Trouble with Eden

Lawrence Block
Writing as Jill Emerson
**TYPICAL COP-OUT**

This is a work of fiction and it’s set in New Hope, Pennsylvania, and that’s really asking for it. None of the characters are based on real people, living or dead. I’d say that anyway to avoid a libel suit, but it also happens to be true. Not that anyone’s likely to believe it.

I thought of changing New Hope, Pennsylvania, to Blue Pope, Illinois, but all that would do (besides making extra work for me) is encourage people to play the game of figuring out what each invented name stood for, and they would carry this through to the characters, which is precisely what I’m hoping to avoid. None of these people are anybody.

Years ago I wrote a novel in which a major character was my fictional interpretation of myself. A girl I barely knew stopped speaking to me because she thought that particular character was supposed to be her and she was offended. God knows why on both counts. He also knows I don’t know enough about anybody’s private life to put him in a book. I suppose the intelligent thing to do would be to set all books in New York, where nobody gives a damn.

—Jill Emerson
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Virgins and Pure Pools
The all pervasive symmetry
Of yews spruced up, and bushes trebly sheared
Offend the eye. Nature has forms
She chose herself. It’s virgins and pure pools
That make a garden… .
—LORETTA KALLETT
ONE

“You’re the only one open. But I guess you knew that, huh?”

She looked up. Interruptions were not likely to startle her. Customers were infrequent during the off-season, and in the time she had worked at the Lemon Tree, Linda Robshaw had learned to lose herself in a book in their absence and to become quickly alert on their appearance.

She said, “Oh, hi, Tanya. What time is it, anyway?”

“Five-thirty, quarter of six. I was just getting my hair done.”

“It looks nice.”

“Well, it’s the same, but thanks. I just let him wash it. I can never get it as clean as I like it. It seems silly to pay money for what you could do standing under a shower. But I wanted to look decent for tonight.”

“Tonight? Oh, the play.”

_The Crucible._ It’s the best part I’ve had so far. I don’t understand all of it, though.” Tanya had been walking back and forth in one of the aisles. Now she took a small doll from an eye-level teak shelf. “‘Made in Taiwan,’” she read. “‘Made in Taiwan by spastics. Who would pay four ninety-five for a dime’s worth of wood and a nickel’s worth of cloth?’”

“The same kind of nut who would buy any of the crud we sell.”

“Don’t let the boss catch you talking that way.”

“Oh, Olive says the same thing herself,” Linda said. “She says contempt for your customers and their lack of taste is a form of local patriotism.”

“What are you reading? Sylvia Plath. She’s the one killed herself?”

“Uh-huh. A poem at a time.”

“Oh, poems? Any good?”

“Very. But depressing.”

“Why read something that’s gonna depress you?”

“Good question,” she said. She closed the book, got to her feet. “Wait while I close up and I’ll walk you home.”

“Well, I was going to the theater, Linda. They want me to go over a couple of things. I could walk you as far as —”

“No, go ahead,” she said. “I’ll be a few minutes.”

After Tanya had left, Linda sat for a few moments at the desk, the copy of _Ariel_ in her hand. Then she locked the cash drawer, turned off the lights, closed and locked the door of the little gift shop, and walked down the corridor and out of the small shopping mall.

The streets were dark, with only a few stores still open. She crossed to the grassy triangle at the corner of Ferry Street, skirted the old cannon with its mound of cannonballs, walked down Main past the playhouse and across the bridge to Mechanic Street.

She shook her head, thinking of Tanya Leopold. _Why read something that’s gonna depress you?_ Tanya would no more read Sylvia Plath than she would permit herself to be depressed for any other reason. The little actress, who Marc had assured her was as utterly untalented as any he had met, had an unquestionable talent for life. She ate, slept, acted, had her hair done, and made love, approaching all these activities with healthy enthusiasm. She was always in good spirits and generally improved the spirits of those who knew her.

Whereas Linda Robshaw, who read depressing books, was in turn depressing—

Spring had come late this year and had not brought her the sense of rebirth she usually associated with the season’s arrival. It was her first spring in New Hope, and she had been looking forward to it through the cold wet deadening winter. Springtime in Manhattan had meant little more than a change in weather—you had to go to the parks for any visible sign of nature returning to life—yet here, with the spring bulbs flowering, with trees leafing out and flowering shrubs showing color, with massive banks of forsythia a golden fire along the Towpath, she still felt no corresponding rush of sap in her own veins.

She turned right at Mechanic Street and walked a few hundred yards to the large squat buildings where she and Marc were living. The three-story brick structure had been built in 1887 by one Cecil Crofter, who had intended it as a factory for the manufacture of wigs and other human hair goods. The business failed almost before it had begun, and the brick structure ultimately emerged as an apartment house, with two apartments on each floor. Each apartment had since been further subdivided, so that there were now six rental units on the first floor and five on each of the two upper stories.

An owner during the twenties had named it the Coryell Arms, and that inscription could still be made out, carved into oaken timbers over the doorway. But no one ever called it by this name. Instead it was universally known as the
Shithouse.

Local history had it that someone had commented that the building was built like a brick shithouse and that the adjective had gradually disappeared from usage over the years. But Shithouse residents were inclined to believe that it would have acquired its name whatever materials had been used in its construction. The drabness of its exterior was more than matched by the squalor within. Neither the rooms nor the hallways had been painted within anyone’s memory. Chunks of plaster periodically dropped from the ceilings and were never replaced. The plumbing was noisy and unreliable, and the building abounded in violations that would have appalled a Harlem slumlord.

The Shithouse was, year in and year out, the most profitable piece of rental property in Bucks County.

The secret of the Shithouse’s commercial success was simple enough. Sully Jaeger rented his apartments by the week, and he would rent to anyone with a week’s rent in his hand. There was no credit investigation because no credit was ever extended. There were no leases to sign, no security deposit to pay. All tenants paid by the week, in advance, and any tenant who could not come up with the rent the day it was demanded was out on the street, bag and baggage, by nightfall. A landlord renting by the week was not hamstrung by eviction procedures, but could operate on the same basis as a hotel. Sully’s eviction proceedings consisted of advising a rentless tenant he had an hour to come up with the rent or remove his belongings. At the end of the hour Sully would return, change the lock cylinder on the apartment door, and throw whatever remained in the apartment out the window. It was widely rumored that on one occasion the tenant himself had been present in the apartment at end of the standard hour, and that Sully had unceremoniously heaved him out the window after his luggage.

Linda climbed the Shithouse stairs. The air in the stairwell was stale, flavored with old cooking smells. They ought to get out of the place, she thought. She and Marc had moved in temporarily in September, glad to pay fifty dollars a week rather than hassle with leases and deposits. But the temporary stay had dragged out for almost eight months already. For the same rent they could have a larger apartment in a decent building. The same rent they could have a larger apartment in a decent building.

It would be worth it—if they were going to stay in New Hope. If.

The apartment door was locked. She fished in her bag for the key, opened the door. She found the note immediately. It was on top of the convertible sofa, where they always left notes for each other. Businesslike notes, some of the time—“Linda, I’ll be late at the theater, go ahead and eat without me.” Cute love notes—“Marcums, I was here. You wasn’t. I misses you. Does you misses me?”

But she knew as soon as she saw the note what it was going to be. She picked it up and stood by the side of the sofa and read it. Her eyes wouldn’t focus at first, and the words were blurred, but she read it all the way through.

LINDA,

I suppose this is cowardly but I can’t help thinking it’s easier all around this way. I just couldn’t handle another scene. Last night was enough.

I guess I’ll go out to the Coast. I’m getting a ride as far as Chicago which is one reason I’m leaving right now, although it probably wouldn’t have lasted much longer in any case.

Sorry about a lot of things. It was good while it lasted. Corny but true…

There was a little more. He had left some money in the dresser drawer, not much, but all he could spare. She put the note down and went to the dresser to discover that he had been able to spare one hundred twenty dollars. She counted the bills three times, then got her wallet from her purse and counted up her own cash. It suddenly seemed very urgent to determine just how she stood financially. The thirty-seven dollars in her wallet gave her total capital of one hundred and fifty-seven dollars. After work Friday she would receive thirty dollars from Olive McIntyre, her wages for fifteen hours of work at the Lemon Tree. Around noon Saturday Sully would be around to collect fifty dollars rent.

Problem: If you have one hundred and fifty-seven dollars to start with, and each week you earn thirty dollars and pay out fifty, how long do you last?

Answer: If you can borrow three dollars from somebody, you can last eight weeks. And that’s long enough, because sometime in the course of those eight weeks you starve to death.

She moved to the kitchenette, a corner of the room furnished with a hot plate and a small refrigerator. She checked the refrigerator and the cupboards. There were some cans of chili and ravioli and vegetable soup, a box from a health food store, some eggs and cheese, other odds and ends. It somehow didn’t look like eight weeks’ worth of food.

She opened dresser drawers, checked the closet, all to confirm what she already knew, that he had taken everything of his from the apartment. They had been together for two years, a year and a half in New York and almost eight months here. For the first few months he had kept his old apartment before they decided they were enough of a long-term prospect to live together. Since then they had accumulated rather little in the way of community property. The record player was his, and he had taken it; the typewriter was hers, and it remained behind. He had taken all the records, which was hardly fair in that perhaps a third of them had been hers originally,
but she could understand that he would not have wanted to waste time sorting through the stack.

And she had long ago decided that, were she to leave him, she would have left all the records behind. Except for one Billie Holiday record, which he had taken with all the others and which she rather expected she would miss. Alan had bought that record for her—how many years ago?—and she had taken it with her when she left Alan.

She would miss that record. It was good get-drunk music, late Billie Holiday, the rusty old voice just getting by, the phrasing covering up the broken-down equipment.

Do nothin’ till you hear from me … and you never will.

She picked up the letter, and Tanya’s voice echoed, again in her head, “Why read something that’s gonna depress you?” But did it in fact depress her? It shook her, it had her off-balance, but she was not at all sure that she was as down now as she had been before finding the note. He was not entirely right. It had not been good while it lasted, but it had been good for quite a while, more often than not, and then somewhere along the way, sometime in the cold, wet, gray winter, it had turned a corner and become more bad than good. Since then the end had been inevitable.

She laughed aloud, an unreal brittle sound that surprised her. “You son of a bitch,” she said, “I was going to leave you, you bastard. Why couldn’t you wait?”

But it evened out, she realized. He had done the leaving and could bear the guilt; she had been left and could feel worthless and rejected. There would be enough bad vibes to go around.

There generally were.

She had always been distant from people. Even as a girl in Dayton, she had lived very much alone in her own world. She was not autistic, and her withdrawal was recognized less by others than by herself. But she had known very early, so early that it seemed to her she had always known, that other people were able to be a part of one another in a way that she was not. An only child herself, her companions in childhood and after were almost invariably only children. With girls, she was most comfortable in relationships that furnished companionship without intimacy, friendship without the sharing of confidences. With boys and later men, her relationships similarly stayed on or near the surface. What intimacy existed was staged, an illusion created by mutual role playing.

When she was seventeen years old, she began dating a boy named Carl Spangenthal. He was nineteen, a second-year business major at the University of Dayton. He was very tall and very thin, with a narrow, rabbity nose and two high spots of color on his pale cheeks. She did not find him attractive, nor did she like him much.

But for some reason or another it never occurred to her to decline a date with him.

“You know what I like about you?” he would say. And then he would praise one or another negative virtue. “Your hands don’t perspire the way so many girls’ do. One thing I can’t take is clammy fingers.” Or he would praise her complexion by assuring her that acne really put him off. “I mean even a couple of pimples, say two or three pimples on a girl’s chin, and that’s it for me.” It seemed to her that his development of their relationship consisted of forever finding new ways in which she failed to turn his stomach.

One night, giddy and taut-nerved after an evening of petting, she became quietly hysterical in her bedroom at the thought of suddenly breaking out in everything that nauseated Carl. She envisioned herself turning in the course of an evening’s near-lovemaking into a creature blossoming with pimples and gleaming with chill sweat, her eyes grown suddenly small and close together (“Just can’t take little beady pig eyes”), her breath foul, her whole body magically transformed into a compendium of everything that he deplored. Then he would turn on the lights and gag and run shrieking from the car, never to be seen again. She couldn’t get the image out of her head, collapsing on her bed in silent spasms of giggling.

However her vision changed her feelings for him, it in no way altered their relationship. He went on taking her out, and presumably would go on doing so until he hit on a flaw and found it in her. And she went on dating him. Few other boys asked her out. She was a high school senior, boys in her classes dated younger girls, and the boys she had dated in earlier years had mostly gone away to college. After she had been going with Carl for two months she turned down all other invitations automatically.

He was able to thrill her, and he was the first boy to manage this. In the limited petting she had done previously she had never been remotely excited. She had been neither fast nor slow, permitting this and prohibiting that intuitively, guessing at what the boy himself expected her to permit or prohibit. She had never enjoyed being touched or kissed. At times she had thought that no girl enjoyed it, that it was something one did—and pretended to enjoy—for the benefit of the boy. At other times she decided that this pleasure real enough for most people, but that it was denied along with access to the warm and intimate world others.

Carl, whose conversation at best bored her, whose appearance varied in her eyes from peculiar to near-ugly, was able to excite her beyond belief.

It was almost as though, when his mouth was on hers and when his hands were inside her blouse or under her skirt, he ceased to exist. He was not there at all for her. The hands on her breasts were disembodied. They were not
hands at all; the warmth of her flesh, the urgent stiffening of her nipples, were simply happening.

It took him over a month to do more than kiss her chastely goodnight at her door. But from the first night he kissed her with passion she never considered denying him anything he wanted. Her capacity for refusal vanished instantly and permanently with the first utterly unexpected wave of excitement.

Yet it was six months more before he had coitus with her. She never once stopped him, and each time he managed to stop himself. Every night they were together he would go just the slightest bit farther than they had gone before, and she wondered years afterward if he had imagined himself a brilliant seducer, always moving closer and closer to that unattainable goal, never realizing that he could have her at any time simply by taking her.

As their weekly dates became more specifically sexual, they talked less, saw fewer movies. She preferred it this way. In his parked car, in darkness and silence, it was easier to tune him out and tune herself in. Their times together left her knotted with frustration which she was unable to recognize as such. She did not know that women had orgasms and mistook the tingling tension for ultimate sexual pleasure. Indeed, it was pleasurable for her; afterward she would feel vital and alive as she had never felt previously.

The pattern of their evenings together became as predictable and ritualized as a bullfight. He would park the car in the riverside park, and they would kiss and touch each other for a few minutes before moving to the back seat. There he would spend an hour undressing and exciting her, and then she would bring him to orgasm. He taught her to do this with her hands and sat back with eyes clenched shut while she stroked him rhythmically as he had shown her. A sudden intake of breath would warn her to be ready with the Kleenex.

Later she satisfied him between her breasts. Her breasts were not especially large (“One thing I can’t take is the type who looks more like a cow than a girl”) but neither were they small, and she would recline on the car’s back seat, knees high and upper body bared, while he crouched over her with his penis between her breasts.

“Hold ‘em together, make it tight, oh that’s right—”

Finally there was a night when he tore the foil from an oiled prophylactic and pulled it on like a glove. Well, this is it, she thought, and lay back trembling. He had trouble entering her and cursed tonelessly. Then he was inside her, and there was pain, but hardly enough to think about, and then an instant later it was over and he was gasping and shaking upon her.

“Well,” he said. “Well, now.”

Later that night she was struck by the thought that this first time would surely be the last time as well. That it had been the pursuit he enjoyed, and that he would cease to be interested in the prize now that he had won it. The thought did not particularly bother her, although it seemed to her that it ought to. She knew she felt nothing like love for him, but she needed him in certain ways, didn’t she? There must have been a need that led her to give herself to him, and what could have happened in the act of giving to eliminate the need?

Perhaps she more than he was excited by the approach and disappointed by the arrival. They went out together five more times and had intercourse each time. On these occasions his own performance improved significantly. He sustained the act for a respectable amount of time and performed it with rather more flair. And yet each time she enjoyed it less. He had had the ability to drive her wild with excitement, and now, although she still drew pleasure from his lovemaking, her excitement was only a fraction of what it had been.

Toward the end, she began to withdraw mentally while they were making love. Previously she had blanked out her lover as a specific person. But now she blanked out the act itself and substituted fantasy. While he was astride her, his penis buried within her, her mind would entertain memories of when she had held him between her breasts.

And years later, when she thought of Carl, she would at once see him curled beside her in that car, wiping his seed from her neck and throat, then folding the tissue and putting it away. That was always the first and strongest image that came to mind when she thought of him. It was the most he had ever shown of tenderness, the closest approach he had ever made to concern, and she never forgot it.

She lit a cigarette and went over to the telephone. She lifted the receiver, poised herself to dial, and for a moment her mind lost the number completely. She could not even remember the area code. Then it came back and she dialed the number and her mother answered on the second ring.

She said, “Hello, Mom. How’s everything at home?”

“Linda! What a surprise.”

“I just thought I would call.”

“Dad and I were going to call you on Sunday. Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine.”

“I was just about to call your father for dinner. He’s out in the garage. We’ve been having a little trouble with the car.”

“I hope it’s nothing serious.”

“Well, you could ask him. No use in asking me, for all I understand about mechanical objects. I seem to
remember something about a wheel bearer or bearing, if there’s such a thing. I suppose Marc would know.”

“He probably would.”

“He’s still at the theater?”

“Yes. He’s going to be directing a show in the spring, if everything goes right.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. He’ll be the director.”

“That’s right.”

“Well, I’m glad he’s making progress. It’s a difficult business, isn’t it? The theater. You have to keep at it for years and years. The struggle to get ahead. Do you think—I’m sorry, I shouldn’t ask.”

“What?”

“Oh, the usual question, I suppose.”

“There’s really no point in our getting married, Mother.”

“I know it, and I’m sorry I—”

“It would be different if we were living in Dayton, of course it would be different, but we’re not. But here nobody thinks about it.”

“You’d be surprised how many people aren’t thinking about it in Dayton. I suppose I’m old-fashioned.”

“I was married once, and so was Marc. Neither of us wants to rush into it again.”

“You don’t have to explain to me, Linda. I understand.”

“Well.”

“All that’s really important is for two people to love each other, isn’t it?”

“That’s what’s important, all right.”

“Of course if it ever came to the point of having children—”

“Then we would get married. But until then there’s no point to it. We’ve had this conversation so many times, Mother, and I—”

“I know, and I’m sorry. Well—”

“How’s everybody in Dayton?”

She got the question out and closed her eyes and tuned out the answer. Everybody in Dayton was about the same, except that so-and-so got married and so-and-so got divorced and so-and-so had a coronary, his second, poor man, but he was recovering nicely all the same, and Mrs. Something was getting cobalt treatments and when they got to that stage, it was as much as saying there was nothing to be done, but doctors of course would never come right out and admit this so they sent you for cobalt instead of telling you to go die quietly, and—

She said the right words in the right places, grateful for a stream of talk that she could half listen to, the endless stream of vital statistics about people whose names she barely recognized and in whom she had not the slightest interest. Sometimes she felt that she ought to be interested. She had spent eighteen years in Dayton plus summers during her college years. The people who filled her mother’s monologues were the people she had known for the greater portion of her life. Insofar as she had a home, Dayton was that home. If she were to die tomorrow, Dayton was where the body would be shipped, Englander’s Funeral Home where the rites would conducted, Park Hill Cemetery where she would be tucked into the earth.

Dayton was where she had run when her marriage broke up. The day she and Alan acknowledged it was over, she flew instinctively to Dayton and moved immediately into her old bedroom. And after a trip to Alabama had officially terminated that marriage, she again returned to Dayton. Because it was all the home she had, and when things fell apart, you went home. She had gone there knowing she could not stay there, could not live there, knowing that whatever life she was going to make for herself had to be made someplace other than Dayton. But it had still been the only place to go each of those times.

“Here’s your father now, Linda.”

“Hello, Dad.”

“Well, Linda. When are we going to see you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s hard to get away.”

“Keeping busy, are you?”

“Well, there’s always something to do. I understand you’re having car trouble.”

“My own fault for not trading the damned thing. You spend four thousand dollars on an automobile and you expect to get more than two years out of it. Fix one thing and something else goes. I’ll tell you something, you and Marc are just as lucky not to have a car. Is he around there? I’d like to say hello to him.”

They had met Marc once the previous Thanksgiving. She had wanted some time to herself and suggested the trip to Dayton, positive he would tell her to go alone. He surprised her by accepting the idea enthusiastically, and the visit had gone far better than she had dared to expect. Marc was consistently polite, projecting warmth and interest in tedious conversations with her parents. He was acting, of course, playing a role in what seemed to her a
transparently phony way, but he had gauged his audience well and they warmed to him. For their part, her parents avoided any mention of marriage and in no way showed disapproval for the nature of their relationship. On the last night her father, loosened slightly by brandy, took Marc aside and put a paternal hand on his shoulder. “I’ll tell you something,” he had said, “you kids have the right idea. You’re young and you’re enjoying yourselves. You know what marriage is? Marriage is the number one cause of divorce. That’s what it is. If you don’t have the one you’ll never have the other.”

“Probably the most profound thought either of them ever had in their lives,” Marc commented later. “Christ, how did you stand it for all those years?”

“They liked you, you know.”

“Listen, don’t get uptight about it. Everybody’s parents are terrible. Mine are worse than yours. ‘Marriage is the number one cause of divorce.’ The man’s a fucking philosopher.”

“Well, this is costing you a fortune,” her father was saying. “And your mother’s putting dinner on the table. You give Marc our love, Linda.”

“I will.”

“And take care of yourself. You want to say good-bye to your mother? Never mind, she’s got her hands full. I’ll say good-bye for you.”

She cradled the telephone and lit a fresh cigarette. She had called to tell them about the break, to tell them she was coming home again, but her conversation had not taken her in that direction.

Marc is fine. Everything is fine. She would not go back to Dayton. She was not sure what it was that she needed, could not define it, but whatever it was she would not find it in Dayton.

