back toward Littletown, his hands in his pockets. He would go down to Frisco--hell!--with the three minstrels. and he would learn the secret from them, because they knew it and they'd tell him if he was a good guy.
And he would wait for another four dollar turn on Terry, because there was no communication, none at all with anyone, ever, and he was locked-in the same as everyone else, and all that mattered was laughing, so he would laugh.
So laughing, till his eyes hurt, he went back down the street. The sound of it did not reach very far in the night.
--Hollywood, 1964

MONA AT HER WINDOWS

When Mona was twenty-three, she had pleurisy, and the time in Women's Hospital had been violently peaceful: so calm and warm and tended that it made her shudder with pleasure to remember it. It was the one happy time--not counting growing up in Minnesota with Buddy and Eenor and the folks--she could remember. It was a period of placid contemplation of the way the world really was, and is.
It was a time in which the constant growing pressure of her ugliness came to her fully,

completely. She had looked at the nurses, even the plain and unattractive ones, and had known they were more appealing than she would ever be. It was the days-long moment through which Mona told herself the truth. I am not just ordinary, I am really quite unappetizing. And she recognized the inevitable end result of having been born with the face she wore: she would never marry, she would perhaps never have a man (unless he was somehow deficient, for otherwise, why should he want her?) and she might never even experience the strange mystery of having a man enter her body. It was, at first, a realization so monstrous, so terrible in its ultimate thoroughness of destruction, that she cried. Not simple uncomplicated tears of sorrow, but a soulful emptying of her body that dried her, leaving her hacking, dry-sobbing, flushed and even sicker than she had been when admitted to the hospital. It was not a sorrow born of having been ill-treated, of being in pain, or of having lost something. It was that unnameable sorrow mixed with passionate fear at never having had anything to lose.

When she was released, she felt she must break away from the past, that she must begin a new existence, at the age of twenty-three, based upon the new truth she had discovered. This resolve was reinforced by the pitying stares of the homely nurses who said good-bye to her; women and girls who had hushed and soothed her during the nights of wretched crying. If these drabs could feel superior to her ... then finally she knew her place, and her fate.

So Mona moved out of her apartment and quit her job. She closed her checking account and paid off her charges at the market and Macy's. She left the tag-ends of hopes and desires she had known till then, and went to find a new subsistence, in the realm of realization of futility.

Mona took an apartment on a busy corner of Seventh Avenue and Twenty-third Street, and she decorated it with Spartan efficiency. No television set and no record player; no parti-colored pillows to decorate the daybed; no bookshelves stocked with glossy flashy paperbacks and philosophical tracts from Anchor or Yale University Press; no clever pewter coffee mugs and no Lyonel Feininger prints on the walls. Just the necessities of life that keep a person breathing and free of sickness.

But the windows ...

Ah, the windows!

Three seeing-out windows. Three constantly changing landscapes hung in the center of her walls. Three openings to the world. Three panoramic shadow plays, always new, always vivid. Into these three windows she poured all the unquenchable instincts a resigned soul could not damp.

She planted her flowerpots, and she set up the foam pillows on the floor, and day after day, night after night (when she was not at work in the catalogue section of the New York Public Library), she stared into the world.

Hidden, recording, devouring and ugly, she stared into other people's lives as they traversed from one side of her sight to the other, and then gone. She watched them with an intensity a casual observer might call psychotic. She studied the moles on the faces of delivery boys; she studied the rough-knuckled hands of cleaning women on their way home from swabbing office floors at five in the morning; she studied the exotic hatboxes and lustrous hairdos of the models, perhaps prostitutes, swirling and delighting their way away from passion; she learned the names of obscure freight companies and cartage firms from trucks roaring by; she absorbed the air and the beat and the life of the world, by osmosis and by rote.

As the months passed into a year, and that year gave way to a second, in the windows of her world, Mona found a particular pleasure in imagining herself one with the girls who lived their brief lives on the streets outside. A saucy brunette with a great flat leather portfolio under her arm would cross Mona's vision and in her window sanctuary Mona would merge with the brunette, knowing her feet were tired from having stood behind a perfume counter for eight hours. She would take heart, however, in the knowledge that now she was on her way to art school, where she would perfect her charcoal technique a little more. And one day I'll be a very good artist, and work for one of the big women's slicks, and one of the models will ask me for a date, and I'll go with him to the Chateaubriand, and then he'll ask me to ...

As the brunette passed out of sight around the corner.

With the lights out in the apartment, and darkness providing a mummer's cloak, Mona picked up a slatternly blonde shuffling up Seventh Avenue, pausing at the light, and empathically she entered the blonde's head, feeling her hands sinking into the side pockets of the Alligator raincoat, wishing I was home in Cedar Rapids instead of going to meet Arnie, that stupe, that creep. But I suppose I'll marry him because if I don't, I'll never get those bills paid at Saks and Klein's. He's not very good-looking, but at least he can make it in the rack, and hell, what am I after, James Garner, or a meal ticket? If only he didn't have that ridiculous astigmatism, those dopey glasses with the tortoise-shell frames! Well, hell, I can always make him go in for contact lenses after I get him ...

Into the restaurant and out of sight of Mona.
It went this way, hour and hour and hour after hour. One girl, two girls, three, four and more, always more, coming down the Avenue, crossing Twenty-third Street, leaving buildings and entering bakeries, pausing at traffic lights and whistling through the twilight mistiness.
It was a whole new, vicarious, utterly satisfying life. And soon, Mona began to realize that she was better than all of them down there.
For they only had one life each, but she had thousands. There were worse fates than merely being ugly, and lonely. She knew all of those fates, because she was Everywoman, and experienced their brief walking-past lives more totally than any of them could. She was each happy girl, every sad girl, all the pretty ones, and for change the not-pretty ones. She thought their many thoughts, wore their many expressions, loved their many lovers, lived life to its fullest. She thrived. Yet there came a night ...
In the dark painting that lived in her window, she saw, this night, a cheap-looking but sensuous Puerto Rican girl in a thigh-length black leather coat, beehive hairdo, smoky hose and overpainted face, strolling liquidly, languidly, close to the buildings. A pickup girl, a loose girl, a scarlet Miss looking for a five-dollar John.
Mona's pale eyes swooped down and slid inside the girl, knowing her soreness between the legs, knowing her weariness at having to make another ten tonight or they'll lock my bags in the room, and I'll have to find a flop somewhere till I can get my clothes out.
There was a stirring in the shadowed doorway, and the Puerto Rican girl who was Mona turned half toward the noise. A hand snaked out of the darkness and physically away! Mona was wrenched, back to her place high in the window, watching terrified and mutely as the man half-pulled the tramp into the doorway.
Mona stared disbelieving as the alter ego that had been hers, a moment before, was thrown to the sidewalk. The man descended on the leather car coat, tore it open and, as Mona stared in horror, violated the streetwalker with an animal ferocity that forced Mona to bite her fist, stifle a scream, and finally, as the man arched upward in climax, faint painfully away from her viewport into reality.
It could only have been a few minutes of unconsciousness, for when she pulled herself to her knees on the foam cushions, the Puerto Rican girl was still lying sprawled on the sidewalk, half into the doorway, her face hidden, but her nyloned legs sticking out, awkwardly spread and limp, into the light from the streetlamps.
Mona closed the window softly, pulled the shade, and went to bed.
When day came, it seemed somehow silent in her streets, and though Mona tried to regain a oneness with her women going by, it was useless.
At eight o'clock that night--finally--she knew she had reached another junction of her existence. There were things worse than being ugly and lonely, and all of them were here, before these windows.
That night the windows were empty for the first time in years, but the streets had a new walker seeking whatever Fate chanced by first.
If there was a God for women who lived in windows, He would send an ugly boy with tortoise-shell glasses, rather than a ferocious animal.
The windows were dead eyes; life meant darkness and the streets of the world. Mona said hello.
--New York City, 1962

WHEN I WAS A HIRED GUN
To be read in the style of a Dashiell Hammett story, featuring Sam Spade, "the hardest-boiled private eye of them all." Move it.
I was once a hired gun.
Restrain mirth, plug up your booze-funnel, and l'll lay it on you how it came to pass that a seventeen-year-old kid wound up packing a .25 Beretta for a pseudo-wealthy neurotic paranoid. (Yeah, that's right, it's the same model Beretta that Bond packed in the early Fleming books, till armaments experts pinned him to the wall with the skinny that that particular model automatic is a "ladies' gun" about as effective in stopping a determined thug as a hatpin; which I didn't know at the time, or I'd have crapped with terror.)
It was 1951, Cleveland. I was going to East High School, a pretty tough school even for those Blackboard Jungle days, and I was into science fiction. I was a charter member of the Cleveland Science Fiction Society. We called ourselves The Terrans. We'd gone from one member's house to another with our meetings, until one week an outré dude named Al Wilson showed, and offered us his pad for a regular meeting-place.
It was a converted dentist's office over a supermarket, on the second floor of a building

somewhere around East 125th Street and St. Clair Avenue. Some of the facts blur, it's almost twenty-five years ago; but the substance is precise.
Wilson looked like a Martian to me. At least, what I had always seen represented in sf magazines as a Martian: skinny, large head, receding hairline, big eyes. He was, to me, a weird and fascinating man. He was into the Fortean Society and all its unexplained phenomena, Korzybskian General Semantics, heavyweight physical sciences, occultism, and he filed his socks under "S" in the filing cabinet. His place was a rabbit hole for me, and I fell down that hole willingly because my Dad was recently dead, I was lost and miserable, doing rotten in school, relating only to science fiction and the emerging world of sf fandom. So Al Wilson came around at just the right time. He wasn't close enough physically or emotionally to be a father image for me, but he was the guru I needed at just that time.
So I started hanging around Al's place all the time. He had a Multilith machine right in the middle of the floor, a Varityper for typing up issues of the club newsletter, and stacks of erudite and obscure books, like Tiffany Thayer's novels, Fort's studies of "excluded facts," what he called "a procession of the damned," James Branch Cabell, Lord Dunsany, Lovecraft, Lincoln Barnett ... that whole crowd. There was a cot in the middle of the "apartment." No sheets. Al slept whenever he felt like it, ate whenever he felt like it, operated off no known clock.
One day, after I'd been playing Roo to his Kanga for some months, Al sat me down and asked me if I wanted a job.
I was seventeen, my Dad had died leaving my mother and myself not too well off, we were living in a resident hotel on East 105th Street, The Sovereign (where Joel Grey also lived when he was Joel Katz), and the best job I'd been able to get was in a bookstore. "How much and what do I have to do?"
"Two hundred a month and you'll be sort of a bodyguard for me. Run errands. Be around when I need you."
I looked at him. Weird eyes looked back.
Al Wilson worked on the assembly line at Thompson Products--or maybe it was Fisher Body in East Cleveland, I don't remember exactly--and I knew he made a good wage, but two hundred a month for a gopher?
I said okay, and went to work for Al Wilson.
I didn't tell my Mother. She was always a little leery about those oddball sf people I was hanging out with, and if I'd told her I was making fifty a week, without deductions , for bodyguarding a Martian, she'd have ... well, she'd have done what she did later. So I kept it quiet and slipped a few bills into her purse when she wasn't looking. Made up in a small way for all the money I'd stolen out of her purse when she was sleeping.
I ran peculiar errands for Al Wilson. Food, sometimes, which wasn't peculiar, but books of a very peculiar nature other times, and strange messages to even stranger people. Then one day, Al brought home a package and unwrapped it on the feeder ledge of the Multilith. I came over and watched; it was a gun. And a shoulder holster. "What's that for?"
He looked at me with those weird eyes and said, "You'll need to wear this from now on when you're running errands for me."
"To the supermarket?"'
"You'll be flying out this week. Other things."
So I started packing the heat. I thought it was funny; and I dug playing pistolero. Sue me.
He also said, "From time to time I want you to scare me." It was in one of those moments when Al wasn't goofing or being weird. It was one of his pathetic moments. He was a lonely man leading an isolated life. He'd been married and divorced long before--even though he was only in his thirties--and now he was all alone inside his skull, thinking things no one else could understand, making friendships slowly, trusting no one. I didn't ask him what he meant, I knew. He wanted me to feed his strangeness, whatever that was.
So I would leave, during the dark of the evening, and I'd go down the long hall and down the stairs and go outside and around the side of the building and there, where they'd rolled up the awnings that shaded the big display windows of the supermarket, I'd climb up the ratchet bar that raised and lowered the canvas awnings, and I'd stand on the rolled-up awning, which brought my face to just the level of the second storey window, and I'd make hideous sounds and tap on the windows and scream and scare the hell out of him.
Did he know it was me? Of course he knew. He'd asked me to do it, hadn't he? Move it.
Peculiar errands. "Take this briefcase and go to a man in Cincinnati whose name I'll give you, and hand it to him and tell him the key to unlock it will come under separate cover by another route. If he asks you your name tell him it's Roger Conroy, and spell it for him with two 'y's'."
Peculiar errands. "I have this canister of fulminate of mercury," he said to me one day, showing

me a large canister of fulminate of mercury, which explodes at the slightest friction or shock.
"Jesus Whirling Christ!" I said, with a decibel count that could have gotten me a booking as the PA system for Madison Square Garden. I jumped eleven feet, nine inches and came down running.
Eventually he collared me and said I had to dispose of it. "You're outta your meso-po-tam-i-an mind," I said, feet still running, body held aloft. "No way I'm gonna get near that stuff. That's dangerous, Al! If it goes off there won't be enough of me left to slip into an envelope and mail back to my Mummy."
So we did it together. We took a bus out Euclid Avenue to what used to be called the Nottingham area beyond East Cleveland. There was this idyllic little pastoral setting, all trees and low hills, right near a shopping area; and running through it, about three hundred yards from Euclid Avenue, which was the main thoroughfare bisecting the heart of Cleveland, was Euclid Creek. Pre-pollution time, it was a sort of park where people went to lie out under the trees and read, play with their children, walk their dogs, nice place.
Al and I got down from the bus, walked down the slope to the Creek, and Al uncapped the canister he'd been carrying in a paper bag. Those of you who know what fulminate of mercury does on contact with water will know what happened next. You will also understand that I had (and have) a very inadequate grasp of chemistry.
But Al should have known! (That has always been one of the big mysteries about him: he clearly did know a whole hell of a lot about science ... why didn't he know what would happen? Or did he?)
He tossed the protective canister into the Creek and we turned to go, when the GODDAMNEDEST FUCKING GIGANTIC CATACLYSMIC KRAKATOAN EXPLOSION!!! (East or West of Java!) went off and that bloody canister came erupting out of the Creek with a waterspout that drenched us both. And hurled the canister right back at us as if King Neptune had got it right in his kisser. Al grabbed for it, and chunks of mercury went all over the grass, sputtering and exploding and sparking and banging away with a million tiny reports like the Lilliputian militia on maneuvers. He grabbed the canister and flung it back in!
"No, no!" I screamed. But Al was busy picking up the bigger chunks of mercury with his bare hands, burning the shit out of himself, and whipping the exploding chemical back into the Creek.
This time it went off with a series of explosions like giant firecrackers, and the canister came up out of the depths skipping across the water like a spasming submarine. I ran like a thief.
Behind me, last thing I could see, was Al Wilson, a deranged Martian elf, scampering around grabbing up burning mercury with his hands, throwing it into the Creek ...
In the distance I could hear police sirens ...
I didn't see him for a week. but when I went back to his pad, he made no mention of the event, and I didn't comment on his bandaged hands. Peculiar errands.
Then Al fell in love. Oh God.
He came home one night after working the swing shift, and his face was almost beatific with light. Seems there was this girl working a couple of lathes down from him, and he hungered for her soul as no one had hungered since Paolo and Francesca were condemned to an eternal fuck in THE DIVINE COMEDY. He set me to the task of shadowing her, to finding out where she lived. So I went to work with him one day, he pointed her out to me, and I came back when his shift was ended, and followed her. On the bus. I don't remember where it was now, this many years later, but it was one of the suburban tract house areas. I trailed her for a week till I was pretty sure I knew her habits, and then I asked Al what he wanted to do about it.
"I don't know."
"Well, why don't you just go up to her and ask her for a date?"
"I can't. I'm afraid."
"Oh, Al, for Christ's sake!"
"I can't. I need you to make an introduction for me."
"Me?!?"
"Sure. I'll send her a gift, and you'll be my John Smith."
"Oh, Gawd! Miles Standish was an asshole. Al. No wonder Patricia Mullen flipped for John Smith. Do it yourself."
"No, no. I've made up my mind. I'll send her a special gift and you'll carry it for me and you'll tell her all about me. She'll like you."
Seers, sarvants and soothsayers will perceive what came next.
So will dummies.
I came waltzing up to this girl's house one evening, carrying Al's "special gift." All set to make the big pitch for the Martian. Now, you may ask, what special gift did Al Wilson, who thought like none of us, maybe not like anyone else who'd ever lived on the Earth, select for the girl of his sex dreams? A brooch, an amethyst necklace, flowers, a five pound box of cherry-filled chocolates,

an ermine cape, a complete set of the works of the Bronté sisters, a gift certificate for a year's worth of McDonald hamburgers, a diamond ring ...?
Al Wilson had bought her an eleven lb. steak, had it wrapped in plastic, and had mounted it on an expensive Swedish serving tray.
Don't ask and I won't have to talk about it.
"Al," I said, "what the hell kind of a gift is that to make an introduction?"
He insisted that was what he wanted her to have. Today, that might he a wild gift, the cost of meat being what it is, but this was in the early Fifties and a slab of meat was just plain crazy. But I took it. I was working for him.
Up to the door of the house, rang the bell, waited. She came to the door, opened it, and looked at me. Did I bother to tell you she was a sensational-looking girl?
"I was wondering how long it would take you to say hello," she said. "I've been watching you follow me home for a week."
Then she invited me in. She introduced me to her Mother. "Oh, you're the one," her mother said. "We were going to call the police about you." I guess I giggled nervously.
"What's with the steak?" the girl said.
"Ah-hmm. I am a messenger for Mr. Al Wilson, who works with you at the plant. Mr. Wilson, who is a very shy man, hut a very nice man, would like to come calling. He has sent me and this small token of his respect and admiration as a calling card."
They looked at the steak, then they looked at me, then they looked at each other.
"I think we should call the cops," her Mother said.
"No, no!" I said, my voice rising. "This is strictly legit. Al is just, well, you know, really quiet and bashful about women, and he's seen you every day at the plant and he didn't know how to strike up an acquaintance."
"You related to him?" the girl asked.
"I work for him."
"Doing what?"
How the hell do you tell two total strangers that you are a hired gun. I mean, for chrissakes, I had zits ... I didn't look a thing like Dick Powell or Bogart or even, God help me, Audie Murphy. I was just a kid with a dumb steak in my hands.
"I run errands for him. He has money."
That seemed to brighten both of them. "We'll cook it for dinner," the Mother said. "Why don't you stay?" said the girl. So I stayed. The night.
We talked through most of the night, the girl and I. It is not by chance that I keep calling her "the girl." After twenty-five years, I can't recall her name. What I do recall is that she tried to get me to take her to bed, and I was a virgin, a scared virgin, and most of that night was spent in consummate horror of being deflowered. You must grasp that I was seventeen, had never even kissed a girl, and the idea of that lush creature and myself in a bed filled me with nameless terrors H. P. Lovecraft never imagined.
I fled the next day, in company with the girl, with whom I rode the bus back into Cleveland. When she got off at Fisher Body, I kept going and would gladly have motored right out of the state if it hadn't been for having to report back to Al.
He wasn't home when I got there, so I guess I went off to school. But at the end of the academic day I took the streetcar out to his apartment on St. Clair Avenue. and waited for him. When he showed, I thought the first thing he'd ask me was what had happened on his love-mission. But he didn't. He told me he had a vital errand for me to run, that he'd been out getting me plane tickets, and I was going to Cincinnati.
"Don't you want to know what happened with the girl and the steak?"
"Oh, sure. What happened ... but be brief."
So I told him she seemed like a nice girl (I didn't mention that she wasn't terribly bright, as far as I could tell) and that she seemed responsive to his overtures (I didn't mention that she had spent the better part of the night trying to reap the dubious benefits of my post-puberty tumescence) and that he should call her.
I wish I could tell you they got married and had nine kids, or that she spurned him in a flamboyant scene, or that he killed her, or she killed him ... but the truth of the matter is that I never heard another word from Al about The Great Love Affair of the Century.
Instead, I readied myself to go to Cincinnati.
(An Author's Note: after the first section of this reminiscence was published, I received a call from an old friend of twenty years' standing, Roy Lavender, formerly of Ohio, now living in Long Beach. Roy remembered Al, remembered the period I had been working for Al. Remembered, in fact, things I'd forgotten. You can perceive with what joy I took the call after the long essays I have

written about people thinking the weird things that happen to me are fever-dreams made up on the moment. Royis living verification of what I've set down here, and he gave me some facts about Al I never knew. He also pointed out that the content of the container Al threw into Euclid Creek--as reported earlier in this reminiscence--was not fulminate of mercury but, rather, metallic sodium. Hence, the explosions. Roy also reminded me of the time Al was beset by a group of juvies from the area, who came up over the grocery awning to rip him off and beat him up in the apartment, and how Al beat the shit out of them, at one point using the handle from the Multilith press to slam a kid so hard it lifted him off through the window into the street below. Stay healthy and live long, Roy Lavender: you are my last touch with verification of this important life-experience.)

Anyhow. Al handcuffed an attaché case to my wrist, gave me a hundred bucks, and sent me off to the airport. I made a mistake, however. It was a school day, and I stopped off at the optometry shop of my brother-in-law, Jerry, on Prospect Avenue in Cleveland, to tell him I was going out of town and would be back the next day. Now, my family has always considered me something of an irresponsible, not to mention a dreamer who might as easily come home for dinner as show up ten hours later with a story that I'd been unavoidably delayed by puce-colored aliens from Proxima Centauri who had kidnapped me and taken me for a ride in their motorized garbanzo bean through the reaches of deepest space. So when Jerry saw the attaché case handcuffed to my wrist, he thought I was into another big lie. and he instantly called my Mother, to tell her to stop me at the airport.