There was a red leatherette address book in her purse. She thumbed through it trying to find someone to call. She dialed a New York number and let it ring twelve times before hanging up. She dialed another New York number and got a recording telling her that the number had been temporarily disconnected. She tried a third number and got a busy signal. The fourth number rang twice before she decided that she did not want to talk to that person after all, so she rang off without knowing whether the call would have been answered or not.

She supposed that she ought to eat dinner. Her father and mother were now sitting over the dinner table, talking about how nice a boy Marc was and wouldn’t it be nice if things worked out and they did get married and settled down. She sighed and went to the refrigerator again, checked the cupboards again. Nothing appealed in the slightest. She put up water and was fixing a cup of instant coffee when there was a knock at the door.

She said, “Marc?” And put her hand to her mouth, surprised at the automatic response.

“It’s Peter.”

“Oh. Come in, it’s open.”

When she had first seen Peter Nicholas with Gretchen Vann, she’d taken them for mother and son. Gretchen’s hollow cheeks and darkly circled eyes made her look far older than her thirty-seven years. Peter, blond and slim-hipped and open-faced at twenty-two, could have passed for eighteen. They shared a large one-room apartment on the ground floor with Gretchen’s three-year-old daughter, and had been living there several months before Marc and Linda moved in.

Marc had found them amusing. “She probably started nursing Peter the day she weaned the kid,” he had said. “The bond that holds them together is that nobody on earth can guess what either one sees in the other. God knows they have a strange effect on each other. Every day she looks a little older and he looks a little younger. One of these day’s he’s going to crawl right back into her womb and never get out.”

“I was making coffee,” Linda said now. “Want a cup?”

“Thanks, but—I’d like a cup if it’s no trouble.”

“The water’s hot. Cream and sugar?”

“Just cream.”

“Well, it’s milk.”

“That’s okay. I hardly ever drink coffee anyway. It’s supposed to be terribly yin.”

“Is that macrobiotics? I didn’t know you were into that.”

“Well, that’s the thing. I keep thinking I ought to be, but I never manage to get into it. I’ll have brown rice for three meals running and then I’ll go and have a Coke, which is ridiculous, and then I’ll see how ridiculous the whole thing is and I’ll have a cheeseburger and that’s the end of the macro thing. Things like that are only possible if you’re living alone, anyway. Or if the person you’re living with is into it. And Gretchen. The thing is, she’s just the kind of person who ought to be into something like that. Some discipline that would help her get herself together.”

His eyes were an absolutely clear and guileless blue. He made small hand movements as he spoke. His fingers were very long, very slender.

She asked about Gretchen.
“Oh, she’s all right, I guess. You know how it is. She’s okay when she’s working, and when she’s not okay she can’t work and she goes into a down cycle. It’s the work that’s important to her. It doesn’t matter if anybody buys her pots or not, it matters in terms of money but sales don’t affect her personally, just that she’s getting the work done and likes what she’s turning out. This is good coffee.”

“It’s a tricky recipe. The hard part is boiling the water.”

“I can imagine. Say, why I dropped in. I was over at the Playhouse and Marc wasn’t around, and I thought he might be here. Which he obviously isn’t. Is he coming back here before the show or should I catch him over there?”

She put down her cup, got a cigarette out of the pack, dropped it, picked it up, got it lit.

She said, “No.”

“No he won’t be here?”

“No he won’t be here and no you can’t catch him there.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, shit,” she said. She stood up and got the note from the sofa. “Annie doesn’t live here anymore,” she said.

“I must have missed the opening credits.”

“Any luck and you could have missed the whole movie. Here.”

He started to read the note. “Oh, wow,” he said. He finished reading it and held it out to her. She took it from him, folded it neatly.

“What do I say, Linda? Hell. I picked a great time to knock on the door.”

“No, I’m glad for the company.”

“How are you taking it? I’m full of stupid questions. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be silly. No, I seem to be taking it pretty well. I suppose I’ll fall apart in a little while but maybe not. As a matter of fact, I was feeling really rotten all afternoon, and I came home to the note and immediately felt better.”

“Maybe you were picking up vibes this afternoon.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been very terrific at picking up vibes.”

“Well, maybe—oh, shit.”

“What’s the matter?”

“He’s supposed to be lighting a show tonight. Marc. I don’t think he told anybody. It’s almost seven and the curtain’s at eight thirty and—can I use your phone?”

“Sure.”

“Just to call the Playhouse. Tony’s going to shit when he hears this.”

She paid little attention to the conversation. It did not much surprise her that Marc would leave without telling anyone at the theater. He had always been the sort to take his responsibilities seriously only while they affected him personally. Once he was out of New Hope, whatever difficulties his absence might cause simply would not occur to him.

Peter said, “Well, that’s a break. At least I think it is.”

“What?”

“They’re going to let me light the show.”

“That’s great.”

“I’ve done a couple of matinee performances of other shows, and I handled the board once during rehearsals of this one, so it shouldn’t be too rough. The thing is, I might get to do it regularly if it goes all right tonight.”

“You’ll be good.”

“I don’t have to be fantastic. Tony knows I’ll work for less than he would have to pay anybody else. I don’t know what Marc was getting but it must have been around eighty.”

“You’re close. He was getting eighty-five and felt he should have been getting a hundred and a half.”

“Josh Logan couldn’t get a hundred and a half out of Tony. He was doing good to get eighty-five. Now if he offers me the job, and he probably will, I’ll get fifty.”

“You shouldn’t take that little.”

“Well, I could probably get sixty if I fought, but I probably won’t fight. I should, but I probably won’t.” The boyish face flashed a smile. “The money doesn’t really matter. Gretch always has enough. I want to do the work, see. A few dollars one way or the other doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“That’s the trouble with the theater. Everybody wants the work.”

“And a son of a bitch like Tony gets away with slave wages. That’s why we have to scrounge, which leads to a question. How’s my chances of scrounging another cup of coffee?”

“Don’t you have to get over to the theater?”

“I have half an hour. Coffee keys me up and I want to be keyed up tonight. What I was going to do, I was going to go downstairs and take a pill, and I thought if I had another cup, I could get away without taking the pill. I don’t like
“to take uppers too much because I like them too much, if you follow me.”
“Uh-huh.”
“You’re going to be okay, Linda.”
“I am?” She looked at him thoughtfully. “You’re right,” she said. “I was wondering about that before you came up. If I was going to be all right. And I think I am.”
“What are you going to do?”
“I’m going to stay here in New Hope.” She tilted her head back and gazed up at the ceiling. “Do you know, I didn’t know that until just this minute. I thought about going home or going back to New York, and I hardly considered staying here, but I’m going to. I came here last fall because Marc wanted to come here, but from the first day I liked it more than he did. Just because he’s left is no reason I should leave, is it?”
“No. I think you’re right to stay.”
“I think this is an easier place to be alone in.”
“Well, New York is supposed to be impossible.”
“Oh, it is. And I’ve had practice being alone here. The past few months.”
“I didn’t know it was bad.”
“Nobody ever knows. When I was married. Well, forget that.”
“Sure.”
“Why read something that’s gonna depress you?”
“Huh?”
“Nothing. Something someone said to me this afternoon, and she was absolutely right. I’m sorry, Peter, I’m talking to myself.”
“Say, I don’t suppose—no, of course not.”
“Now you’re talking to yourself.”
“No, the reason I was looking for Marc. He was going to sell me some dope, but he must have taken it with him.”
“He took his clothes. And all the records and the player. He’d leave those before he’d abandon the grass.”
“That’s what I figured.”
“Let me look, though.” She went into the bathroom. “It must be still here. He kept it in the towel bar and he wouldn’t have taken the trouble to put the bar back afterward. He would have left it on the floor. There’s a screwdriver in that drawer on the left. Thanks.”
She removed the bracket and took out the hollow chrome towel bar, tilted it and shook out a plastic vial three-fourths full. “Here,” she said.
“Oh, this is all cleaned. This must be the equivalent of an ounce and a half, maybe two ounces.”
“Take it.”
“I just wanted enough for a couple of jays. In fact, I was going to smoke now, but I don’t want to be behind grass when I’m lighting the show. Later on when I’m used to it I could dig it, but not when I’m under pressure like tonight. I could take a pinch of it now to save for later.”
“No, take the whole thing.”
“You don’t want it?”
She shook her head. “I haven’t been smoking much. Sometimes I would keep Marc company if he insisted. But I haven’t enjoyed it lately. My head keeps going to places I’d rather stay away from.”
“Well, if you’re sure. This is, I don’t know. Say thirty dollars? It’s probably worth a little more than that, but does thirty seem all right?”
“Oh, just take it, Peter.”
“No, I can’t do that.”
“I mean I’m not in the business.”
“No, but it’s the same as money. If you’re giving it to me you’re giving me thirty dollars. I’ll pay you later. Or you can hold it until I bring the money.”
“No, take it with you. I don’t really want it around, as a matter of fact. You know, I think I will take the money, come to think of it. There’s no rush, but whenever you get the chance. I’m not rich enough to be that charitable.”
“Is thirty all right? Because there might be fifty dollars’ worth here.”
“No, thirty is fine. Thirty is a week’s wages. I like the idea of thirty dollars.”
“Well, fine, then. I’ll have it for you later tonight, or tomorrow at the latest.”
“There’s no rush.”
“If you say so. Well, I’d better get over there. Time for the goofy little kid to play games with the lights.”
“You’re not goofy. You’re not even a little kid, are you? I am going to be all right, Peter.”
“I know you are.”
“And thanks for telling me. I didn’t realize it until you said so, and it’s a good thing to know.”
“Thanks for the coffee.”
“Sure.”
“And for this.”
“Sure.”
After he left she went into the bathroom and reassembled the towel bar.
She was going to be all right, and she had not quite known that before. She was going to stay in New Hope, too, and that was another thing she had not previously known. She liked it here, liked it here better now, with Marc gone, than she had with him present.
She would have to make certain changes, of course. She would need a job that paid more money and an apartment that cost less. But it was not urgent that she find either of these things immediately. It was more important that she make no sudden moves, that she permit things to proceed at their own pace.
She straightened the apartment. It was always easier for her to keep a place neat when she lived alone in it. Clutter tended to irritate her when she was living alone. Then she undressed and stood under the shower. She washed her hair, and a melody ran through her mind, just the tune at first, and it took her a few moments to fit words to it. “I’m gonna wash that man right out of my hair… .” Funny how tunes did that, popping up involuntarily at the proper time.
She soaped and rinsed, soaped and rinsed, letting the stream of warm water play over her breasts and loins. She felt a quiver of erotic response and smiled. Ah, good, she thought. The machinery still worked. It was nice know that the machinery still worked.
She dried off, turned the sofa into a bed. The sheets held his smell. She noted this but found it neither pleasing nor disturbing.
She lay on her back in the darkness. With one hand she held a pillow against her breasts, hugging it close, and with the other hand she stroked herself. You’re regressing, she thought, but she had actually never done this in adolescence, had not known that it was possible for a girl to excite herself. It was not until she was halfway through her marriage to Alan that she discovered masturbation.
Now she played with herself very slowly and lazily. Her mind was virtually blank. There was no fantasy, no memory, only the pure tactile pleasure of her fingers upon her loins. At one point she heard Peter’s voice telling her that she was going to be all right.
After half an hour or so she got out of bed, made toast, fried a couple eggs. She had not reached orgasm. It would have been easy for her to do so, it always was, but she did not want to.
TWO

Peter walked easily down the stairs, then felt his shoulders sag as he reached the door to his own apartment. For a moment he was tempted to go straight to the theater. It was safe enough to walk around New Hope with drugs on one’s person; if they busted everyone in town who was holding at any given moment they would cut the local population in half. Besides, he was known, he was local. The mobs of itinerant freaks who massed around the base of the cannon were subject to periodic frisks, but New Hope residents could do everything short of shooting up in public without drawing official attention.

So it would be safe enough to go directly to the theater, and thus avoid Gretchen—

But he couldn’t do it. First there was his rule: He did not carry anything illegal if there was any way to avoid it. He had several rules, all of them painfully evolved over the past few years, and he felt it necessary to stay within them insofar as possible. It was a part of staying together, and Peter was very much aware how easy it was to cease to be together, and thus to fall apart.

Gretchen was in the process of falling apart. This was a reason why he increasingly wanted to avoid seeing her, and it was also a reason why he had to see her.

Because of the kid.

Robin hopped off the couch as he opened the door, toddled across the room to him. The child’s face glowed with total joy, and Peter had never failed to respond to such radiance. “Peter, Peter, Peter,” she chirped.

He bent over, gripped her by her hips, hoisted her high into the air. “How is Robin Redbreast?” he singsonged. “How is Peter’s baby bird?”

She squealed with delight. “Oh, I can almost touch the ceiling!”

“See how big you’re getting?”

“Hold me higher, Peter, I can almost touch the ceiling.”

He boosted her a few inches higher and the little fingers brushed a piece of loose paint. “I did it,” she said. The chip of paint fell. “Oh, my goodness,” he said, “Here comes the ceiling.”

“Is it falling, Peter?”

“Oh, Chicken-Licken, the sky is falling. The sky is falling, Robin-Lobin.”

“The sky is falling, Peter-Leter.”

He swung her to and fro, then set her on her feet. “Where’s Mommy?”

“Mommy-Lommy,” Robin said.

“Catch on fast, don’t you?”

“Gretchen-Letchen’s in the bathroom, Peter-Leter.”

He smiled. Gretchen-Letchen indeed. Mouth of babes, he thought. And was Gretchen lechin’ after all? One never quite knew.

“In the bathroom,” Robin said again. “She’s been in the bathroom almost forever.”

He went to the door, knocked. No answer. He spoke her name, knocked again, called out her name again and tried the knob. The door was locked.

His mind filled in a rush with images. Gretchen in the bathtub, her face swollen beneath the water. Gretchen sprawled on the floor with her wrists slashed and the tiles red with her blood. Gretchen slumped on the toilet like Lenny Bruce with a spike of bad smack still in her arm. But she wasn’t shooting anything these days, was she? But how could you tell, how could you ever tell from one day to the next?

“Gretchen.”

“Gretchen-Letchen, Mommy-Lommy—”

He forced his face to soften, then turned to Robin. He said, “Honey, could you go watch television for a few minutes?”

“The picture’s all funny.”

“Well, play with the knobs and see if you can fix it.”

“Oh, dynamite,” Robin said.

The hip talk had originally amused him. There was something undeniably funny in hearing hip phrases delivered with just the right inflection by a three-year-old. Lately he had become less amused. Of course the kid talked that way—it was the only kind of English she ever had a chance to learn. With Gretchen for a mother it was a miracle that Robin could talk at all.

“Gretchen, answer me if you can hear me. Because otherwise I’ll assume you’re unconscious and I’ll kick the door down, and then we’ll just have to get it fixed again.”

“Leave me alone.”
“Are you all right?”
“No.”
“What’s the matter?”
“Nothing. Go away.”
“Open the door, Gretchen.”
“You fucking little snot, can’t you leave me alone?”
“What’s the matter?”
“I’m all strung out and I’m shaking.”
“Open the door.”
He waited, and just as he was about to give up and turn from the door he heard the bolt. She held the door open a crack and peered out at him.
“Do you want me to come in?”
“I want to see you.”
She opened the door further and supported herself by leaning against the jamb. “Anybody who wants to see me,” she said, “has got to be crazy.” She tried on a smile but it wouldn’t play. “Oh, Jesus,” she said. “Oh, I’m so f*cked up. How did I get so f*cked up?”
He looked at her face and felt tears welling up behind his eyes. She was such a beautiful woman and none of the beauty showed now. Her face was ravaged, haunted. The circles under her eyes looked unreal, like make-up amateurishly applied. Her dirty blond hair was uncombed and lifeless. There were tiny sores in the corners of her mouth. The yellow cotton housedress she wore had been tight on her body when she bought it. Now it hung like a tent.
“Peter, I’m dying,” she said. “Oh, poor Peter, poor poor Peter.”
She lurched forward and he caught her, let her head drop to his shoulder. He stroked her hair and the back of her neck, making automatic calming sounds. He couldn’t get over how thin she had grown. She was eating herself up, melting the flesh from her bones.
She said, “I look like hell, don’t I?”
“You could straighten out. Get off all this shit, put yourself back together again.”
“I can’t do it.”
“You can try. I’ll help.”
“You can’t even help. Nothing can help. I hate those f*cking pills and I’m worse without them.”
“What are you on?”
“What do you think? Speed.”
“Just pills?”
“I was going to shoot but I didn’t.”
“Thank God.”
“I don’t know which is worse. Shooting might have been better. Now I’m all strung out. I can’t get off and I can’t get back on either. You know what it is, I’m overamping. My brain is burning too fast for my brain to keep up with it. You can’t understand me, can you? I don’t know if I can, either. Some of the time I can—”
She ran out of words and he held onto her. “I have some grass,” he said, “but I don’t know if that would be better or worse for you.”
“Worse. I’m on a bad trip and it would just make the colors brighter. Where did you get it?”
“From Marc. Well, from Linda. Marc’s halfway to Chicago by now.” He told her briefly about the note Linda had found and that he was going to light the show. It was hard to tell whether she was interested or not. She seemed to be listening but not reacting.
She said, “Maybe that’s a good idea.”
“What?”
“Chicago.”
“You want to go to Chicago?”
“You could go. To Chicago or Kansas City or Acapulco or Tel Aviv or, oh, some place.” Her eyes fixed on him suddenly. “Why don’t you leave me, Petey?”
“I like it here.”
“Oh, shit. Nobody likes it here. I don’t know how you stand it. I can’t live with myself, how can anybody else stand to live with me?”
“Sometimes it’s good.”
“It is, isn’t it? But not very often. I haven’t been any good for you in a long time.”
“You will be.”
She lowered her eyes. “I don’t know.”
“Sure you will.”
“I just don’t know. It’s a hard corner to turn this time. It isn’t a matter of getting straight. The pills, all of that shit. You know it’s not just that.”
“I know.”
“It’s wanting to be straight. If I could work. But lately all I can think is who on earth gives a shit if a pot has a lip or it doesn’t, or what fucking glaze I put on it, or whether I sell it or give it away or throw it in the canal. I mean it’s not an art. I mean go ahead and name twenty famous Italian Renaissance ceramicists. Shit, all it is is making pots by hand that they can make better than by machines, and idiots buy them because they think they’re supposed to. So they can surround themselves with craftsmanship and escape from the Plastic Age. I mean who fucking cares, baby?”
He stood awkwardly for a moment, then put a quick kiss on her waxen forehead.
“I have to go. I’m sort of late.”
“Oh, the show. Yeah, you’d better do. Break a leg and everything, huh?”
“Sure.”
“You’ll be beautiful, baby, I know you will. I’m proud of you.”
“Because Marc ran off and left them hanging?”
“Just because. Because I want to be proud of you, so let me, huh?”
“Sure.” He started for the door, then turned. “Hey,” he said, “you had dinner yet?”
“Oh, sure. I spent the whole day eating and sleeping. Can’t you tell by looking at me?”
“I just—”
“I mean for Christ’s sake, Petey, do I look like I had dinner? You know how I get, you know I couldn’t swallow anything and if I did it wouldn’t stay down, and—”
“I was thinking about Robin.”
“Oh.” Her face fell. “I forgot.”
“Christ.”
“I think I gave her a sandwich for lunch. Robin? Honey, did you have any lunch?”
“Fix her some dinner, Gretch.”
“I can’t.”
“Jesus, Gretchen—”
She stood hunched forward, her fingernails digging through the sheer housedress into the scant flesh of her thighs. Tears welled out of her eyes and coursed down her cheeks. She said, “I can’t, Jesus, I can’t, I just can’t, I’d vomit, I swear I would vomit, I can’t do it—”
He looked at Robin. The girl was wide-eyed, expressionless, taking it all in. God, what that kid had to take in. The whole trip, he thought. Everything but food.
“Okay,” he said. He bent over, scooped the child up in his arms, perched her on her shoulders. “Let’s go, Robin Bluejay Nightingale Vann. Let’s get moving, Moving Vann. We’re going to a tacky little restaurant where you can have a tacky big dinner, got it?”
“Moving Vann,” Robin said, and began to giggle.
He took Robin to Raparound, an outdoor coffeehouse around the corner from the playhouse. He put her in a chair and took one of the waitresses aside.
“A large orange juice and all the milk she’ll drink, and whatever else you can stuff into her. She usually likes French toast. Then you can take her back to the Shithouse or else keep her here until after the show.”
“I didn’t think you were in it.”
“I’m doing the lighting tonight. And I’m late, I really have to run.”
The waitress was a heavyset girl named Anne. She had olive skin and prominent white teeth. She said, “I don’t mind taking her home, Peter, but is it all right?”
“Huh?”
“Is it safe?”
“Gretchen’s not a monster.”
“I know, I only meant—”
“Gretch has never been bad to the kid. It’s just that sometimes she can’t cope.”
“I know. I was thinking she could sleep in the back room here. There’s a cot.”
He thought for a moment. “All right,” he said. “Maybe that’s best if Danny doesn’t mind.”
“Why should he?”
“Okay. I’ll pick her up whatever time it is. Eleven, eleven thirty.”
She nodded and looked about to say something. He could guess what it probably was and didn’t have time to
listen to it. He turned, darted outside, jogged off toward the playhouse.

Anthony Bartholomew wore his standard uniform of white duck trousers, a black shirt open at the throat, and a white linen ascot. He looked at his watch and whistled soundlessly.

Peter said, “I know. There were problems.”

“I imagine there were. Everybody has them. Well, you know the play and the board. I’ll have a fast run-through on the script with you and then we’ll see what happens. It’s going to be the usual Wednesday night crowd plus a busful of blue-haired ladies from Trenton, so if you eff up nobody’ll likely notice. Just give Warren the spot when he’s supposed to get it or the cocksucker’s likely to stop in the middle of the scene and correct you from the stage.”

“They’d just think Miller wrote it that way.”

“They might, but Tanya won’t. She’s been shitting up the stage anyway and she has trouble handling the unexpected. Well, let’s plunge into it.”

The play was The Crucible, and Peter was familiar enough with it to pick up the overall rhythm early in the first act. He found it an easy show to work. There was a predictable ebb and flow to Miller’s treatment of the Salem witch trials, and before long he was handling the board automatically, keeping on top of it with most of his mind free for other concerns.