Thus, when I got there, I was greeted by cops and airport fuzz who yanked me off the flight, searched me--they couldn't search the case. they didn't have a key--and finally had to release me, because I was legitimately ticketed.

I went to Cincinnati, really pissed at my Mother, and ambivalent as hell about my role in life. Was I, in fact, Ashenden the secret agent, or was I a punk kid who needed his Mommy's approval before he could have an adventure? Not in the least ameliorating my feelings was the memory of Al's words as he'd handcuffed the case to my wrist:

"Be careful. There are people who will try to take this away from you." At that moment I decided to leave the Beretta with Al. Good thing I did: can you imagine the looks of lively interest on the faces of the airport cossacks?

When I got to Cincinnati, I took a cab to the address Al had given me, where I met Don Ford, a science fiction fan (now, sadly, deceased) whom I knew casually, but whom I knew to be a friend of Al's. He unlocked the cuffs, took the case into the next room, and came back to offer me the hospitality of his home for the rest of the day and that night. I had no idea what was in the case, but Roy Lavender advises that Al Wilson, for all his weirdness, was a man who had invented a method for producing steel directly from iron ore without going through the pig iron stage. He had contacts in South America and in Newfoundland, and apparently there were big business interests that were willing to stop at very little to get the secret.

None of this did I know.

But when, the next day, I went to board the plane back to Cleveland, someone took a shot at me. Okay, okay. I'm dreaming. Have it your way. All I know is that as I crossed the tarmac to board the plane--in the days before those access tunnels that take you from the plane's passenger cab straight into the terminal--I heard what sounded like a gunshot, and a hole appeared in the fuselage of the plane. I may be making that up. I didn't wait around to ponder the equation. I bolted past everyone else, shoved me widdle self up the gangway and was inside the liner before that pre-Sirhan Sirhan could get off another.

When I got back to Cleveland, I tendered my resignation.

It had been a brief but fascinating sojourn in company with the mysterious Martian, Al Wilson, but I suddenly realized I had a deep-seated aversion to bullet holes in my as-then-sexually-unexplored cuteness.

Al reluctantly let me off the hook, said he would miss me, and we went our separate ways.

There is an almost apocryphal afternote.

I never saw Al Wilson again, save once.

I was in Philadelphia in 1953, there for a science fiction convention, and on a dead Sunday morning, while everyone else slept off the effects of having drunk themselves into stupors the night before, I went looking for an open breakfast nook. You may have heard how dead Philly is on a Sunday morning. The reports are hardly exaggerated.

But as I walked the street seeking a breakfast counter, I saw a man walking toward me. As we neared each other, I recognized him as Al Wilson. I stopped. He came straight up to me, as though he'd known I would be there, and had hurried to meet me. There was no preamble, no greetings between two people who hadn't seen each other in years. He merely came in close, looked straight at me with those faintly protruberant eyes, and said in an undertone, "When you see Stan Skirvin,

tell him to examine pages 476 to 495 in T. E. Lawrence's SEVEN PILLARS OF WISDOM."
Then he walked past me and was gone.
I have read those pages in every hardcover and paperback edition of Lawrence of Arabia's book ever printed; I have never found the slightest clue to what mystery may be hidden there.
But I'll tell you this: Al Wilson walked out of a chill Philadelphia morning in 1953 to tell me that, and I'll be damned if I don't believe that if I can ever unravel what he meant, I'll be rich, Willy Loman, rich as Croseus!
And that's the story of how I was a hired gun.
Honest.
--Los Angeles, 1973

A PATH THROUGH THE DARKNESS
In a summer heavy with sunshine and promises, I came to New York. It was the end of the confused times for me--and in many ways the beginning of even more confusion.
College had confused me with its confounding regimentation and inability to provide realities, answers; my family had exposed itself for the inelastic failure I had always known it to be, unconsciously; love had been a high-flown word whose meaning had changed with every pretty smile; I was, simply enough, a seeker.
New York magically held all my answers. On streets of purest gold I would seek my fortune, find it, and mold a life of meaning, achievement and satisfaction.
I took a room uptown across from Columbia University, in what had once been (thirty years before) a fashionable hotel. I paid ten dollars a week for a room with an unobstructed view of the air shaft, and cooking privileges I shared with two spinster schoolteachers, three college students, two Chinese exchange students and a constantly drunken Puerto Rican day-laborer. It was a quiet place, whose walls retained the odor of Cantonese cooking, Gallo Wine and that never-to-be-forgotten smell of disinfectant mixed with urine. I had my radio, my books, my typewriter and a good bed.
If there had ever been happiness, this was it, languishing in a simplicity of bodily functions that I had thought long since lost and forgotten.
At first the writing came slowly, amateurishly, but in my fervor to write, and say what I had to say--to hell with the fact that others had said it all before me, far better; I had to write--I stayed behind the machine, working far into the nights, sleeping most of the mornings, then making the editorial rounds in the afternoon.
Again, it was the good life. Except for the loneliness.
There were friends, of course: Billy and Stella Soles who had come from California and subsisted on kidney bean soup, the publication of an amateur science fiction journal and endless bed-bouts; Aggie Vinson, a selling writer with a cool manner and a brotherly affection for my stumbling attempts at writing; Pernell Morris and his sister Beth, who ran a newsstand on Broadway and invited me over perhaps twice a week for a kosher meal; others.
But there was still the feeling I was walking alone, that I had no human goal toward which to work. That I was out there swinging by myself, and if it were to end tomorrow no one could really be troubled. The ripples would roll out and disappear, the water would close over and silence would replace me.
Perhaps that is the essence of loneliness: to feel that silence will replace you.
So when my money ran out, and I landed the job selling books and souvenirs in the Times Square bookshop (seven P.M. to three in the morning) I decided to throw a small blast. God knows my room wasn't large enough for the full Elsa Maxwell treatment, but nonetheless I invited everyone I had even remotely grown to know, and urged them to bring friends. It was the perfectly ordinary sort of thing one does when the loneliness gets too oppressive, too obstinately endless.
It was an ordinary thing, and when I think back on it I want to cry. It brings on those dream fantasies about going back in time five minutes before the event, and just not doing it. How I've wished for those five minutes to live over again. Would it have saved her--I think not.
But it might have saved me.
They started arriving early, and the first ones were the Columbia students who wanted to souse-up their dates, lay them and get them back before Barnard curfew. They came with eighty-nine-cent bottles of Chianti and with routines borrowed from comedians' LPs. They were pretty much an empty lot, all sound and not a helluva lot of fury, but they made good background noise and as bookends they eminently served the purpose of decoration.
At about nine o'clock Aggie arrived carrying a brown paper sack with a bottle of Pernod in it, and he flashed both the label and a secret smile as he retreated to a far corner. The label was the come-on and the secret smile said, The dishwater booze is for the tourists, podnuh, but the

goodies is for us.
Billy and Stella blew in noisily, with a bowl of clam dip plastic-covered, and a box of stiff potato chips for dipping. Of all the horrors of the civilized world, I had decided clam, oyster and bleu cheese dips were the worst, and of the worst, Stella Soles's dips were the dippiest.
I beamed and thanked them. It smelled like decaying bodies.
Stella and Billy snuggled down on the sofabed and began pawing each other immediately. It was very much like the hippo and the dik-dik bird. Stella was perhaps six feet, three inches and big... really big, across the chest, across the shoulders, in the hips ... a big woman. Billy was a gnat. He was barely five four, and wore his hair in a style reminiscent of Farmer Al Falfa. When he went at her, it was like watching a dwarf storm the Bastille. But they loved each other almost outrageously, and the whining sound of Stella calling, "Bill-ee ... Billll-ee!" was a familiar sound in our building.
The mating call of the great musk ox.
The party was both dying and phoenixly rising when the knock came at the door. I went over without difficulty--for it was one of those parties where everyone settles down in an orderly, out-of-the-way manner--and opened the door.
She had come with three fags, each dressed entirely in black, and next to their lean, hard-muscled litheness her tiny white-swathed figure was a shock.
Her face was so clear and direct, the features arranged as they might have been by a simpering cameo-carver who saw perfection in the face of disorder, I was truly startled. I had no idea who she was, but I instantly related to her, instantly desired her, instantly saw her image of me rise up and be greeted with attention. The three homosexuals with her distressed me, for I was very nearly pathological in my abhorrence for those of the gay set--but the girl was so arresting I let them pass.
She came into my single room, smiling like a street gamine, and found a place for herself and her retinue by the far window. It was too much; my eyes followed her as though I'd lost all volition or personal desire except to be near her, even if it was only by sight.
I followed them and started making introductions ... for the first time in the evening they went badly. Inevitably they were set straight and she said her name was Stephie Cook, her friends were Blank, Blank and Blank Blank. Who the hell listened, who the hell cared what marcelled titles they had given themselves. That she was a queen of the fag set did not seem to offend me. Before, when I had run into a seemingly normal girl surrounded and attended by queers, I had drawn my own conclusions as to the girl's personality and sex habits. But with Stephie, somehow, it was entirely different. She was straight, I knew it, I could feel it, she was interested in me from the first, and I--by that weird alchemical nature of attraction--was completely in her power.
As the evening wore down, we gravitated toward one another on imbecile pretext: would you like a glass of Pernod? Do you work? Have you really read all these books? Where do you live?
The homosexuals seemed not to mind, smiling like indulgent dueñas at Stephie as she nuzzled closer to me in a dim corner by the record player.
Sometime during the decaying last moments of the party, without either of us saying it aloud, we knew she would stay with me that night.
Aggie seemed to know, too. Perhaps it was that he knew me so well, took such a bemused view of my goings-on, and wished me well or perhaps he knew because he was also a writer who felt he had to know people to write honestly.
As he left, he raised the empty Pernod bottle in a pseudo-centurion salute, mumbled, "Post hoc, ergo proctor hoc," and grinned his way out of the room. Billy and Stella left soon after. They had been the last--the coeds and their spatula-handed paramours having checked out hours before, the three gay boys long since departed to their contorted repose--and when the door shut after them, we stared at each other from our seats without moving.
"Would you like a pair of my pajamas?" I asked. She nodded and gave me a look that was half-affection and half-trust. It was quite unlike anything I'd ever seen in a woman's face before.
I found my last laundry return had included only one pair of pajamas, so I offered her the tops. She took them, went down the hall to the bathroom and changed while I did the same in the room, and she returned as I was crawling into bed.
Wearing my oversized pajama tops, the sleeves rolled well above the wrists, the tails hanging down past her thighs, she was a Dresden doll figurine, come to life. It was an entirely commonplace, entirely believable and trite situation; I knew it had happened to a million other guys with a million other girls, but for me, it was the most astounding, the most hypnotizing experience of my life. In a matter of hours my loneliness had been ended.
She came to bed and we lay there talking for hours. We did not make love that night; we slept soundly, holding each other.

She lived in Brooklyn, and I would come running up out of the subway entrance, gathering speed as I raced down the half block to her building and--Doug Fairbanks-style--would bunch my muscles and leap, catching the railing of the little balcony that faced off her room. I would catch it, pull myself up and throw myself onto the balcony. It had all the demented romantic imagery of a Romeo seeking his Juliet. It was our own personal route to one another. And then the French doors would open into the broom closet that she rented as a room. It was perhaps five feet across and twelve feet long, a narrow coffin of a room whose only advantage was that little balcony. Her bookshelf was on the wall over the racklike bed, and her bureau was shoved into a niche on the opposite wall. Posters of Eglevsky, Maria Tallchief and the Ballet Russe covered that wall opposite the bed; staring at us all through the short nights of muggy passion and unsatisfied demands.

In that room I grew to know Stephie more intimately than I had ever known anyone before. Not merely her body, which she gave rarely, unsatisfactorily, painfully. But her mind, and that commodity I had always thought was folly, her soul. But Stephie had a soul, one that at first confused me and invited attention; one that soon exposed itself for what it was--the soul of a demon.

Her thoughts were dark, strange, troubled.

She dwelled on facets of life that I had never even known existed. One night she sat smoking, her legs folded under her, and said:

"l saw a boy run over a cat today, with his bike."

I looked up from the book of Jackson Pollock prints we had gone in on together, not really hearing what she had said, but suddenly letting it filter through, and catching meaning from her intention to explain. "Oh?" I said.

"Yes," she explained, "he ran over it lengthwise, and the guts came out of its mouth like a pound of raw hamburger; its eyes were bulged and there was a tire track up its back and through the center of the spilled innards. Ants were--"

"Jeezus, Stephie!" I shouted. "For God's sake, what the hell is the matter with you?" I had a strong stomach, but this clinical attention to morbid detail gagged me.

She shrugged, got up and walked out onto the balcony, still smoking. She looked so tiny against the massed darkness of Brooklyn at night.

She was a tiny, delicate girl. Tiny. Delicate. Like a cell of botulism.

How had it happened? How had something so pure and innocent and--the word seems alien to me, but somehow appropriate--charming become so demented, so twisted and destructive? Could it have been me ... could it have been that I had taken Stephie from paths she knew, paths that led deeper into the darkness of her own fears and past torments, and tried to lead her on a new path, out of the darkness? Was it that? Or is it preordained that some men will instinctively seek out those women who are worst for them, women who are good with other men but become evil in the hands of the wrong one? It tormented me, it haunted me, as the days went by and we continued to hurt each other in terrible, unnameable ways. Little ways that would have no meaning taken individually, but collectively painted a haunted canvas by Tchelitchew or Max Ernst.

There, existing in a chilly, tormented half-world of metamorphosed loneliness and vague desires, I sought ways to bedevil myself. I went far out of my way to discover trouble, to cultivate it, to urge its flagellant attentions on myself. Perhaps that was it: perhaps it was the smell of desperation and hopelessness on me that had attracted Stephie. Now, later, thinking on it, I have no doubt that a healthy man, someone not seeking the nit-picking of bits of destruction, would have avoided her.

Stephie was a Typhoid Mary, a plague-bearer, and only someone desiring illness would have rubbed up against her.

One night I had a date with her--it was my single night-off from the bookstore; usually I took the subway during the still hours after work; Times Square at three A.M. is another world, filled with weird types and wanderers who will never find their paths out of the darkness; riding to Brooklyn in that peculiarly No-Doz-chilled world was a surrealistic experience--and I had stopped off to buy her a trinket. It was a silver lavaliere; it had only cost a few dollars, but there was always this intense feeling in me that I might break through her wall of strange and disturbing distantness with a word, a gift, a kiss, a gesture. I never did, of course, but the attempts were constantly being made.

I see them now as adolescent attempts to buy her, but at the time I thought they were unselfish. Was this a refusal on my part really to give of myself? Was it perhaps an attempt to gain without offering myself exposed? Did I sense she had the power to cut and hurt?

With the little silver pendant in its nest of cotton, the box tucked into my pocket, I vaulted to the balcony. The doors were locked.

I waited, sitting against the cold night with my back to the French doors, until early morning. I

fell asleep that way, and only chance prevented the beat cop from seeing me there like some fetus-positioned cat-burglar. She didn't come home till almost three that afternoon. By then I was so sunk into a waiting stupor that even when she opened the French doors and I fell sidewise, half into her room, I didn't realize she had come back.

Her explanation: she had spent the night talking ballet with the "boys" at one of their co-op apartments; yes, she had known I would be there; no, she hadn't considered it important to phone me or leave a note; if she was gone she assumed I would leave, ride the long ride back to Manhattan, and be ready to see her another time.

We went for our blood test that week. She had to hold my hand when the doctor took the sample. I was poor, and wrote an uncle of mine in New Mexico, who owned a jewelry store, asking him for a ring. He sent a lovely but inexpensive modern band.

Why? Because it is far better to be lonely with someone than to be lonely alone.

I was frightened of Stephie, I knew it was all wrong, she was killing me by obscure, dangerous degrees, but I needed someone. And in that unfathomable way all those who seek to destroy themselves share, I wanted her. What was worst for me, I needed most. Still, I had no understanding of her; I didn't really know her, and we were both running headlong down that path into the darkness, hand-in-hand, knives in backs.

It was a little like going mad.

We went to an art movie on Lexington Avenue, midtown; a dark and depressing thing that seemed perfectly suited to my being with Stephie. As the weeks had gone by I had started smoking more, my thoughts were strange, devious, my work at the shop hadn't suffered because there wasn't that much imagination needed for it, but I was more easily upset, nastier to customers, shorter with the creeps who sought the clinical sex books; my nights alone were introspective, troubled. We were walking back to the subway on Lexington when we saw a crowd.

Stephie hurried me along and as we came abreast of them Stephie pointed up. Everyone was watching a ledge fifteen floors up. A man was standing there, his hands finger-spread against the sooty brick, his feet half-hanging over the edge.

His eyes held me. Even fifteen floors below him, I could see the whites, gigantic, milky, terrified. He didn't want to jump ... whatever had driven him onto that ledge, he was like me, he was me... he wanted to fight it, but it had driven him there and he was held by it. But he wanted to live.

I glanced at Stephie, started to say something.

Her face.

How can I explain it so it will hold the impact it held for me then? How can I describe the expression of her face, the way she ground her teeth together, the contortion of her tiny features, the almost purple light across her cheekbones, the way her fists were clenched so tightly they went white. She wanted him to jump.

She didn't say a thing. I heard her. She was silent. I heard her!

Jump! she was saying, with her clenched teeth, her fists, that awful purple light playing across her face, Jump! The sight of him tumbling, going down, trying to fly the way falling men do with arms out, twitching. That was what she wanted to see. My throat went as dry as if I had chain-smoked for an hour straight. It was the most frightening thing I had ever seen.

I don't remember whether he fell, or was saved, or crawled back inside of his own volition, or whether we simply walked away. I don't remember. It didn't matter; just as what happened to me didn't matter. That guy up there was doomed--if not now, then sometime soon--just as I was. Something was destroying him, and something was destroying me. It didn't matter whether we fell now or later. It didn't matter. It had to happen.

Eight days before we were to go to City Hall--Billy and Stella were to be our witnesses--I learned who Stephie Cook was. I was allowed to discover how deep the layers of rust and decay on her soul were.

Jump!

We had been robbed at the bookstore on Broadway ... or almost. Davey Haieff, the manager of the shop, was a rough number, who called the tourists and perverts who shopped for "different" books in our shop kadodies. We were just at the slack period of the evening, nine o'clock when most of the out-of-towners were free of dinner at the tourist traps and had made the eight-thirty curtain at the theaters ... and we were loafing it.

That was when the four teenagers came in. They were like any other four teenagers you can see cruising Times Square, digging trouble. One of them meandered toward me in the back of the store, keeping his eyes on the showcase filled with Italian stilettos, Samurai swords, Solingen steel hunting knives--the sort of deadly looking but perfectly legal hardware sold to impress the yucks back home. I followed him, noticing that the other three hung around the raised cash register

counter behind which Davey waited, watching, always watching everyone in the tiny shop.
"Can I interest you in a knife?" I asked the kid.
He was taller than I, by at least six inches, and the way he wore his T-shirt indicated he worked out on the parallel bars at the PAL gym. He looked more Bronx than Brooklyn; but they all looked pretty much the same, really. "Yeah, how 'bout that thing there." He jabbed a finger at the locked glass showcase, indicating a sixteen-inch Italian steel clasp-knife.
I grinned. This was my specialty. I could operate one of the clasp-knives by wrist action faster than any switchblade on the market, illegal though they were. We weren't allowed to sell switches or gravity or shake knives, so I had mastered the technique the better to push the merchandise we could sell.
Just as I unlocked the case, the other three made their move. I had the knife in my hand as one of them came up with an ironwood billy club and took a swing at Davey. I saw the action from the corner of my eye, and it was like a Mack Sennett comedy, sped up fifty-times normal.
Davey reached down, in and out, and up all in one fluid motion, and belted two of them with the rubber hose he kept there for just that purpose. They went down instantly, one of them open above the eyebrow with a five-inch gash that blinded him with his own blood. The third one bolted into the street.
My customer stood where he was. He had to, I had whipped open the knife and jammed it against his windpipe as I saw Davey move. It made a tiny indentation in the flesh, and he was still standing, staring wide-eyed at it when the cops came to take them away.
Davey told me to take the rest of the evening off.
I took the subway to Brooklyn and arrived just before ten o'clock--six hours earlier than usual. The balcony was vaulted, the doors thrown open and I bounded into the room carrying two popsicles, like something out of The Thief of Bagdad.
Stephie wasn't alone. She wasn't in bed, which made it worse.
A man would have driven me insane, I would have probably killed them both, so keyed up with violence from the action in the shop was I, but it wasn't a man. I was stopped, and stopped and stopped and stared and felt myself saying things to myself. Don't ask what I was saying, I have no idea.
Two girls lay on the bed, sucking on each other. Stephie sat naked, cross-legged on the floor, watching them with that same terrible expression she had had while watching the man on the ledge. One of the girls on the bed lay perfectly still as I came bursting in, playing possum, not stirring to draw attention. The other looked up and went white, deathly pale, the way I had written it a million times in my inadequate stories that avoided true confessions like this because they were improbable, written for sillyass housewives who would swallow only improbability. And I was part of it. They stared at me, all three of them. The first girl blankly, the second with fear--a puffy moth of a girl whose suntanned body seemed gross and fleshy to me--and Stephie, defiantly.
She wore a wedding ring. But not mine.
She wore a ring all right. On her little finger, left hand. A wedding ring--a lesbian's token of love and commitment. I was ill.
Had she been on the bed with one of them, it might have made some difference, then there would have been a reason, I could have rationalized. But watching...
I dropped the ridiculous popsicles and stumbled toward them, thinking I was moving back, away from them. The pudgy girl leaped off the bed, glistening with sweat, and flattened like a sack of brown sugar against the wall. "Don't hit me," she cried, "I can't stand pain ... don't hit me!"
Stephie recrossed her legs in front of her, and her eyes were cold, dead, like a pair of gravestones. It became clear so suddenly, as I saw those eyes empty now of their ghoulish pleasure, that I felt a hurling, a dropping, a heaving in my stomach. She had hit me solidly. She had used me as a cover, would have gone to the extreme of marrying me to cover. Why? What did I care? Her family, her job, the world in general, what did it matter? She had used me, and I was used up.
Then she tinkled. She let loose a Snow White giggle that sliced like a butcher's blade right through my stumbling consciousness and drained me of all energy.
Watching.
She had been watching.
The one lying there still. Still as dead. If I lie silently here no one will hurt me. Fright. The room stank of it.
The other, against the wall. Terrified. Of me. The gross, hurting man. And my Stephie ... watching.
Watching it all. Smiling endlessly.