He would have preferred it if the evening’s work had been more demanding. The thoughts that came to mind were not ones he welcomed.

“Why don’t you leave me, Petey?”

Did she know, did she have the slightest idea, how he itched to get out of there? He doubted it. She raised the question often enough, had brought it up even during the good times. “I’m too old for you, Petey. Jesus, you don’t need a mother that much. The Oedipus bit is fun but it has to drag you down sooner or later. You ought to be out there in the world with some sweet young thing with firm little tits and a nice tight cunt. What do you want with an old bag? I mean, for God’s fucking sake, Petey—”

It would be so much easier if Robin were his own daughter. If that were the case he knew precisely what he would do. He would pick up the kid and get the hell out. You could do that, if you were the kid’s real father and the mother was as completely incapable as Gretchen was.

And he could even have done it with a treasonably clear conscience. Gretchen could not be worse off without the child to care for. Robin was a responsibility at a time when the woman could barely handle the responsibility of putting on her own shoes when she got out of bed in the morning. Gretchen was falling apart, and there seemed to be nothing he could do to put her back together again. Sometimes he thought no once could, that she was doomed to burn herself out no matter what anyone tried to do to help her. Other times he was fairly sure he did her some good, gave her something however frail to lean on, did her some service by walking along behind her and picking up what she dropped.

And still other times he wondered if he might not be bad for her, as she was bad for him, wondered if his presence was not partially responsible for what was happening to her.

“Why don’t you leave me, Petey?”

Because of the kid, you silly bitch. Did she realize that? It seemed that she must, but when she was in a bad way she was scarcely aware of Robin’s existence. Gretchen had failed to feed Robin—and often failed to feed her—not out of any malice but simply because she hardly knew Robin was there. She was locked too tightly into her own self to waste any thought on Robin.

Such a sweet child. Such a sweet perfect beautiful child, and how exciting it was to have a child who thought you were the most important person in the world, and if she were only his kid, God, if she were only his kid—

But she wasn’t, any more than she was Harold Vann’s. Vann had still been married to Gretchen when Robin was born, but had moved out long before the conception. Robin’s father could have been any of a few dozen men. According to Gretchen’s calculations, the girl had most likely been conceived during a two-week stay in Miami Beach, during which time she had sexual relations with a great number of total strangers, men whose names she never knew and whose faces she could not have identified.

“It’s funny I got pregnant that trip,” she told Peter once. “I seem to remember blowing most of them. Obviously there must have been some that I fucked. Either that or the kid’s the world’s first oral conception.”

She was very nearly born by the world’s first oral delivery. Gretchen was nauseated throughout nine months of pregnancy. She had had several abortions before, and wondered aloud during the late stages of pregnancy why she had not had another one this time. “I’m already sick to my stomach with this kid,” she said, “and the little bastard’s not even born yet.”

That Robin was not literally a little bastard was the result of Harold Vann’s benevolence. He had instituted divorce proceedings but withdrew them when he learned that Gretchen was pregnant and intended to have the baby. He waited until the child was born, then permitted Gretchen to divorce him. The terms of the divorce settlement
called on him to pay four hundred and sixty dollars a month in child support until Robin reached the age of twenty-one. He also carried life insurance with the child as beneficiary.

A check arrived within the first five days of every month. Vann’s attorney drew it, signed it, and mailed it. The monthly check was the extent of Harold Vann’s contact with either Robin or her mother. “He never wants to see either of us,” Gretchen had said. “Never wants to know anything about Robin, how she’s doing, anything. He told me once that he felt a certain responsibility to Robin because he should have had the sense to have me sterilized. I can still hear him saying it. I suppose he was right.”

But he wasn’t, Peter thought. Gretchen and her unknown lover had accomplished a minor miracle, producing through their loveless coupling a precious and perfect child. Such a child justified a great deal. Among other things, it justified his staying with a woman with whom it was literally impossible to live.

Well, suppose he just picked up the kid and went? He doubted that Gretchen would go to the police. It was not even inconceivable that she would fail to notice Robin was gone. And he could see the two of them off somewhere, some little farm somewhere in New England or Nova Scotia, and he would raise enough food for the two of them, earn a little money with handcrafts, bring the kid up in the open air with animals to play with, teach her everything he knew, just the two of them off by themselves and—

No way.

He sighed, focused a baby spot, softened the footlights. No way, he thought. It was a beautiful fantasy trip but would not, could not happen that way. The little cabin in the woods, with or without Robin, would involve running away from more than Gretchen, more than New Hope. It would mean running away from aspects of himself which he could not ultimately outrace.

Nor, he admitted, would Gretchen be all that easy to leave, Robin or no Robin. There was something there that he still needed. And he wondered, not for the first time, if his love for Robin was not at least in part an excuse that enabled him to stay with a woman he did not love and often could not bear.

He made himself concentrate on the stage.

Warren Ormont scrubbed at the last of his makeup and peered solemnly into his mirror. He was altogether quite satisfied with what he saw there. Several years ago his hairline had begun a rapid climb and now had crept just slightly past the midpoint of his head. What hair remained was silver-blond and hung almost to his shoulders. The recession of his hairline had appalled him at first, but as his hair fell out in front and grew longer in back, he recognized that it was just the sort of thing his particular face required. His features—a strong beak of a nose, bright and intense blue eyes, a small precise mouth—were somehow drawn together and reinforced by his partial baldness.

Now, when he popped out the contacts he had worn on stage and replaced them with a pair of rimless spectacles, he bore an unmistakable resemblance to Benjamin Franklin. His awareness of this resemblance had prompted the original purchase of the rimless glasses two years earlier. If one were going to look like anyone at all, he had considered, one could do worse than look like Benjamin Franklin.

“You were marvelous tonight, Warren,” someone said.

“Yes, wasn’t I?”

He combed his long hair carefully back. No complaints about the face, he decided. One could have done worse. It was a face that seemed to be improving with age, a face which would wear well for the foreseeable future. Altogether a better face than he would have predicted for himself twenty years ago.

An arm draped over his shoulder and a small cheek pressed against his. Tanya Leopold’s gamin face looked out of his mirror at him. “Can I get in on this picture, man?”

“You enhance it, Tanya mine.”

“Mmmm, love you,” she said. She kissed him on his bald spot, dropped onto the stool beside him. “You were beautiful out there, Warren. You scared the shit out of me, I swear to God.”

“I was properly vicious, wasn’t I?”

“Improperly vicious. You made me want to confess long before I was supposed to.”

“Pure method, love.”

“Oh?”

“Oh indeed. I summoned up all my loathing for the play’s author and directed it at you poor witches.”

“But Arthur Miller—”

“Sucks,” he supplied.

“Isn’t he supposed to be one of our major playwrights?”

“So I’ve heard.”

“And Crucible’s an allegory. It was very important. The McCarthy era and everything.”

He looked at her fondly. “Didn’t you campaign for him in New Hampshire?”

Her face turned uncertain. “Was it the same person? I can never quite—”
He snapped his fingers. “By Jove, I believe you’re right. I can never keep those things straight myself. Politics is such a damned bore, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “But I guess it’s important.”

“Ah, boring things always are. Which confirms your report that *The Crucible* and its author are indeed important. But important to whom? Not, I fear, to me. For I am merely an actor, and the stage all I know of life. I play my part, little one. One can do no more.”

“Well, you were good.”

“How can one fail with such lines to speak. ‘I saw Goody Two-Shoes with the Devil!’ ‘Did you? What were they doing?’ ‘They were fucking!’ ‘Well, good for the Devil! And the devil with Goody!’ Shakespeare, put aside your pen. Shaw, eat your heart out. Sophocle—”

She giggled and he beamed paternally at her. A charming child, he thought. Not a brain in her head, not a wisp of talent in her body, but nonetheless charming for it.

“You were very good,” she was saying. “I keep saying I that, but what I’m trying to say is that you were so good I that you made me be a little less rotten than I usually I am, you made me feel almost good, and, I don’t know, I oh, I wanted to thank you for it.”

“Why, Tanya,” he said. She lowered her eyes and I blushed furiously. He was enormously touched and on the point of tears. His voice soft, he said, “That is as genuinely sweet a compliment as anyone has ever paid me. God bless you. I will always love you for having said I that.” He coughed to clear his throat, heaved himself to I his feet. “I must away,” he said, his voice normal again. “My turn to pay a compliment to the young lad but for whom you and I would have been utterly in the dark. I speak of young Peter of Nicholas.”

“He worked the lights, didn’t he?”

“He did. Friend Marc dropped the old show-must-go-on philosophy in the dirt, and young Peter dusted it off. I ought to tell him he was good before Tony tells him he was bad.”

“Why would Tony tell him that?”

“So that Tony can pay him as little as possible, as he will no doubt do anyhow. Tanya, you were good tonight yourself, incidentally. I hate to offer compliments as a *quid pro quo*, but there it is. You’ve never been better.”

Which was true enough, he thought, but which was unfortunately saying lamentably little.

“I’ll be joining some people at Sully’s later,” he added. “Will you be going?”

“Tanya, you were good tonight yourself, incidentally. I hate to offer compliments as a *quid pro quo*, but there it is. You’ve never been better.”

“Who could fail to?”

Her face went impish. “Now if you’d straighten out for me, Warren, I might be interested.”

His eyes inventoried her body—dainty feet, willowy legs, tight little ass, tiny waist, opulent breasts. He sighed wistfully. “I’m afraid,” he said slowly, “that you’re just the slightest shade too butch for me.”

Her laughter followed him out of the dressing room. A dramatic talent equaled only by the depth and breadth of her intellect, he thought. She would never be an actress, and he supposed she knew as much. But for the next half dozen years her looks would carry her, and by that time she would probably find the stage something of a bore.

“He found Peter and Tony Bartholomew at the rear of the house. Tony was talking, and Peter was nodding at the pauses. Excellent, Warren thought. He had timed his entrance well.

“Ah, there you are,” he called out, approaching the two. Bartholomew raised his eyes in irritation at the interruption but Warren’s gaze swept quickly over him and centered on Peter. “Peter, that was superb. I was nervous tonight when I heard you would be on the lights. I loathe being nervous. But you were so much better than I dared to hope that I was astounded.”

“That’s kind of you, Warren.”

“Kind? Kindness has nothing to do with it. It’s pure and simple self-interest. I prefer to play with the lights well handled. One does not want to become blessedly invisible at the wrong moment. Thus, as there is always the chance that you might not realize quite how good you are, I’m taking the small trouble of informing you in order to encourage you to do this regularly.” His eyes turned briefly to Bartholomew. “As I’m sure Tony has been trying to say himself.”

“Yes, of course it is, of course it is. Peter, as I’m sure Tony has already told you, you were far better tonight than Marc Hillary ever was in his life. And Marc was not bad. One got one’s money’s worth with Marc. But you are better intuitively than Marc was with rehearsal and practice and training. Tony, you’ve turned up an honest talent. Permit me to congratulate you.”
“Thanks so much, Warren. I was telling the boy—"

“I know precisely what you were telling him, and I’m sure I’ve done no more than echo your own praise Tony, it was a good show. If one must perform Arthur Miller one might as well do him properly. You’ll excuse us, won’t you? We’re supposed to be meeting some people at Sully’s and I’m afraid we’re late already. I’ll see you tomorrow, Tony?”

“It does seem likely.”

“And perhaps you can join us at Sully’s if you can get I away.”

“I think I’ll be tied up tonight.”

“A pity,” Warren said. He grabbed Peter’s arm and led him out of the theater and through the parking lot.

Halfway to the street Peter said, “What’s this about meeting people at Sully’s?”

“Well, you don’t have to if you don’t want to, sweet, but I thought I’d buy you a drink. I did think we ought to get away from Antonio and it seemed an easier way than handing him a bottle of mouthwash. Subtler, I thought.”

“Uh-huh. How did I do with the lights, incidentally?”

“Hmmm. Let us say that you were not awful. You were a little unsteady in the first act, you were quite good in the second act, and you may have been thinking of something else toward the very end. I can understand that. I have the same problem myself. Arthur Miller has that effect on any sensitive intelligence. Oh, you weren’t bad. On a scale of one to ten I’d give you about a seven overall, and I don’t think Marc ever got much more than an eight-point-six on his best night, so I’d call it an impressive debut.”

“Thanks, incidentally.”

“For that back there or for what I just said?”

“Both. I don’t think it will work, though.”

“Let me guess. He was giving you the usual ostrich shit about how much you had to learn.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And how it was essentially a favor to train you, but he was hard up and didn’t want to go to the bother of getting somebody decent all the way from New York.”

“That’s fantastic.”

“It is like hell. I could write his dialogue for the rest of the season. It’s a case of contempt breeding familiarity. What did he offer you?”

“You came in before we got around to numbers.”

“Well, thank God for that. What was he about to offer you?”

“Probably fifty.”

“And what would you have said?”

“I don’t know.”

“Tell him he can pay you eighty or he can fuck himself.”

“He won’t pay me eighty.”

“No, but he’ll pay you sixty-five.”

“Why don’t I ask for sixty-five?”

“You could. That’s what I would do in your position, but I’m not sure you have the balls for it. If you ask sixty-five, do you think you could stick to it? Suppose you shot it out as an ultimatum and he said it was out of the question and turned his back on you. What you would have to do is walk out of the room and keep on walking until he raised his price to sixty-five. And I’m not at all certain you could do it.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I would think so. It’s very important to know your capabilities. You can get sixty-five, which still amounts to gross exploitation, incidentally, but you’ll only get it if you ask for eighty. And if you make it damned evident that you want eighty, and think you’re entitled to it.”

“The thing is, the money doesn’t really matter.”

“It matters to Tony.”

“It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Aah. Then give the extra fifteen a week to a charity of your choice. But Tony’s a bad charity. If you work for fifty, you’re personally donating fifteen dollars a week to Anton Bartholomew, and that cocksucker’s no hardship case. Truth?”

“Truth.”

“Piss it away on something. Put it toward a Ferrari. Buy Gretch some new pills and a monogrammed needle. I’m sorry, I hit a sore spot, didn’t I?”

“Kind of.”

“I’m sorry, Peterkin.”
“You couldn’t know.”
“She’s been bad lately, then.”
“You could call it that.”
“Well, reverse the tape and wipe out that line. And profit by my example and avoid developing a reputation for cutting wit. It’s more trouble than it’s worth. Incidentally, we are not walking toward Sully’s.”
“I know.”
“Does your knowledge also include our destination?”
“I left the kid at the Raparound.”
“I see. Again, forgive me.”
“Let it go, Warren.”
“I think I’ll pass on this domestic scene. I’d like to talk with you about it sometime, or rap, as the kiddies say. But not now. Will you come over to Sully’s later and let me buy you that drink?”
“Maybe.”
“Oh, come on. You already know whether you will or not. Clue me in and I’ll make plans accordingly.”
“Well, putting it that way, I had decided not to. But I’ll change my mind. I’ll be over in, I don’t know, half an hour?”
“I’ll keep a seat warm.”
Danny had closed the grill at the Raparound. A handful of theatergoers were sitting over coffee. Peter sat down at a table and Anne took a tray of dirty dishes back to the kitchen, then joined him.
She said, “I took her home. I had her all tucked in on the couch and she started saying she wanted her mommy, so I cut out and took her home.”
“How was everything?”
“Gretchen seemed all right. I mean she didn’t throw anything at me. She seemed, I don’t know, in control?”
“That’s good. What do I owe you?”
“Just a minute, I have the check here. Here it is. Oh, wow.”
“How much?”
“Well, it comes to $4.77.”
“Huh?”
“That’s including the tax.”
“Anne, find the right check.”
“Fifty cents for a large orange juice, a dollar and a half for a bacon burger, a dollar for french toast, and fifty cents each for three glasses of milk.”
“She drank three glasses of milk?”
“She was starving, Peter.”
“Yeah, I can dig it, but you’re charging a three-year-old kid a dollar and a half for less than a quart of milk? That’s beautiful.”
“Well, this is no place for a meal, Peter. What am I supposed to do?”
He nodded. “I know. It’s okay, it really is. It’s just that the numbers threw me for a minute.”
“I don’t blame you.”
“Okay to give it to you tomorrow?”
“Well, you’ll have to give it to me. I mean personally, because I’ll cover the check out of my own pocket. You know Danny and credit.”
“Uh-huh. Same as I know Danny and fair prices.”
“It’s for the tourists. You know that. It’s to sit over a cup of coffee for three hours or it’s for the tourists.”
“Sure. New Hope’s a nice place to live but I’d hate to visit here.”
“Oh, it’s not even a nice place to live, Peter.”
“I’ll pay you tomorrow.”
“I kind of hope you do.”
“I will, Anne. And thanks.”
“You don’t have to thank me.”
“That’s the point.”
THREE

Sully Jaeger leaned on the bar and looked over the house. The crowd was a little better than usual for a week- 
night in April. Sully’s restaurant business, like virtually every other retail business in New Hope, was very much a 
seasonal operation. The fat summer months yielded enough of a profit to cover the rest of the year. But Sully’s 
place, unlike some others, came out ahead twelve months of the year. While he sold little food off-season, he had 
a large enough regular trade of local drinkers to cover the nut even in the deadest months of January and February. 

During the summer Sully moved a lot of steaks and chicken and shrimp. But his only food customers were 
tourists, and for most of them one meal at Sully’s was enough. The steaks at the Barge Inn cost seven dollars a copy 
and were on a par with those at the $1.49 steak joints on Times Square. His fried chicken cost five times as much as 
the foxy old franchising colonel’s and wasn’t a fifth as good. His shrimp were too long out of the ocean and a plate 
of four of them was priced at $4.50. His baked potatoes sat in the oven until they sold, however long that might take. 
Sully himself never ate at his own restaurant, taking most of his meals at a lunch counter on Main Street. 

Complaints about the food generally brought a sorrowful expression to his face. He was a jowly, bearish man, a 
little puffy under the eyes, and he had as much trouble getting a clean shave as Richard Nixon. He had a barrel chest 
an d an ample but firm gut. His whole body was thickly pelted with black hair. Each of his four wives had initially 
found his hairiness exciting, and each had gradually lost her enthusiasm for it. 

Sully first married at thirty-eight, taking as a bride a girl of twenty-two. Since then he had traded in every five 
years or so, always selecting as a replacement a voluptuous girl between twenty and twenty-five years of age. Sully 
was now fifty-six and had been married to the current Mrs. Jaeger for a little over three years. No one earth expected 
it to last much longer. 

Sometimes he became defensive when the quality of” the Barge Inn’s food was brought to his attention. “Listen,” 
he would say, “let’s be honest. I didn’t open this place for people to have a meal. That’s not what it’s for. This is a 
place to come have a couple of drinks and talk with your friends and feed cracker crumbs to the ducks on the canal. 
Summer weekends you do all this and listen to music. The rest of the time it’s the same program without the music. 
Now some people won’t walk into a place unless there’s food. They got to have food in front of them or they can’t 
enjoy theirselves. So all right. There’s food. They eat it, it fills their stomachs, it don’t kill them. They don’t like it 
then next time they can use their brain and eat somewhere else first, or for that matter they can stay out of here 
altogether. That’s all.” 

He sighed now and took a long drink from the water glass that was always on the bar top beside him during 
business hours. The glass contained applejack, but it was neither the American commercial brand nor the imported 
Calvados that he stocked behind the bar. Twice a month a farmer from over in Berks County drove to Sully’s and 
delivered two gallon jugs of applejack, exchanging them for a pair of empty jugs and a twenty-dollar bill. The 
farmer was a Pennsylvani a Dutchman named Gutnacht; he and his father and grandfather had been making 
applejack in the same old-fashioned way since long before Prohibition. Sully had been a steady customer for almost 
twenty years, during which time the price had gone from six to ten dollars a gallon. It was still cheaper than any 
taxed liquor available, but Sully would have paid three times the price if he had to. It was the only thing he would 
drink. 

He set the glass down and shook his head. “This fucking town,” he said. 
Hugh Markarian grinned across the bar at him. “A familiar phrase,” he said. “What brings it on?” 
“Nothing in particular. Another of those?” 
Hugh covered his glass. “No, I’m all right. I don’t think it’s such a bad town. Or were you speaking literally? I’m 
not sure there’s that much more fucking going on here than in the average town. It’s more visible here, of course, 
and perhaps it runs to more unorthodox forms, but—” 
Sully leaned forward, elbows on the bar top. “You know what it is? Two kinds of people in the town, the young 
ones and the old ones. The young ones are always figuring out where to go from here, and the old ones are trying to 
figure out how they wound up here.” 
“How did you wind up here, Sully?” 
“God knows.” 
“You weren’t born here?” 
“Christ, no. It’s a Dutchy name, but it’s Milwaukee Dutch, not Pennsylvania. Except they never said Dutch for 
German in Milwaukee. Krauts they called you, or Chermans. Christ, if I was born here, I never would of stayed 
around.” 
“How long have you been here?” 
“Let me think. I came here two years before I got married the first time. That was to Alicia, I think that was before
your time. So that would be something like twenty years in September. Twenty years exactly. I remember I hit this
town Labor Day weekend.”

“I suppose you never thought you would stay. At the beginning, that is.”

“You kidding? I was here ten years never figuring I would stay no more than another week. Then one day I look
around, and there’s ten years gone and I don’t know where the hell they went to, and I realize I’m probably gonna
spend the rest of my life in this toilet. It’s the kind of town it is, it sneaks up on you like that.”

“It’s been good to you, though.”

“Yeah, I got no personal bitch.”

“You’ve done well.”

“I make a living.”

“You’ve got this place and you’ve got the Coryell Arms and God knows what else.”

“Not so much else. Not so much as you might think, Hugh. You know something, you’re the first person ever
called it the Coryell Arms in my hearing. I had to think a minute to realize you were talking about the Shithouse.
Sully’s Shithouse, that’s all anybody calls it. Hell, it’s what I call it.”

“Twenty years in New Hope. You should throw a party to celebrate.”

“Hold your breath,” He picked up the glass again his large hand, took a long swallow. “You can almost throw
your own party, can’t you, Hugh? You haven’t been around any twenty years but you didn’t turn up yesterday
either. What is it, twelve, fourteen years?”