Somehow, I got out of there, and back to Manhattan. Somehow.
Did I go by subway ... was it underground or was I some sort of dead man on the way to the river Styx? Did I think about it, did I see that scene again and again? I don't know. I can't remember. Never!
I didn't know what to do.
I found Aggie and managed to tell it all, what I could tell, so driven out of my mind was I at the thought of her watching them on that bed ... those dykes! He gave me a drink, and then called a girl he knew. She was a West Indian and she smelled of oregano. It couldn't have been worse.
Oddly, I kept feeling the doctor's needle in my arm, drawing the blood for the test, all through it. Everything was shaded in crimson.
I never saw Stephie again. The ultimate cliché for the ultimate hackneyed pain-story.
Unfortunately, life is not a magazine story, with a sharp ending and a clear-cut moral; it drags on, there are sloppy ends, little after-touches, occasional phone calls, taperings-off that dull the edges of the most magnificent of tragedies. So it was with my Stephie, my woman-child and her Arctic chill. I later heard she had contracted tuberculosis and was suffering with it rather than asking her parents in New Jersey for money to see a doctor. Some made it nobility, I saw it as empty bravado, a further step on the path to self-destruction Stephie had chosen all-knowing.
I missed her. Terribly. I was alone, once more, and now I was alone with the knowledge that Stephie and I were very much alike; the victims of the world; too weak to win.
I didn't even have the satisfaction of knowing I could use it as story-material. It wouldn't play; it was too much a tearjerker, too obviously probable to be a story; reality often stinks.
In any case--
Don't believe them. It's possible. You can keep a good man down.
--New York City and Chicago, 1960

BATTLE WITHOUT BANNERS

When they first broke out of the machine shop, holding the guards before them, screwdrivers sharp and deadly against white-cloth backs covering streaks of yellow, they made for the South Tower, and took it without death. One of the hostage guards tried to break free, however, in the subsequent scuffle to liberate the machine gun from its gimbals and tracks, and Simon Rubin was forced to use the screwdriver on the man. They threw the body from the Tower as an example to the remaining three hostages, and had no further difficulties. In fact, the object lesson was so successful that it was the guards themselves that carried the cumbersome machine gun, with all its belts of ammunition, back down into the yard. The Tower was an insecure defensive position, interlocked as it was with the other three Towers and the sniping positions on the roofs of the main buildings. They had decided in advance to make it back down into the yard and there, with backs to the wall itself, to take their stand for as long as it took the second group to blow the gate.
Construction on the new drainage system had been underway for only two days, and the great sheets of corrugated sheet metal, the sandbags, the picks and shovels, all were stacked under guard near the wall. They were forced to gun down the man on duty to get into the shelter of the piles of material, but it didn't matter either way--if he lived or died--because they were going to take as many with them as they could, breakout or not.
Nigger Joe and Don Karpinsky set up the big-barreled machine gun and braced its sides as well as fore and aft with sandbags, digging it in so the recoil would not affect its efficiency.
Gyp Williams, who had engineered the break, took up a solid rifleman's position, flat out on his belly with legs spread and toes pointed out, the machine rifle braced against right shoulder and the left elbow dug deep into the brown earth of the yard, supporting the tripod grip. His brown eyes set deep into his black face were roaming things as he covered the wide expanse of the yard, waiting for the first assault; it had to come; he was the readiest ever.
Lew Steiner and the kid they called Chocolate made up the rest of the skirmish team, and they were busily unloading the homemade grenades and black powder bombs from the cotton batting of the insulated box ... when the first assault broke out of cover around the far wall of the Administration Building.
They came as a wave of white-winged doves, the ivory of their uniforms blazing against the hard cold light of the early morning. First came the sprayers, pocking the ground with little upbursts of dirt, and shredding the morning silence with the noise of their grease guns. Then a row of riflemen, and behind them half a dozen longarms with grenades, if needed.
"Away, they comin'!" Gyp Williams snapped over his shoulder. "Dig, babies!" and he got off the first burst of the defense, into their middle. Three of the grease gunners went down, legs everywhichway and guns tossed off like refuse, clattering and still chattering on automatic fire,

pelting the wall with wasted lead. The second wave faltered an instant, and in that snatch of time Nigger Joe fed the belts to Karpinsky, who swung the big weapon back and forth, in even arcs, cutting them down right across the bellies. None of the riflemen made it a fifth of the distance across the empty yard. One of them went down kicking, and Karpinsky took him out on the next, lowered, arc.

"I am," Lew Steiner screamed, arching high to toss a black powder bomb, "home free!" It hit and exploded fifteen yards too short, but the effect was marvelous. The longarms caught up short and tried to turn.

"Bang

"Bang

"And bang," Gyp Williams grinned and murmured as he snapped off three sharp, short bursts, ending it for a trio of grenade carriers. And it was over that quickly, as the remaining grease gunners and three longarms fell, clambered, tripped, sprinted, raced back around the building.

"We done that thing." Gyp Williams rolled over on his back, aiming a thumb-and-finger pistol at his troops. "We sure enough, we done that thing."

"Send those guards outta here." Chocolate nodded his head at the hostages. Gyp agreed with a small movement of his massive head, and the three white-jacketed guards were shoved around the side of the enclosure, out into the open. For a moment they tensed, as though they expected to be shot down by the men in the tiny fort, but when no movement was made, they broke into a dead run, across the yard, arms waving, yelling to their compatriots that they were coming through.

The first burst of machine-gun fire came from the North Tower and took one of them in mid-stride, making him miss his footing, leap and plunge in a half-somersault to crash finally onto the ground, sliding a foot and a half on the side of his face. The second burst cut down his partners. They tumbled almost into a loving embrace, piled atop one another.

Chocolate expelled breath through dry lips and asked "Who's got the cigarettes?" Simon Rubin tossed him the pack and for a while they just lay there, smoking, alert, watching the bodies of the dead white guards who had been shot by their own men.

"Well," Gyp Williams commented philosophically, after a time, "everybody knows a white cat gets around niggers is gonna get contaminated. They just couldn't be trust, man. Dirty. Dir-ty."

"And kikes," Lew Steiner added. "Ding ding."

They settled down for the long wait, till the second group could blow the wall. They watched the shadows of the sun slither across the yard. Nothing moved. Warm, and nice, waiting. Quiet, too.

"How long you been in this prison?" Chocolate asked Simon Rubin. There was no answer for the space of time it took Rubin to draw in on the butt and expel smoke through his nostrils; then his long, horsey face drew down, character lines in the bony cheeks and around the deep-set eyes mapping new expressions. "As far back as I can remember," he replied carefully, thinking about it, "I suppose all of my life." Chocolate nodded lightly, turning back to the empty yard with a thin whistle of nervousness.

Something should happen. They all wanted it.

"When the hell they gonna blow that gate?" Nigger Joe murmured. He had been biting the inside of his full lower lip, chewing, biting again. "I thought they was gonna blow it soon's we got a position here. What the hell they doin' back in there?"

Gyp Williams motioned him to silence. "Quiet, willya. They'll get on it, you take it easy."

"I'm really scared." Don Karpinsky added a footnote. "It's like waiting for them to come and kill you. My old man told me about that at Belsen, how they came around and just looked at you, didn't say a word, just walked up and down, gauging you, looking to see if there was meat on you, and then later, boy oh boy, later they came back and didn't have any trouble picking you out, just walked up and down again, pointing, that one and that one and ..."

"Can it." Gyp Williams hushed him. "Boy, you sure can talk!" He was silent a second, scrutinizing the young man, too young to need a shave every day, but old enough to be here behind the wall with them. Then, "What you in for, boy?"

Don Karpinsky looked startled, his face rearranging itself to make explanations, excuses, reading itself for extenuating circumstances, amelioration. "I, I, uh, I hurt some people."

Gyp Williams turned toward him more completely (yet kept a corner of his eye on the empty yard, where the bodies remained crumpled). "You what, you did what?"

"I just, uh, I hurt some people, with a, uh, with a bomb, see I made this bomb and when I tossed it I din't know there was any--"

"Whoa back, boy!" Gyp Williams pulled the young man's racethrough dialogue to a halt. "Go on back a bit. You made a what? A bomb?"

Karpinsky nodded dumbly; it was obvious he had never thought he would be censured here.

"Now what'n the hell you do that for, boy?"

Don Karpinsky turned to the belts of long slugs, neatly folded over themselves, ready for the maw of the machine gun. He would not, or could not, answer.
Simon Rubin spoke up. He had been listening to the interchange but had decided to let the young Karpinsky handle his own explanations. But now it needed ending, and since the young man had confided in him one rainy night in their cell, he felt the privileged communication might best be put to use here. "Gyp," he called the big black man's attention away from Karpinsky. It seemed to halt the next words from Gyp Williams's mouth.
"He bombed a church, Gyp. Some little town in Iowa. The minister was apparently some kind of a monster, got the local Male White Protestants convinced Jews ate goyishe children for Passover. They made it hell on the kid and his family. He was a chemistry bug, made a bomb, and tossed it. Killed six people. They threw him in here."
Gyp Williams seemed about to say something, merely clucked his tongue, and rolled over once more into a firing position. The only sound in the enclosure was the metallic sliding of the machine rifle's bolt as Gyp Williams made unnecessary checks.
Lew Steiner was asleep against the wall, his back propped outward by a sandbag, a black powder bomb in each hand, as though in that instant of snapping awake, he might reflexively hurl one of the spheroids more accurately, more powerfully than he had in combat.
"Whaddaya think, Gyp?" Chocolate asked. "You think they gonna try an' take us in daylight, or wait till t'night?" He was as young as Don Karpinsky, somewhere under twenty, but a reddish, ragged scar that split down his left cheek to the corner of his mouth made him seem--somehow--older, more experienced, more capable of violence than the boy who had bombed the small Iowa church.
Gyp Williams rose up on an elbow, gaining a better field of vision across the yard. He talked as much to himself as to Chocolate. "I don't know. Might be they'd be careful about waiting till dark. That's a good time for us as much as them. And when the other boys make the move to blow the gate, the dark'll be on our side, we can shoot out them searchlights ..."
He chuckled, lightly, almost naively.
"What's so funny?" Nigger Joe asked, then turned as Simon Rubin asked, "Hey, Joe, I got a crick in my- back, here, want to rub it out for me?" Nigger Joe acknowledged the request and slid across the dirt to Rubin, who turned his back, indicating the sore area. The Negro began thumbing it smooth with practiced hands, repeating, "Gyp, what's so funny?"
Gyp Williams' ruggedly handsome face went into a softer stage. "I remember the night they came for us, the caravan, about fifteen twenty cars, came on down to Littletown, all of them with the hoods, lookin' for the one who'd grabbed a feel off the druggist's wife. Man, they were sure pretty, all of them real black against the sky, just them white hoods showing them off like perfect targets.
"They's about ten of us, see, about ten, all laid out like I am now, out there on a little hill in the tall grass, watching them cars move on down. Show-offs, that's what they was. Show-offs, or they wouldn't've sat up on the backs of them convertibles, where we could see 'em so plain. No lights on the cars, all silent, but the white hoods, as plain as moonliglit.
"We got about thirteen or fourteen of them cats before they figured they'd been ruined. I was just thinkin' 'bout it now, thinkin' 'bout them searchlights when they come on. Those white uniforms gonna be might fine to shoot at, soon's it gets dark." Then, without a break in meter, his tone became frenzied, annoyed, "When the hell they gonna blow that goddam gate?"
As if in reply, a long, strident burst from a grease gun, sprayed from the roof of the Administration Building, pocked the wall behind them, chewing out irregular niches in the brick. They were spattered with brick chips and mortar, dirt and whizzing bits of stone. Lew Steiner came rigidly awake, grasped the situation and ducked in a dummy-up cover, imitating the other five defenders.
They were huddled over that way, when they heard the whispering, chocking whirr of helicopter rotors chewing the air. "They're coming over the wall in a 'copter!" Don Karpinsky shrieked.
Gyp Williams turned over, elevating the machine rifle, bracing it on an upright sheet of corrugated metal. "Lew! Get set, them bombs ... they comin' over ... Lew!"
But Steiner was lost in fear. It was silence he heard, rather than the commanding voice of Gyp Williams. His buttocks stared out where his face should have been, and Gyp Williams cursed tightly, eyes directed at the wall, scanning, tracking back and forth for the first sight of the guard helicopter, coming with the tear gas or the thermite or a ten-second shrapnel cannister.
"Joe, do somethin' about him, you Joe!"
Nigger Joe slid across the ground, grasped Lew Steiner by the hair, and jerked him out of the snail-like foetal position he had assumed. Steiner still clutched the black smoke bombs, one in either fist, like thick, burnt rolls, snatched from an oven.
The colored man was unconcerned with niceties. He slapped Steiner heavily, the sound a

counterpoint to the copter's rising comments. Lew Steiner did not want to come back from wherever he had gone to find peace and security. But the black man's palm would not be ignored. He bounced the work-pinkened flesh off Steiner's cheeks until the milky-blue of sight unseen had faded, and Steiner was back with them.

"Them bombs, Lew," Nigger Joe said, softly, with great kindness. "They comin' over the wall right'cheer behind us." Steiner's defection was already forgotten.

No more was said as Steiner rolled over, ready to meet the helicopter with his bombs. Chocolate and Don Karpinsky stayed with the fixed machine gun, prepared for a rear-guard attack in the face of the aerial threat. Nigger Joe and Simon Rubin lay on their backs, rifles pointed at the sky. The whirlybird came over the wall fifty feet down the line, and Gyp Williams quickly readjusted himself for its approach. The machine was perhaps twenty feet over their heads, and came churning toward them rapidly, as though intent on low-level strafing. Gyp Williams loosed his first burst before the others, and it missed the mark by two feet. The helicopter came on rapidly, steadily. The six men lay staring at it, readying themselves, trying at the same time to find places for their naked bodies in the earth.

When it was almost directly overhead, Lew Steiner rose to a kneeling position and hurled first one black powder bomb, then the other, with tremendous force. The first bomb went straight, directly up into the air, passed over the cockpit of the machine, and tumbled back wobbling, to hit the top of the wall, bounce and exp}ode on the other side. The reverberation could be felt in the wall and the ground, but no rifts appeared in the brick. The second bomb crashed into the side of the machine and a deafening roar split up the even sussuration of the 'copter's rotors. The machine tottered on its course, slipped sidewise and lost minor altitude, but was compensated, began to climb, and just as it hurled itself away in a slanting curve, a projectile tumbled dizzily, end-over-end from the machine.

Then the 'copter was gone, and they watched the projectile falling straight for them. Gyp Williams began screaming, "Fire, fire, hit it hit it hitithititithitit ..." and they all poured flame into the sky, missing the tear gas bomb as it fell a few yards from their enclosure, exploded, and sent rolling clouds of tear gas straight toward them.

The vapors struck, and they began to feel the sting of the chemicals, and their eyes went blood-red in a moment, and Don Karpinsky fell on his side, clutching his face, crying like an infant. Lew Steiner grabbed up another bomb from somewhere, and hurled it at the empty yard, a motion of wanton fury and impotence that no one saw, himself most of all. Gyp Williams refused to cry. He dug his broad face deep into the dirt and enjoyed the cool feel of pain from gravel and sod, but the stinging was terrible and his grunts of feeling were strangely intermingled.

The others recoiled, tried to protect themselves, and knew the guards would attack in this moment. They could hear them coming, rebel yells of victory and bloodlust strung out rustily in the air. And over the battle cries, the malicious rattle of the machine gun as Chocolate sprayed the yard in steady, back-and-forth sweeps. Blind to everything, tears running out of his burning eyes, knowing only that he had the power to cut them down, the young man with the livid scar continued his barrage, building a wall of death the guards in their white uniforms could not penetrate.

And after a while, when the belts were exhausted, and the guards had gone back to cover, when the gas had blown away, stringers of mist on a late afternoon breeze some God had sent to prolong their passion, they all lay back with eyes crimson and streaming, knowing it had to be over soon, and hoping the second group would finally, please dear Lord, blow that frigging gate!

"Man, how long, how long." Nigger Joe spoke to the advancing dusk. "How long this gotta go on. It seem like I been livin' off misery all my life, you'd think it'd end sometime, not just keep goin' on and on and on."

Simon Rubin sat up and looked at him, and there was compassion in his lean, ascetic face.

"How many lives I gotta lead, steppin' down into the gutter for some 'fay cat? How many times I gotta be called 'Boy', an' when'm I gonna get some memories I wanta put away to think back on, another time?" His eyes were lost in the twilight, set deep under bony eyebrow ridges, but his fierce voice was all around them, very soft but compelling. "Even in here they makin' me be somethin' I ain't. Even in here I'm tryin' to get away, get some life, what's left to me, and they got me down with my face in the dirt; they don't know. Man, they'll never know. I can remember every one them cats, makin' jokes, pokin' fun, sayin' things, a man's got to have pride, that's what matters, just his goddamn pride. They can have all the rest of it, just gimme the pride. An' when they come 'round takin' that too, then you gotta raise up and split some sonofabitch's head with a shovel ..."

Simon Rubin's voice came sliding in on the semi-darkness, a cool soft fabric covering tiny sounds of crickets and metal clanking on metal from somewhere out there. "I know how you feel, Joe. There are a lot of us in that kind of ghetto.

"Only for some of us it gets worse, even when it gets better. You knew your kind of hate, but it was diiferent for me."
Gyp Williams snorted in disgust. "Sheet, man, when you Jewish cats gonna come off that kick? When you gonna stop lyin' on yourself, man, that you been persecuted, so you know how a black man feels? Jeezus, you Jewish own most of the tenements up in Harlem. You as bad as any the rest of them cats." He turned away in suppressed fury, turning his anger on the machine rifle, whose bolt he snapped back twice quickly.
Simon Rubin began speaking again, as though by the continuing stream of words he could negate what Gyp Williams had said. "I wanted to get into dental college, but they had a quota on Jews. I didn't have the money or the name to be in that quota, so I went out for veterinary medicine. I got set back and set back so many times, I finally said to hell with it, and I changed my name, and had my nose fixed, and then I married a gentile.
"It even worked for a while." He smiled thinly, remembering, out of his not-very-Semitic face. "And then one night we had a fight about something, I don't remember what, and we went to bed angry, and in the middle of the night I turned to her and we started to make love, and when she was ready she began saying over and over in my ear, 'Now, you dirty kike, now, you dirty kike ...' "
Simon Rubin buried his face in his hands.
Don Karpinsky asked, "Simon ... ?"
"So ... so I know how you feel Joe," Simon finished. "I hated myself more than she could ever hate me; and when they sent me here for her, because of her, what I did to her, I gave them my name the way I came into the world with it. So I know, Joe, believe me, I know."
Nigger Joe started to turn away, his thoughts turned inward. He paused and looked directly at Simon Rubin: "I'm sorry you feel bad, Simon," he lamented, "it's just I been in chains four hundred years, and all that clankin' makes me hear not so good. I'm sorry you got troubles, man."
And their contest of agonies, their cataloguing of misery, their one-up of sorrow was cut short as the loudspeaker blared from across the yard, from the Administration Building.
"Hey! Hey over there!"
It was the main loudspeaker, mounted on the Administration Building, where the guards were waiting to come for them, holding out--it was now obvious--until their nerves were raw.
"Hey, Simon ... Lew ... all the rest of you ... this is David, do you hear me, can you hear me, all of you?"
Gyp Williams fired off a long flaming burst, and they could hear the tinkle and shatter of window glass when it hit. It was an answer, of sorts.
"Listen, we can't blow the gate. We just can't do it, you guys."
Chocolate looked at his companions. "Hey! That's David, the one who was with the second group, what's he doin' in there with them?" Gyp Williams motioned him to silence. They listened.
"They've got the gate staked out, listen you men! They have it fixed so we can't get at it. Simon! Lew Steiner! All of you, Gyp, Gyp Williams, listen! They said they won't punish us if we go back to our cells. They said they won't demand payment, we can go right on like we were before, it's better this way, it isn't so bad, we know what we can do, we know what they won't let us do! Simon, Gyp, come on back, come on back and they won't make any trouble for us, we can go on the way we were before, don't rock the boat, you guys, don't rock the boat!"
Gyp Williams rose to both knees, somehow manhandling the heavy machine rifle against his chest, and he screamed at the top of his voice, throwing his head back so his very white teeth stood out like a necklace of sparkling gems in his mouth-- "Sellout bastards!" and he fired, without taking his finger from the trigger, he fired and the flames and heat and steel and anguish went cascading across the yard, hitting unreceptive stone and gravel and occasionally one of the already dead would leap as a slug tore its cold flesh.
Finally, when he had made it clear what their answer was to be, he fell exhausted behind the sandbags, where he would die.
In that instant of minor silence, Simon Rubin said, "I'm going back." And he got up and walked across the yard, his head down, his hands locked behind his head.
Don Karpinsky began to cry, then, and Chocolate slid across to him, trying by his nearness to stop the fear and the fury of being too brave to live, too cowardly to die without tears. No one behind the barricade moved to shoot Simon Rubin. There was no point to it, no anger at him, only pity and a deep revulsion. And the guards in their immaculate white did not shoot him. Back in their world he was infinitely more valuable, as a symbol, a broken image, for the others who might try to free themselves another time.
They would point to him and say, "See Simon Rubin, he tried to rock the boat, and see what he's like?"

Behind the barricade Nigger Joe turned to Lew Steiner and the crying kid who had not fled with Simon Rubin.
"There's that's how much your people understand." He condemned them all.
And Lew Steiner said, "There were half a dozen of your boys in that second group, Joe. My back aches again, you feel like doing that thing?"
Nigger Joe chuckled lackadaisically, slid over and began thumbing Lew Steiner's back.
They were like that, waiting, when the final assault began. The high keening whine of a mortar shell came at them like the doppler of a train passing on a track, and it landed far down at the end, where Chocolate caught it full, and split up like a ripe, dark pod. He was dead even as it struck, and the other four fell in a heap to protect themselves from screaming shrapnel.
When the ground had ceased to tremble, and they could see the world again, they tried not to look toward the end of the barricade, where a brown leg and a torn bit of cloth showed from under the heap of rubble, from under fhe fallen sheets of metal. They tried not to look, and succeeded, but Gyp Williams's face was now incapable of even that half-bitter, knowing smile he had offered before.
Another whining shell came across, struck the wall above them and exploded violently, with Lew Steiner's howl of pain matching it on a lower level.
The shard of twisted metal had caught him in the neck, ripping through and leaving him with a deep furrow, welling out wetly, black-red down his shirt and over the hand he raised to staunch the flow. Nigger Joe tore his shirt down the front and made a crude bandage. "It ain't bad, Lew, here, hold this on if you can."
The four of them turned back to see the first wave of white-uniformed guards breaking from the cover of the Administration Building and another group from around the end of the Laundry.
They came on like a wide-angled "V" with a longarm grenade hurler at the point. Gyp Williams turned loose with the machine rifle, and swept the first attackers; they fell, but one of them got off a grenade, and it sailed almost gracefully, a balloon of hard stuff, over and over into the enclosure. The earth split up and deafened them, and great chunks of steel and stone cascaded about them. It was enough to ruin the machine gun, and send Don Karpinsky tumbling over backward, his body saturated with tiny bits of steel and sand. He lay sprawled backward, eyes open at the sky of free darkening blue, over the wall he would never climb.
They huddled there, the three of them left--Gyp Williams, Nigger Joe and Lew Steiner, still clutching the bloody rag to his neck.
The guards in their white uniforms would not let them go back to the cells. They knew the ones who were weak enough to keep from rocking the boat, and they knew the ones who had to be destroyed. These three were the last of the ones who had sought their freedom and their pride. They would be killed where they lay, when the ammunition had run out and all the strength was sapped from them, not only by the fighting, but by the ones who had betrayed them, the ones who had said it was better not to make trouble.
And as waves of faceless, soulless attackers streamed toward them across the dead-piled yard, no more intent on the particular men behind the barricade than they would have been about any other vermin who threatened them, Gyp Williams said it all for all three of them, and for the few strong ones who had found peace if not pride: "We all of us down in the dark. Some day, maybe ... some day."
Then he managed somehow to get the machine rifle steadied, and he fired into the midst of them, screaming and running with their immaculate white uniforms the badges of purity and cleanliness. But there were just too many of them.
There were always, just too many of them.
--New York City, 1961

A PRAYER FOR NO ONE'S ENEMY
"Did you get in?" He turned up the transistor. The Supremes were singing "Baby Love."
"None'a your damn business, man; a gentleman doesn't talk." The other one peeled a third stick of Juicy Fruit and folded it into his mouth. The sugary immediacy of it stood out for a moment, then disappeared into the wad already filling his left cheek.
"Gentleman? Shit, baby, you're a lotta stuff, but you aren't one of them there." He snapped fingers.
"D'jou check the plugs 'n' points like I said?"
He switched stations, stopped. The Rolling Stones were singing "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." "I took it into Cranston's, they said it was in the timing. Twenty-seven bucks."
"Plugs 'n' points."
"Oh, Christ, man, why don't you shine up awreddy. I'm tellin' you what Cranston said. He said it

was in the timing, so why d'you keep sayin' plugs 'n' points?"
"Lemme use your comb."
"Use your own comb. You got scalp ringworm."
"Get stuffed! Lemme use your damn comb already!"
He pulled the Swedish aluminum comb out of his hip pocket and passed it over. The comb was tapered like a barber's comb. Gum stopped moving for an instant as the other pulled the gray shape through his long brown hair in practiced swirls. He patted his hair and handed the comb back. "Y'wanna go up to the Big Boy and get something to eat, clock the action?"
"You gonna fill the tank?"
"Fat chance."
"No, I don't wanna go up to the Big Boy and drive around and around like redskins at the Little Big Horn and see if that dopey-ass chick of yours is up there."
"Well, whaddaya wanna do?"
"I don't wanna go up to the Big Boy and go round and round like General Custer, that's for damn sure ..."
"I got the picture. Round and round. Ha ha. Very clever. You oughta be in Hollywood, well what the hell do you wanna do?"
"You seen what's up at The Coronet?"
"I dunno, what is it?"
"That picture about the Jews in Palestine."
"Who's in it?"
"I dunno, Paul Newman I think."
"Israel."
"Okay, Israel, you seen it?"
"No, y'wanna see it?"
"Might as well, nothin' else happening around here."
"What time's your old lady come home?"
"She picks my father up at seven."
"That don't answer my question."
"Around seven-thirty."
"Let's make it. You got money ... ?"
"Yeah, for me."
"Jesus, you're a cheap bastard. I thought I was your tight close buddy?"
"You're a leech, baby."
"Turn off the radio."
"I'm gonna take it with me."
"So you ain't gonna tell me if you screwed Donna, huh?"
"None'a your damn business. You wanna tell me if you screwed Patti?"
"Forget it. Plugs 'n' points, you'll see."
"C'mon, we'll miss the first show."
So they went to see the picture about the Jews. The one that was supposed to say a very great deal about the Jews. They were both Gentile, and they had no way of knowing in advance that the picture about the Jews said nothing whatever about the Jews. In Palestine, or Israel, or wherever it was that the Jews were.
It wasn't even a particularly good film, but the exploitation had been cunning, and grosses for the first three days had been rewarding. Detroit. Where they make cars. Where Father Coughlin's Church of the Little Flower reposes in sanctified holiness. Population approximately two million; good people, strong like peasant stock. Where many good jazz men have started, blowing gigs in small roadhouses. Best barbecued spareribs in the world, at the House of Blue Lights. Detroit. Nice town.
The large Jewish Community had turned out to see the film, and though anyone who had been to Israel, or knew the first thing about how a kibbutz functioned, would have laughed it off the screen, for sheer emotionalism it struck the proper chords. With characteristic Hollywood candor, the film stirred a fierce ethnic pride, pointing out in broad strokes: See, them little yids got guts, too; they can fight when they got to. The movie was in the grand, altogether innocent tradition of cinematic flag-waving. It was recommended by Parents' Magazine and won a Photoplay gold medal as fare for the entire family.
The queue that had lined up to see the film stretched from the ticket booth across the front of the building, past a candy store with a window full of popcorn balls in half a dozen different flavors, past a laundromat, around a corner and three-quarters of the way down the block.
It was a quiet crowd. People in lines are always a quiet crowd. Arch and Frank were quiet. They

waited, with Arch listening to the transistor, and Frank, Frank Amato, smoking and shuffling. Neither paid much attention to the sound of engines roaring until the three Volkswagens screamed to a halt directly in front of the theater. Then they looked up, as the doors slammed open and out poured a horde of young boys. They were wearing black. Black turtleneck T-shirts, black slacks, black Beatle boots. The only splash of color on them came from the yellow-and-black armbands, and the form of the swastika on the armbands.

Under the staccato directions of a slim Nordic-looking boy with very bright, wet gray eyes, they began to picket the theater, assembling in drill-formations, carrying signs neatly printed on a hand-press, very sturdy. The signs said:

THIS MOVIE IS COMMUNIST- PRODUCED! BOYCOTT IT!

GO BACK WHERE YOU CAME FROM! STOP RAPING AMERICA!

TRUE AMERICANS SEE THROUGH YOUR LIES!

THIS FILM WILL CORRUPT YOUR CHILDREN! BOYCOTT IT!

and chanting, over and over: "Dirty little Christ-killer, dirty little Christ-killers, dirty little Christ-killers ..."

In the queue was a sixty-year-old woman; her name was Lilian Goldbosch.

She had lost her husband Martin, her older son Shimon and her younger son Avram in the furnaces of Belsen. She had come to America with eight hundred other refugees on a converted cattle boat, from Liverpool, after five years of hopeless wandering across the desolate face of Europe. She had become a naturalized citizen and had found some stature as a buyer for a piece-goods house, but her reaction to the sight of the always remembered swastika was that of the hunted Jewess who had escaped death--only to find loneliness in a new world. Lilian Goldbosch stared wide-eyed at them, overflowing the sidewalk, inundating her eyes and her thoughts and her sudden thismoment reality; arrogant in their militant fanaticism; and as one they came back to her--for they had never left her--terror, hatred, rage. Her mind (like a broken clock, whirling, spinning backward in time) sparklike leaped the gap of years, and her tired eyes blazed yellow.

She gave a wretched little scream and hurled herself at the tall blond boy, the leader with the gray eyes.

It was a signal.

The crowd broke. A low animal roar. Men flung themselves forward. Women were jostled, and then joined, without reason or pausing to consider it. The muffled sound of souls torn by the sight of stalking (almost goose-stepping) picketers. Before they could stop themselves, the riot was underway.

A burly man in a brown topcoat reached them first. He grabbed the sign from one of the picketers, and with teeth grating behind skinned-back lips, for an instant an animal, hurled it into the gutter. Another man ripped into the center of the group and snapped a fist into the mouth of one of the boys chanting the slogan. The boy flailed backward, arms windmilling, and he went down on one knee. A foot on the end of gray sharkskin trousers--seemingly disembodied--lashed out of the melee. The toe of the shoetook the boy in the groin and thigh. He fell on his back, clutching himself, and they began to stomp him. His body curled inward as they danced their quaint tribal dance on him. If he screamed, it was lost in the roar of the mob.

Also in the queue were two high school boys. Arch; Frank.

They had been alone there, among all those people waiting. But now they were part of a social unit, something was happening. Arch and Frank had fallen back for an instant as others rushed forward; others whose synapses were more quickly triggered by what they saw; but now they found their reactions to the violence around them swift and unthinking. Though they had been brushed aside by men on either side, cursing foully, who had left the line to get at the picketers, now they moved toward the mass of struggling bodies, still unaware of what was really taking place. It was a bop, and they felt the sting of participation. But in a moment they had collided with the frantic figure of Lilian Goldbosch, whose nails were raking deep furrows down the cheek of the tall, blond boy.

He was braced, legs apart, but did not move as she attacked him.

There was a contained, almost Messianic tranquility about him.

"Nazi! Nazi! Murd'rer!" she was mouthing, almost incomprehensibly. She slipped into Polish and the sounds became garbled with spittle. Her body writhed back and forth as she lashed out again and again at the boy.

Her arms were syncopated machines of hard work, destructive, coming up and down in a rhythm all their own, a rhythm of which she was unaware. His face was badly ripped, yet he did not move against her.

At that moment the two high school boys, faceless, came at the woman, one from either side; they took her by the biceps, holding her, protecting not the blond boy, but the older woman. Her

movements went to spastic as she struggled against them frenziedly. "Let me, let go, let--" she struggled against them, flashing them a glance of such madness and hatred that for an instant they felt she must think them part of the picketing group, and then--abruptly--her eyes rolled up in her head and she fainted into Frank Amato's grasp.

"Thank you ... whoever you are," the blond boy said. He started to move away, back through the rioting mob. It was as though he had wanted to take the woman's abuse; as though his purpose had been to martyr himself, to absorb all the hate and frenzy into his body, like a lightning rod sucking up the power of the heavens. Now he moved.

Arch grabbed him by the sleeve.

"Hold it a minute ... hero! Not s'fast!"

The blond boy's mouth began to turn up in an insolent remark, but he caught himself, and instead, with a flowing, completely assured overhand movement, struck the younger boy's hand from his arm. "My work's done here."

He turned, then, and cupped his hands to his mouth. A piercing whistle leaped above the crowd noises, and as the signal penetrated down through the mob, the swastika-wearers began to disengage themselves with more ferocity. One picketer kicked out, caught an older man in the shin with the tip of a tightly laced barracks boot, and shoved the man back into the crowd. Another boy jabbed a thumb into his opponent's diaphragm and sent the suddenly wheezing attacker sprawling, cutting himself off from further assault.

It went that way all through the crowd as the once-again-chanting picketers moved slowly but methodically toward their cars. It was a handsomely executed tactical maneuver, a strategic withdrawal of class and composure.

Once at the open car doors, they piled back against the black metal bugs, raising arms in an unmistakable Heil! and screamed, almost as one: "America always! To hell with the poisoners! Kill the Jews!"

Pop, Pop! With timing vaguely reminiscent of a Keystone Kops imbroglio, they heaved themselves into the vehicles, and were roaring down the street, around the corner, before the approaching growlers of the police prowl cars (summoned on a major 415) were more than a faint whine approaching from the distance.

On the sidewalk in front of the theater, people--for no other release was left to them--burst into tears and cursing.

Some kind of battle had been fought here--and lost.

On the sidewalk, someone had clandestinely chalked the symbol. No one moved to scuff it out. None of the picketers had had the free time to do it; the obvious was obvious: someone in the queue had done it.

The subtlest, most effective poison.

Her apartment was an attempt to reassure her crippled spirit that possessions meant security, security meant permanence, and permanence meant the exclusion of sorrow and fear and darkness. She had thrust into every corner of the small one-bedroom apartment every convenience of modern technology, every possible knickknack and gimcrack of oddity, every utensil and luxury of the New World the rooms would hold. Here a 23" television set, its rabbit-ears askew against the wall ... there a dehumidifier, busily purring at the silence ... over there a set of Royal Doulton mugs, Pickwick figures cherubically smiling at their own ingenuousness ... and a paint-by-the-numbers portrait of Washington astride a white stallion ... a lemon glass vase overflowing with swizzle sticks from exotic restaurants ... a stack of Life, Time, Look and Holiday magazines ... a reclining lounge chair that vibrated ... a stereo set with accompanying racks of albums, mostly Offenbach and Richard Strauss ... a hide-a-bed sofa with orange and brown throw pillows ... a novelty bird whose long beak, when moistened, dipped the creature forward on its wire rack, submerging its face in a glass of water, then pulled it erect, to repeat the performance endlessly...

The jerky movement of the novelty bird in the room, a bad cartoon playing over and over, was intended as reassurance of life still going on; yet it was a cheap, shadowy substitute, and instead of charming the two high school boys who had brought Lilian Goldbosch home, it unsettled them. It made them aware of the faint scent of decay and immolation here; a world within a world, a specie of creative precontinuum in which emotions had palpable massiveness, greater clarity.

The boys helped the still-shaken woman to the sofa, and sat her down heavily. Her face was not old, the lines were adornment rather than devastation, but there was a superimposition of pain on the tidy, even features. Cobwebs on marble. Her hair--so carefully tended and set every week by a professional, tipped, ratted, back-combed, pampered--was disheveled, limp, as though soaked with sweat. Moist stringlets hung down over one cheek. Her eyes, a light blue, altogether perceptive and lucid, were filmed by a milkiness that might have been tears, and might have been gelatinous

anguish. Her mouth seemed moist, as though barely containing a wash of tormented sounds.
The years rolled back for Lilian Goldbosch. Once more she knew the sound of the enclosed van whose exhaust pipes led back into the prisoners' compartment, the awful keee-gl keee-gl keee-gl of the klaxon, rising above the frozen streets; frozen with fear of movement (if I stay quiet, they'll miss me, pass me by). The Doppler-impending approach of the van, its giant presence directly below the window, right at the curb, next to the face and the ears, and then its hissing passage as it swept away, a moving vacuum cleaner of living things, swallowing whole families. With eyes white eggshells in pale faces. And into the rear of that van, the exhaust whispering its sibilant tune of gas and monoxided forever. All this came back to Lilian Goldbosch as she shamefully spaded-over her memories of the past half hour. Those boys. Their armbands. Her fear. The crowd attacking. The way she had leaped at them. The madness. The fear.
The fear.
Again, the fear.
Burning, blazing through all of it: the fear!
That boy with his imperious blond good looks, the Aryan Superman: could he really know? Could he somehow, this American child born between clean sheets, with the greatest terror afailing mark in school, could he somehow know what that hated black swastika meant to her, to whole generations, to races of individuals who had worn yellow Stars of David and the word Juden, to shattered spirits and captured hearts who stood on alien roads as Stukas dived, or walked in desolate resignation to already filling mass graves, or labored across no-man's-lands with shellbursts lighting the way? Could he know, or was this something else ... a new thing, that merely looked like the old sickness, the fear?
For the first time in more years than she cared to remember--had it been only twenty years since all of it?--Lilian Goldbosch had a surge of desire. Not the gilded wastes she had substituted for caring: not the pathological attention to hair in the latest frosted style, not the temporal acquisition of goods to fill empty rooms, not the television with it gray images, surrogates of life. A want. A need to know. A desire to find out.
Born of an old fear.
Was it the same ... or something new?
She had to know. She was engulfed by desperation.
And with the desperation, a shocking realization that she could do something. What, she was not certain. But she had the sensation burning in her that if she could know this blond Gentile youth, could talk to him, this goy, could communicate with him, this stranger, she could find out the answers, know if the evil was coming again, or if it was just another lonely person, trapped within his skin.
"Will you boys do me a favor?" Lilian Goldbosch asked the two who had escorted her home. "Will you help me?"
At first they were confused, but as she talked, as she explained why she had to know, why it was important, they were drawn into a prospect of their times, and finally they nodded, a little hesitantly, the taller of the two saying, "I don't know if it'll do any good, but we'll try and find him for you."
Then they left. Down the stairs. While she went to wash the tears and streaked mascara from her young-old face.
Frank Amato was of Italian descent. He was a typical child of his times; transistorized, Sanforized, boss gear bomped groovy tuned-in on the music of the spheres, in a Continental belt-back slim-line hopsacking crease-resistant 14" tapered ineluctable reality that placed him in and of the teenage sub-culture.
Vietnam? Huh?
Voter registration in Alabama? Huh?
The ethical structure of the universe?
Huh?
Arch Lennon was a WASP. He had heard the term, but had never applied it to himself. He was a carbon-copy of Frank Amato. He lived day to day, Big Boy to Big Boy, track meet to track meet, and if there were sounds that went boomp in the night they were probably the old man getting up to haul another pop-top out of the Kelvinator.
Military junta? Huh?
Limited nuclear retaliation? Huh?
The infinitesimal dispensation of Homo sapiens in the disinterested cosmos?
Huh?
Standing down on the sidewalk outside Lilian Goldbosch's apartment, staring at each other.
"That was a smart move."

"Well, what the hell was I supposed to say? For chrissakes, she had aholda my arm I thought she was gonna bust it. That old lady's nuts."
"So why'd you promise her? Where the hell we gonna find that guy?"
"How should I know?"
"I gave my word."
"Big deal."
"Maybe not to you, but I gave it just the same."
"So we try and find that kid, right?"
"Uh ..."
"What I thought. I gotta do all the brain work again. Jeezus, man, you are such a nit."
"D'jou get the license number of any of those cars?"
"Don't be a clown. No, I din't get the number. And even if I did, what'd we do with it?"
"DMV, wouldn't they tell us who it was registered to?"
"Sure. We're gonna walk into the Motor Vehicle Department just like James Bond, a couple of guys our age, and we're gonna say hey who owns this VW. Sure, I can picture it real good. You're a nit."
"So that's that."
"I wish."
"You got something else?"
"Maybe. One of those VWs had a sticker on the windshield. It was an emblem. Pulaski Vocational High School."
"So one of those guys goes to Pulaski. You know how many inmates they got over there? Maybe a million."
"It's a start."
"You're serious about this."
"Yeah, I'm serious about it."
"How come?"
"I dunno, she asked, an' I gave her my word. She's an old lady, it won't hurt anything to look a while."
"Hey, Frank?"
"What?"
"What's this all about?"
"I dunno, but those bastards were lousy, an' I gave my word."
"Okay, I'll help. But I gotta get home now, my folks oughta be back by now, and we can't do anything till tomorrow anyhow."
"Stay loose. See ya."
"See ya. Don't get in any trouble, double-oh-seven."
"Stick it."
They didn't know which one they would find, or even if they would recognize him when they did find him. But one of the wearers of the swastika attended Pulaski Vocational, and Pulaski Vocational went all year round. Summer, winter, night and day, it turned out students who knew more about carburetors, chassis dynamometers, metal lathes and printed circuitry than they did about THE CANTERBURY TALES, scoria and pumice, the theory of vectors and the fact that Crispus Attucks, a Negro, was the first American to fall in the Revolutionary War. It was a great gray stone Coventry of a school, where young boys went in unmarked, and emerged some years later all punched and coded to fit into the System, with fringe benefits and an approximate date of death IBM'd by the group insurance company.
Chances were good the boy--whichever boy it turned out to be--was still attending classes, even though it was summer, and Arch and Frank were free. So they waited, and they watched. And finally, they found one of them.
An acne-speckled, pudgy-hipped specimen in a baggy orange velour pullover.
He came out of the school, and Arch recognized him.
"There, the pear-shaped one, in the orange."
They followed him into the parking lot. The car he unlocked was a Monza, a late model. If they watched for the VW they would have missed him.
"Hey!" Frank came up behind him. The pudgy turned.
He had beady little eyes, like a marmoset. The face was fleshy, with many small inflamed areas where he had shaved and the skin had broken out. There was a wasted look about him, as though he had been used up, and cast away. Even to Arch and Frank, the look of intense intelligence was missing from the pudgy's expression.
"Who're you guys?"