“More like eighteen.”

“Is that a fact? Well, I wouldn’t of said that much. If that’s the case you must of been here when I was married to
Alicia, but I don’t remember knowing you then.”

“I didn’t go to bars much back then.”

“I didn’t have this place at the time, but you would of had to go to a bar to meet me. I worked for old man Lakey
who had a place where the mall is now, and then I tended bar for a time at the Inn up in Pipersville. You look
empty.”

“Yeah, you can do it again, Sully.”

“Same way? Here you go. No, you’re giving me too much, Hugh. What you’re drinking is just a buck ten.
Thanks.” A waitress approached with a table order and Sully expertly mixed half a dozen drinks, then returned to
Hugh. “This fucking town,” he said.

“You said that before, I think.”

“It’s a downhill town, Hugh. There’s towns that are getting better and there’s towns that are getting worse, and
this one’s the kind that’s getting worse. The tourists come here because it’s supposed to be an art colony. The good
artists have been getting fewer and farther between in these parts ever since the war. The tourist business is still alive
because those shitheads don’t realize anything until a hundred years after it happens, so they still come up to look
for artists and walk around with ice-cream cones in their fists looking for something to hang on the bathroom wall.
Each year there’s more of them in town and each year they spend less and look worse. These days they’re either
freaked-out kids with no money in their pockets or Bermuda shorts types who wouldn’t pay a nickel to see Christ
ride a bicycle. The fucking tourists keep the town alive and the fucking town won’t put up a parking lot or a public
toilet for their benefit. Who the hell wants to come to New Hope as a tourist? If I drove through this shithole I
wouldn’t even get gas.”

“You would if you ate here.”

“Huh? Oh, very funny, very fucking funny. But why do I have to tell you this, for Christ’s sake? You live here,
you know the place is dying.”

“They’ve been saying that for eighteen years that I know about.”

“They’ve been saying it for twenty years that I know about, and they’re still saying it, and it was true then and it’s
true now.”

Hugh Markarian was halfway through his drink of Grant’s and water when a voice sounded in his ear. “Why are
you not at your typewriter?”

He turned around, then smiled up at Warren Ormont. “Why aren’t you at the Old Vic?” he countered.

“Oh, but I didn’t ask why you weren’t writing the Great American Novel. I merely inquired as to why, rather then
write anything at all, you had chosen to visit this snake pit. I hope you didn’t eat here?”

“I ate here once.”

“Everyone ate here once. How are you, writer? You look good.”

“I feel good. And you, Warren?”

“Never better, although God knows I’ve been in better things. Why don’t you grab your socks and join us? I’m
telling some dear friends the awful truth about Arthur Miller.”
“Which is?”
“That he’s either Rod Serling in drag or Paddy Chayefsky rolled into one. Possibly both, but one can’t be sure.”
Hugh laughed. “That’s a good line.”
“And it’s delivered with the full force of my rapierlike wit. Come join us. Solitary drinking is nothing but alcoholic masturbation.”
“I might. Who’s in the party?”
“Let me see. There’s Bryce Meredith, who’s directed this little gem. He actually likes Miller, no doubt because he directs him as well as anyone I’ve ever worked with. I think you know Bryce.”
“Not well, but we’ve met.”
“There’s also a very pleasant couple named John and Rita Walsh. Or it may be Walsh. Friends of Bryce’s from Baltimore. I gather Bryce knew John in college. They came up to see the play and they’re putting up overnight at the Logan, I think they said. He’s a dermatologist but he has the good grace to keep it to himself. He’s also a fan of yours, by the way.”
“I don’t have fans. I have readers, but no fans. People apologize for enjoying my stuff.”
“He didn’t sound apologetic. There’s also Peter Nicholas, who is Gretchen Vann’s current thing, and lucky little her. A face like the little Belgian boy who pisses into the water in those plaster monstrosities people bring home from Europe. And an adorable little ass.”
“You sound proprietary. Isn’t Bert with you tonight?”
Warren rolled his eyes. “Gawd,” he said. “I turned queer to escape from all that, Hugh. I’ve been getting ‘Where’s Bert?’ since I walked in here. I feel like a philandering husband who keeps running into all his wife’s best friends. It’s damned annoying.”
“Where is Bert, anyway?”
“Bless your heart, you rug peddler. Bertram is auditioning at Upper Black Eddy. He thinks it may lead to Something Good.”
“Isn’t he happy at Mignon’s?”
“That’s just Fridays and Saturdays. The people up the river have the weekends covered with a jazz trio and thought Bert’s brand of Bobby Short cocktail-piano-cum-torching might be the cat’s nuts during the week. Or a couple nights thereof. Which I have just explained for the last time this evening. The next person who asks after Bert is going to be told some positively outrageous lie. ‘Bert has terminal acne,’ I’ll say. ‘Bert is in Egypt buggering a camel.’ Coming, Hugh?”
“Let me get a refill first.”
“We’re over on the rail where we can throw things to the ducks. It’s fun watching the mother duck and the father duck push the cunning little ducklings aside and hog the food themselves. A graphic lesson in the perfidy of parents, avian division.”
Hugh finished his drink, motioned to Sully for another. He hesitated for a moment. That John Welsh (or Walsh) was a fan of his had an effect opposite to Warren’s intention. It was not by any means an inducement for him to join the table. Any fan, however well intentioned, sooner or later wondered aloud when Hugh would write another book of the stature of One If by Land. Not that they didn’t enjoy all his books, of course. Not that they didn’t feel the work he was doing now was as good as anything he had done in the past. But there was something about One If by Land—
Hugh had just turned twenty-three when Japanese planes attacked Pearl Harbor. He enlisted in the Army the next morning, was tabbed for OCS, and spent the next three and a half years commanding infantry in North Africa and Europe. After his discharge he returned to the States with no clear idea of what he ought to do. Unlike many returning veterans, he didn’t have the option of killing four years in college while he sorted himself out. He had already graduated from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and had put in half a year as a Wall Street trainee before the war broke out.
He went home to Westminster, Maryland, and spent six weeks with his mother. By the end of the second week he was starting to feel like Krebs in the Hemingway story. Hugh’s Armenian father had died of a pulmonary embolism about the time of the Italian campaign. His Scottish mother was keeping company with a widower who was thinking of retiring from his dry-cleaning business. The man came over every other night after dinner to drink the Armenian coffee Mrs. Markarian had learned to make. The two of them killed a pot of coffee and played backgammon. Sometimes they coaxed Hugh into playing, and then the three of them would pretend to be enjoying themselves.
Hugh’s two younger sisters had both married while he was overseas. Emily, the one he’d always liked best, had married a dentist and lived somewhere in southern California. Ruth, the older of the two, lived in Westminster. Her husband sold real estate and insurance and seemed incapable of believing that Hugh was equally uninterested in acquiring either. Ruth had always bored him and now he found her company unbearable. Her husband was worse.
They felt obligated to invite Hugh once a week for dinner, and he felt obligated to accept. It was worse than the backgammon sessions.

He stuck it for six weeks and then went to New York. His old firm was perfectly happy to rehire him, which surprised him. He took an apartment on West Thirteenth Street and went to the office every morning and came home every night. It took him two weeks to confirm something he had suspected all along, that had no desire whatsoever to become a stockbroker. He had been perfectly happy before the war with the idea of spending his life selling stocks and bonds. Now every time he sat at the desk he thought of his horrible sister and her horrible husband and he couldn’t stand it.

He explained this to his boss, who had heard similar stories from other veterans. “You may change your mind later on,” the man said. “Take some time to find yourself. If it turns out that this is the right kind of life for you, come back and we’ll talk about it.”

He never went back. He moved furniture, cooked at a lunch counter, sold women’s shoes on Fourteenth Street. He would pick up a job and keep it until he couldn’t stand it, and then he would sit around his apartment drinking beer and reading library books until his cash ran out.

One night a girl was talking about a recent war novel. “You’ve just got to read it,” she said. “It’s unbelievable.”

“I was over there,” he said. “Why do I have to read about it?” He preferred Westerns, and was at the time gradually working his way through the complete works of Zane Grey.

“She’s right,” she said, “just read it. That’s all. Just read it, it’s unbelievable.”

The next afternoon he went to the Eighth Street Book Shop and paid five dollars for the book. He’d asked for it at the library, but the waiting list ran clear onto the back of the card. He took the book home and read fifty pages and threw it against the wall. He went around the corner, drank three glasses of beer, returned to his apartment and picked the book up again. He sat down with it and read the remaining five hundred pages at one sitting. By the time he was done it was eleven in the morning but he didn’t even consider going to bed. He showered and changed his clothes and spent the next six hours walking aimlessly around the Village.

The girl worked as a secretary at an advertising agency. He was waiting on her doorstep when she got home from work. She didn’t recognize him at first. They’d just met at a party, and their only conversation had concerned the novel.

“You read it already? I’m flattered. Isn’t it something?”

“It’s unbelievable, all right.”

“I told you you’d——”

“It’s unbelievable as a flood in the desert. I read it from cover to cover and it’s the worst piece of shit I ever read in my life.”

She stepped back and gaped at him as if he were exposing himself in Washington Square.

“It’s phony all the way through,” he went on doggedly. “Either the biography on the back cover is so much crap or he walked through the war wearing a blindfold. Not to mention the cotton in his ears. Nobody ever talked like that, nobody ever thought like that——”

“Now just who the hell do you think you are?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you!” Her voice was pure Bronx now. “You were there in all the mud and blood and so that means you know it all, huh? A man produces a work of art and all you can do is knock it.”

“If that’s a work of art——”

“I suppose you could do better?”

“If I couldn’t,” he said, “I might as well jump off a bridge.”

“Oh, people like you make me sick to my stomach. You could write a better book than Moby Dick and you could paint better than that idiot Picasso and what the hell did you ever do?”

“I couldn’t paint better than Picasso. In the first place nobody could and in the second place I couldn’t paint a floor without getting paint on the ceiling.”

“So what gives you the idea you could write better than——”

“I don’t know about Moby Dick,” he said. “I never read Moby Dick, and if you think a lot of it I don’t think I want to. I just——”

“What do you know, anyway?”

“I know there’s no r in ‘idea.’ And I know I could write better about the war than that moron I read last night.”

“So go,” she said. “So do it.”

So he did it.

It took forever. He thought it would take him a month, maybe two at the outside. He bought a typewriter and a box of paper and put a sheet in the the typewriter and typed “1.” on top of it. Then he skipped few lines and typed
“Chapter One.” He lit a cigarette, took two puffs, put it out, skipped a few more lines, and started pecking at the keys.

He wrote for a week, then took a job, trying to work nights on the book, but after a day’s work he couldn’t concentrate sufficiently to write well. So he established a pattern, working for a week or ten days, then writing for as long as he could make his money last. He taught himself to cook spaghetti and lived on it. He found a furniture mover who would hire him whenever he ran out of money and who would throw all the overtime work his way that he could handle. He could clear a hundred dollars in a week’s work, and he learned to make that hundred last out the month.

His mother wrote him a letter every week. She had married her dry cleaner and they were thinking about living in Florida, but Ruth was pregnant and she wanted to be there for the delivery. Ruth’s baby was born and his mother was living in St. Petersburg before he typed “The End” at the bottom of page 784. He looked at the two words and wondered what in hell to do now.

He spent four hours getting drunk and ten hours sleeping. He got up and took the 784 pages to the girl’s apartment. She had moved out four months earlier and he had trouble getting her new address from the building superintendent because he didn’t know her last name and the super’s English was minimal. They worked it out finally and he found out that the girl was living on West Thirteenth just the other side of Sixth. He went over there and rang her bell. She didn’t recognize him. He was thinner, pale from working indoors, and he had a full beard because shaving was a waste of time and nobody cared what a part-time furniture shlepper looked like.

He put the manuscript in her hands. She looked at it and at him and asked what the hell it was supposed to be.

“It’s not a better book than Moby Dick,” he said. “I read that one since I saw you and I’d know better than to try to top it. But it’s the best I can do.”

“It’s you,” she said. “I don’t believe it.”

“I thought maybe you’d look at it.”

“Listen, I’m no authority.”

“You sounded like one last time.”

“I wondered how come I never saw you after that. I figured you left town.”

“I was busy writing. Fifteen months. I never thought it would take that long.”

“Writers sometimes spend years and years.”

“I can see why.”

She weighed the script in her hands. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“You could try reading it. And tell me if it’s any good.”

“What’s your phone number?”

“I haven’t got a phone. I’m only a block away, you could come over when you’re done. The address is on the first page.”

“I don’t even know your name. One If by Land by Hugh Markarian. That’s you?”

“That’s me.”

He went crazy waiting. Three nights later she appeared and handed him the manuscript and four single-spaced pages of criticism tearing the book apart. She sat down on the edge of his bed while he read two of the four pages. Then he looked up and asked if he had to read the rest. “It’s obviously a piece of shit and I wasted fifteen months, so why read all this?” She told him to skip to the last paragraph if he wanted. He did, and in the final paragraph she told him that the book was rough and choppy and disorganized and cluttered and vague, and that it was also a better book by far than the one that started all this, and it needed work but that didn’t change the fact that he had written a great book and might be a great writer.

He asked her if she really meant it.

She said, “Jesus Christ, you think I’d break my neck typing all that if I didn’t?”

She spent the night at his place. In the morning she told him his apartment was terrible and he should move in with her. He did, but kept his place to work in. He thought it would take him another fifteen months to rewrite the book but he did it in six, cutting almost a hundred pages and reworking virtually every scene. The editor who saw it took Hugh to lunch and told him the book was great, truly great, but that his house was over inventoried with war novels and the public’s interest in World War II fiction was ebbing fast. “I’d like to scrap half the books we have scheduled and publish yours in their place,” the man said, “but I can’t do it.”

He went back to Anita dejected. He said, “I’m a genius and he loves the book and they don’t want it.”

“Well, fuck him,” she said.

The next editor who saw it took Hugh to the same restaurant, where he ordered the same dish he had had before. The editor started off the same way and spoke in the same prep school accent and Hugh was tempted to finish his sentences for him. But while he was picking at his food and barely paying attention the man was saying that there
were a few changes he would recommend, nothing substantial and Hugh of course would be the final judge, and
they would like to schedule the book for the following spring if Hugh thought he could make the changes by then,
and they would pay an advance of thus and so many dollars, and—

The next afternoon they took out a marriage license. “I don’t know,” she said. “An Irish-Italian and a Scotch-
Armenian. I know it’s the American way but my parents are going to shit.”

“Well, fuck ‘em,” he said.

“It would help if you were Catholic. What exactly are you, anyway?”

“I’m an atheist.”

“Well, no kidding. So am I, but I mean a Catholic atheist or a Protestant atheist.”

“A Protestant atheist.”

“Yeah, I know. It would be so much easier all around if you were a Catholic atheist.”

“I could pretend to be one.”

“You could, couldn’t you? While you’re pretending, you could even leave out the atheist part.”

“There I draw the line.”

They were married and the book came out in the spring. It hit the charts three weeks after publication day and
went straight to the top. There was a movie sale and dozens of foreign sales and reprint offers and all of a sudden it
was raining money and he knew he would never have to eat spaghetti again. Which was unfortunate, because it was
the only thing Anita knew how to cook.

The book was still high on the best-seller list when the baby was born. That was in 1953, eight years after the war
had ended, seven years after he had started trying to write about it. They told each other that New York was no place
to bring up a kid and they looked around and found Bucks County and let a realtor drive them around and show
them houses. They bought a stone farmhouse with thirty acres of land five miles out of New Hope.

Twelve years later Anita flew to El Paso and walked across the border for a Mexican divorce. She came back to
the Bucks County farmhouse long enough to collect Karen and to tell Hugh that he ought to read his own books if he
wanted to know why the marriage failed. She spent a week in New York before flying to Arizona. There was an
architect she’d met in Juárez. He wanted to marry her. She knew he was good in bed but wanted to check what kind
of houses he built before making up her mind. Evidently she liked his houses better than she liked Hugh’s books
since One If by Land.

He still lived in the stone farmhouse. On three occasions he had listed the property for sale, and each time he had
withdrawn it at the first sign of a serious offer. One local realtor had not spoken to him since. He realized now that
he would never leave, that something kept him there, that no matter how far he traveled he would always come back.
He lived there and wrote a book every year. Every winter he turned in a manuscript to his publisher, and every fall a
new novel by Hugh Markarian appeared in the bookstores. Only a couple had made the best-seller lists and none had
lingered there long, but neither had any of them ever lost money. The paperback editions were constantly in print.
Reviewers generally noted his smooth professionalism, his ability to tell a story and keep it moving, his facility with
realistic dialogue and swift delineation of character. And nine times out of ten they mentioned One If by Land.

Every now and then he would pick up a copy of One If by Land and try to read it. There was a song from On a
Clear Day, the Broadway musical, and it ran through his head during those occasional forays at the book.

What did I have that I don’t have
What have I lost the warm sweet knack of…

Each time he found the book unreadable. The writing was awkward, uneven. The construction of the book, after
all that careful revision, was impossibly clumsy. He would read sentences and wince at the thought of ever having
written so badly.

The paradox infuriated him. Every book since One If by Land was better written, and none was as good a book.
What had he had that he didn’t have now?

He closed his eyes for a moment. He had turned in his latest novel two months ago and it was time for him to start
a new one. Hence it was not a time for negative thoughts. Hence he would stop thinking negatively.

He picked up his drink and crossed the room.
FOUR

Peter was drinking screwdrivers and making them last. He didn’t understand alcohol and never knew what to order on the rare occasions when he had to order something. This time he had tried to order a brandy Alexander. He had had one once and seemed to remember enjoying the taste. But Warren refused to let him order it. “That’s a faggot drink,” he insisted. “Order a man’s drink, for Christ’s sake.”

“Well, a screwdriver, then.”

Warren put his head in his hands, muttering that a whole generation of American youth had failed to learn how to drink and the country was going to hell in a hearse. The screwdriver wasn’t too bad. It tasted like orange juice that was beginning to go bad in the carton. He was on the point of telling the waitress that the orange juice was turning when he realized that the sort of varnishy taste was the vodka.

Warren was drinking Cognac and drinking quite a lot of it. The more he drank, the more he seemed to become himself, with all of his mannerisms more pronounced than ever. As he studied him, Peter saw that alcohol was definitely a high for some people. For him it had never been other than a down, and he was incapable of understanding what people liked about drinking. It tasted terrible and it dulled your mind and eventually it made you throw up and pass out. He could see no stage of the game where it was even marginally pleasurable.

He had tried most drugs in the course of his twenty-two years. He had done glue in ninth grade and found nothing much to it outside of dizziness and nausea. You reeled around a little, and you threw up. During the next two years he got into cough syrup and grass. The cough syrup was a down, and while there were still times he seemed to require it—especially during bad times with Gretchen—he had never much liked it. Grass was good from the beginning, and for a long time he thought grass was never other than good, until one day he was in a bad mood and smoked a lot and freaked completely. He had never stopped doing grass, it was a part way of life, but there were times when he knew it would be a bad idea to smoke just then.

Acid was nice. He’d tripped ten times in the space of about two months and was glad he had done it and equally glad never to do it again. It took him to some interesting places and showed him some important parts of his head, but it also scared the hell out of him. He saw how easy it would be to let go completely and just stay inside there with all the pretty colors. What seemed most frightening of all was that he might like it there and want to stay there, and he did not want to want it. Besides, while it taught you to get out of linear paths it also did odd things to memory and perception, and he decided he could live without it.

He could also live without scag, which he had snorted once, and barbiturates, which he tried four times in an effort to discover something pleasurable in them. There was no difficulty finding pleasure in scag. It was so overwhelmingly enjoyable that he knew once was enough and twice was too much, and when something felt that good it would be very fucking easy to acquire a jones and very fucking hard to kick it. There were a great many things he did not want to be, and a junkie was high up on the list.

Speed was beautiful, cocaine best of all. One time after he and Gretchen had been living together for a couple of months she came home with a couple of twists of coke. They each snorted one and jumped into bed. They didn’t get out of bed for sixteen hours and didn’t stop bailing for more than five minutes at a time in all those sixteen hours. It was a supergood sex trip but the stuff was expensive and hard to find, and he thought it was probably just as well, because you could literally screw yourself to death on it. It wasn’t supposed to hit everybody that way. It certainly hit him hard, though.

Other speeds were good, if not sexy. Your brain worked better than ever and you were all ego, absolutely on top of everything. For a while he and Gretchen had been doing a hell of a lot of speed, and it was no good because the stuff had to get to you sooner or later. You lost weight and began to fall apart physically. That part of it he had always been able to control. He took heavy doses of organic vitamins and made sure he ate decently whether he felt like it or not. But Gretchen wouldn’t take the trouble. Even if he put the vitamin pills out for her she wouldn’t get around to swallowing them. And even the vitamins couldn’t protect him from the mental effects of too much speed, the occasional blackouts, the desperate need to crash, to sleep, counterbalanced by the utter inability to turn one’s mind off and escape from consciousness. Finally they both got off it, balanced themselves out with tranquilizers and worked their way clean. He had stayed off, Gretchen had not. He would drop a pill now and then when he had a reason to but he would not ride the high, would not take another pill when the first one ran down. He seemed capable of staying on that plane, but he was still not entirely sure of himself; it was like heroin, you had to be terrified of anything you liked that much.

By that line of reasoning, he didn’t have to be terrified of alcohol. He sipped now and then at his screwdriver, wondering as he did so how anyone could prefer the taste of it to that of pure orange juice, and when the glass was finally empty he let himself be talked into a second.
He was enjoying himself, the drinks notwithstanding. He was pleased with the way the show had gone, and Warren’s praise had warmed him, however little of it had been sincerely meant. Warren had introduced him to the dermatologist and his wife as “the Harold Pinter—no, no, the Bryce Meredith—of theatrical lighting.” But Bryce had also complimented him on his efforts and Bryce was supposed to be a director who was generally sparing of praise.

It felt nice just sitting here, being simultaneously alone and among friends. He was happy to let the conversation go on around him, and no one seemed to care that he wasn’t saying much of anything. Warren was carrying most of the conversation, as he generally did when he was in a manic phase; when the pendulum swayed the other way he generally kept to himself. He moved the ball around now, interspersing a running put-down of Arthur Miller with various numbers on absent members of the theatrical company.

“Did you know that he actually thought Salesman was a comedy? He wrote it as a comedy and when he was all finished he read through it and thought it was a comedy. So he gave it to someone to read and they said ‘baby, this is tragic,’ and he thought, ‘Oh, then it’s a tragedy.’”

“You are oversimplifying and—”

“Oh, of course I am, Bryce. I don’t want to put us all to sleep, do I? But consider that play staged as comedy. Would you care for that job?”

“I enjoy directing it traditionally.”

“And you do it brilliantly, dear boy. No one denies it But the author saw it as a comedy! Now there are plays that work both ways. Hamlet, for example. Has there ever been a better comic character than Polonius? Those incredible gusts of pompous wind. And then the man is slain by mistake! Or the soliloquy, the famous and genuinely beautiful soliloquy, with its metaphors so thoroughly mixed it could have been written by a Waring blender, except that it transcends its own ridiculous elements. Imagine the soliloquy—”

Peter faded out of the conversation, let the warmth and cadence of the voices soothe him without bothering to register the words.

Warren fascinated him, and this fascination in turn worried Peter. Warren delighted in flaunting his homosexuality in a way Peter could not comprehend. He could understand people insisting on the right to be openly homosexual. He could similarly understand the Gay Militants with their “Gay Is Proud” slogan. But Warren’s approach took neither of these forms. He did not defend his rights so much as he took them for granted, and instead of exuding homosexual pride he managed at once to mock himself and the heterosexual world.

Peter could never have carried it off, and knew it. Even when he had been able to accept himself as gay he had been unable to believe deeply that homosexuality was normal or respectable. Occasionally he worried that it was this disbelief that turned him away from male lovers and toward female ones. Most of the time he rejected this line of thought, feeling instead that homosexuality had been for him a logical developmental stage, a stage very much consistent with his personality and upbringing, but no more than a stage for him on the road to adult heterosexuality. He was not yet entirely secure enough to be comfortable when Warren vamped him. He knew that it was a game and not to be taken seriously, but like every game it had its serious aspects, and if Warren was kidding, he was also kidding on the square. And he would not be doing so if he did not think Peter was something of a prospect, and where there was smoke and all that, and Peter wished he were more confident that Warren was wrong.

The first time he had not known what was happening. Later on he would imagine that he must have known, must have sensed what it was all about, but he was fourteen years old and drug-wise and sex-foolish, a fair and slender boy who hitchhiked back and forth from Newton every day after school because New Hope was where it was happening.

He remembered the driver, remembered the upholstery of the car, remembered the sound of the man’s voice but could not summon up a picture of the face. The stream of questions—Did he like girls, did he like to jerk off—a line of patter he now knew was the ultimate seduction cliché but which he was being exposed to then for the first time.

“There’s something that’s better than jerking off,” the man assured him. “Twice the fun and half the effort, and it’s not bad for you the way jerking off is.”

This had interested him. He had always vaguely assumed there was something wrong with masturbating, but the pleasure was too great to pass up. Especially if you were stoned—the orgasm seemed to last for a month.

“The only thing is I don’t know if you’re mature enough for it. You’d better let me see your cock.”

Without a second thought he had opened his pants, produced his penis. The man’s hand, large and calloused, reached to stroke him. “Hey, that’s not bad at all for a guy your size,” he said admiringly. His fingers worked skillfully and Peter responded immediately. “Ah,” the man said. “You can really get it up there, can’t you? Hard as a fucking rock. You’re more of a man than I would have guessed.”

The praise dispelled any doubts the boy might have had. The man turned the car onto a side road, found a parking space behind a clump of brush. “Now I’ll tell you what we’ll do. First show me how you jerk off, and then I’ll show
you a way that’s ten times as good.”
“And it’s really better for you?”
“The best.”

Peter reached to manipulate his penis. “No,” the man said. “No, show me on mine.” He opened his pants and exposed himself. His penis was much larger than Peter’s and was already erect. Peter envied it. He stroked the organ for a few seconds until the man moaned and had a powerful orgasm.

“You are great,” the man said. “You are one great kid.” He caught his breath. “Now I’ll show you the better way,” he said, and leaned over to take Peter’s organ in his mouth and suck him.

It was a complete surprise, he had never even heard of anything like this, and Peter’s initial reaction was panic; he thought the man was a lunatic who was going to bite his cock off. But the sensations banished the fear and overwhelmed Peter completely. The man was good, bringing him to the brink of orgasm and then shifting the pace until the boy was dizzy and breathless with the need to reach a climax.

The orgasm, when it came, was indescribable.

Afterward the man dropped him in New Hope and told him he was a great kid and a man’s man and gave him a dollar. Peter spent the dollar on three jays that he bought from a black kid who did a little small-time dealing around the high school. He couldn’t wait to find out what it would feel like behind grass.

It wasn’t long before he found out. He never saw the first man again, but in less than a week he hitched a ride with another man with similar tastes. It was even better this time. In a way it wasn’t as exciting because this time he knew what to expect, but the grass enhanced it fantastically and of course this time he wasn’t afraid of having his penis bitten.

He learned quickly, learned how to operate before he really knew what he was doing. He learned how to predict that a man would want to suck him and he learned how to make it evident that he could be safely approached. Something about it bothered him, something that many of the men projected, and he would try to give it up just as he had tried to give up masturbation, and with no greater success.

Ultimately—he was surprised in retrospect that it took as long as it did—he met a man who wanted reciprocity. A man who sucked him well enough and then pulled out his own penis and demanded that Peter give what he had just received.

“I never do that,” he said.
“You do today,” the man said, and grabbed Peter by the hair.

He struggled, but knew as he did so that he was going to do as the man desired. The man was twice his size and built like an ox, and Peter knew the man could make him do anything he wanted.

Besides, he wanted to know what it was like. All these men wanted to do it. What did they get out of it? What was it like to have a cock in your mouth and suck it? What did it feel like, what did it taste like?

He had to do it, so here was the perfect excuse to find out.

He found out he liked it.

“… have to admit he attempts more than any other American playwright. The man tries.”
“He tries my patience.”
“He’s ambitious, Warren.”

“Don’t you think you might be confusing ambition with pretense? God knows he selects the loftiest themes imaginable, but to praise him for that is like giving a man a medal for climbing fifty feet up Mount Everest. What’s so ambitious about coming out against witchhunts? And the analogy doesn’t even hold, you know. Those girls in Salem were witches. Damn silly reason to hang them, but facts are facts.

“As far as ambition goes, the most ambitious thing the man ever did was marry Marilyn Monroe, and I don’t think he handled that so triumphantly. He did not do well by the lady, but then nobody did.”
“You one of her fans, Warren?”
“How could I be otherwise? A sexy waif and a born loser who always knew it. What self-respecting faggot can fail to respond to that? Garland, Monroe—”

“What do you think of Miller, Hugh?”
“I haven’t seen that many of his plays, and none of them recently. I remember enjoying A View from the Bridge.”
“Better than most,” Warren conceded.
“But I can’t really judge him, I’m afraid.”
“You can judge him as a craftsman, can’t you?”

“Of, definitely not. Playwriting is a completely different discipline and one I know nothing about.”

“You’ve never written a play?”

“Wouldn’t know where to start.”

“But your dialogue—”

“Dialogue is a completely different matter on the stage and between book covers. It has an entirely different task to perform. In a book…”

Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe and Gretchen Vann.

Was that how he had chosen her? A sexy waif and a born loser who always knew it. That was Gretch well enough. She was a loser, Fey, doomed, and it was there in her haunted eyes in the best of times. Was that the aspect of her that had appealed to him?

He wondered. In a way he had not chosen her at all. She had chosen him, warming to him that afternoon when he had stopped at her shop on the Towpath, keeping him there in bubbling conversation all afternoon, then taking him back to her apartment in the Shithouse and leading him promptly to bed.

He’d never expected it would end in bed; when it did, he never thought it would lead to more than a quick tumble, of little good to either of them. He had not thought of her that way while they talked, probably because of the difference in their ages. He had been with girls before, perhaps half a dozen of them (although she was the first he ever lived with), but all his female sexual partners had been in his own age group.

Perhaps that had made it easier for him to relax in her presence. They got to know each other through conversation uncomplicated by sexual overtones; the undertones were there but he wasn’t listening to them. He talked to her, more at ease with her than with any other man or woman, and he listened to her and was struck by her wit and warmth and verve.

If she surprised him by taking him to bed, once there he surprised himself. Her body was exciting, soft skin over firm flesh, the curves of her hips, the sweet plain of her belly, but while recognizing this he felt no great desire for her. His detachment was cerebral; his loins had other ideas and wanted her with an urgent and yet confident potency he had never enjoyed before. He lay upon her and moved in and out of her warmth with long, deep, tantalizingly slow strokes, each movement heightening his passion but bringing him no closer to fulfillment. His first orgasm thrilled him with a sense of heady masculine power; he had experienced nothing like it before. He thought he ought to stop, that she was finished and it would be boorish to continue. His body had other ideas and he went on thrusting at her and breathing the hot female smell of her. He moved faster and harder, hammering himself into her, and she quivered and moaned in serial orgasm until he emptied himself utterly into her.

“Oh, baby,” she told him afterward, cuddling his head to her little breasts. “Baby, if I had the strength to move, I’d lock the door and swallow the key. I’ve got me a sweet young stud and I’m not letting go of him. Are you always so great? Be a gentleman and lie and tell me I had something to do with it.”

“You had everything to do with it. It’s not a lie. It was… I can’t fit words to it.”

“Baby says the sweetest things. Oh, I knew you’d be good for me the minute I saw you. You’re so beautiful and you turned me on so much, and I knew you would want me a little. But talk about beyond the lady’s wildest dreams. The sun and the moon and all the fucking stars. I don’t think I’ll ever let you out of this room. You can go but your cock stays right here.”

There were still times like that. They would go weeks without having each other, especially when drugs them too far inside their own heads for the sexual appat ratus to function. Then the mood would be suddenly right and they would take each other in frenzied coupling. At such times they thrilled each other as neither had ever been thrilled by anyone else. The rest of the world looked at them and saw a depraved older woman and a young man who lived off her; no one knew how tightly they were bound to each other.

He had fled homosexuality before meeting her, preferring a sexless existence to a way of life that had grown increasingly uncomfortable and guilt-ridden. She made him aware of himself as a fully heterosexual being. And now, even knowing that he had to leave her, that she was tearing him apart, he realized what he owed her and how much he still seemed to require her.

“Let me get on top. Let Mama do the work.”

“… vacancy coming up at the Shithouse, so if you know anybody looking for a place—”

“Dear dear Sully. Now how could I in all good conscience recommend that establishment to anyone? It should be
condemned, you know.”
“It’s a solid building. And it gives people what they need.”
“So do the heroin peddlers.”
“You know the longest I ever had a unit vacant? Ten days, and that was in the depths of winter.”
“The depths of winter. Winter’s gloomy depths. Suleiman, you’re a closet poet.”
Peter looked up. “A vacancy? Who’s moving out? Or are we evicted?”
“I wouldn’t throw you two out. Hell, I love you people.”
“Then who is it?”
“What’s-his-name, Hillary. Top floor.”
“Who told you they were moving?”
“Well, he left town, didn’t he? I guess his girl’s still around the way I heard it, but she won’t be staying.”
Peter shook his head. “She’s staying.”
“Staying in New Hope? Who told you that?”
“She did. A couple of hours ago.”
“And she’s keeping her room?”
“For the time being. I don’t know how she can afford it. She works part time for Olive McIntyre and I don’t think she can be making more than twenty-five or thirty dollars a week.”
“Maybe she’s got money of her own,” Sully suggested.
“Well, maybe, but I have the impression she doesn’t.”
“Which means I haven’t got a vacancy now but probably will in a couple of weeks. Well, that’s something to know. Very interesting. What’s her name again?”
“Linda.”
“That’s right, Linda. Not a bad-looking girl, either. Not bad at all. You wouldn’t know her last name by any chance? He took the place in his name, Hillary, so I never got her last name.”
Peter had to think a moment. “Robshaw,” he said.
“Linda Robshaw. Well, you’ll excuse me, but I just told some other people that I had a vacancy, and now I have to tell them that I don’t.”
When Sully was out of earshot, Warren said, “The great hunter goes off to load his gun.”
Hugh said, “Whoever Linda Robshaw is, it sounds as though she has a good shot at being the next Mrs. Jaeger. If she plays her cards right.”
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“If she plays them wrong, you mean. I’m afraid not, though.”
“Isn’t he about due for a change?”
Warren shrugged. “I don’t follow his career all that closely, but I think the current model still has a year or two left on it. He wouldn’t marry Linda, though. She’s too old. She must be around twenty-eight.”
“He did look predatory,” the doctor said.
“Ah, Sully the Magnificent was that, all right. He’ll try to screw her and he may well manage it. He’s sup posed to have a surprisingly good batting average that way.”
The doctor’s wife said she couldn’t imagine why. “He’s not at all attractive. I certainly wouldn’t consider him attractive.”
“Nor would I, my dear. It’s the cocksure masculinity, if you’ll pardon the expression, coupled with the feudal approach. He’s most successful with tenants and employees. Tumbles them three or four times and then never wants them again. According to rumor, he’s been in bed at least once with every girl who ever waited tables here. He doesn’t make it a requirement up front, but somehow it always seems to work out that way before long.”
“I don’t think he’ll get Linda,” Peter said.
“I hope not,” said Rita Welsh. “I think he’s a monster. He looks like an ape, anyway.”
“Interesting,” Warren said. “I’ve never noticed it before, but his arms are a shade longer than his legs. Something odd about his thumbs, too. I wonder if he ever had anything going with Fay Wray?”
Hugh was the first to leave. Bryce and the Welshs followed him within a few minutes. Peter took a last sip of his second screwdriver.
“Well,” he said.
“One more round,” Warren said, signaling the waitress.
“I really don’t want another drink, Warren.”
“I do, and I hate drinking alone. One more won’t hurt you, Peterkin.”
“I know it won’t, but I can’t stand the taste. Would it be all right if I had plain orange juice?”
“You’re beyond salvation.” He raised his eyes to the girl. “A double Cognac and a large OJ on the rocks.”
When she brought the drinks she asked Warren if he wanted them mixed. He turned slightly green and shuddered
violently. “Thanks just the same,” he said, “but the Cognac is for me, and the orange juice is for my young friend here. He’s driving, you see.”

Peter said, “Maybe it wouldn’t be bad. Cognac and orange juice.”

“Let us take it on faith that it would be bad.”

“I really ought to be getting home, Warren.”

“Nonsense. The night is young. And you’re so beautiful.”

“I wish you’d stop that.”

“You know what Blake said about ungratified desire. Or perhaps you don’t. Briefly, he was against it. You don’t want to go home, lad. You want to come home with me.”

“I suppose I Should feel flattered.”

“No question about it.”

“The thing is, Warren, I couldn’t be less interested. I’m not gay.”

“Of course not. You’ve never been in bed with a man, have you?”

“That was a stage.”

“All the world’s a stage, Peterkin.”

“I grew out of it.”

“Outgrown and discarded like a child’s old shoes. What a sad fate for poor old homosexuality! I’ll tell you a secret, Peterkin. You never outgrow it. Think of the things you used to do in bed and tell me how they wouldn’t be fun anymore.”

“Maybe they would be. I don’t want to find out. I’ve given all of that up.”

“For Gretchen.”

“For myself, actually.” He forced a smile. “Besides, I wouldn’t want to come between you and Bert.”

“You wouldn’t want to come between us? I wasn’t suggesting a trio, but it sounds delicious.”

“I mean Bert wouldn’t like it if you brought me home, would he?”

“The only thing that would disturb Bert is if I did something unkind to his piano, and I’ve never been deliberately unkind to a piano in my life. Bert hasn’t a jealous bone in his head. I really think you ought to come home with me, Peterkin.”

“I really think you ought to tone down the camping, Warren. And I really think I ought to go home myself.”

“To Gretchen.”

“Yes, to Gretchen.”

“What an odd medium you selected as salvation from the quagmire of faggotry. She’s just a mother substitute, Peterkin.”

“Leave it alone.”

“Although I have to admit her maternal impulses are sometimes hard to detect.”

“God damn it—”

“I’m sorry. I am sorry. I enjoy baiting people but when I drink too much I carry it too far. It’s primarily self-destructive because now I’ll have to sit around hating myself. You’ll forgive Aunt Warren, won’t you?”

“Of course. You found a sore spot, that’s all.”

“It’s a habit of mine. One of the more regrettable ones. You’re going now? How was the orange juice?”

“Better than the screwdriver.”

“Extraordinary. Well, I think I’ll have one more before I toddle off. I’ll see you tomorrow. And remember what I told you about Tony. Don’t sell yourself any shorter than you absolutely have to.”

“I’ll remember.”

The apartment was dark when he returned to it. He let himself in and checked Robin. She was curled on her side, her thumb in her mouth. She sucked her thumb only when she slept.

He went to the big double bed. He undressed quietly in the darkness, went to the bathroom and urinated. When he was on his way back to the bed she said, “You can flush it. I’m not asleep.”

He flushed the toilet. “I thought you were out. I was hoping you’d be able to sleep.”

“I can’t just yet, but I’m getting a little drowsy, baby. My head is still making circles but they’re slowing down a little. I took a trank.”

“I hope it wasn’t a Librium.”

“No, it was Valium. Librium would have been a bad idea.”

“A very bad idea. I didn’t know we had any Vals, or I would have gotten one into you before.”

“I took the last one. I almost took a sleeping pill but I didn’t. Are you proud of me? I’m proud of me.”

“I’m proud of you. Who was going to give you the sleeping pill?”

“I still have a couple of reds.”
“Christ.”
“I had them hidden. Isn’t that disgusting? Only a couple, Petey. Not enough to kill yourself if you wanted to, and I
would never do that anyway. I don’t think I would.”
“It’s such a bad drug. People kill themselves by accident. They have one and they get groggy and forget they took
it so they take another, and they empty the whole bottle that way and never wake up.”
“I’ll throw them out tomorrow. I swear I will. I’ll give them to you and you can throw them out. You’re right.
They’re scary. To kill yourself by accident. Isn’t that what happened to Marilyn Monroe? I’ll give them to you and
you can—did I say something wrong, baby?”
“Just a mental connection. Nothing.”
“Oh, I didn’t ask you about the show.”
“It was fine. I think I’ll have a jay before I go to sleep, but I don’t think you should have one.”
“No, I don’t want to smoke.”
“I’ll just have enough to get a little buzz. I don’t want to be very high.” He got the plastic vial and a pack of
cigarette papers and rolled a skinny cigarette. He smoked half of it, then pinched it out and emptied the stub back
into the vial. “That’s enough,” he said. “Just to soften the edges.”
“Come to bed, Petey.”
He lay down beside her and she turned to him. “I’m going to come out of it this time, Petey. I can feel the wires
loosening. I’ll be better.”
“I know you will.”
“I wish I knew it. All I can do is think it and not be sure. You’ll help me.”
“Sure.”
“I can’t stay a hundred percent clean, but I can at least balance myself. Don’t leave me, Petey.”
“I won’t.”
“Hold me, Petey. Just hold me. Make us be warm. It’s so cold out there, and there are men with long sharp knives.
Hold me.”
Linda was just drifting off to sleep when there was a knock at the door. Her mind was beginning to shift from
thought to dream, and for an instant she tried to fit the knocking sound into the dream pattern. Then it registered—a
knock on the door—and she sat bolt upright, her heart pounding.
Was it Marc?
But Marc wouldn’t knock. And Marc would not come back. Marc, once gone, would never return.
Then who?
The knock was repeated. She considered who it might have been. Peter, coming to pay her the thirty dollars? It
seemed unlikely that he would bother her so late at night, but if he was sufficiently stoned it might seem like a good
idea to him. Whoever it was, she couldn’t imagine why she should answer the door. She had been to sleep. All right
—if she left the knock unanswered she could slip back into sleep and that would be the end it. If only whoever it
was would go away—
Another knock. And a voice she didn’t recognize: “Miss Robshaw?”
Oh, the hell with it. “Who is it?”
“Mr. Jaeger.”
“Who?”
“Sully Jaeger. Sully.”
“What do you want?”
“I wanted to talk to you.”
“It’s the middle of the night.”
“I’m sorry to disturb you at this hour but I couldn’t help it, I just closed the restaurant a few minutes ago. Could
you open the door?”
What did he want at this hour? To tell her she’d have to vacate the apartment? But he wouldn’t barge in on her in
the middle of the night to throw her out. Then again, he might very well throw her out if she refused to let him into
his own property.
“Just a minute.”
She always slept nude. Now she grabbed a pair of jeans and a sweater and got into them hurriedly. She looked
like hell but she was damned if she would comb her hair and brush her teeth for his benefit. She went to the door and
opened it and asked him what he wanted.
“Really sorry to disturb you,” he said. “I thought you just might be up, so many theatrical people keep late hours,
and I’m going to be out of town tomorrow and it couldn’t wait. So I took a chance.” He tried a smile. “I’d as soon be
in bed myself.”
Was that double entendre or was she getting paranoid?

“I’m not in the theater.”

“Well, Mr. Hillary.”

“Mr. Hillary doesn’t live here anymore.”

“I know. That’s what I heard, and this evening I had a fellow over to the place asking did I have a vacancy, and he has to know one way or the other. What I wanted to know is whether you’ll be staying on now or not.”

“I’ll be staying.”

“Well, fine. I’m glad to hear that.”

“You are?”

“I always get the rent on time and I never had the slightest bit of trouble from you. I’d much rather have you here than take a chance on somebody else, and with somebody new you’re always taking a chance.” The same smile again. “Besides, you’re prettier than he is. You do more for the place’s image, I think they call it.”

“Thank you. Is that all?”

“How’s that?”

“Is that all you wanted to know?”

“I guess that’s the size of it.”

“Well.”

He scratched his head. “I guess it’s no strain for you financially. Fifty a week is a tougher rent to pay when there’s only one person paying it.”