Arch did not like him. For a nameless reason, he did not like him. "Friends of a friend of yours."
Pudgy looked wary. He dumped his books into the back seat, not turning from them. He was getting set to jump inside the car and slam the door, and lock it, and pull out in a hurry. Pudgy was scared.
"Who's that, what friend?"
Frank moved slightly, to the side. It was almost a pavane, the maneuvering: Pudgy angled himself, his hand went toward the back of the front seat; Arch slid around the edge of the door. Frank's hand came up onto the roof of the car, near Pudgy's head. Pudgy's eyes got milky, fear bubbled up behind him, the taint was in his bloodstream.
"A tall kid, blond hair, you know," Frank said, his voice was deeper, a trifle threatening, "he was with you the other night at the movie, remember?"
Pudgy's right cheek tic'd. He knew what was happening. These were Jews. He made his move.
Arch slammed the door. It caught Pudgy at the forearm. He howled. Arch reached across and grabbed him by the ear. Frank sank a fist into Pudgy's stomach. The air whooshed out of Pudgy and left him flat, very flat, a cardboard cutout that they bundled into the front seat of the Monza, one on either side of him. They started the car, and rolled out of the parking lot. They would take him someplace. Someplace else. Pudgy would tell them who the blond Aryan had been, what his name was, where he could be found.
If they could pump enough air into him to produce sound.
Victor. Rohrer. Victor Rohrer. Blond, tall, solid with no extra flesh on his body, muscles very firm and tight, as though packed from the factory in plastic. Victor Rohrer. A face hewn from lignum vitae, from marble. Eyes chipped gray ice frost from lapis lazuli and allowed to die, harden into leaden cadaverousness. A body languinous, soft downy-covered with barely visible blond hairs, each one a sensor, a feeler of atmospheres and temperatures, each one a cilium seeing and smelling and knowing the tenor of the situation. A Cardiff Giant, not even remotely human, something cold and breathing, defying Mendelian theories, defying heredity, a creature from another island universe. Muscled and wired and gray eyes that had sometime never been blue with life. Lips thinned in expectation of silence. Victor. Rohrer. A creation of self, brought forth from its own mind for a need to exist.
Victor Rohrer, organizer of men.
Victor Rohrer, who had never known childhood.
Victor Rohrer, repository of frozen secrets.
Victor Rohrer, wearer of swastikas.
Patron of days and nights; singer of silent songs; visionary of clouds and nothingness; avatar of magics and unspoken credos; celebrant of terrors in nights of endless murmurings; architect of orderly destructions; Victor Rohrer.
"Who are you? Get away from me."
"We want you to talk to somebody."
"Punk filth!"
"Don't make me flatten you, wise guy."
"Don't try it; I don't like hurting people."
"There's one of the great laughs of our generation."
"Come on, Rohrer, get your ass in gear; somebody's waiting for you."
"I said: get away from me."
"We aren't goons, Rohrer, don't make us belt you around a little."
"It would take two of you?"
"If it had to."
"That isn't very sportsmanlike."
"Somewhichway, friend, you don't make us feel very sporty. Move it, or s'help me I'll lay this alongside your head."
"Are you from one of those street gangs?"
"No, we're just a coupla patriots doing a good deed."
"I'm tired'a talking. Get it going, Rohrer."
"You ... you're Jewish, aren't you?"
"I said get going, you bastard! Now!"
And they brought him to Lilian Goldbosch.
Wonder danced in her eyes. A dance of the dead in a bombed-out graveyard; a useless weed growing in a bog. She stared across the room at him. He stood just inside the door, legs close together, arms at his sides, his face as featureless as an expanse of tundra. Only the gray eyes moved in the face, and they did so liquidly, flowing from corner to corner, seeing what was there to be seen.

Lilian Goldbosch walked across the room toward him. Victor Rohrer did not move. Behind him, Arch and Frank closed the door softly. They stood like paladins, one on either side of the door. They watched--with intense fascination--what was happening in this silently humming room. As different worlds paused for an eternal moment.

They did not fully comprehend what it was, but so completely had the blond boy and the old woman absorbed each other's presence, that for now they--the ones who had effected the meeting--were gone, invisible, out of phase, no more a part of the life generated in the room than the mad little bird that dipped its beak in water, agonizingly straightened, rocked and dipped again, endlessly.

She walked up, very close to him. Where she had scratched him, his face was still marked. She reached up, involuntarily fascinated, and made as if to touch him. He moved back an inch, and she caught herself.

"You are very young."

It was said in appraisal, with a tinge of amazement, not a hue of poetry anywhere in it; an attempt to codify the reality of this creature, Victor Rohrer.

He said nothing, but a faint softness came to his mouth, as if he knew another truth. On another face, it might have been a sneer.

"Do you know me?" she asked. "Who I am?"

He was extremely polite, as if she were a supplicant and it had fallen to him to maintain decorum and form with her. "You're the woman who attacked me."

Her lips tightened. The memory was still fresh, an eroded fall on a volcanic hillside she had thought incapable of being ravaged again. "I'm sorry about that."

"I've come to expect it. From you people."

"My people ..."

"Jews."

"Oh. Yes. I'm Jewish."

He smiled knowledgeably. "Yes, I know. It says everything, doesn't it?"

"Why do you do this thing? Why do you walk around and tell people to hate one another?"

"I don't hate you."

She stared at him warily; there had to be more. There was.

"How can one hate a plague of locusts, or a packrat that lives in the walls? I don't hate, I'm merely an exterminator."

"Where did you get these ideas? Why does a boy your age fool around with this kind of thing, do you know what went on in the world twenty-five years ago, do you know all the sorrow and death this kind of thinking brought?"

"Not enough. He was a madman, but he had the right idea about the Juden. He had the final solution, but he made mistakes."

His face was perfectly calm. He was not reciting cant, he was delivering a theory he had worked out, logically, completely, finally.

"How did you get so much sickness in you?"

"It is a matter of opinion which of us is diseased. I choose to believe you are the cancer."

"What do your parents think of this?"

A hot little spot of red appeared high on his cheeks. "Their opinions are of very little concern to me."

"Do they know about what you do?"

"I'm getting tired of this. Are you going to tell these two punks to let me go, or will I have to put up with more abuse from you and your kind?" His face was getting slightly flushed now. "Do you wonder that we want to purge you, purify the country of your filth? When you constantly prove what we say is so?"

Lilian Goldbosch turned to the two boys by the door. "Do you know where he lives?" Arch nodded. "I want to see his mother and father. Will you take me there?" Again, Arch nodded. "He doesn't know. He doesn't understand. I can't find out from him. I'll have to ask there."

Flames burned up suddenly in Victor Rohrer's eyes. "You'll stay away from my home!"

"I'll get my purse," she said, softly.

He went for her. His hands came out and up and he was on her, hurling her backward, over a footstool, and they went into a heap, the woman thrashing frantically, and Victor Rohrer coldly, dispassionately trying to strangle her.

Arch and Frank moved quickly.

Frank grabbed Rohrer around the throat in a hammerlock, and without ceremony or warning, Arch lifted a marble ashtray from an end table and swung it in an arc. The ashtray smacked across the side of Victor Rohrer's head with an audible sound, and he suddenly tilted to the left and fell

past Lilian Goldbosch.
He was not unconscious, Arch had pulled his punch, but he was dazed. He sat on the floor, moving his head as if it belonged to somebody else. The two high school boys attended the woman. She struggled to pick herself up, and they helped her to her feet.
"Are you okay?" Frank asked.
She leaned against Arch, and automatically her hand went to her hair, to tidy it. But the movement was only half-formed, as if all those narcissistic acts she had used to make her life livable were now frippery. Her breathing was jagged, and red marks circled her larynx where Rohrer had fastened on tightly.
"He is the complete Nazi," she husked. "He has eaten the Nazi cake, and digested it; he is one of them. It is the old fear, the same one, the very same one, come again. Dear God, we will see it again, the way it was before."
She began to sob. From an empty room within the structure of her soul, tears that had dried years before were called on, and would not come. Ludicrously, she rasped and wheezed, and when nothing came to hereyes, she swallowed hard and bit her lip. In a while she had stopped.
"We must take him home," she said. "I want to talk to his parents."
They got Victor Rohrer under the arms, and they lifted him. He staggered and bobbled, but between them they got him downstairs and into the car. Arch sat in back with him, and Lilian Goldbosch stared straight ahead through the windshield, even when they finally pulled up in front of Rohrer's house in the suburb, Berkeley.
"We're here," Frank said to her. She started, and looked around slowly. It was a neat, unprepossessing house, set in a line among many such houses. It escaped a total loss of identity by a certain warmth of landscaping: dwarf Japanese trees dotting the front lawn, a carefully trimmed hedge that ran down the property line on one side, ivy holding fast to a corner of the house with several years of climbing having brought it just under the second-floor windows. An ordinary house, in an ordinary town.
"Okay, Rohrer, out."
Victor Rohrer went wild! His face contorted. The cold logical animosity of the cool reasoning racist was suddenly washed away. He began speaking in a thin, venomous tone, the words slipping out between knife-edge lips; they did not hiss, but they might as well have; he did not scream, but it had the same shocking effect.
"Kike filth. How much longer do you think you're going to be able to push people around like this? All of you, just like you, with your rotten poisonous filth, trying to take over, trying to tell people what to do; you ought to be killed, every one of you, slaughtered like pigs, I'd do it myself if I could. You'll see, your day is coming, the final day for you ..."
It was rasped out with such intensity, Lilian Goldbosch sat straight, tensed, unable to move, it was a voice from the past. Her body began to tremble. It was the old fear, the one that years of war and years of peace had put in a grave she now found had always been too shallow. The corpse of that fear had clawed its way up out of the dirt and massed dead flesh of the communal grave, and was again walking the world.
Arch reached across and opened the door. He shoved Victor Rohrer before him. Frank and Lilian Goldbosch joined them as they walked up the front drive toward the little house.
"I've found my answer," Lilian Goldbosch said, terror in her voice. "It is the old fear, the terrible one, the one that destroys worlds. And he is the first of them ... but there will be many more ... many ..."
Her eyes were dull as they reached the front door. Rohrer spun about, slapping Arch's hand off his arm. "You aren't going to meet them! I won't allow you in! This isn't a Jew-run town, I'll have you arrested for kidnapping, for breaking and entering ..."
Lilian looked past him.
Past him, to the lintel of the door.
And the fear suddenly drained out of her face.
Victor Rohrer saw her expression, and half-turned his head. Arch and Frank looked in the direction of Lilian Goldbosch's stare. Attached to the lintel of the door, at a slant, was a tubular ornament of shiny brass. Near the top of the face of the ornament was a small hole, through which Arch and Frank could see some strange lettering.
Lilian Goldbosch said, "Shaddai," reached across Victor Rohrer and touched the tiny hole, then withdrew her hand and kissed the fingertips. Her face had been transformed. She no longer looked as though darkness was on its way.
Victor Rohrer made no move toward her.
"That is a fine mezuzah, Victor," she said, softly, looking at him now with complete control of the situation. She started to turn away. "Come along, boys, I don't need to see Victor's parents

now: I understand."
They stared at Rohrer. He suddenly looked like a hunted animal. All his cool polite self-possession was gone. He was sweating. Alone. He stood, suddenly, on his own doorstep, next to a tubular ornament on a right doorpost, alone. Afraid.
Lilian paused a moment, turned back to Victor Rohrer. "It is true no one has a happy childhood, Victor. But we all have to live, to go on. Yours must not have been nice, but ... try to live, Victor. You aren't my enemy, neither am I your enemy."
She walked down the steps, turned once more and said, kindly, as an afterthought, "I will say a prayer for you."
Bewildered, Arch and Frank looked at Victor Rohrer for a long moment. They saw a man of dust. A scarecrow. An emptiness where a person had stood a moment before. This old woman, with incomprehensible words and a sudden sureness, had hamstrung him, cut the nerves from his body, emptied him like a container of murky liquid.
With a soft sound of panic, Victor Rohrer hurled himself off the front steps, and ran across the yard, disappearing in a moment. He was gone, and the three of them stood there, looking at the afternoon.
"What did you say to him?" Arch said. "That word you said. What was it?"
Lilian Goldbosch turned and walked to the car. They came and held the door for her. She was regal. When she looked up at the boys, she smiled. "Shaddai. The name of the Lord. From Deuteronomy."
Then she got in, and they closed the door, Out of sight of Lilian Goldbosch, where she sat calmly, waiting to be driven home, Arch and Frank stared at each other. Total confusion. Something had happened here, but they had no idea what it was.
Then they got in the car, and drove her home. She thanked them, and asked them to call on her again, any time. They could not bring themselves to ask what had happened, because they felt they should be smart enough to know; but they didn't know.
Outside, they looked at each other, and abruptly, just like that, everything that had gone before in their lives seemed somehow trivial. The dancing, the girls, the cars, the school that taught them nothing, the aimless days and nights of movies and cursing and picnics and drag races and ball games, all of it, seemed terribly inconsequential, next to this puzzle they had become part of.
"Shuh-die," Arch said, looking at Frank.
"And that other word: muh-zooz--what it was."
They went to see a boy they knew, in their class, a boy they had never had occasion to talk to before. His name was Arnie Sugarman, and he told them three things.
When they got back to Lilian Goldbosch's apartment, they knew something was wrong the moment they approached the door. It was open, and the sound of classical music came from within. They shoved the door open completely, and looked in.
She was lying half on the sofa, half on the floor. He had used a steam iron on her, and there was blood everywhere. They entered the room, avoiding the sight, avoiding the mass of pulped meat that had been her face before he had beaten her again, and again, and again, in a senseless violence that had no beginning and no end. The two high school boys went to the telephone, and Frank dialed the operator.
"Puh-police, please ... I want to report a, uh, a murder ..."
Lilian Goldbosch lay twisted and final; the terror that had pursued her across the world, through the years--the terror she had momentarily escaped--had at last found her and added her to the total that could never be totaled. She had found her answer, twenty-five years too late.
In the room, the only movement was a small bird with a comic beak that dipped itself in water, straightened, and then, agonizingly, repeated the process, over and over and over ...
Hunkered down in an alley, where they would find him, Victor Rohrer stared out of mad eyes. Eyes as huge as golden suns, eyes that whirled with fiery little points of light. Eyes that could no longer see.
See his past, his childhood, when they had used names to hurt him. When his parents had been funny little people who talked with accents. When he had been friendless ... for that reason.
For the reason of the mezuzuh on the lintel. The little holy object on the lintel, the ornament that contained the little rectangle of parchment with its twenty-two lines of Hebrew from Deuteronomy.
Back behind huge garbage cans spilling refuse, in the sick-sweet rotting odor of the alley, Victor Rohrer sat with knees drawn up, staring at his limp hands, the way a fetus "sees" its limp, relaxed hands before its face. Quiet in there, inside Victor Rohrer. Quiet for the first time. Quiet after a long time of shrieking and sound and siren wails inside a skull that had offered no defense, no protection.

Victor Rohrer and Lilian Goldbosch, both Juden, both stalked; and on an afternoon in Detroit ...
...both had answered with their lives a question that had never even existed, much less been asked, by two high school boys who now had begun to suspect...
...no one escapes, when night begins to fall.
--Hollywood, 1965

PUNKY AND THE YALE MEN

"Love ain't nothing but sex misspelled," he had said, when he had left New York, for the last time. He had said it to the girl he had been sleeping with: a junior fashion and beauty editor with one of the big women's slicks. He had just found out she was a thirty-six-dollar-a-day cocaine addict, and it hadn't mattered, really, because he had gift-wrapped his love and given it to her, asking nothing in return except that she let him be near her.

And yet, when he asked her, that final day, why they had made love only once (with all her stray baby cats mewling in corners and walking over their intertwined bodies), she answered, "I was stoned. It was the only way I could hack it." And he had been sick. Even in his middle thirties, having been down so many dark roads that ended in nothingness, he had been hurt, had been destroyed, and he had gone away from her, gone away from that place, in that special time, and he had told her, "Love ain't nothing but sex misspelled."

It had been bad grammar for a writer as famous as Sorokin. But he was entitled to indulge. It had been a bad year. So he had left New York, for the last time, once again resuming the search that had no end; he had gone back to the studio in Hollywood, and had forgotten quite completely, knowing he would never return to New York.

Now, in another time, still seeking the punchline of the bad joke his life had become, he was back in New York.

Andy Sorokin came out of the elevator squinting, as though he had just stepped into dazzling sunshine.

Dazzling.

It was the forty-second-floor reception room of Marquis magazine and the most dazzling thing in it was the shadow-box display of Kodachrome transparencies from the pages of Marquis.

Dazzling:

Pâche flambée at The Forum of The XII Caesars; tuxedoed and tuck-bow-tied stalwarts at a Joan Sutherland premiére; decorous girl stuff, no nylon and garter belt crotch shots; deep-sea fishing with marlin and mad-eyed bonita breaking white water; Yousuf Karsh character studies of two post-debs and a Louisiana racist politico; a brace of artily drawn cartoons; a Maserati spinning-out at the Nürburg Ring; Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dorothy Parker, Nathanael West, others whose first work had appeared in the magazine; a soft-nosed Labrador Retriever in high grass, ostensibly retrieving a Labrador; two catamarans running before a gale.

Andy Sorokin was not dazzled. He squinted like a man suffering on the outside of a needle-thrust of heartburn.

The unlit cigarette hung from the exact center of his mouth, and he worked with his teeth at the spongy, now moist filter. Behind him, the elevator doors sighed shut, and he was almost alone in the reception room. He stood, still only two steps onto the deep-pile wall-to-wall, a man listening to silent songs in stone, as the nearly pretty receptionist looked up, waiting for him to come to her.

When he didn't, she pursed, nibbled, and then flashed her receptionist eyes. When he still paid no attention to her, she said firmly, projecting, "Yes, may I help you?"

Sorokin had not been daydreaming. He had been entirely there, assaulted by the almost pathological density of good taste in the reception room, beguiled by the relentless masculinity of the Marquis image as totemized in the Kodachromes, amused by an impending meeting that was intended to regain for him that innocence of childhood or nature he had somewhen lost, by the preposterous expedient of hurling him back into a scene, a past, he had fled--gladly--seventeen years before.

"I doubt it," he replied.

Steel shutters slammed down in her eyes. It had been a bitch of a day, lousy lunch, out of pills and the Curse right on time, and but no room in a day like today for some sillyass cigarette-nibbling smartass with funnys. It became unaccountably chill in the room.

Sorokin knew it had been a dumb remark. But it wasn't worth retracting.

"Walter Werringer, please," he said wearily.

"Your name?" in ice.

"Sorokin."

And she knew she had blown it. Ohmigod Sorokin. All day Werringer and the staff had been on

tiptoes, like a basic training barracks waiting for the Inspector General. Sorokin, the giant. Standing here rumpled and nibbling a filter, and she had chopped him. The word was ohmigod. And but no way to recoup. If he so much as dropped a whisper to someone in editorial country, a whisper, the time for moving out of her parents' apartment on Pelham Parkway was farther off, the Times want ads.

She tried a smile, and then didn't bother. His eyes. How drawn and dark they were, like pursestrings pulled tight closed. She should have guessed: those eyes: Sorokin.

"Right this way, Mr. Sorokin," she said, standing, smoothing her skirt across her thighs. There was a momentary flicker of reprieve: he looked at her body. So she preceded him down the corridor into editorial country, moving it fluidly. "Mr. Werringer and the staff have been expecting you," she said, turning to speak over her shoulder, letting the ironed-flat blonde discothèque hair sway back from her good left profile.

"Thank you," he said, wearily. It was a long quiet corridor.

"I really admired your book," she said, still walking. He had had fourteen novels published, she didn't say which one, which meant she had read none of them.

"Thank you."

She continued talking, saying things as meaningful as throat-clearings. And the terrible thing about it, was that from the moment Andy Sorokin had entered the reception room, and she had thought I blew it, he had known everything that had passed through her mind. He had thought her thoughts, the instant she had thought them. Because she was a people, and that was Andy Sorokin's line. He was cursed with an empathy that often threatened to drive him up the wall, around the bend, down the tube and out of this world. He knew she had been playing it bitchily cool, then scared when she found out who he was, then trying to ameliorate it with her body and the hair-swirling. He knew it all, and it depressed him: to find out he was correct again. Once again. As always.

If just once they'd surprise me, he thought, following her mouth and words, her body. Thinking this, in preparation:

Here I am returning to New York, to the very core of The Apple, after summer solstice in L.A. (where the capris run to tight and the soma run to trembly), and it's returning to my past, to my childhood. Filthy, drizzly, crowded till I gag and scream for elbow room on the BMT, it's still where I came from, a glory--notably absent from The Coast. It doesn't even matter that the collar of my Eagle broadcloth looks as though caterpillars had shit in a sooty trail, after a day on the town; it doesn't matter that everyone snarls and bites in the streets; it doesn't matter that the service at the Teheran has run into the toilet since Vincente went over the hill to The Chateaubriand; it doesn't matter that Whitey silenced Jimmy Baldwin the only way it could, by absorbing him, recognizing him, deifying him, making him the Voice of His People, driving him insane; it doesn't even matter that Olaf Burger up at Fawcett has grown stodgy with wealth and position; to hell with all the carping, dammit, it's New York, the hub of it all, the place where it all started again, and I've been so damned long on The Coast, in that Mickey Mouse scene hiya baby pussycat sweetheart lover ... and even when I'm systemically inclined to believe sesquipedalianistic Thomas Wolfe (no, not that Tom Wolfe, the real Tom Wolfe), I keep being amazed to find I can go home again, and again, and again.

It is always New York, my Manhattan, where I learned to walk, where I learned all I know, and where it waits for me every time I come back, like a childhood sweetheart grown sexy with experience, yet still capable of adolescent charm. How bloody literary!

Sonofabitch, I love you, N'Yawk.

She was still gibbering, walking, and all he thought, every spun-out spiderweb sentence of it, only took a moment to whirl through his mind, before they arrived at the door to Walter Werringer's office, concluding with:

Even forty-two stories up in an editorial office, going in to see an important editor who wouldn't have paid me penny-a-word to carve the Magna Carta on his executive toilet wall before I went to Hollywood and became a Name, who now offers me an arm, a leg and a quivering thigh to go back down to Red Hook, Brooklyn and rewrite my impressions, seventeen years later, of juvenile delinquency, "Kid Gang Revisited," even this is New York lovely...

Oh, revenge, thy taste is groovy!

Thoughts of Andrew Sorokin, best-selling novelist, Hollywood scenarist, page 146 (vols. 5-6) of CONTEMPORARY AUTHORS [Born May 27, 1929, in Buffalo, New York; joined a gang of juvenile delinquents in Red Hook, Brooklyn, and posed as a member of the group for three months during 1948, gathering authentic background material for his first novel, CHILDREN OF THE GUTTERS.], and nominee for an Academy Award, as he stepped past an oiled-hipped receptionist into the outer office of Walter Werringer, editor of Marquis magazine: thoughts of Andrew Sorokin, if not

recognized as a prophet in his own land, at least a prodigal returned to accept the huzzahs of the nobility. Time had passed, times had changed, and Andy Sorokin was back.

The receptionist spoke with purport to the trim and distant secretary in the outer office. "Frances ... Mr. Sorokin." The secretary brightened, and the smile buttered across her lower face. "Oh, just a moment, Mr. Sorokin; Mr. Werringer is expecting you." She began clicking the intercom. The receptionist did a little sensuality thing with her mouth as she touched Andy Sorokin's sleeve. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Sorokin."

He smiled back at her. "I'll stop to say good-bye on my way out." She was off the hook. He had done it purposely. One of his occasional gestures of humanity: why let her worry that he was going to cost her a job with a casual remark. It also meant he was going to ask for her number. Now all she had to decide was whether she would play it ingenue and let him ask, or hand him the pre-written note with the name and number on it, when he came back past her in the reception room. It was an infinitely fascinating game of ramifications, and Andy Sorokin knew she would play it with herself till he reappeared. She went, and he turned back as the secretary rose to usher him into the inner presence of Walter Werringer.

"Right this way, Mr. Sorokin," she said, standing, smoothing her skirt across her thighs. He looked at her body. She preceded him to the inner office door, moving it fluidly. If just once they'd surprise me, he thought.

Forty minutes later, they still had not discussed what Sorokin had come to discuss: the assignment. They had talked about Sorokin's career, from pulp detective and science fiction stories through the novels to Hollywood and the television, the motion picture scripts. The impending Oscar night, and Sorokin's nomination. They had discussed Sorokin's two disastrous marriages, his appraisal of Hollywood politics, the elegance of Marquis, the silliness of Sorokin's never having been in the pages of that elegant slick monthly. (But not the bitter weevil that nibbled Sorokin's viscera: that Marquis had never thought him worthy of acceptance before he had become famous and a Name.) They had discussed women, JFK, what had become of Mailer, the unreliability of agents, paperback trends, everything but the assignment.

And a peculiar posturing had sprung up between them.

Werringer stared at Andy Sorokin across a huge Danish coffee mug, steam fogging his bifocals, gulping with heavenly satisfaction. "Without joe I'd be dead," he said. He took another gulp, reinforcing his own stated addiction, and plonked the mug down on the desk blotter. "Ten, fifteen cups a day. Gotta have it." He liked to play the stevedore, rather than the literary lion. He enjoyed the role of the Hemingway more than that of the Maxwell Perkins. It was his posture, and as far as Sorokin was concerned, he was stuck with it. Yet it had an adverse effect on Sorokin, who had been what Werringer worked at seeming to be. (Damn my empathy, he thought. Perversity incarnate!) It had the effect of sending Sorokin into a pseudo-Truman Capote stance. Limpwristed, campy, biting with effeminate aphorism and innuendo. Werringer was on the verge of mentally labeling Sorokin homosexual, even though the conclusion ran contrary to everything he knew of the writer, and the confusion only served to amuse Sorokin. But not too much.

"About this idea of yours, for me..." Sorokin finally broached it.

"Right. Yeah, let's get to it." Werringer crinkled his face in a Victor McLaglen roughsmile. He rummaged under a stack of manuscripts and pulled out a copy of Sorokin's first novel, sixteen years old in its original dust wrapper. CHILDREN OF THE GUTTERS. He fingered it as though it were some rare and moldering edition, a first folio "Macbeth," rather than a somewhat better than good fictionalized autobiography of three months Andy Sorokin had spent living a double-life, seventeen years before, when he had been young and provincial enough to think "experience" was a substitute for content or style. Three months with a kid gang, living in and running through the stinking streets, getting what he liked to call "the inside."

Now, seventeen years later, and Werringer wanted him to go back to those streets. After the army, after Paula and Carrie, after the accident, after Hollywood, after the last seventeen years that had given him so much, and stripped him so clean. Go back, Sorokin. Go back to it. If you can.

Werringer was doing the hairy-chested bit again. He tapped the book with a fingernail. "This has real guts, Andy. Real balls. I always felt that way about it."

"Call me Punky," Sorokin minced, smiling boyishly. "That's what they called me in the gang. Punky."

Werringer did a frowning thing. If Sorokin was a visceral realist out of the gutsy Robert Ruark school, why was he camping?

"Uh-huh, Punky, sure," he tried to get his feet under him, but wobbled a little. Sorokin tried not to snicker. "It has real plunge, real honesty in it, a bitchofuh lot of depth," Werringer added, lamely.

Sorokin assumed a moue of displeasure, pure faggot: "Too bad it tiptoed through the bookstores,"

he said. "It was written to alter the course of Western Civilization, you know." Werringer paled. What was happening here? "You do know that, don't you?"
Werringer nodded dumbly, and took the remark at face value. He didn't know why he should feel as though he had just fallen down the rabbit hole, but the impression was overwhelming.
"Well, uh, what we'd like, what we want, for Marquis, is the same sort of ballz--uh, the same sort of highly emotional writing you put into this."
Sorokin felt his stomach tightening, now that the moment was with him. "What you want me to do, is go back down to Red Hook, to the same place I knew, and write about the way it is now."
Werringer banged a palm on the desk. "Exactly! The kids, what happened to them, where they are now. Did they wind up in the slammer, did they get married, go into the army, the whole story, seventeen years later. And the social conditions. Have the tenements been cleaned up? What about the low-rent housing projects? Has the Police Athletic League been of any use? What about racial tensions down there now, does it make for a different kind of kid gang, different rumbles, you know, the whole scene."
"You want me to go back down there."
Werringer stared. "Yeah, right, that's what we want. 'Kid Gang Revisited.' Something in depth."
The tension that had been growing in Sorokin now abruptly tightened like a fist. Go back down there. Go back to it, seventeen years later. "I was nineteen years old when I joined that gang," Andrew Sorokin said, half to himself. Werringer continued to stare. The man in front of him seemed to be in some sort of shock.
"I'm thirty-six now. I don't know--"
Werringer bit the inside of his lip. "We only want you to write it from the outside this time. You're no kid now, Andy ... Mr. Soro--"
"But you don't want it to be a surface skimming, do you?"
"Well, no--"
"You want it to be guts and balls, right?"
"Yeah, right, we want--"
"You want it told the way it is, right? With realism, all the hip talk the kids talk?"
"Sure, that's part of--"
"You want me to find out what happened to all those kids I ran with, who didn't know I was studying them like bugs in a bottle. You want me to go down there seventeen years later and say, 'I'm the guy finked on you, remember me?' You want that, in essence that's what you want, isn't it?"
Werringer had the feeling now (sudden shifts with this man) that Sorokin was furious, was frightened, but furious. What the hell was going on?
"Well, yes, we want the truth, the inside, the way you did it the first time, but we don't want you to take any chances. We aren't ... hell, we aren't Confidential or the Enquirer! We want--"
"You want me to go back in and let them take a whack at me!"
Aggression. Werringer reeled.
"Say, wait a minute we--"
"You expect a helluva story, and all the risks, and you want it now, right, Mr. Werringer?"
"What's the matter with you, Sorok--"
"Well, how the hell do you expect me to do it unless I go back down there and sink into it again, up to my GUTS, up to my BALLS, up to my EYEBALLS FOR CHRISSAKES! YOU DAMN DUMB DEADLINE-MEETER, YOU!"
Werringer shoved back from his desk, as though Sorokin might jump across and throttle him. His eyes were wide behind the bifocals, all out of shape and moist.
"It'll be my pleasure, Mr. Werringer," in a tone so soft and warm, relaxed at last. "How soon do you need it? And what length?"
Walter Werringer fumbled for his Danish coffee mug.
Sorokin had his hand on the door, when it opened inward, and two young men came through. The moment he saw them, prim and clean-scrubbed in their almost-identical dark blue suits, he knew they had come from the right families, had learned to dance at the age of six or seven at Miss Blesham's, or one of the other good salons, had been allowed that first quarter-snifter of Napoleon with "Dad," and had most certainly graduated from one of the right schools.
The one on the left, the taller of the two, with the straw-colored hair and polar twinkling blue eyes, entering the room with thumbs hooked into the decorative pockets of his vest, was an Andover man. Had to be.
The other, slightly shorter, perhaps only six feet, with shoes impeccably dullshined to avoid the vulgar ostentation of gloss, with flat brown hair parted straight back on the left side and brushed toward the rear of the skull in the European manner, whose eyes were of the lizard, he was

Choate, surely, definitely, of course.
"Walter," Andover said, as he burst into the office, "we're breaking a little early today. Going over to The Algonquin for a few. Care to come along?"
Then he saw Sorokin, and stumbled to silence, in awe.
Werringer introduced them, with names Sorokin let slip out of his mind the instant they were spoken. He knew their names.
"Where did you go to school?" he asked them.
"Yale," said Andover.
"Yale," said Choate.
"Call me Punky," said Andrew Sorokin.
So they all went to The Algonquin for a few.
Choate scrabbled around in the bottom of the bowl. All the salted peanuts and little Cheerios and pretzels were gone. He gripped the bowl by its edge and banged it on the table. At The Algonquin, that was poor form.
"Succulents!" Choate howled.
The waiter came and took the bowl away from him like a nanny with an obstreperous infant.
"Succulents, dammt," he slurred the word, only faintly.
"Andrew P. for Punky Sorokin, by God what a thrill and a half for overtime," said Andover, staring at Andy for the one billionth time since they had sat down. "A giant, you're a bloody giant, a flaming institoootion! Y'know that? And here we are sitting right with you!"
Werringer had left two hours before. Evening was coming on. The two Yale men named Andover and Choate were just high enough to be playful. Andy was sober. He had tried, God knew he had tried, but he was still sober.
"Reality, that's what you deal in," said one of them. It didn't matter which was which. They both spoke from the same cultural mouth.
"Truth. Life. You know all there is to know about Life. An' I don't mean that Lucely, heh heh heeheehee ..." he broke himself up completely, rolled around in the booth. Choate (or Andover, depending which had punned) shoved him away, roughly.
"You don't know what the hell you're talkin' about, Rob. Thass the one thing he doesn't know about. Life! The core of it, the heartmeat of it! We, who come from such austere backgrounds, even we know it better more truly than Andrew P. for Punky Sorokin sitting right there."
The other Yale man sat up, angry. "You shut up! This man is a giant. A flaming giant, and he knows, I tell you. He knows about the seamy side of Life."
"He never even touched it."
"He knows! He knows it all!"
"Fraud! Poseur!"
"Step owsside you bastard, I never knew you were such a bigoted crypto-Fascist bastard!"
Sorokin listened to them, and the fear he had known earlier that afternoon, when Werringer had sentenced him to going back down to Red Hook, returned. He had condemned himself to it, really, by what series of compulsions he did not want to examine, but here it was again. How did Choate know he was a fraud? How had Choate discovered the secret nubbin of fear in Andrew Sorokin's heart and soul?
"What, uh, what makes you say I'm a fraud?" he asked Choate. Choate's face had grown blotchy with drink, but he aimed a meaty finger at Sorokin and said, "I get spirit messages from the other world."
Andover took it as an affront. He shoved Choate roughly. "Owsside, bastard! Owsside, crypto-pinko!"
Sorokin wanted to get to the sober heart of it, though. "No, really, what makes you think I don't know reality?"
Choate took on the look of a pedant, and intoned sepulchrally. "Your first book'a short stories, you had a quote from Hemingway, remember it? You said it was your credo. Bushwah! 'There is no use writing anything that has been written before unless you can beat it. What a writer in our time has to do is write what hasn't been written before or beat dead men at what they have done.' I memorized it. It seemed to be valid. Bushwah!"
"Socialist, right-wing Birch muther-fugger!"
"Yes? So what makes you think I don't know what I'm talking about? That certainly doesn't prove your point."
"Ah!" Choate lifted a finger alongside his nose, like Santa Claus about to zoom up the chimney. Conspiratorial. "Ah! But your fifth book'a short stories, after you'd been out there"--he waved toward California--"you used another quote. You know what it was? Hah, you remember?"
Sorokin paused an instant to get it right, then recited. " 'To reject one's own experiences is to

arrest one's own development. To deny one's own experience is to put a lie into the lips of one's own life. It is no less than a denial of the Soul.' Oscar Wilde. What has that to do with proving your point?"
Choate was triumphant. "Fear. Cop-out.Your subconscious was squealing like a butchered pig. It knew you were a liar from the first, and were lying all the more in Hollywood. It knew! And so you had to say it to the world, so they could never accuse you of it. You don't know what Life is, what reality is, what truth is, what anydamnthing is!"
"I'm gonna push your rotten cruddy Tory face in!"
They wrestled around the other side of the booth, each too hammered to do the other any harm, as Sorokin thought about what Choate had said. Was it possible? Had he been trying to plead silently guilty to an unspoken charge?
When he had been a small child, he had been a petty thief. He had stolen things from the dime store. Not because he could not have bought them, because his family was too poor, but because he wanted them without having to pay for them, a sense of accomplishment, in a child's own strange philosophy. But he had always felt compelled to play with the new, stolen item, directly in front of his parents, that same night. So they could ask him where he got it, and he could risk their finding out he had stolen. If they did not press it, the stolen plaything was truly his; if they pressed it and he blurted he had stolen it, then he had to suffer a punishment he knew he deserved.
Was the inclusion of the Wilde quotation, as Choate suggested, another playing with a stolen toy in front of mommy and daddy, the world, his public?
Was it a manifestation of the fear he now felt? The fear that he had lost it, had always been in the process of losing it, could never regain it?
"Okay, dammit, I'm gonna show you the seamy side of Life! Now what about it, Mr. Punky? You wanna see the seamy side of Life?"
"He knows it, I tell ya!"
"Well, do you? Huh?"
"I'll have to make a phone call first. Cancel a dinner appointment." He sat, not moving, and they stared at one another like walruses contemplating the permanence of the sea.
"Well, do you, huh? If you do, put up or shut up." Choate was on the pinnacle of proving his point.
"Just shuddup, Terry, just shuddup; this man is not going to be chivvied and bullied and chockablock by the likes of a McCarthy neo-Fascist demagogue such as yourself!" Andover was a tot drunker than Choate.
Sorokin was trembling inside. If anyone knew the seamy side of Life, it was Andrew Sorokin. He had run away at age fifteen, had been driving a dynamite truck in North Carolina by sixteen, working on a cat-cracker in West Texas age seventeen, at nineteen the gang, and his first book published at twenty. He had been in every scene imaginable from the sybaritic high life of the international jet set to uncontrolled LSD experimentation with Big Sur hippies. He had always wanted to believe he was with it, contemporary, of the times, in touch with the realities, all the myriad multicolored realities, no matter how strained or weird or demeaning.
And the question now before him: has all this living degenerated into a search for kicks, is it a complex cop-out? He slid out of the booth, and went to call Olaf Burger.
When he had gotten through the switchboard and all the interference, Burger's bushwhacker voice came across the line. "Yeah?"
"Didn't I tell you a million times that's no way to answer a phone? You should say, 'Massah Buhgah's awfiss, c'n ah helps yuh, bwana.' "
"Explain to me why I have to have a busy workday interrupted periodically by bigots, rednecks and kook writer sellouts from Smog Junction."
" 'Cause you got such dear little Shirley Temple dimples, and you is a big paperback editor, and I burn for your body with a bright blue flame."
"What's on your alleged mind, nitwit?"
"Gotta call off the dinner."
"Janine'll parboil me. She made patlijan moussaka because you were coming. And dicing and braising lamb all day will not put her in a receptive frame of mind. At least give me an excuse."
"Two hotrock Ivy types from Marquis want to show me 'the seamy side of Life.' "
"That's not an excuse, that's a seizure of petit mal. You've got to be kidding."
There was a moment of serious silence from Sorokin. Then, in a different, slower voice he said, "I've got to do it, Olaf. It's important."
A corresponding moment of reorientation, the dual statement of a musical threnody. "You sound upset, Andy. Something happen? It's been three months since I've seen you, something biting on you

again?"
Sorokin clicked his tongue against his teeth, seeking the words, finally deciding in an instant to put it baldly. "I'm trying to find out if I've got balls. Again."
"For the thousandth time."
"Yeah."
"When do you stop? When you get killed?"
"Give my love to Janine. I'll call you tomorrow. My treat at The Four Seasons, that ought to make up for it."
A pause. "Andy ..."
Another beat of timelessness. "Uh-huh?"
"You're too expensive for the paperback line I edit, but there are a lot of others with a stock in you. Don't screw yourself up."
"Uh-huh."
Burger clicked off, and Andy Sorokin stood staring at the red plush of the phone booth for a long moment. Then he turned, exhaling breath in finality, and went back to a scene from Hogarth. Andover was tapping the table over and over and over with his index finger, saying over and over and over, "You'll see, you'll see, you'll see ..."
While Choate, who had rubbed carbon black from half a dozen spent matches on his cheeks, was flapping his arms tidily, and croaking over and over and over, "Nevermore, nevermore, nevermore ..."
They took him to every paradise he had already known. All the places he had been when he was younger, all the predictable places. The Lower East Side. The Village. Spanish Harlem. Bedford-Stuyvesant.
And they grew more and more furious. They had sobered; the chill night air, the snow of winter's November, too many stop-offs where the liquor wasn't free; they were sobered. It had become a vendetta with both of the Yale men, not just Choate. Now Andover was with him, and they wanted to show the giant, Sorokin, something he had not seen before.
There were bars, and more bars, and dingy down-the-hole places where people sat murmuring into one another's libidos. And then a party ...
Noise cascaded about him, a Niagara of watery impressions, indistinct conversational images. Snatches of flotsam carried down thunderingly past his ears "... I went over to Ted Bates to ask them about those Viceroy residuals, and Marvy told me what the hell I'd gotten a trip to the Virgin Islands out of it and why didn't I stop bitching, and I told him, say, after that damned fruitcake director and his fayguluh crew got done letting me 'save' them from the gay life, I was so raw and miserable double residuals wouldn't of been enough to make up for all that weirdscene swinging, and besides, if they'd taken along some hooker they'd of had to pay her, too, so I should be getting extra consider--"
... beep, bip, boop, blah, bdip, chee chee chee ...
"... a gass! A real gass! The joint is laid out like an Arabian Nights kind of thing, with the waitresses in these transparent pants, and all the waiters in pasha turbans, and you lay on your side to eat, and I've got to admit it's hard as hell eating laying on your side, which is almost as bad as laying eating on your side heh heh, I swear I don't see how the hell they did it in those days, but the food is ab-solutely a gass, man. They've got this lemon drop soup, they call it kufte abour and it's a g--"
... bdoing, bupp, bupp, beep, bip, chee chee chee ...
"... this compendium of aborted hours and dead-end relationships is of minor concern, for at this moment, this very instant in weightless timeless time, this moment that I am about to describe minutely, all of what I have been through before this will outline itself. If not in particular, then in essence, hindsighted as it were, and what went before will be seen as merely a vapor trail of incidents one like another, building to this moment and ... oh for CHRIST'S sake, Ginny, take your finger out of your nose ..."
... bang bang bang, bding dong, clank, crunch, chee chee chee ...
Technically, it might have been a party. Superficially it resembled a party, with too many people clogged into too small a space, a dingy loft off Jane Street in the Village. But there was more going on than just that.
The ritual dances of the friendly natives were being staged, both physically--as Simone and her husband's agent did a slow, extremely inept, psychosexual Skate--and emotionally--as Wagner Cole scathingly sliced up the peroxided poetess whose aspirations of literary immediacy were transparently Saturday Review--as well as ethnically--minor chittering of who-balled-who in the far corner by the rubber plant. The whole crowd was there, because it was Florence Mahrgren's birthday (wheeee!) and not just a dreamed-up reason for getting together.

Andy Sorokin stood against the fireplace wall, his margarita in his two cupped hands, talking to the whey-faced virgin Andover had found and brought to him. She was talking at him, about a bad movie made from one of his lesser novels.
"I never really thought Karin was completely bad," the virgin was saying. "And when they made the movie, I just did not like the way Lana Turner played the part."
Sorokin stared down at her benignly. She was very short, and large-bosomed. She wore a Rudi Gernreich and it had her pushed all up tight in front; she smiled with her lips but not her teeth.
"That's very kind of you to say; there wasn't a great deal in the motion picture version to like, though I thought Frankenheimer's direction was nice."
She answered something totally irrelevant. He bore these conversations neatly or badly, depending on the final objective. In this case, it was getting the short, buxom virgin into the master bedroom; he gave it what charm he could spare.
Around them, like mist encircling a cleared space, the eye of a storm, the party pitched itself a noticeable degree higher in hysteria. Florence Mahrgren was hoisted on the shoulders of Bernbach & Barker (producers of three current Broadway hits) and carried around the room, as Ray Charles sang in the background, her skirt crumpled about her thighs, Bernbach & Barker improvising obscene happy birthday lyrics to the tune of their current success's theme song. Sorokin felt his gut tightening on him again. It never seemed to change, no matter how many times the people changed. They said the same stupid things, did the same senseless things, postured and played with themselves insipidly. He wanted either to screw the virgin or to get out of the party.
From another corner of the living room someone yelled, "Hey! How about Circle-Insult?" and before Andy could make for the door, the virgin had been snapped up by Andover, and she in turn had clutched his sleeve, and daisy-chain, they careened into the center of the maelstrom.
Circle-Insult. They were already forming the circle, everyone hunkering down cross-legged on the floor. The idle talented and the idle rich and the idle poor and the idle bored playing their games; affectation of innocence, the return to honesty in form--if not in content. Circle-Insult. The women sitting in the preordained postures, careless, nonchalant unawareness of lingerie and pale inner flesh flashed and gone and flashing again, beacons for the wanderers who would home there that night, keeping the coastline firmly in sight, keeping the final berth open to the lost and the needy. Charitable bawds.
They began playing Circle-Insult, the world's easiest game.
Tony Morrow turned to Iris Paine on his right. Tony to Iris: "You're the worst lay I've ever had. You don't move. You just lay there and let a guy, any guy, stick it in, and you whimper. Jeezus, you're a lousy lay."
Iris Paine turned to Gus Diamond on her right. Iris to Gus: "You smell bad. You have really vile bad breath. And you always stand too close when you talk to someone. You stink completely."
Gus Diamond turned to Bill Gardner on his right. Gus to Bill: "I hate niggers, and you are the most obnoxious nigger I ever met. You got no natural rhythm, and when we played tennis last weekend I saw you were hung smaller than me so stop trying to horse around with Betty, nigger, or you'll find your throat cut!"
Bill Gardner turned to Kathy Dineen on his right. Bill to Kathy: "You always steal outta these parties. One night you stole thirty-five bucks from Bernice's purse, and then split, and they called the cops but they never found out it was you. You're a thief."
Around and around and around. Circle-Insult.
Andy Sorokin stood as much of it as he could, then he rose and left, Andover and Choate trailing all quiet and sadly sober behind him. "You didn't like it," Choate said, following him down the stairs.
"I didn't like it."
"It wasn't the core of reality."
Sorokin smiled. "It wasn't even particularly seamy."
Choate shrugged. "I tried."
"How about The Ninth Circle?" Andover asked.
Sorokin stopped on the stairs, half-turned. "What's that?"
Choate grinned conspiratorially. "It's a joint, you know, a pub, a place." Sorokin nodded silently, bobbed his head and they followed him.
They took him to The Ninth Circle, which was a Village hangout, the way Chumley's had been a hangout when Andy had walked the weary streets. The way Rienzi's had been the spot to go and read The Manchester Guardian on a wooden hang-up pole, and sleep on Davey Rienzi's sandwich-cutting board when the rent was too much to make. The way there was always an in-hole for the colder children who couldn't bear to stand on street corners naked to the night.
And Choate and Andover--again--grew furious.