“I think I’ll manage.”

“You’re working for what’s-her-name over at the mall—”

“Olive McIntyre.”

“Yeah, I see a lot of her husband. Sell liquor in this town and you’ll see a lot of old Clem. What are you, working part time for her?”

Would he never leave? “That’s right.”

“She can’t be paying you a hell of a lot.”

“Pardon me?”

“I said she can’t be—”

“Mr. Jaeger, is there a point to all of this?”

He scratched his head again and flashed the smile. “Well, matter of fact, there is. I don’t want to barge right in with it—”

I’ll fucking bet you don’t.

“—but it occurs to me that working for Clem’s wife can’t pay you enough to get by on, and maybe you could use either a full-time job or some additional part-time work. I generally look to hire two extra waitresses around the first of June for the summer season, but we’ve been doing fair business the past couple weeks and it wouldn’t hurt to get another girl any time now, and I thought if you need work you might be interested.”

For a moment she felt guilty for having guessed he was dropping back to throw a pass. Then she realized she was supposed to fed guilty, and he was preparing to make a pass.

“That’s very generous of you,” she said.

“Not generous. I need a waitress and you need work. One hand washes the other, I think they call it. Just a question of being practical.”

“I’m impractical.”

“How’s that?”

“I don’t think I’d like the work, Mr. Jaeger.”

“I’m an easy guy to work for, Linda, and—”

“I understand you make it a point to sleep with your waitresses.”

He looked hurt. “Who told you that?”

“Everybody.”

“Well, I don’t know what you heard—”

“I just told you what I heard.”

“I don’t know what you heard, but don’t believe everything you hear.” The smile. “Sleep with all my waitresses. Like some Arab with his harem, the way you make it sound. I admit it sometimes works out that there’s what they call a mutual attraction, and then nature takes its course. But as far as—”

“I’m sorry if I jumped to conclusions,” she said, her tone as flat as she could make it. “Thank you for the offer, then. But I really don’t think I’d care for the work.”

“How do you know till you try it?”
“I waited on tables before, Mr. Jaeger. I didn’t like it.”

He nodded, and his face changed; he had tried and failed and was now giving up. “Well, you could always change your mind,” he said.

“I’ll let you know if I do.”

“You do that,” he said.

When the door was closed and the key turned in the lock she sagged against the door and listened to his footsteps on the stairs. She felt drained, exhausted. Early in the conversation she had wanted a cigarette but had been unwilling to step out of the doorway to get one.

Now she found the pack and lit a cigarette, walked listlessly around the room. She wondered if she had handled it well and decided that she had. She had made it nixonially clear that she was not interested in his job or in him and had done so in a manner which ought to discourage further overtures. And she had kept her cool; he left disappointed but left without hating her. It was never a good idea to have a landlord who carried a grudge against you. Life at the Shithouse was bad enough without that.

Men, she thought, were just incredible. She would have gladly bet her remaining hundred and fifty-seven dollars that he had no prospective tenant with an urgent need to know if her apartment was up for grabs. She was convinced that Sully had known the answers to his questions before he asked them. The question that mattered to him was one he had never put in words, however clearly he got his meaning across.

Well, she’d answered that question, too.

She put out the cigarette. She would have to get used to this sort of thing from now on. Men would be sniffing at her like dogs at a bitch in heat. That she had never been less in heat seemed to be immaterial. All that mattered was her availability.

It had been that way after her divorce. Some of the suitors surprised her. Friends of Alan’s, husbands of her own friends, men who had never done so much as exchange a secret glance with her at parties, were suddenly turning up on her doorstep. Not because she was irresistible. Merely because she was there.

The best thing about living with a man, she thought, was that it tended to keep some of the others away.

Sully was breathing heavily on his way down the stairs. He bore the rejection philosophically. The easiest way to get any woman was to be the nearest man around during times of stress. Folk wisdom had it that recent widows were the easiest game on earth, and while Sully couldn’t bear that one out on the basis of personal experience, he saw every reason in the world why it should be true. They leaned on some man for ten or twenty years and all at once he wasn’t there, so they fell over. And as soon as they hit the ground they opened their legs.

This one wasn’t having any. Well, that was up to her. But the only way to find out was to find out, and it hadn’t cost him more than a short walk and a couple flights of stairs. It was like being a salesman, he had often thought. You had to make the calls and get the doors shut in your face if you were going to make any sales. A guy who stopped girls on the street and asked them if they’d like to fuck would get his face slapped a lot, but he would also get laid a damn sight more frequently than the average Joe.

He paused at the ground-floor landing. She’d riven him a hard-on just standing there and talking to him, and he’d been wondering if she was going to notice. If she had, she’d given him no sign of it. But you couldn’t be sure with that kind; she was all ice water, frozen to the bone.

He touched himself. He was still partially tumescent, and his groin throbbed with need. He thought of his wife. She would be in bed now. If there was a late movie that she liked, she’d be watching it, propped up with pillows. Or she’d be asleep, smelling jointly of Shalimar and her own warm musk. She always wore Shalimar to bed, and nothing else. She had said so not long before the wedding, and the line had charmed him. Later he found that a movie star had said it twenty years ago, that some flack wrote the line for the star, and that the extent of Melanie’s originality had been to change the name of the perfume from Chanel to her own brand.

He could smell her now, could remember the way her skin felt against his.

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He started for the door, stopped abruptly, turned and walked down the hallway. He stopped before a door and put his head against the panel. No voices, just soft music. And a light was on; he could see it under the bottom of the door.

He knocked.

“Who’s there?”

“Me. Sully.”

“What do you want?”

“What do I want? I want to go across the Atlantic in a rowboat.”

“Not tonight.”

“Oh?”

“I got company.”
She might have had company, or she might have been alone. There was no way of knowing. The relationship he had with her was such that he felt free to knock on her door whenever he felt like it, while she in turn was just as free to turn him down. She had not turned him down often, and on those few occasions she had always made an excuse—that she was with someone, that she was feeling sick, that she was washing her hair.

He walked to the Barge Inn parking lot and picked up his car. He drove home and used his key in the door. The bedroom light was out, but he saw her in bed, illuminated in the glow of the television set.

She smiled. “Missed you,” she said.

“Long night.”

“Busy?”

“Fairly busy. What are you watching?”

“Nothing sensational. You could turn it off, I was just looking at it until I fell asleep.”

He tuned off the set, undressed in the darkness and got into bed beside her. He breathed her smell and put a hand on her and she turned to him and pressed against him. He ran his hands over her and felt the texture of her skin and kissed her.

“Oh, I missed you,” she said.

He kissed her and stroked her, telling himself how perfect her breasts were, how warm she was, how desirable. He focused his mind on the urgency of his desire and how much he wanted her. He made love to her with expert hands and she made small noises and caught at the hair on his back and shoulders.

“Oh God don’t make me wait—”

Nothing. Nothing at all. He could get a hard-on talking to a dime-a-dozen nobody who wished he would drop dead, and now he was with a beautiful woman who was dying for him and he didn’t have enough cock to fill a thimble.

“Sully—”

He kicked the bedclothes back, kissed her breasts, then moved downward. Not her fault so why leave her hanging? His mouth found her and she sighed luxuriously with pleasure, told him over and over how good it was.

He performed skillfully, hating her and hating himself all the while. For a while he thought she was never going to make it, but she got there with a near scream and collapsed gasping on her pillow.

He pulled up the covers and got under them, lying on his back.

“You’re so good to me,” she said.

“Baby.”

“Can I be good to you?”

“Not tonight.”

“Nothing I could do?”

There was nothing she could do because there was nothing that would work. He could not stay married for more than five years because he could never find a woman he could go on wanting for more than two or three years. It didn’t seem to matter how young she was or how beautiful, or how much she did or didn’t love him, or what she did or didn’t like to do in bed. Any other girl in the world right now and he’d be a bull, a prize stallion with the mare’s fee paid, but here he was with the most attractive woman in the world and there was nothing she could do because nothing would work.

“Let’s just get some sleep,” he said. “I’m beat.”

“Me too. Sully? Is it me?”

“You kidding?”

“I just wondered.”

“Too much work is all. I’m no kid, and I was on my feet all day.”

“Well, you made me feel awful good. Love me?”

“Love you,” he said, and kissed her and turned away.
Olive McIntyre’s hair had turned silver-gray overnight when she was twenty-nine. Since then her face had had almost thirty years to grow to match the hair and hadn’t yet succeeded. Her brow was unlined, her eyes keen and vital. She was a tall woman, bigboned and stout; men never thought of her as pretty and never failed to regard her as attractive.

When Linda rang the bell of her white clapboard house, Olive led her inside to the kitchen, seated her at a round oak table, poured out two cups of fresh coffee and sat down opposite her. “You’re a damn sight better off without the son of a bitch,” she said by way of preamble. “But nobody can live on thirty a week this side of Pakistan. If you’d lived in New Hope longer you wouldn’t look so surprised. You can’t move your bowels here without the word getting around. Made any plans yet?”

“No.”

“Well, let’s put our heads together. Dumb as we are, the two of us ought to come up with something.”

Olive had never been inclined to beat around bushes. She always found it more natural to walk right over them. She was the only child of a Presbyterian minister who had in turn been the son and only heir of a Scotch-Irish immigrant who got rich in the Pennsylvania oilfields and went on to own railroads and newspapers. Olive’s father had spent little of the money while losing a great deal of it through bad investments; every few years Olive would turn up another batch of worthless securities in the attic. At first she had burned them. Now she sold them in bulk to a local shop which framed old documents and sold them as wall hangings. “Daddy always insisted those czarist bonds would be worth something, and I’ll be damned if he wasn’t right after all,” she’d said more than once.

“Twenty-five cents a piece for a trunkful. A fraction less than the original purchase price, but it’s the principle that’s important.”

But there was no way for the minister to lose everything, and after his death Olive put her inheritance solid issues and never thereafter had the slightest difficulty living on her income. Except for occasional vacations, she spent every night of her life under the roof of the white clapboard house where she had been bom. Her wealth and social position enabled her to live as she wanted, unchallenged by anyone. Her dour view of the human race in turn enabled her to regard wealth as convenience and social position as an absurdity.

It was widely believed that the night Olive’s hair turned gray was the same night she married Clement McIntyre. “One night with Clem and she just turned white, and one look at that gray hair on the pillow next to him and Clem felt the need of a drink. Her hair never went brown again and he never stopped drinking, and one’s as likely as the other in time to come.”

It was a good story, the sort men enjoyed telling whether they really credited it or not. There was no truth in it. Olive’s hair went gray three years before she met McIntyre and as many years after her first night in bed with a man. She received her first proposal of marriage three days after her eighteenth birthday. It was the first of a dozen, none of which she ever considered accepting. Then at thirty-two she took a walk along the Towpath and passed a man sitting at an easel and gazing at an empty canvas. He had a three-day growth of beard and his pants were spotted with paint.

She took the same route back two hours later, not having thought of him since. He was still there in the same position and the canvas was still blank.

“It’s coming along nicely,” she said pleasantly.

“It’s finished.”

“Is it for sale?”

He turned and looked at her for the first time. Some life came into his eyes. “It’s too personal a statement for me to take money for it,” he said. “But I’ll give it to you, if you like.”

“I’d love to have it.”

“It’s yours.”

He handed it to her. She moved to take it, then withdrew. “You didn’t sign it,” she said.

“I’ll sign it on the back. I don’t like signatures on the front. They distract.”

He signed the back of the blank canvas. She thanked him again and went home with the blood singing in her veins. She did not look at his signature until she was inside her house with the door closed. “Clement McIntyre,” she said aloud. “Mrs. Clement McIntyre. Olive Drew McIntyre. Olive McIntyre.” She liked the sound of it, and in less than two weeks it was her name.

He was an alcoholic painter who had drifted into town just two days before she met him. He arrived in a Model-A Ford with the back full of canvases. In two days he had shown his work to every gallery in town and had found no one willing to display him. His paintings and his car and the clothes on his back were all he owned in the world. All
he wanted to do on earth was to drink and to paint, and he was better at the former than the latter. No one in New Hope could figure out how on earth he persuaded Olive Drew to marry him.

He didn’t. It was she who persuaded him, and it took her the better part of a week. At first he couldn’t believe she was serious. Then he decided she was crazy. He told her if all she wanted was a husband she could do better than him. She said if all she wanted was a husband then she had picked a funny time to decide it, because she had already turned down half the town.

“I didn’t want them and I don’t want the other half. I want you.”

“Then you’ve got to be crazy.”

“If I’m too crazy to live with you can always get back in the car and leave. I wouldn’t let the bloodhounds after you.”

“How could I marry a woman I never slept with?”

“Now you’re talking,” she said. “The bedroom’s upstairs. You want to take a fresh drink with you?”

“I want to take the whole bottle.”

In bed they were perfect together. He was utterly astonished, and candid enough to say so. She was not surprised at all, because it had gone exactly as she had expected, exactly as she had known it would be from their first exchange of words on the Towpath.

She said, “Well?”

“Well, you’ve got to be crazy to want to marry me, but I’d have to be crazier to turn you down. As far as that goes I might have to marry you. Meaning I didn’t use anything. I was going to pull out but I got carried away.”

“Thank God for that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t have children. I had an operation a couple of years ago and they had to take out some spare parts. Everything’s in working order but I can’t ever get pregnant. You ought to know that ahead of time. I never cared to have children myself, but it means a lot to some people.”

“All it means to me is never again being embarrassed in a drugstore. It’s your own business but when you say an operation—”

“If I meant an abortion I would have said so.”

“You do tend to cut to the heart of the matter. You know, downstairs I was half convinced you were a virgin, and in bed I got the complete reverse of that impression.”

“In other words, how close to a virgin am I? There were five men. Nobody ever made love to me more than once.”

“An hour from now,” he said, “you won’t be able to make that statement.”

They were married by a justice of the peace in Doylestown on a rainy Thursday afternoon in October. For twenty-five years there had never been a day when she was not conscious of her love for him. He was never an unpleasant drunk, never had blackouts, never became sloppy or hostile. Nor was he ever wholly sober.

He warned her before the wedding that he might not remain faithful to her. “Just don’t bring anything home with you,” she said.

“You wouldn’t get upset?”

“Five years ago the tools in this town passed a law that no dog could run free within town limits. The day the law became official I took two good beagles and gave them to a farmer the other side of Lahaska. I never want anything with a leash on it.”

“I’ve got to marry you because God knows I’ll never find anyone else like you.”

“Of course if a dog or a man would sooner stay home in front of the fire I wouldn’t hold it against him. But it’s got to be him that decides.”

He never once had another woman because he never once wanted one. And not even in fantasy could she entertain the thought of another man. She paid for paints and canvases and he would paint in occasional spurts of great energy. The walls of the clapboard house were covered with his work to the point where every room but one looked like an art gallery.

The exception was the bedroom. Only one canvas hung there, the blank one he had given her on their first meeting. She had hung it that first night, centered over her bed. She had never taken it down.

“It’s a shame he couldn’t have cooled his heels for another month,” Olive said now. “As of Decoration Day we go on summer hours. I’d had it in mind to see if you’d want to work full time starting then. Our summer schedule’s about standard for New Hope. Tuesday through Sunday, eleven to ten, sometimes later on Saturdays if the crowds hold up. Like everybody else we close Mondays. I generally work most of Saturday and Sunday and split shifts on weekdays with whoever works for me.

“I can use you a minimum of forty hours a week, maybe a little more if you want extra work. And I’ll raise you to
two fifty an hour. Not out of the goodness of my heart. I pay more during the season because it’s more work. In the
good months you’re busy all day long. The scum of the earth streams in and out of the shop in a neverending stream.
They may not buy much of anything, but they’re there. Forty hours at two-fifty an hour is a hundred a week before
deductions, and if you can’t live on that you’ve got a problem.”

“I can live on that easily.”

“That’s starting Decoration Day. In the meantime it’s pointless to extend the hours. It would just give you more
time to sit around waiting for something to happen. What I will do is raise your hourly rate to two fifty immediately.
That’s not charity either, it’s an inducement to keep you working for me for the next six weeks. It’s not hard to find
summer help around here. There’s nothing easier. What’s hard is to find anybody who’s any good, or if you do they
pack up and go to Woodstock in the middle of July and leave you stranded. If you don’t plan on staying through
Labor Day, I’d like you to tell me now.”

“I’ll stay. Definitely.”

“Fair enough. In the meantime you can work four days instead of three. That would be twenty-four hours. On
Saturdays and Sundays you can open at eleven I’ll take over at two. That’s six more hours making it thirty hours
comes to seventy-five dollars a week. Can you get by on that?”

“Yes.”

“Barely, but you can make it.”

“The thing is—”

“What?”

“I’ve almost felt guilty working for you this winter. There are days when the shop doesn’t take in enough to pay
my salary, and I don’t want—”

“You don’t want to be a charity case. Well, I don’t want to be a home for stray cats, as far as that goes. I don’t
make a profit on weekdays off-season. I stay open because it does a business good in the long run to have regular
hours and keep to them. If people never know whether you’ll be open or not they give up after a while and stop
coming around.

“This is the most amateur town in the world, Linda. The English are supposed to be a nation of shopkeepers.
Well, New Hope is a town of shopkeepers, but ninety percent of them are doing it as a hobby. They don’t have to
make a living, but they’re sick of playing solitaire and not bright enough for anything else, so they come here and
open some artsy-fartsy shop and try not to lose more money than they can afford. As long as the stock dividends or
the alimony or daddy’s check comes in every month they’ve got nothing to worry about.”

She refilled the coffee cups, gave Linda a cigarette and took one herself. She said, “Well, I’m an amateur myself.
I opened the Lemon Tree because I thought it would be something interesting to do. I like to watch people. I think
they’re the most amusing animals on God’s earth. The locals give you more long-range laughs but the tourists are
always good for a few chuckles. They tickle the hell out of me.

“But I wouldn’t keep the shop open if it didn’t make a profit. The money’s not important in and of itself. I could
live without it, or God knows I could find easier ways to make more of it. But I don’t want to play a game and lose
at it, and the money is how you keep score. Now this is a roundabout way to say what I said in the beginning. I’m
not doing you any favors. I’m not extending hours to create work. They’re just hours that I’d be working myself
otherwise, and there’s no difference between paying two and a half bucks an hour to you or paying it to myself.
Does that cover the subject?”

“I guess so.”

“You can go on down and open up as soon as you finish that coffee. I stay on summer hours until sometime in
October, so you’ll have enough to live on at least that long. And by then you’ll have some other man to live with.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Oh? Perhaps not. You’re tougher than you look, aren’t you?”

“I’m learning,” she said.

She left her coffee unfinished and went to the shop and opened for business. That first day was a fluke; although
the volume of tourists was no higher than usual, she somehow took in over two hundred dollars. A third of the sum
came in a single sale. There were a dozen of Clement McIntyre’s canvases on one wall, and she sold one of them for
seventy-five dollars. It was the first painting she had sold in all the months she’d worked there. Later she found out
that there was a twenty percent commission on the pictures. “But don’t get carried away,” Olive warned her. “It’ll
probably be six months before you sell another one.”

The days that followed were a return to normal, with a handful of small sales scattered across the hours. She
chose to take it as an omen that her first day was such a good one. It seemed like confirmation of Olive’s offer and
of her own acceptance of it.

She found herself more involved with the Lemon Tree now. She worked more hours, yet found the work less
boring. Before the job had been a place to go and little more. If owning the Lemon Tree had been a hobby for Olive, working there had been much the same sort of thing for her. Before she had put in an occasional afternoon before going home to Marc; now she worked there six days a week for the money that she lived on, and when she left it was to return to an empty apartment. By the end of the first week in May she realized that she was getting along very well. She had anticipated bad moments and there had been several of them, but they had not been as bad as she had feared. There were some sleepless nights, and black hours of self-doubt and self-loathing. But they were no worse than similar hours while Marc lived with her. Solitude in and of itself was not a cause of despair, any more than companionship was in and of itself a cure.

And, too, she was becoming more open to casual conversations than she had been before Marc’s departure. She found herself chatting briefly with other residents of the Shithouse. Before she had rarely spoken to anyone there besides Peter and Gretchen—who had been Marc’s friends through the theater—and the couple on the first floor from whom she had bought a handmade silver necklace. And at work she seemed to be functioning as more of a social being.

Part of it, she knew, stemmed from her availability. Other men had followed in Sully’s wake, with more or less subtlety but with the same lack of success. She was open and friendly in most cases but she was simply not interested.

But not everyone who talked to her was a man on the make. She felt that she must be projecting more warmth, that she must give the impression of greater openness. More people were waving hello on the street; more casual acquaintances would stop into the Lemon Tree to exchange a few words.

Peter confirmed it for her. “You’ve changed,” he said. “I suppose everyone’s told you that.”

“As a matter of fact, you’re the first. How have I changed?”

“You seem less uptight, I guess.”

“Maybe I am. How?”

“I don’t know. You’re easier to talk to.”

“Did I used to be hard to talk to?”

“I shouldn’t say that, because you and I hardly ever talked. I think the first time we rapped at all was the night Marc split. But before that, I don’t know, it was a feeling I got from you. Vibrations. Like walking past a restaurant and just knowing they’re not going to want you in there with sandals. I always felt that you wanted to be left alone.”

“And I’m opening up now?”

“Well, maybe it’s that I know you better than I did. But you look better, did you know that? You look more, alive.”

“Well I feel better, Peter.”

She did little long-range planning. She would get up around nine and cook breakfast and do the dishes. Then she would read or play the radio until it was time to open the shop. For lunch she would pick up a sandwich and a container of coffee from the diner down the block. After she closed at night she generally took a long walk around town. The weather had turned warmer and her response to spring, somewhat delayed this year as was the season itself, was strong.

In the course of her walk she would stop to pick up something for dinner. She had turned lazy toward the end of her time with Marc, and dinner more often than not consisted of something canned or frozen. Now, with only herself to cook for, she cooked everything herself. Her meals were not elaborate, but they were good and inexpensive and she enjoyed preparing them.

Periodically she would tell herself that she ought to move out of the Shithouse. She was paying too much for too little, and the building had always depressed her. There had been times when she could barely stand to look at it from the outside, times when she had had to force herself to walk in the door. The Shithouse’s one advantage no longer applied in her case. She was pledged to stay in New Hope at least until fall and had pledged to herself to stay longer than that. So she would have no qualms about signing a year’s lease on an apartment or on investing money in furniture.

The point came up in conversation with Tanya Leopold. The young actress was a local girl who lived with her parents, but who lately spent most of her offstage time with Bill Donatelli, a bushily bearded abstract painter who lived across the hall from Linda and who, as far as she could tell, was incapable of speech. At least he had never talked in her presence. Tanya told her she had to move soon or forget it for a few months. “A lot of people come up for the season. For one thing there are more jobs in town and the people who come to take them need to stay somewheres. And there’s people like the ones who run the art gallery on Bridge Street. They live in Philly and move here in June and just stay open during the season. Plus the freaks and college kids who move in for the summer. There’s probably still time to find something, but another two weeks and that’s it.”

Now, with time a concern, she made a decision. She would stay at the Shithouse. She would stay for no better
reason than that it seemed to suit her, she seemed to functioning well, and so for the time being she would opt for the evil she knew. The building would always be depressing, but her segment of it could become pleasant enough. She already kept it neater and cleaner than before. It was not merely that she had more time and inclination, but that it was simply easier to keep a place neat when only one person lived in it. And there was no reason why she could not improve it further. A few dollars’ worth of paint would make a world of difference. Sully might spring for the paint and brushes. If not she could spare the money herself. A new bedspread, some halfway decent curtains—she couldn’t afford to do everything at once, but it would be fun doing it a little at a time.

And it would give her something to do. One of the reasons for long walks after work was that they shortened the gap between dinner and bedtime, the hours when solitude could become desperate. There was just not that much she could do with those hours. She took books from the library and read them, she listened to the radio; she dealt out hands of solitaire. Twice she walked to Lambertville for a bottle of wine and brought it back across the bridge and drank it. But private drinking held little appeal for her; it was a last resort, and one she rarely felt the need of.

There was no movie within walking distance. There was the Playhouse, but seats were not inexpensive and she had never been that much of a theatergoer. In the time she had been with Marc, first in New York and then here, she had seen far more plays than she cared to.

Occasionally she went to the Raparound and sat over a cup of coffee for an hour or two. The problem was that she hated to go alone, not because she minded sitting by herself, but because she looked as though she were waiting to be approached. She had enough men coming on to her without sitting around asking for it.

“You ought to get out more,” Tanya told her one afternoon. She was at the Lemon Tree and Tanya had stopped in to handle the dolls, tap experimentally on the African drums, and chat idly while she examined the stock. “You must go nuts spending that much time looking at four walls.”

“I don’t mind it.”

“No? It would, have me walking across the ceiling in no time at all. I need people, conversation.”

If she required conversation, Linda thought, her affair with the silent painter smacked of masochism. “Besides,” Tanya, went on, “how are you going to meet somebody?”

“Going to meet who?”

“Well, anybody.”

“Who am I supposed to meet?”

“Well, you won’t know his name until you meet him, Linda. A man, like. You don’t want to be a nun, do you?”

Did she? She was unsure of the answer and had spent recent weeks trying to avoid the question. She said, “I don’t really want to meet anybody just now.”

“It’s like horse riding. When you have a bad fall the thing is to get right back on again.”

“So you can have another bad fall? I would think the thing to do is stay away from horses. But that’s not the point, Tanya. I didn’t really have a bad fall. I’m in better shape now than I was before he left. I was going to leave him sooner or later, he just happened to get around to it first. ‘You can’t fire me, I quit,’ that sort of thing.”

“Then what’s the hassle?”

“I don’t feel like getting involved with anybody for the time being. That’s all.”

“Well, that’s cool.” She picked up a woven shoulder bag, modeled it, put it back on its hook. “But just girl to girl, what do you do about sex?”

“About sex,” she drawled, “I has me cuppa tay.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, it’s a joke. An Englishman is in the west of Ireland, and he likes it there but there’s nothing to do for sex, so he asks an Irishman what they do about sex, and the Irishman says about sex we have our tea. I can’t do accents at all and it’s not that good a joke in the first place but I happened to think of it.”

“Oh, I get it.”

“It’s not very funny.”

“But besides tea, Linda, what do you do?”

For the slightest moment she wondered what the point of this was, wondered if there was a motive to Tanya’s interest. Paranoia, she told herself. Not everyone in the world wanted her fair white body. And Tanya was an unlikely lesbian; Bill kept her busy enough in his room across the hall. All the two of them seemed to do was screw and watch television, and they hadn’t been watching much television lately.

“I don’t do anything,” she said.
“Tanya, I don’t mean to pry.”
“Not, that’s all right.”
“But don’t you … I don’t know, doesn’t it get to you? I mean you’ve lived with guys, you get used to it”
“I’ve lived without them and I’ve gotten used to that, too.”
“I suppose so. I couldn’t go without it myself. I just get so I can’t even talk to people. I start biting my nails, I get ginchy, the whole trip. I mean a couple of days and I just about break out in hives. I guess people are different that way.”

“I guess they are.”

“For me it wouldn’t be healthy. And as far as getting involved. I mean there are enough guys in this town and the last thing they want is getting involved. Unless you’re afraid of falling in love yourself and getting hurt.”

“No.”

“The point is, you could take care of your needs without getting involved.”

“Well, I have all the time in the world, Tanya.”

“Well, sure.”

“It’s not as if I had a deadline.”

“Who said it was? You know, I think I’d like one of the Greek bags. That’s where they’re from, Greece? For two bucks I might as well. You think it’s right for me?”

“I think it’s very good. Try the blue one right behind you, it might be a better color for you. Yes, I think it’s better.”

“You know, you’re right. Yeah, I think I’ll take it, Linda.”

When Warren walked into the Raparound he saw Peter and Gretchen at a corner table. Robin was crouched beneath the table playing with Peter’s shoelaces and squealing joyously. Warren glanced their way quickly, then walked on by toward the other side of the room. He looked for someone to sit with but there was no one around whom he knew well enough to join. He was just pulling out a chair at an empty table when Peter hailed him. He pretended not to hear. When Peter called his name a second time he closed his eyes for a moment, opened them, then spun around and made a show of recognition. “I haven’t seen you in a while,” Peter said. “Have a seat.”

“I’m supposed to be meeting someone.”

“Well, sit here until they come. I suppose you’ve heard about Gypsy. You’re lucky you’re out of this one.”

“So I understand.”

“Sit down and have some coffee.”

He hesitated, then pulled out the chair Peter was indicating. As he did so Gretchen pushed back her own chair and stood. Her coffee cup was still half full.

“I really have to run,” she told Peter. “I was going to get Robin into the tub an hour ago. Are you coming or do you want to stay here?”

Peter stared.

She retrieved Robin from beneath the table, hoisted her onto her shoulder. “Whichever you want,” she said to Peter. “I’ll be at the apartment.”

Peter watched her walk quickly to the door and out. He put money on the table and gaped at Warren. He said, “I just don’t get it.”

“Go with her.”

“I don’t—”

“Some other time. Go on.”

Warren turned and went to the table he had originally selected. He sat down and ordered a cup of coffee, unfolded his newspaper and glanced idly through it. The new Hillbreth play had opened the night before and Clive Barnes seemed to have liked it, although it was hard to be sure. It was also evidently hard to be sure what the play was about, or at least it had been hard for Barnes. He scanned the cast. Three of the seven listed performers were ones he’d worked with at one time or another.

He felt a momentary twinge of envy and smiled at it. No matter how thoroughly one knew one did not wish to play Broadway, there were inevitable moments when one forgot. He had decided long ago that he did not want all that. Nor was it sour grapes. He could have had, if not steady employment, at least the Broadway equi thereof. He was a solid character actor with a wide range. Producers and directors knew him and liked to use him. Other actors found him good company on and off the stage.

He had worked one Broadway show. The vehicle was a good play, the first (and, as it turned out, the last) work of a promising young playwright. Warren’s own part was small, but that sort of thing had never concerned him.

What did concern him was what had happened to the play. After endless rehearsals and out-of-town tryouts, it opened at the Martin Beck and closed after three performances. The critics, the handful of important ones, did not like it. What they didn’t like nobody saw.

He decided it was ridiculous. He and a great many other talented people had spent an untoward amount of time—not to mention a ton of Other People’s Money—polishing a play to the point where they could bring it to New York, perform it three times, and then consign it to theatrical limbo for eternity. It did not make sense, nor did it make
much more sense to land in a hit show and be doomed to play the same role night after night until you couldn’t keep
from walking through the play one night out of three. There were two pitfalls for an actor on Broadway—failure and
success.
He had returned to New Hope vowing never to be tempted away from it. God knew it had its disadvantages. Tony
Bartholomew was one of them all by himself. The money was not good, although it was not much worse than
Broadway and the steady work more than compensated. The performances were never perfect. Something was
always a little off, and often virtually everything was a little off. If the New Hope Repertory Company was not in
any sense amateur, neither was it utterly professional. In any event, it was handicapped by the need to get a new play
on the boards every week or two. Things could never be perfectly polished under those circumstances.
On the other hand, there was the excitement of a new play always in the wings. One could not go stale in a role.
The most loathsome play never took more than a few weeks of your life. One was sustained by the knowledge that it
would be part of the past before too long. Nor could any play fail as plays failed on Broadway. Good or bad,
critically praised or damned, they played out their run and drew about the same size house regardless.
There were still occasional moments when he would forget that he did not really want fame. He would see an old
friend on the Cavett show and would have to remind himself that he did not want to be on the Cavett show, that it
was sacrifice enough on his part to watch it. He played enough ego games and played them well enough. He needed
no additional ones.
He had worked his way through the Times to the television section and was on his third cup of coffee when Peter
sat down at his table. He folded his paper and sighed.
“I’m sorry about that, Warren.”
“You’ve no reason. I just hope that didn’t precipitate a scene.”
“It didn’t. We gave Robin a bath and put her in for a nap, and Gretch was tired and decided to take a nap herself.
So I thought I’d see if you were still here.”
“And here I am.”
“And here you are. What was all of that about?”
“It’s too long to go into, and it’s ancient history anyway. I hope you didn’t ask her.”
“I wanted to but she acted as though nothing had happened, and I thought it would be uncool to bring it up.”
“Wise of you. She looks good, by the way.”
“She’s been good.”
“I can see it, and I’m glad for her. And for you. I take it she’s working.”
“Not too many hours a day. The important thing is staying clean. But she’s working.”
“That’s very important. And you too are working, which is also important, and I believe you were telling me with
a certain amount of glee that the show stank.”
“You haven’t seen it?”
“I played the album just last night. I saw it on Broadway with Merman. A solid show. Not much book, but the
music and lyrics are more than enough to carry it. Of course,” he added casually, “you do need a star.”
“That sums it up.”
“Vanessa, I take it, shall not a Merman make.”
“I never even heard the album, let alone saw show. The thing is, it doesn’t matter whether she’s good or not. She
has everybody around so uptight that they can barely walk on and off the stage. Either she’s coming on to you with
this phony sugary routine or she’s screaming like I don’t know what.”
“Like a fishwife, perhaps?”
“I guess. She has Tanya just about ready to give up show business for life, and Tanya’s hardly in the fucking play.
I don’t know how she found an excuse to give the kid hell, but she did.”
“Oh, dear. Tanya does not deserve that sort of treatment. I suppose you get your share of abuse.”
“It doesn’t bother me. It’s a pain in the ass but she acts that way to everybody so I can’t see taking it personally.”
“You’re wise.”
“She isn’t always yelling at me. The rest of the time she’s groping for my cock.”
“I think I’d rather be yelled at.” He shook his head. “I would not work with that bitch in a royal command
performance. I worked with her once the summer before last. She deliberately made me look bad four times on
opening night. Cheap tricks, Peter. She came in as a big name star and had to feed her ego with the tackiest sort of
bits. Things you learn how to do in high school drama groups, and then in college you learn not to do them. She
went from one lucky Broadway role to Hollywood, and if she knew anything about acting she forgot it out there.
Now she’s too old to stand close-ups and too rotten to make it on Broadway, so she plays the circuit and everybody
wants to see her because she’s a Big Star. They see her on talk shows and think they know her.”
“She certainly sells tickets.”
“So do a ton of name people who are also human beings. Her outstanding feature is that Tony can get her cheap because so many places won’t touch her with a rake. She gave me the treatment opening night and waited to see what I’d do. I did nothing. Pretended I didn’t notice. So she did it again the next night, and I let her get away with it. Eight shows, and each time the cunt was waiting for a reaction. By the last performance she was blowing her own lines. She was that tense to see what I was saving up for her. Nothing. Nothing on the stage, nothing after the show. It was a truly difficult piece of acting, and I doubt she got the point, but I was trying to teach her a trick she never heard of. Restraint.”

“Think that was too subtle for her.”

“I’m sure it was, but I like to think I made her uncomfortable. Tony wanted me to play opposite against her last summer. What was the play? Mame. I took the script home and didn’t open it. I brought it back the next day. I told him I couldn’t handle the part. He said it would be a cinch for me. ‘I just can’t do it,’ I told him. ‘I haven’t got the talent.’ Of course he knew why I wouldn’t do it and he knew better than to push. This time he wanted me for Mr. Goldstone. Well, you walk on and you walk off. Anybody can do it who can wear a suit, and you don’t have to wear it particularly well. ‘I don’t have the talent, Tony.’ He had to stand there and take it. Somehow I couldn’t sympathize with him.”

“He’s been getting it pretty good from Vanessa himself.”

“He knew what to expect. He tried to tell me I thought bit parts were beneath me. I would have liked a bit part. It’s a pleasure every now and then to be part of a production without the strain of a demanding role. Next week we get going on The Man Who Came to Dinner. I’ve played that so many times I don’t think I’ll have to refer to the script, but even so it’s a taxing part. A bit part before that would have been pleasant. Well, it’s even more pleasant to be at liberty. I even like the phrase. It’s a delicious euphemism, and one can’t object to the state when it’s only going to last for a week. Peter? I’m glad to see Gretchen looking herself again. I think you’re very good for her.”

“We’re good for each other.”

“May I presume for a moment? Please don’t take this the wrong way.”

“What?”

“Just that you shouldn’t expect miracles.”

“I hardly ever do.”

“She’s gotten better before. It’s what she does when she’s not getting worse.”

“I know.”
On the first of May, Hugh Markarian got up at daybreak. He showered, shaved the stubble from his neck and cheekbones, and noted that his beard needed a trim. He habitually trimmed his own beard, never having found a local barber to whom he would trust the job. But beard trimming was methodical work, certainly not to be undertaken first thing in the morning.

He got the Times from the front stoop and scanned the front page while his eggs fried in the cast-iron saucepan. He read as much as he cared to of the paper while he ate his breakfast, and in the course of it noticed the date.

A line of doggerel ran through his head:

Hey, hey, the first of May,  
Outdoor fucking starts today!

Well, it would have to start without him, he thought, because he had other things to do. He generally began the annual novel at about this time and had already decided that today would be his first day on the book. If things went well he would turn it in by Christmas; even if they didn’t, he would have a final manuscript on his publisher’s desk in time for the book to appear the following fall.

Hey, hey, the first of May… .

He was at his desk with the door closed before his housekeeper arrived. Mrs. Kleinschmidt was a garrulous sort, pleasant enough company when he was in the mood but a pain in the neck when he wasn’t. When she had come to work for the Markarians fifteen years ago he had given her strict instructions: when he was in his study with the door closed she was not to disturb him unless the house was on fire.

She had taken these instructions to heart, and he suspected she might let the house burn almost to the foundation before intruding on his privacy. During the windstorms in August of ‘55 there had been heavy flooding in the front rooms of the old house, with heavy damage to the wide board floors. He did not learn of the situation until he left his desk at five o’clock. Mrs. Kleinschmidt, coping herself with the situation, had not even considered interrupting him. To her, his work was sacred.

Perhaps she was able to think so because she had never read his books or anyone else’s. She’d been an elderly widow when she came to work for them and looked now exactly as she had then, a wizened dumpling of a woman with an unquenchable passion for cleanliness. For years one of her sons drove her to the Markarian house four mornings a week and picked her up in the afternoons. When Anita divorced him, Mrs. Kleinschmidt had taken it harder than Hugh. “To leave a man such as you,” she muttered. “To do this.”

He suggested she move into a room in the house. “I was chust thinking these things,” she said. “In the car house there could be a room fixed up. The large room in the upstairs. This would be goot. The other, not so goot. These people, they chust look for such things. Then the tongues will wag. So why should the tongues wag?”

There were servants’ quarters on the second floor of the old carriage house and it had been simple enough to have carpenters fix up a bedroom and bathroom. She had insisted on bringing her own furniture from her son’s house and had seemed very comfortable there ever since. He had no idea what her living quarters looked like, having never been invited to visit them.

Although the thought of tongues wagging over himself and the little old woman had done nothing but amuse him, her idea was a good one for another reason. Another person in the house would have bothered him. This way he had as much privacy as he could have wished—the carriage house was not even in sight of the main house, screened by a thicket of white pine. And he had Mrs. Kleinschmidt nearby so that she could handle all of his housekeeping and shopping. He paid her a good salary and always wondered what she did with it. It did not seem to him that her personal expenditures could have amounted to as much as ten dollars a week.

He sat down at his desk, uncovered his typewriter. The machine was an IBM electric, the model with the little ball that moved magically along the page and somehow managed to print the proper letters as long as he touched the proper keys. At first it had seemed likely to drive him crazy. He hadn’t been able to get used to a machine without a moving carriage. He had had it three years now and its idiosyncrasies had long since come to seem perfectly natural.

It was a far cry from the broken-down Royal portable on which One If by Land had been systematically pounded out. But then this room, paneled in oak and lined with bookshelves, was at least as far a cry from the room on West Thirteenth Street.

Because it was the first of the month, there were things he had to do before he could begin the novel. He wrote out a check for one hundred and fifty dollars and addressed an envelope to his daughter Karen, at Northwestern University. His child-support obligations had legally ceased on Karen’s eighteenth birthday, but he had insisted on paying her college tuition and room and board costs. He had not said anything about incidental expenses; if Anita wanted to send the girl pocket money, he was not inclined to discourage her. But he himself sent a check directly to
her every month. This morning in particular he would have liked to tuck the check in the envelope and let it go at
that. But he had never done so before and would not do so now. Karen did not always acknowledge the checks, and
when she did it was with a brief and uninspired letter. He was unbothered by this. He himself had no taste for
 correspondence and wrote to no one regularly other than her. He enjoyed her company, indeed he delighted in it, but
he did not seek letters as a substitute for it.

He rolled a sheet of letterhead into the typewriter and tried to think of something to tell her. He would again
suggest that she might enjoy spending at least part of the summer in New Hope. But he would have to keep it a
suggestion and avoid giving it anything resembling the force of a command. There were a few things that had
happened recently around town she might find amusing. It was hard knowing just what kind of tack to take with her.
He never saw her more often than twice a year, and she was at an age where personality changes and growth in a
six-month period could be extraordinary.

From the day she was born he had loved her total and uncritical love, and it seemed to him that loved him in much
the same way. It was the totality of his love for her that paradoxically helped make the separation bearable. He was
confident of her: No matter how far away she was or how infrequently he was with her, she would always be his
daughter.

He began typing, hesitantly at first, then getting into the letter as he got into a piece of fiction. He covered almost
all of the page, took it from the typewriter, read it and signed it.

His other first-of-the-month tasks took little time and less attention. He cleared them up and readied himself for
work. He stacked a ream of fresh white bond paper at the right-hand side of the typewriter. He had not kept a carbon
copy when he wrote One If By Land because it had never occurred to him that you were supposed to. Three books
ago he had stopped keeping carbons. It was a nuisance, and he now felt that he could afford a couple of hundred
dollars to have the finished manuscript reproduce in quadruplicate by xerography.

He put the first sheet in the typewriter. In the left-hand corner he typed his name and the name and address of his
agent. Below it he typed the date followed by a dash; after it he would ultimately put the date on which the book was
completed. As he typed the date, the same bit of doggerel again went through his head. Hey, hey, the first of May—

He skipped halfway down the page for the title. He grinned suddenly and typed:

OUTDOOR FUCKING

by Hugh Markarian

He took the page out of the typewriter, looked at it, and laughed wholeheartedly. Still laughing, he crumpled the
piece of paper and dropped it in the wastebasket. The wastebasket was richly covered in leather; it had been a
Christmas gift several seasons ago, purchased by his agent from Dunhill’s for $79.95.

On West Thirteenth Street he had torn unsuccessful pages from the typewriter, wadded them viciously into a ball
and hurled them across the room. Sometimes that corner of the room had looked like the scene of a snow-storm.
Now he had a seventy-nine-dollar wastebasket for failed pages, and now far fewer of them had to be discarded and
redone.

Outdoor Fucking starts today. Why were the best jokes invariably ones which could not possibly be funny to
anyone else? But he already had a title. It had come to him several books ago but had never quite suited anything he
had written until now.

He again prepared a title page. His name, his agent’s name and address, the date. In the middle of the page he
typed:

THE EDGE OF THOUGHT

by Hugh Markarian

He read it through and was happy with it. He placed the title page to the left of the typewriter and prepared a
second page, this one containing the epigraph quotation. It was the first stanza of a poem by Josephine Miles and he
did not have to look it up in order to reproduce it. Later, when he got around to it, he could check the punctuation.

Here’s a gray afternoon, bleak as to freeze
The edge of thought like a hacksaw. Chinese
Die in the news, this wind on them
Cold as a garden… .

The title was good by itself. The context put it in perspective. And it seemed to fit the book he intended to write.
Of course the book might take its own shape, as all of his did to a greater or lesser extent. His present title could lose
its significance, or a more appropriate title might occur as the book grew.

On a third page he typed “(dedication).” He had not yet decided to whom the book would be dedicated so he left
the page otherwise blank and added it to the stack.
There were now three sheets to the left of the typewriter, and none of them represented any work on his part, but he had discovered that he was uncomfortable working on a book unless he had already prepared the front matter. He might discard or change all of it later on, but he could not write the first page of a novel until he had these other pages written.