For the moment they entered the noisy, dingy bar with its inauspicious bullfight posters and sawdusty floor, a tall, skeletal man erupted from a seat tilted back against a wall, and dashed for Sorokin. "Andy! Andy Sorokin!"
It was Sid, big Sid, who had operated the tourist bus dodge on 46th Street and Broadway, in the days when Andy Sorokin had worked selling pornography in a bookshop on The Gay White Way. Cadaverously thin Sid, who had been one of the coterie of early-morning residents of Times Square, a closed society of those who were with it, as Andy had been.
Sid made a great fuss over Sorokin, pulling him to a table full of pretty girls and buffalo-moustached pickup men for the pretty girls. They reminisced about the old days before Sorokin had told his bosses at the bookshop to pick it and stick it, he was going to write. Before Sorokin had sold his books, gone in the army, married the women, made it in Hollywood. The old days before.
And the two Yale men grew furious at Punky.
Here they were, determined to show him the raw and pulsing inner heart of the seamy side of Life, and he was a familiar of all the types even they could not get to know. It was frustrating.
"So what are you doing these days?" Andy asked Sid. Sid flip-flopped a deprecatory hand. "Not much. I'm working a couple of hookers, you know, making a buck here and there." Andy grinned. "Remember the night that chick wandered into the bookstore, and she wanted to get laid, and Freddy Smeigel started hustling her, and she pulled her skirt up to her chin and she was sans pants--"
Sid interrupted, "What pants?"
Andy grinned. "Without."
"Oh, yeah, tell it, g'wan, these guys'd laugh like hell."
Sorokin warmed to the story of the tourist woman from Sheboygan, and how they had quickly locked the front door and pulled the blind and she had pulled up her skirt again and let them look. She had done it half a dozen times, like a yo-yo on a string, just say the word and zip up went the dress. So they'd taken her next door into the record shop and Freddy had told her to do it for them, and she had done it zip again. So then they'd taken her around the block, upstairs of the Victoria Theatre, to the stockroom, and everyone had balled her.
Sorokin and Sid laughed over it, and Andover got nearly as furious as Choate. So they started drinking again, trying to resurrect their buzz of earlier that evening. Finally, when Andy had had enough of The Ninth Circle, he suggested they leave, and Sid handed him a card.
It said: LOTTE Call Sid 611 East 101st.
There was a phone number, and it had been scratched off, and another phone number written in, in ball-point. Sid laid an incredibly thin arm around Sorokin's shoulder. "It's one of my hustlers. Fourteen years old. Puerto Rican meat, but too much. You want a little bang, just call me, I'm usually around. On the house. Old times, like that."
Andy grinned, and shoved the card into the pocket of his Harris tweed jacket. "Take care, Sid. Nice seeing you again." And they left.
The two Yale men had an air of determination about them now, a frenzy almost. They would find a seamy side of Life to reveal to this wiseass giant, Sorokin, if they had to scour every grimy garbage can in the greater Manhattan area.
There is an infinitude of grimy garbage cans in the greater Manhattan area. They scoured many of them that night, that morning, winding up finally, stone-drunk, all three of them, in The Dog House Bar, a filth-pit of unspeakable emptiness, deep in the Bowery.
Sorokin sat across from the Yale men. Choate's face was once again blotchy with pink. Andover was giddy.
"Punky, pussycat." Andover smiled lopsidedly. "Luv'ya!" Choate sneered. The strain of surliness that lay close to the surface needed only a whisper of wind, a rustle of leaves, a murmur of direction, to come to the top.
"Cop-out," he mumbled. Then he swallowed hard. And his face went puce. "I'm going to whooppee," he mumbled.
His cheeks puffed out. There was a moist sound.
"You talk like a dumb New Yorker story," Andover said, very carefully. "Now if you were a Playboy story, you'd say puke, 'cause it's a realie word, and it has'a lotta reality, huh? And if you were a Kenyon Review story, you'd say vomit, because it has history behind it, roots, so t'speak. And if you were an Esquire story, you'd say upchuck, 'cause they're still trying to con everyone into thinking they're the voice of college. And if you were a National Geographic story--"
Choate slid sidewise in the booth, crab-style, and started out of the booth. "Ergh," he hummed soggily, "toil-ed?" Andy stood to help him.
Supporting Choate with an arm around his waist, and a hand under his armpit, Andy moved back through the crowded, smoke-dense bar, to the battered door marked GENTS. All around them, suddenly, Sorokin realized what a dismal, sinister place The Dog House Bar really was.

In a far corner sat a trio of men in black, all leaning hunkered down in, one next to the other, till they seemed to be one great black gelatinous mass. A whisp of conversation, like a sibilant ghost, hushed through the instant of silence, from that mass, to Sorokin: "Man, I gotta get off... gotta take a drive..."

Old junkies.

Back behind the jukebox, which was silent, lights faded, a tired harridan merely waiting for a john to slip a coin into her to show her jaded charms, a man and woman were doing something uncomfortable, the woman straddling the man's lap.

The booths were all filled. Groups of men in heavy sweaters, still feeling November with them, outside the fly-specked windows of the bar. Longshoremen, sandhogs, merchant mariners, night truckers; a group of Chinese over from Mott Street; hefty-thighed women clustered about one man with a pack of tarot cards; no one was clean. The smell of swine was in the room. Heavy, changing tone, first garlic, then sweat, then urine, it roiled overhead mixed layer on layer with cigarette and pipe smoke, occasionally clearing sufficiently to smell the acrid aroma of bad marijuana, too many seeds and stems to give any kind of a decent high. And dark. Dim shadows moving here and there, like plankton dark under a sea heavy with silt.

The hum of voices, all somnolent, no hilarity, not a laugh, not a snicker. The substitute was an occasional grunt, a forced sluggish thudding thrust of ughhh as of someone forcing a bowel movement, and usually from a woman, groped under a table. A place of base relationships.

The word immoral did not even apply. It was akin to the drunk who lay on the floor, propped against the wall between stacks of Coca-Cola cases, eyes wide yet unseeing, hands caked with unidentifiable filth, clothes shapeless and gray. An object of no identity, so sunk into alcoholism, addlewitted, that he was what the police called a wetbrain. The term drunk no longer applied, just as the term immoral did not apply. What Sorokin saw here, around him, poised holding Choate, at the door of the toilet, was the final descent of man, to base needs.

He saw the world as it really was, as it was for him, also. The world that was unaffected by ambition or history or social graces. He saw the real side of life, which he had not seen for many years. He saw, God help him, the seamy side of Life.

The bar was full, down reflecting the length of the streaked backbar mirror. Elbow to elbow as four o'clock curfew raced toward them, bending and drinking, not even talking, getting as much inside as possible before night overtook them and they were sent out into the world alone.

A Negro came up to Sorokin, a heavy-faced Negro with conked reddish hair and bloodshot eyes, character gone from the face and replaced with weary cunning. He held up a pair of red plastic dice. "You go'n th' toilet baby? We got us a few fren'z heah, wanna do a thang'a craps, huh, howzabout?" and he laid his hand on Sorokin's backside. Sorokin stiffened.

"Forget it," he said, thickly. Spade fag, he thought, and was ill. Of all the horrors Whitey has committed against the black man, homosexuality is the most perverse.

The black man drew himself up, snorted a word, and went away, smelling strongly of Arrid and Jean Naté. Out of the corner of his eye, Sorokin saw him join another Negro in a side booth for two, and knew they were discussing that damn straight whitey muthuh by the toilet door.

And in that instant, Sorokin was satisfied. He knew at last, somehow and inexplicably, he had come of age. Late adolescence, the chase for masculinity, were found and over. He had seen all there was to see, and what he had done since he had left this milieu, was to seek responsibility. To mature was to belong; where you wanted to belong, surely, but to care about a life with continuity. He was suddenly whole. And free.

He opened the door and went through into the filthy bathroom with Choate.

The moment they entered the white-tiled toilet, Choate broke away, and fell down on his knees by the stand-up urinal. He began to vomit heavily, a rhinoceros sound deep from his stomach. Sorokin moved away from him, realizing his own bladder cried for emptying. He entered the stall, letting the swinging door slam hard behind him, and unzipped.

He began to urinate, thinking a codifying series of thoughts about the moment of realization he had just known. He barely heard the sound of the outer door open, the scuff of feet against the tiles, a heavy thwack! of something heavy hitting something yielding, and an almost immediate soft ughhh of gentle pain.

Sorokin, still urinating, peered outside the stall, pushing open the door in idle curiosity.

Two Negroes, the same two from the bar, were working Choate over. One had smashed Choate behind the ear with a white tennis sock full of coins, and Choate was bleeding from the scalp, half-slumped into the vomit-filled urinal. The other one was groping for Choate's wallet.

Sorokin did not think about it. If he had, he would not have done it.

He charged out of the stall, head down, and plunged full-tilt into the Negro with the sockful of silver. It had been the Negro with the red plastic dice. He hit him at full speed, head against

chest, hands pushing the black man sharply away from him. The Negro careened backward under the impact of the rush, and his head crashed against the white tiles with a sharp car-door crack. He sank to the floor instantly, eyes closed.

Sorokin turned, just in time to see the glint of honed steel as the second Negro flipped open the straight razor and set himself hard, slashing straight through in a flat arc from left shoulder across his body, like a good tennis player fielding a smash with a tight backhand. The razor silently hummed.

The black man caught Sorokin directly across the belly, and Sorokin felt it only as a tiny paper cut might feel. He plunged forward, still doing a ballet turn from the first Negro, unconscious against the tiles. Ingrained army infighting, learned at no small traumatic cost years before, leaped unbidden into Sorokin's reflexes. (You never forget how to swim, once you've learned. You never forget how to ride a bicycle, once you've learned. You never forget how to lay a woman, once you've learned. You never forget how to kill, once you've learned.)

He caught the Negro under the nose with the flat, hard edge of his palm, slamming back and up. The Negro's head whipped up as though on a wire, and he shrieked, high and piercingly, a woman's shriek. His knees buckled inward, and his arms flailed out to the sides. The straight razor went flying and clattered into a corner of the toilet, under the sink. The black man started to fall face-forward, and Sorokin realized he had not for a moment seen the black blood gushing out of the black man's black mouth onto his lower face. A torrent, a river, a dam burst of blood.

The Negro fell past Sorokin like a dropped sandbag. Empty and cold and heavily. He hit on his face, and lay silent, but the smear of blood ran across the white tiles. As he hit, something fell from his vest pocket, and tinkled away.

Sorokin knew the Negro was dead. One for certain, possibly two. He had to get out of there. He looked down, and the razor had cut through his Harris tweed jacket, through his shirt, through his undershirt, and through the top layers of his stomach's soft flesh. He was bleeding profusely, in a constantly welling red line, straight and clean and very, very neat. He touched it, and a bombshell went off in his head as shock set in. His eyes widened, and he said something but did not know what it was.

The thing that had fallen from the smashed Negro's vest winked up at him. It was one of the red plastic dice. It said two. Little white eyes in a clear red box.

Choate was still gasping and vomiting. Sorokin grabbed him up by the back of his jacket, and hauled him toward the door of the toilet. Behind him, neither black man moved, the scene of carnage just as it had been for almost a minute, an hour, forever.

They stumbled out of the toilet together, and Sorokin realized his fly was still open. He did the acceptable thing, and then zipped up his pants. He half-carried Choate toward the table.

Andover was making flirting, obscene gestures at the fat henna-rinsed sow locked in the over-shoulder embrace of a massive longshoreman, one booth away. Oh, Jesus, Sorokin thought, terror again bubbling up, these two are going to get me killed!

He pulled a ten dollar bill from his side pocket, and threw it down on the table. Then he grabbed Andover and pulled him out of the booth before the sow could complain to her paramour. "Get the coats!" Sorokin ordered him.

Andover grabbed the coats, and with Sorokin hauling both of the drunken Yale men, they stumbled and fell out of The Dog House Bar. Punky wanted very much to get as far away from the scene in the toilet as possible.

For it was entirely probable that death lay stretched out on those filthy white tiles. The final crap-out.

The streets were cold and empty at four o'clock November.

The blood would not stop. He had torn up his undershirt, and stuffed it around his middle, but it had done no good. The undershirt was soaked deep brown from rotted blood.

He could not feel his legs, yet they continued to move, one in front of the other, a puppet conditioned to go on moving even when the puppet-master was dead. An improbable concept, a dead puppet-master, but flamingos were fine, as well. And papaya juice, sweet, cold, milky. There was a toy soldier once, that he had buried in the ground behind his parents' garage, in the town where he had been born, very long ago. He would go back and dig it up. When the whistle blew. Or before. If he could.

The two Yale men were drunk out of their skulls. They laughed and tittered and followed Punky where he led them, which was nowhere, plodding through fresh-fallen snow in the New York streets; he was in shock, and did not know it. The Yale men did not seem to find the dripping slash across Punky's belly very funny, but they didn't talk about it, so it probably didn't matter.

The heavy Harris tweed jacket (a new jacket, recently bought, at Jack Breidbart's, on Sixth Avenue) was what had saved his life. It had absorbed much of the impact of that flat, whistling

slash. Straight razor. Clean and true and deadly, made for death, not shaving.
And back there, in that toilet. If you strike a man hard enough under the nose, you will shatter the bridge and drive bone splinters into the brain, killing him instantly. And he will fall past you like a sandbag, like the Negro fell past Punky, so that you must sidestep, a torero who has made his kill. Back there, in that toilet.
And they walked the cold, chill, empty, screaming streets.
Punky put his hands in his pockets. He was cold, very cold. He felt a bit of cardboard. He pulled it out. It said: LOTTE Call Sid 611 East 101st.
Punky yelled for a taxi. He yelled and yelled and yelled, his voice rising up spiraling among the icicle-frozen buildings of the Manhattan where he had come to get slashed, where he had come to find his manhood so late in his life, and found it, now dripping out on the white snow of the Manhattan that had always taken him back.
Then there was a taxi, and a long ride uptown, and Sid opening a tenement door, and a gorgeous black-haired Puerto Rican girl who said her name was Lotte, and she was only fourteen, but did someone wanna good fokk?
And time spun hazily by. The two Yale men had gotten laid, and were sleeping on two of the four beds in the apartment. And Sid had sampled his own merchandise, and he was sleeping off a methedrine high on the third bed, and Punky Sorokin was insanely sitting at a kitchen table, at 5:30 in the gray-rising morning, in the four-bed crib of a fourteen-year-old Puerto Rican whore named Lotte, playing gin rummy.
"Knock on six." He grinned boyishly, and bled.
She had serviced the other three, then returned to him and asked, "Wal, you nex', guy. You ready't fokk?"
He had smiled at her in friendliness, totally removed from the world around him, a child in shock, and touched his own bleeding belly. "Did you see I'm bleeding?" he had asked her, very matter-of-factly.
She had looked at it, and they had examined it together with intense care. She had said a few nice things about it, and he had thanked her. But he didn't want to fokk. But, he had asked, did she play gin rummy?
Knock or straight gin, she had wanted to know.
So they had sat down to play, over the oilclothed kitchen table. He liked Lotte a lot. She was a sweet child, and extremely pretty. All that black hair, done up in a high intricate style.
That went on for a long time, the timeless time of just playing, and the two of them smiling at one another. Until Punky decided to tell her things, and say what he had learned that night, and what was in his heart.
She listened, and was polite. She did not interrupt. And this is what Punky Sorokin said ...
"You see before you a man eaten by worms. Envy, hungers most men don't even smell; lust, nameless things I want. To belong, someplace, to say what I have to say before I die, before I waste my years. All of it, pouring out of the tips of my fingers, like blood, needs. You sitthere, and you live day to day and you sleep, get up, go eat, do things. But me, for me, each little thing should have been bigger, each book should have been better, all the riches, all the women, everything I want, just out beyond my reach, tormenting me. And even when I get the gold, when I get the story, when I do the movie, it still isn't what I want, it's something more, something bigger, something perfect. I don't know. I look every way, up and down the world, walking through rooms like something that's waiting for meat to come to it. I can't name it, can't say what it is, where I want it to come from. All I want to do, is do! At the peak of my form, at the fastest pace I can set. Running. Running till I drop. Oh, God, don't let me die till I've won."
Lotte, the fourteen-year-old Puerto Rican whore, stared at him across her cards. She laid the hand of gin rummy face-down on the kitchen-smelling oilcloth, and did not know what he was raving about. "Y'wanna can owf beer, hanh?"
In it, was all the gentleness, all the caring, all the concern AndyPunky had ever known. All the sweetness, all the warmth of someone who gave a damn. He started to cry. From far down inside him, it started up, building, great gasps of power, wrenching sobs. He lowered his head onto his hands, still bloody from the wounds that dripped across his middle. He cried muffledly, and the girl shrugged. She turned on the radio, and a Latin band was wailing:
Vaya!
There were streets and he was alone now. Punky had lost his two Yale men. They had showed him the seamy side of Life. Streets he walked on. At six o'clock in the New York morning. And he saw things. He saw ten things.
He saw a cabdriver sleeping in his front seat.
He saw a candy-maker opening his shop to work.

He saw a dog lifting its leg against a standpipe.
He saw a child in an alley
He saw a sun that would not come up behind snow.
He saw an old, tired Negro man collecting cardboard flats behind a grocery store, and he told the old man I'm sorry.
He saw a toy store and smiled.
He saw pinwheels of violent color that cascaded and spun behind his eyes till he fell in the street.
He saw his own feet moving under him, leftrightleft.
He saw pain, red and raw and ugly in his stomach.
But then, somehow, he was in the Village, in front of Olaf Burger's apartment house, so he whistled a little tune, and thought he might go up to say hello. It was six-thirty.
So he went up and looked at the door for a while.
He whistled. It was nice.
Punky pressed the door buzzer. There was no answer. He waited an extremely long time, half-asleep, leaning there against the jamb. Then he pressed the buzzer again, and held it down. Inside the apartment he could hear the distant, muffled locust hum of the buzzer. Then a shout. And then footsteps coming toward the door. The door was unlocked, slammed back on the police chain. Olaf's face, blurred by sleep, peering out of wakelessness in fury, glared at him.
"What the hell do you want at this--"
and stopped. The eyes widened at sight of all that blood. The door slammed shut, the chain was slipped, and the door opened again. Olaf stared at him, a little sick.
"Jesus Christ, Andy, what happened to you!"
"I fou--I found what I w-was looking for ..."
They stared at each other, helpless.
Punky smiled once, gently, and murmured, "I'm hurt, Olaf, help me ..." and fell sidewise, in through the doorway.
Was lost, and is found. The prodigal returned. Night and awakening. After a night of such length, opening of eyes, and a new awakening. The weavers, Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos. Atropos. She is the inflexible, who with her shears cuts off the thread of human life spun by Clotho, measured off by Lachesis.
Spun by Punky and his Yale men. Measured off by a fourteen-year-old Puerto Rican whore named Lotte in a four-bed pad in Harlem. Cut off by a Negro homosexual in The Dog House Bar in the Bowery. Hospital white, hospital bright, and blood, instantblood, now downdropping from a bottle, and before the end, just before the end, Punky woke long enough to say, very distinctly "Escape, please ... escape ..." and went away from there.
The doctor on Punky's right turned to the nurse on his right, and said, "He had enough."
Circle-Insult.
--New York City and Hollywood, 1965

I CURSE THE LESSON AND BLESS THE KNOWLEDGE

Okay, if you'll for chrissakes stop leaning over my shoulder, I'll start it again. How the hell do you expect me to write this with you ... supervising the damned thing? Listen, nuisance, one of the reasons I became a writer was because I swore I'd never work under someone's beady, watchful eyes ever again.
And here you are, telling me I haven't got it right, that it didn't happen that way at all. This is fiction, dammit, not real life. Fiction turns the mirror of reality; slightly, so things are seen in a new way.
That's unfair. I'm not lecturing, I'm merely explaining the way I write so you won't get all bent out of shape if I alter the facts. This isn't supposed to be one-for-one. It's supposed to be a story, and that means things will be changed.
Now I'll start it again, and you just shut up and stop nuhdzing me. And okay, okay, I won't call you Patti. (But I still think that's a super name for the young woman in the story.) Now. For the third time. I begin.
The first thing Katie ever said to me was, "How much is the school paying you to come here to speak today?"
I said, "Eight hundred dollars."
She looked shocked and awe-stricken for a moment and then said, "That's indecent. Nobody should make eight hundred dollars just for amusing a bunch of imbeciles for an hour and a half."
"I usually get fifteen hundred," I said.

"You're kidding. Just for standing up here and reading a couple of stories you wrote?"
"I've been told I read very well."
"So what? Dylan Thomas read better than you and he died broke."
"And an alcoholic to boot," I said. "Thank God I don't drink."
She started to turn away. The rest of the mob of students pressing in for autographs jammed into the space she'd vacated. I watched her as she walked away. "Hey!" I yelled. She stopped and turned around. She knew I meant her.
"Are you going with, engaged to, pregnant by, or hung up on?"
She thought about it for a moment. The mob ping-ponged their eyes between us, history in the making, before their very faces. "No," she said. "Why?"
"How'd you like to have a cup of coffee with me?"
The guy who had strolled up beside her looked as if he were about to get an enema with a thermite bomb. He started to take her arm, but she smiled and said, "Okay," and his hand never finished the grab.
She sat down in the first row of the empty auditorium and had a heated conversation with the guy who hadn't finished the grab. I tried to catch what they were saying, but the fans were babbling in my face and I've never been able to listen to two things at once. I signed their books as fast as I could--I was afraid she'd disappear--and as the last straggler moved away, fangs finally removed from my throat, charisma leaking out of my body with a soft hiss, I stepped off the stage and walked over to her.
Yes, I know I've made you sound cooler and hipper than you were that day. Yes, I know you went fumfuh fumfuh a lot. But this makes it sound better. So what if you've never read Dylan Thomas, what does that matter? Will you just sit back and let me get into this bloody thing!
They both stood up. The grabless guy didn't like me a lot; negative vibes hammered at me like the assault of noise made by one of those superpimp blacks in mile-hi platform wedgies who carry Radio Shack transistors with hundred and eighty decibel speakers, who boogie up and down Hollywood Boulevard blasting Kiwanis schmucks from Kankakee out of their white socks with the gain up full.
"Mr. Kane," Katie said, indicating the source of the negative emanations, "this is Joey. Joey, this is--"
He knew who I was. He'd sat through my lecture and my readings and had applauded. Until I'd hustled his girl, he'd been a faithful reader of my wonderful prose. I lose more fans that way. He didn't wait for the introduction, just thrust his hand forward and said, "Howdyado."
We shook. Solemnly. On such dumbass grounds as this did Menelaus and Paris get into one hell of a lousy relationship.
Nothing happened for a few seconds. Everyone waited for the Earth to stop jiggling on its axis. As usual, I was the one to move the action. "Well, listen, uh, Joey, it was nice meeting you." I turned to Katie. "Are you ready to go?" She almost gave Joey a look: the muscles in her neck moved slightly: but then she just nodded and said, "Okay." I smiled at Joey, very friendly, very magnanimous, and we walked away from him. I am very grateful blowguns and poisoned darts have never been marketed in this country by Wham-O.
The nameless nuisance in the background tells me I'm lying, and making Joey look like a jerk. That is true. Even though her affair with Joey was at an end at the time we met, she was still fucking him occasionally, and though I like to believe I'm very sophisticated about such things, I was born in 1934, which makes me forty-one, and I spent the greater part of my life as a sexist, not knowing I was doing anything wrong, and though I've had the error of my ways pointed out to me by a number of voluble women infinitely smarter and better-adjusted than myself, I cannot deny that the oink of the beast can occasionally be heard in the velvet tones I now affect. (Like an ex-drunk proselytizing for Alcoholics Anonymous, or a reformed head who's found Jesus, there are few things in this life as dichotomous, neither fish nor fowl, as an apostate male feminist. I try, but it's Fool's Gold, and I despise myself for the hypocrisy.)
Nonetheless, the truth of the matter is that Joey was a very good guy, and he urged her to have the cup of coffee with me. But I still hated him. He'd had his hands on her for two years, and I was jealous, And it's my story, dammit!
So we went to Yellowfingers where I ordered with all the aplomb of Gael Greene and Alexis Bespaloff melded into one unisexual gourmet.
"We'll have the spinach and mushroom salad for two, a sausage, cheese and ratatouille cr·à·pe for the lady, and I'd like the fried baby and a cup of warm hair," I said, dimpling prettily. Katie broke up, the waitress stared at me with a charming mixture of nausea and loathing. "Make that a Croque Hawaiian and an iced tea," I said hurriedly. "And what would you like to drink?"
"A Coke."
At that instant I saw the future, "the evening spread out against the sky / Like a patient

etherized upon a table." Gray and chill and inevitable. This moment during which I sit here writing it, as it hurtles down on me; I saw it then.

In a few minutes I would discover that Katie was eighteen, and I would discover that I was forty, nearly forty-one, she nearly nineteen, and she didn't even have to tell me how it was going to end. Damn you, Nabokov!

"Bring the lady a Coca-Cola," I said, and knocked my silverware into my lap trying to pull loose the napkin.

(It was too like that! Shut up and leave me alone; I feel like shit. Let me write, woman!)

The lunch went well. I snowed her like crazy. I was by turns serious, clever, amusing, controversial, urbane and Huck Finn. Her eyes were mostly green. Sometimes blue. Her hair fell over one side of her forehead in a soft sweep that paralyzed me.

I told her I was putting the make on her. She said, "You are?" She wasn't being coy, she simply didn't know that was what was happening. Lesson one for the old man trying to play grabass with (what the nuisance bitchily calls) "young stuff" (when she's trying to bug me): they don't do it that way these days. They are free--they assure me they're free. They just seem to raise invisible antennae and the libidinous message pulses off them. And in some marvelous, thaumaturgical progression of events without time or measure, like a fast wipe in a Chabrol film, pow! there they are in bed together, free and libidinous, everybody orgasming just the way Alex Comfort would have it, no effort, no hangups, no groping and no seduction. In the sweet and amoral world of the children there is no stalking, no hunting, no hustling; just the act, final and total and contained, as Merwin puts it, "one tone both pure and entire floating in the silence of the egg, at the same pitch as the silence."

I have no idea what I was thinking. It had been just another pain-in-the-ass speaking engagement; Price Junior College, an agro school that got confused and wound up with a bedroom-community commuter day-care babysitting population of twenty-five thousand acne-festooned urchins taking dingbat classes in Science Fiction, Artificial Flowers I, Bowling, Inert Gas Welding and Current Events in the Arts (which, so help me, Amen-Ra, turns out to be a course in how to be a good audience). Because it is essentially a free tuition college for state residents--$6.50 per semester for students carrying 6 units or more, $2.50 for schmucks handling under 6 units--it is a refuge for post-puberty illiterates who would better serve the commonweal if they were out planting Ponderosa Pines in an effort to stem the floodtide of concrete threatening to pave over the entire state.

If, from these utterly objective and well-mannered remarks you get the impression that I have very little use for young girls, I am content in the knowledge that I absorbed Lord Alfred Korzybski's theories of General Semantics. I have but nothing to say to young girls. They're fine to look at, in the way I would look at a case filled with Shang dynasty glazes, but expecting to carry on a conversation with the average teenaged young lady is akin to reading Voltaire to a cage filled with chimpanzees. I'm certain they would feel the same alienation for me. I can live with that knowledge.

For instance ...

Yes, I realize I'm digressing, nuisance! This is what is called background color. It lends depth to a story; it establishes character, motivation. Please! Do you mind?

As I was saying. For instance, one night I had a date with a certifiably mind-blowing, color-coded, lathe-turned, rhodium-plated gorgeous. I picked her up and she was wearing an evening dress that, had Lee Harvey Oswald turned around from his position crouched in front of that window in the Texas Schoolbook Depository, 1940 vintage Italian-made Mannlicher-Carcano in his mitt, and seen it, with her in it, would have burned out the clown's eyeballs and we'd be living in a much better country today. What I'm saying here, if you catch my drift, is that this female was a positive paralyzer.

Visions of sugar plums danced in my steamy gutter of a mind.

We went to The Magic Castle, which is a fornigalactic private club with dining room that specializes in showcasing the craft of the magician. We were carrying our drinks around the many fascinating rooms, and wandered into one where they had an Atwater-Kent setup that was playing tapes of old time radio. Amos 'n' Andy, Jack Armstrong, Lux Presents Hollywood, Gangbusters. And above the radio was a glass-fronted cabinet in which reposed half a dozen Captain Midnight secret decoder badges. I began enthusing over the nostalgic wonders of the little plastic-and-metal icons, and only paused in my panegyric when I caught the look of total noncomprehension on the face of my Helen of Troy. "Captain Midnight," I said. "He was on the radio in the Forties, when I was a kid. I used to lie on my stomach and listen to the program. It was sponsored by Ovaltine. I had a map of the Pacific Theatre of Operations on the wall. I used to mark the progress of the war with little maptacks with red heads on them." Absolute bewilderment on her face. "The war in the

Pacific. Bataan, Corregidor, Saipan, Palau, Wake Island?" Nothing. "V-J Day?" More nothing. "World War II? It was in all the papers. 1941 through 1945."

She looked at me, perfection in every line and tremble, holding the Remy Martin of lust in the crystal snifters of her eyes, and she said, "World War II? I was born in nineteen--" and she named the year that coincided exactly with the date of the fire-bombing of my third marriage. I computed rapidly and came up with her age as not quite seventeen. I hastily ran the numbers through my terrified mind a second time and, even allowing for a recent birthday on her part, I was still in deep trouble. I removed the stinger from her paw very gingerly, smiled my brightest, and said, "It's time to go home now, dear." Fifteen minutes later she was inside her own home, safe and unsullied. Christ, I could have been arrested just for what I was thinking!

All of which brings me back to Katie, who was eighteen, and who was the exception to my loathing of young women that proved absolutely nothing. I was bananas over her from the git-go.

All of which totals up to make the point that we talked to each other. I got answers. Good answers. A marvel, this Katie. I didn't want to let her get away.

What do you mean: what impressed me most about you? The size of your tits, what do you think? Don't hit me, I'm a sick man. I was only kidding, for God's sake!

All kinds of things impressed me. That look on your face like a depraved munchkin. The dumb imitations of Lily Tomlin you do. The word you made up for the feel of velvet against skin, smoooodgee. And what the hell do you think you're doing now? You're not going to put up that damned Christmas tree in here while I'm working? Can't you keep an eye on me from the living room? Oh, boy. Okay, okay, but if you make a sound I'll do a Jose Greco on your head.

I didn't want to let her get away. I knew I had to solidify the thing. I told her I had a few interesting errands to run, and did she want to come along before I returned her to Price and the parking lot where she'd left her car? She said okay, we finished eating, and left Yellowfingers. She accompanied me to the post office to buy stamps for the office; to the hardware store to buy a half dozen packages of gopher gassers as weaponry in my losing battle against the carnivorous rodents systematically gnawing my lawn and flowers to death; to the record shop to pick up the new sides by The Spinners and Grover Washington, Jr. And then I purposely made a detour through Bullock's Fashion Square so we could hit the bookstore. And there, right in front, between E. L. Doctorow's sensational RAGTIME and Rod McKuen's SUCK UP THE COOL (or whatever), right on the front table, was a stack of my new book with my name in bright red letters. THOMAS KIRLIN KANE. "Oh, that's my new book," I said offhandedly, walking past the table as if it were a matter of absolutely no consequence. I wandered back to the "obscure stuff and incunabula" section, pretending to look for a book on quahogs (an edible clam) while surreptitiously watching her reactions as she picked up the book, read the cover, turned the book over, opened it and read the front flap copy, flipped to the back flap and saw my photograph, a stunner by Jill Krementz, showing me in thoughtful contemplation, pipe in mouth, finger up left nostril. She kept looking from the photo to me and back again, like an immigration official trying to penetrate a passport disguise, trying to see if Robert Vesco is really dumb enough to try sneaking back into the country posing as Leo Gorcey.

I couldn't find a book on quahogs. She came walking up beside me. I held my breath. This was the moment. Actually, there is no book on quahogs. "Jesus Christ," she said, "I didn't realize you were famous."

"You thought I was just another pretty tuchis?"

"I got to your lecture late. The auditorium was full, so I stood at the back with some friends. None of us knew who you were."

"So why'd you come up to talk to me?"

"I thought you were funny."

"Funny? Funny!?! A man stands up there and explains the Ethical Structure of the Universe, the Convoluted Nature of Life in the Cosmos, the Core Dichotomies of Love in a Loveless World ... not to mention how to replace washers in leaking spigots ... and you think he's funny?"

"I thought you had a nice tuchis, too."

Okay, so you didn't say that. You were slack-jawed that I was a world-famous author, come on, admit it. All right, you dumbshit nuisance, don't admit it, and will you fer chrissakes stop dropping that tinsel all over the typewriter! It's making the keys stick.

Then what happened ... ? Oh. Yeah. We went up to my house in the hills. Nice view, straight across the San Fernando Valley, above the smog line. Clear view to the Ventura Freeway and the pall of yellow-gray death produced by the thousand-wheeled worm. When people ask me if I find it hard living in Los Angeles with the smog, I tell them it doesn't hang where I am; but I have a dandy picture of the stuff killing all the Birchers out there in the Valley. It isn't a line that goes over very well in Ohio. But then, what can you expect from a state that lets the Kent State

killers off without even rapping their pinkies?
She wandered around the house with her mouth hanging idly open. It's a super house. Like a giant toy shop furnished in Early Berserk. "My God," she murmured, passing me on her way toward the dining room with its posters from the Doug Fairbanks Thief of Bagdad, Errol Flynn Sea Hawk and Gary Cooper Beau Geste on the ceiling, "you really are famous."
She didn't want to break her date that night with her roommate and another girl friend. I took all three of them out. She mentioned she was going to look for work as a restaurant hostess. I left her at three in the morning, went home and masturbated till I went blind. Next morning, early, I called her and suggested she come to work for me, as an assistant to my office assistant. She said she didn't take charity. I said it wasn't charity, that I needed someone, that the work load was getting too much for Lynne, what with all the fan mail. She said she didn't believe me. I called Lynne out in Santa Monica. A guy answered. I said, "Let me talk to Lynne." After a second a muggy voice came on. "What time is it?" she asked. I told her. She groaned. "Call Katie," I said, on the verge of hysteria. "Tell her we need her." She wanted to know who Katie was. I told her the whole story. She continued groaning. I badgered her. She held out. I gave her a six dollar a week raise. She called Katie.
That day Katie came to work for me. She didn't go home. That night we fucked. I'd like to say we "made love" or that we "slept together" but the simple, unadorned truth of the matter is that I was blind with Technicolor passion and I went at her the way a troop of backpacking Boy Scouts fresh off the Gobi Desert would go at a six-pack of Hostess Twinkies. There is no firm memory anywhere in my head of what happened or how long it went on, though I keep getting a recurring vision of myself hanging upside-down from the shower curtain rod. That can't possibly be an accurate recollection.
She moved in two days later.
I ingratiated myself with her ex-roommate, her parents, her friends from Price, her hairdresser, and the mechanic who serviced her Fiat, just to be on the safe side.
That first month we went to Denver and Boulder on a lecture tour; I took her to New York (it was her first time out of the state) and turned her loose with my credit cards; and when she came back with a superb silver choker for me, and told me she'd bought it with her own money, I was hopelessly, desperately, irretrievably hooked through the gills. I put the ordering of Cokes with duck l'orange out of my mind. This was no kid, this was a woman; the one I'd been waiting for through three scungy marriages and forty-one lonely years. Thus doth Cupid make assholes of us all.
What's that? Oh, so I finally said something nice about you. It's all nice. Except the Coke thing, which I keep harping on because it's supposed to portend ugliness to come. I know it's not important. Look out, you're going to drop that ornament ... oh shit, now look at it, all over the floor, and I'm barefoot. Merry Christmas, with me in Mt. Sinai, my foot rotting away from gangrene. No, don't get the vacuum, it'll tear it up inside. Get the broom and the dustpan. Nag, nag, nag: it's my gangrenous foot we're talking about here!
Okay, where the hell was I?
What do you mean, "get to when it started to go sour"? Oh. That's what you mean.
Well, it was a dynamite three months from the starting gate. We went everywhere, saw everything, did everything, and I started falling behind in the writing. So I had to spend a lot of time behind this typewriter. Katie started getting antsy. She wanted to go out and go to the beach, go water skiing, take a drive up the Coast to San Francisco. I kept promising, but I was 'way behind and my publisher was screaming at me long distance from New York every day. Right on the tick of seven A.M., ten o'clock in New York, the phone would ring and it would be Norman, calling me a rancid pyramid of pig shit because he was missing printing deadlines. I would tell him I was working, which was true, but it wasn't coming fast enough.
So I was locked into the house. And Katie started hanging out at school longer each day, started going to evening rehearsals of "A Midsummer's Night Dream," took a flying lesson with some guy, spent lots of time in some restaurant with the "theatuh crowd" and I knew something was going on, though she kept volunteering the information that everything was cool and she loved me. She talked an awful lot of good trash at me.
Now understand something: as a card-carrying loner, I prefer, no I insist on a woman having her own thing. I definitely do not want a Stepford Wife, explaining the merits of Easy-Off Oven Cleaner or the manifest benefits of Preparation H rectal suppositories while she's whipping up my favorite dessert with one hand and polishing the slate slabs in the entranceway with the other. I want a fully-realized human being who, unlike my mother who spent twenty-five years after my father died crying and wandering through life alone and stunned, can make it on her own. But. I am not a dip. I like to think I'm passing intelligent. And I don't mind if someone thinks I'm dumb,

just as long as they don't talk to me as if they thought I was dumb. I knew something was up. Yes, nuisance, I knew what was going down all the time. Not the specifics, but I knew there was a Baskerville hound out there on the moors, sniffing around your supple young boogie'ing body.
It wasn't till the fourth month that I learned his name was David.
Would that my name had been Goliath.
I don't remember how I found out that she'd been balling him. It doesn't matter.
I said it doesn't matter.
No, dammit, I don't want to write that part. Shut up, nuisance ... the tree is tipping. Hold it! Okay, now prop it up on the right. On the right ... yeah, there. No, I'm not going into that part of it. We talked about it, you let something slip, he called here, I got tired of playing the game of I-know-nothing-and-everything's cool, whatever it was, I found out, and you laid all that crapola on me about how you were only nineteen and you needed to fly, to discover yourself, that it was the first relationship you'd ever had with someone who had a steady job, an occupation, a fully-established life that needed aerating and fertilizing and watering, and you were too young to handle responsibility for someone else's love and life, and I understood all that shit, but you want to know what I thought of?
I thought of that scene out of, I guess it was Monkey Business, where Groucho is carrying-on with Margaret Dumont and he begins dancing the shag, flinging his arms in the air, and he says, "l want to sing, I want to dance, I want to hot cha cha!" Well, I tried talking to you about it, and it didn't do any good; hell, yes, I knew you loved me, that it was good with us, but you were being torn in two directions at once, and it wasn't even that asshole David. Sure he was fucking you, but that wasn't what was important. Love ain't nothing but sex misspelled anyhow. That isn't where love comes from! I've never understood how some poor slob could permit his wife or lady friend to have a deep intellectual relationship with another man, and not think anything about it, but let him get meaty about it and the slob goes out of his pithecanthropoid mind. Love isn't meat in meat. It's all in the headwork. So David was only a convenient symptom. If he was good in bed and you enjoyed it, that's fine with me. I do the best I can. If you need supplements to your diet, well, McDonald's is on every street corner these days. But it was clear you wanted to cut and run because it was getting too thick, and you saw me as an older dude strapped to a typewriter, and you wanted to find out who Katie is.
So we had our little talk, Katie and me, and I suggested we ease off and just do our things as best we could, and if one or the other of us felt the need to partake of a greaseburger at some other fast-food counter, that was okay. And you said to me ... no! And Katie said to me, "What you're proposing is a mature, adult way of handling this thing; and since I'm neither mature nor adult, it just won't work. There's no way things are going to be copacetic for both of us." (I always wondered how you knew the word copacetic; that's a word from my generation, not yours.) "There's no way to avoid one of us getting wrecked, and I've decided it ought to be you, because you can handle it better than I. That's because you're a mature adult."
And you left. No, dammit ... Katie left, and I put it all out of my mind in an hour. Don't say no one can put it out of his mind in an hour, God damn you, I did! I learned how to do it a long time ago. Just to mortar up that alcove where the hurt is. To brick it over and keep moving, just shuckin' and jivin'.
Yeah, Merry Christmas to you, too, kiddo.
I ain't mad. I curse the lesson and bless the knowledge. It'll be a long time again between hurts.
Hold everything. My name is David Feinberg and I did not write what you have just read. There is no Thomas Kirlin Kane. What you have just read was written by a woman. Her name is Patricia Katherine Feinberg. Her maiden name was Patti Brody. She is twenty years old. I am forty-three. We have been married for almost two years. She is the dearest person I have ever known and there is nothing in this life I need more than her love and support and presence in my world. For a while, when we first met, we had problems. Not so much between us, but from the outside, from people who saw us as a mismatch of "young stuff" and "dirty old man." We got past that after a great many aggravations. And how she remembered it all!
I have been in trimming the Christmas tree, which would decimate my mother if she were still alive, a good Jew like me; and I've heard Patti typing in here for days. But not till now has she suggested I come in and read what she's been writing. It's not her usual non-fiction stuff, it's a story. Her first fiction. I hope you enjoyed it. How she did it so much inside my head, writing it the way a man would write it, I'll never know. She wrote it a great deal more fairly than I would have, but for the record, I'm the one who orders Coke with Canard l'Orange. How did she remember all this, all the detail, all the things I said in idle moments? I'm amazed.
But it's the best Christmas present I've ever received.
And have a happy yourself.

With love, from us, a terrific object lesson in beating the odds. Or, as Thomas Kirlin Kane would put it, everything's copacetic.
--Los Angeles, 1975

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