He lit a cigarette, set it in the ashtray. By the day’s end the ashtray would be overflowing with butts, yet he would have smoked relatively little. When his work engrossed him, he would let cigarettes burn up unnoticed in the ashtray.

He typed “1.” in the top left corner of a fresh page. Halfway down he typed “Chapter One” and skipped a dozen lines. Page one, chapter one. Now what?

He lit a cigarette, having already forgotten the one burning a few inches from his elbow. He took a few drags from the new one and set it alongside the other. His fingers positioned themselves on the keyboard. The opening scene was clear enough in his mind. It was just a matter of deciding which of several ways to structure it.

For fifteen minutes he did nothing but sit with his eyes on the blank paper before him. Then he began typing, and for the next twenty minutes the typewriter was never silent for more than five or ten seconds at a time. After twenty minutes he lit a cigarette. By that time he was at the top of page four, and when he left his desk at three fifteen that afternoon there were a dozen more finished pages to the left of the typewriter and a dozen fewer blank sheets to the right.

Sometimes at night he would stay in the large stone house, reading and listening to records. His reading consisted of magazine pieces and nonfiction. He had discovered that he could not read novels while he was himself writing one. He knew writers who consciously avoided fiction while they were at work, fearing that another author’s style would adversely influence their own. This had never bothered Hugh. Instead, he found that he simply could not concentrate on another man’s book when his own was in progress. He was too conscious of style and technique. Characters seemed to lack depth, dialogue had no flavor, plot lines were impossible to remember. Between books he read voraciously, swallowing novels in huge gulps, but he could not do this while he was at work.

Other nights he went out. He needed people around him at such times, yet was too locked into his work to be of much use in conversation. He would go to Sully’s or the Logan Inn or one of several other bars. He would never drink heavily, but always had enough scotch in him so that sleep came easily by the time he returned home.

On such nights there would almost always be questions about his work. When was his next book coming out? That was easily answered but led to questions about its title and theme, and he disliked discussing one book while involved with another. He even more disliked discussing current work and simply refused to do so, explaining that if he talked about it it would go stale for him. How was the new book coming, then?

It was coming along, he would say.

Which was as much of an answer as existed, because he could not have said whether the book was going well or poorly. All he knew for certain was that it was continuing to get written, that the pile to the typewriter’s left was increasing while the pile to the right shrunk smaller.

Some days were good ones, when the pages seemed to write themselves. On those days he would have to force himself to stop when he had written twenty pages, the maximum he allowed himself in a single day. On other days he would enter his study at nine in the morning and it would be dark before he had finished his minimum of five pages. Some days every page that went into the typewriter wound up on the stack of finished copy. Other days there were three sheets in the wastebasket for every sheet he kept.

And later, when the book was done, no one including Hugh would be able to tell the easy work from the hard, the smooth pages that hurried their way to completion from the ones over which he sweated blood. The work itself was all of a piece. It made no sense to him, seemed as though it should not be that way, but it was so.

The summer after the divorce he lectured at a writers’ conference in New Hampshire. He had received similar invitations frequently in the past and had always regretted them, considering such conferences a waste of time for all concerned, the students at least as much as the instructors. He accepted this invitation because it was something to do and some place to go at a time when he was doing nothing and going nowhere. They paid his expenses and a fee of five hundred dollars, which they called an honorarium and which he alternately regarded as too much or too little.

The conference was about what he had expected. The other instructors included a lesbian poetess of whom he had never heard, a screenwriter who arrived drunk, gave one disastrous lecture and fled to the Coast, and a painfully earnest woman from Washington who wrote articles for general magazines. Hugh avoided them all. The students included some who, like Hugh, seemed to find the idea of a week in New Hampshire agreeable. Others really thought the conference would help their work, and they were as agonizingly sincere about it as the magazine writer. Finally there was a sprinkling of women who wanted to sleep with a successful author. Hugh could not imagine their reasons, but he obliged one a night for seven nights and spent the rest of his time drinking.

His lectures went over well enough. Idietically enough, his audience sat there taking meaningless notes while he
told them how to write novels. Afterward he couldn’t remember what he had told them, and hoped their memories were equally selective.

Because he had no idea how to write a novel.

There was a time when he thought there was a way. After the success of One If by Land he had had considerable second-novel trouble. He threw away one effort after another, ten pages of this and thirty pages of that and once a hundred pages that simply died on him. In desperation he began reading books purporting to tell how to write a novel.

Most of them were too vague to do any harm. But one had reduced the entire process to a systematic method which anyone with a typewriter could follow. First you drew a chart with all your characters and the relationship of each to the others. Then for each character you filled out a series of index cards with all their quirks and foibles and the details of their lives from cradle to grave. Then you did an outline of the entire book, indicating every scene and conversation. Then, with your chart and your index cards and your outline to guide you, you filled in the blanks and wrote the book.

He had proceeded as far as the index cards and had filled out a series about his lead character before he came to his senses and burned cards and chart in the fireplace. He also burned the book that had involved him in this idiocy, and other books of its ilk, and all the false starts he had thus far made on his second novel. Then he wrote the book as he had written One If by Land, by the simple method of putting the chair in front of the typewriter and his ass on the chair and going ahead and doing it.

He still didn’t know how he did it. From time to time he tried outlines, only to discard them as overly rigid once the book took on life of its own. All he knew now was that there was a magic that had to happen. The characters had to become real, had to speak their own lines to him so that he could put those lines on the paper.

The magic was not always there. His best books had parts that lacked it. His worst ones—the ones he liked least, which was no criterion of their critical or popular reception—always had parts that worked perfectly. Sometimes he thought the whole thing was illusory. There was no magic. You got the words down and part was good and part was bad and it didn’t matter what you did or how you did it.

For seventeen days he wrote every day. That was not uncommon for him at the beginning of a book; he dreaded breaking for a day for fear of losing the handle. In those seventeen days he wrote one hundred and eighteen pages. His novels normally ran close to eight hundred pages, sometimes longer. Cutting reduced this length by as much as a third in some cases, but several of them had been published virtually as written.

On the eighteenth day he sat at the desk and typed “119,” at the top of a page. For two hours he sat without typing anything further. It was time for a break, time to take a week or more off, and he had known it from the moment he had finished the previous day’s writing. He fought it because he could not begin a book without a fierce urge to see it finished, but he knew better than to fight it any longer. He was drained for the time being. He could not write what he could not imagine, and his imagination was out to lunch. He dropped page 119 in the wastebasket and covered his typewriter. It had not been covered once since he began the book.

He drove to Trenton, caught an express train to New York. He lunched with his agent, Mary Fradin, an intense woman who chainsmoked and consumed endless cups of strong black coffee. She had represented him far the past dozen years, inheriting him from Jerry Geller, who had retired to Florida and died within two months, presumably of boredom. On their first meeting after Geller’s retirement, she took him to Orsini’s and Downey’s, and he took her to the Algonquin and to bed. All night long conversation had been a trial, and little about her had appealed to him personally or professionally. He made a pass at her less out of desire than with the thought that she might recoil violently, providing him an excuse to find another agent. She surprised him twice, first by going to his room, then by revealing a talent and enthusiasm beyond his fondest dreams.

After the first time he lay back exhausted, too spent even to laugh at his own astonishment. She said, “Ready to sleep?”

“Uh-huh.”

“That’s what you think. You look better naked than I thought. A little pudgy, though. You should get more exercise out there in God’s country. Chop some wood, do you good, just like the song.”

“Song?”

“Never mind. Let me know if you don’t like any of this.”

“Any of what?”

“Shhhhh.”

She began to kiss and lick various parts of his body. For the most part these consisted of areas he had never considered erogenous zones, and for the most part he found out he’d been wrong. At the end he raised his head to watch her mouth working greedily on him. The expression on her face was the most erotic thing he had ever seen. And then at the very end he had to put his head down and close his eyes because the pleasure was too intense to be
borne.

“When you come good,” she said, “you like to make noise, don’t you?”

“Jesus.”

“And you thought you were ready to go to sleep. Now you can sleep.”

He sat up. “I’m not sure I can now.”

“Of course you can.” She was off the bed and dressing. “God, don’t tell me I shocked you. You should have figured. Cigarettes and coffee all day long. Very oral. Read your Uncle Sigmund. Something you should know, I don’t sleep with clients.”

“That’s why you’re going home now?”

“Correction, I don’t fuck clients. But you were obviously ready to look for someone else anyway, and I had the feeling we’d be good together.”

“So?”

“So don’t think you have to stay with me so we can do this again. Because if you do stay with me, it means we won’t do this again. Although I have the feeling we wouldn’t anyway. I don’t think you’ll want to.”

“I want to right this minute, and I haven’t—”

“Yes, right this minute, but you also have a wife and you’re not looking to get involved with anybody. You won’t pass up a quick jump but you don’t want an affair. Neither do I, as far as that goes. So don’t stay a client thinking we’ll do this on alternate Thursdays, because we won’t. At all. And for that matter don’t find a new agent because you think I’ll unzip your pants every time you walk into the office.”

“Why should I?”

“Why should you what?”

“Stay a client.”

“In twenty-five words or less? And without the bullshit? Because you were evidently satisfied with Jerry, and I’m twice as sharp as Jerry and a lot more honest. No, he never cheated you, but there were things he did that you never knew about. I’m not going to tell you what. I can get you as good terms as anyone and I’ll never give you any shit. And I’ll leave you alone. Jerry used to call you just to talk and I know you didn’t like it. He was your agent and I already know more about you than he ever did.”

“I never went to bed with Jerry. Anyway, that’s more than twenty-five words.”

“I don’t get paid by the word. Think it over.”

“I already did.”

“And?”

“Come to bed one more time and I’m your client far life.”

She looked at him. Then she said, “Well, I’ve done a lot crazier things,” and took off her clothes again. “I feel a little like a hooker, but that’s not the world’s worst feeling. What do you want to do?”

“What we just did.”

“You mean what I just did. I ought to be able to get on the Sullivan show with this. Don’t get used to it, Hugh, this is the last time for us.”

“Then make it a good one.”

She did, and it was the last time for them. She was, as far as he could tell, as good an agent as Jerry Geller had been. He stayed away from New York as much as possible, paid minimal attention to contracts and options, but over the years he had learned to trust her. It was possible that Jerry had been cheating him, and it was equally possible that she was cheating him, but there was that possibility with any agent. He trusted her.

Once, during the turmoil after the divorce, he had tried to get her to bed. She sidestepped neatly. “You don’t want me,” she told him. “You really don’t. I’m flattered, sweets, but I’m not what you want right now. But there’s a friend of mine you’ll love, and she’ll love you. Wait here while I make a phone call.”

“I couldn’t go through the getting-to-know-you number right now, Mary.”

“You won’t have to. I have senses about people. ESP. The two of you are going to take a look at each other and jump into bed. Just like that.”

She sent him to an apartment on East Fifty-fourth Street where a Eurasian girl met him at the door. He spent the next three days and nights in her bed. It was three months later that he found out the Eurasian girl was a hooker and Mary Fradin had picked up the tab. From then on there wasn’t a thing she could do wrong.

After lunch he walked her back to her office, then took a cab to his publishers. His editor showed him some rough flap copy and asked polite questions about the new book. Hugh gave him polite answers in return. His editor was under thirty and wore mod clothes, and could get excited talking about books by New Left activists and aspiring black writers until he remembered Hugh wasn’t interested in them any more than he was interested in Hugh. He left as quickly as he could and checked in at the Algonquin. Then he called a number he had called in the past and gave
his name and the hotel and room number and said he could take immediate delivery of fifty cases of hairpins.

He had just enough time to shower before the girl arrived. Half an hour later he gave her fifty dollars, and she left. He called downstairs for a bottle of Grant’s and some ice and soda. He drank and watched television for four hours, then called the same number again with the same request.

The woman on the other end of the line read it back in a finishing school accent, then stopped abruptly. “Wait a minute, was something the matter with Trina?”

“That was hours ago,” he said.

“You just get off a ship?”

“A nuclear submarine. Three years under the ocean.”

“I guess.”

In fifteen minutes a second girl arrived. He thought at first that she looked something like Trina, then realized that he had forgotten what Trina looked like. In any case she was attractive enough to fill his needs, as Trina had been. She was less hurried than Trina, accepted a drink, and made a certain amount of conversation in and out of bed. It was almost an hour after her arrival when she took her fifty dollars and left.

He tried to get to sleep but couldn’t. He was drunk but not drunk enough for sleep and he did not want to drink any more. He sat on the edge of the bed and looked at himself in the mirror on the closet door. He wasn’t crazy about what he saw.

He had noticed at lunch that Mary Fradin had gray in her hair. Well, he was getting gray in his beard lately. They were none of them getting younger. His editor talked reverently about One If by Land, whether he had really read it or not. His editor had been born in 1942 and had been three years old when the war ended, the war that One If by Land was about. Worse, his editor gave the impression of knowing nothing about anything that had taken place before his own brief lifetime; as if anything much more ancient than yesterday was unimportant.

He smoked cigarettes and made another drink without wanting it. He had had a number of affairs since the divorce, but only two of them had been of any substance. Twice he had lived with women, once for three months, once for almost a year. Twice they had moved into the old stone house, and each time their entrance and ultimate exit was tactfully unremarked by Mrs. Kleinschmidt. Tongues might wag all they wanted, evidently, but so they did not wag about her.

In each instance he had seen marriage as an eventual outcome, though both times he had wanted to be very sure before letting it go that far. And in each instance the relationship had run its course and then broken down. No hard feelings, no regrets or bitterness on either side. Smiles at parting. Cards at Christmas. He had even slept again with one of the two women a year and a half after they separated. It was nothing important at the time and convinced him it had been nothing important before.

He reached for the phone and found himself starting to dial the same number a third time. The act had been involuntary and scared him. He cradled the phone and forced himself to lie down. He did not want another whore.

He had not wanted the first two, much as he had seemed to need them. He wanted a woman.

He wanted Anita. He had always wanted her and always would, and of course he knew it. But that was one of a great many things he tried not to think about.

He woke up in the morning. When he ordered breakfast he also asked them to send up a tin of aspirin and a double Bloody Mary. He went back to Trenton on the Metroliner and his headache was gone by the time he boarded the train.

He spent the next few days as he spent most nonworking days. He drove into New Hope one day and Doylestown another, wandering the streets, looking in store windows, talking to friends and strangers. He drank coffee in his kitchen and half listened to Mrs. Kleinschmidt’s endless stories about various friends and relatives. He could not keep the people straight in her stories and did not try to, as there was no point. Her stories all lacked a time element; she would tell him an anecdote as if it had happened yesterday, and he would later learn it had taken place fifty years ago, and that the daring young people in the story were now sitting on porches while their arteries hardened. Most of her stories concerned people long dead, some of them local characters who had died in her childhood, but her reminiscences all had the flavor of current gossip. Years ago he had learned to let her conversation wash over him, neither listening nor not listening to it. It was astonishing how much of what she said, not consciously noted at the time, would later find its way into one of his books. On more than a few occasions he had realized after the fact that a bit of plot material or a scrap of background he had thought he was inventing had in fact derived from something the old woman had said.

In the morning after breakfast or in the evening when the sky was still bright he would walk over his property. Eighteen years ago his land had been a farm, neglected for a time but still identifiable as such. The back land was clear pasture to within less than a hundred yards of the creek, where the woods began. With surprising speed the woods had moved up toward the garden behind the house. In ten years’ time the whole meadow had become a
young forest of red cedar. Now the cedar forest was rapidly evolving into a hardwood forest; oak and maple seedlings shot up above the short-lived cedars, and as they matured and shaded the cedars they would take over completely. There were deer in the woods, and in season there were hunters who would not be deterred by the signs he posted every autumn. There were also foxes and rabbits and pheasants, and muskrats lived in the creek bed. Now the grackles were nesting, and nine out of ten of the cedars had nests in their branches. He walked through his woods and felt the special pleasure he had felt so many times before and knew as he had always known that he could not sell this land.

It did not belong to him nearly so much as he belonged to it. For the first two years he had tried to maintain it himself, mowing and planting and pruning with furious energy. He would put in farmer’s hours at these tasks, but when a book took hold, he could put in no time at all. When he wrote he could think of nothing but the book on which he was working and would go weeks without walking over his land, let alone working on it. A garden could not be thus neglected, and eventually he had hired gardeners. They had been busy this spring, and he walked through the beds of flowers and shrubbery and noted the changes. The towering Kieffer pear was in bloom at the kitchen door. Late daffodils vied with the earliest tulips. Most of those flowers were bulbs he had planted. In eighteen years there had not been an autumn when he had not put at least a few bulbs into the ground.

On one afternoon almost a week after his trip to New York he returned from a walk in the woods just as a car pulled into the driveway. One of the rear doors opened and a girl emerged carrying a suitcase. The driver rounded the circular driveway and headed back toward town and the girl approached the house. She was on the doorstep before he recognized his daughter.

He was at the side of the house as this happened, and he hurried forward and called to her. She turned to him still holding the suitcase, and her face broke out in a smile that made his chest ache. They met in front of the living room window and embraced.

He said, “Did you write? I never got your letter. You should have called.”

“I thought I’d surprise you.”

“I’ve never had a better surprise. You cut your hair.”

“I got tired of it.”

“Let me see. Well, it was lovely long, but I can understand why you got bored with it.”

“I mean, everybody had long hair.”

“I know.” He stepped back and looked at her. “You know, when you got out of the car I didn’t recognize you. I wondered who was the beautiful girl and what she was doing here. You grow more beautiful every time I see you.”

“You just think so because I look like you.”

“That’s what they tell me, but it looks better on you. How long are you staying?”

“I don’t know. All I know is I’m here.”

“Well, I’ll settle for that. How did you get here?”

“Oh, wow. I was in New York and I took a bus to Flemington and hitched a ride to Lambertville and walked across the bridge and looked around for someone I knew to give me a ride, and I didn’t see anyone I knew. That’s weird, growing up in a town and all of a sudden there’s nobody around that you know.”

“You still know a lot of people here. Last summer—”

“Well, they weren’t around today. I took a cab.”

“It’s a shame you took a cab. You should have called me, but I guess that would have blunted the surprise. What were you doing in New York?”

“Let’s go inside, okay? I want to sit down in your chair and put my feet up. I hope you still have that chair.”

“Of course I do.”

He carried her suitcase. They went into the living room where she sat in his reclining chair. He called in Mrs. Kleinschmidt and the woman made just the right amount of fuss over the girl before retiring to the kitchen. He made himself a drink and was sitting down himself before he thought to ask Karen if she wanted one.

“I don’t—actually I think I will. If it’s all right.”

“Of course it’s all right. What would you like?”

“I don’t know. I don’t drink much.”

“Well, this is an occasion. Scotch and water?”

“Just scotch.”

“Ice?”

“Just plain.”

He poured two fingers of scotch in a glass and took it to her. He went to get his own glass for a toast but before he could turn around she had tossed off her drink and was grimacing.

“You don’t have to drink it like that,” he said mildly.
“I just wanted to—I don’t know.”
“What’s the matter, kitten?”
“I don’t know.”
“How was school?”
“Fine.”
“You’re happy there? Because you can always transfer, you know.”
“Daddy.”
He looked at her, and for a moment her face was twelve years old again.
“Go on, kitten.”
“I just don’t know,” she said, miserably.
“Anyway you want.”
“I can’t decide whether to be nice or honest.”
“Which would you rather someone were to you?”
“Honest, but it might not be the same if I was a parent.”
“I was a kid once.”
“You were, weren’t you?” She patted her pockets, asked for a cigarette. He gave her one and lit it for her. Two years ago he had seen her smoking for the first time, and she had acted as if she had been puffing cigarettes all her life.

She said, “I had it all worked out in my mind. I would come down here and be Little Mary Sunshine for a couple of days and everything would be cool, but I don’t want to play games with you. I can put on an act with Mother and Gregory because I’ve been doing it for years, but not with you.”

“You don’t have to, kitten.”

“I know I don’t, but do I have to lay a whole trip on you? That’s the question.” She worked on the cigarette in silence. Then she said, “I didn’t do too well in school.”

“Exams didn’t go very well?”
“Next week is exam week, Daddy.”
“I see. Of course you’ve decided not to go back.”
“I couldn’t pass them anyway. No, you might as well have the whole thing. Then we can play out some shitty scene and I’ll get on a bus in the morning. I dropped out of school—I don’t know, three months ago? Something like that. Sometime after the start of the semester. I had just had it with that place.”

“But you weren’t in New York all that time. Unless you had mail forwarded—”

“No. I was in Evanston.”
“They let you stay in the dorm?”
“I wasn’t in the dorm.”

“Oh.”

“I was in this sort of commune off campus. Not exactly a commune, we called it that but it wasn’t a real commune. Just a house in town that somebody rented and a bunch of us were living there.”

“I see.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, I think so. You dropped out and you were shacking up with a guy and experimenting with drugs and you want to feed me this a spoonful at a time because you’re afraid it will shock me.”

“Just grass, if you call that a drug. There were other things around but we stayed away from them.”

“I’m just as glad to hear that.”

“And I wasn’t exactly living with a guy. We weren’t into a monogamy thing. So you could say I was shacking up with four guys, if you wanted to use that term.”

“Well, one term’s as good as the next.”

“I suppose so. You are shocked, ain’t you?”

He made a fresh drink. Before answering the question aloud he tried to answer it in his own mind. He said, “I am, but probably not in precisely the way you think. I wonder how I can explain it. When I called to you and you looked at me with your face beaming I held out my arms to you. I don’t know if you noticed. And I realize now that I expected you to fly across the gravel and throw yourself into my arms the way you did years ago. But of course you didn’t because you’re—I was going to say a woman, and I’m not sure that’s accurate. It doesn’t matter. You’re an older girl than the one who would run crazily and leap at me. I’m your father, Karen, and that means for the rest of my life I’ll always tend to remember you as a child and I’ll always tend to think of you as younger than you actually are. So I am shocked, but not because I disapprove of anything you’ve done. I may disapprove of it and I may not but that’s beside the point. I’m shocked because you’ve changed and of course it would be infinitely worse if you
hadn’t changed, but nevertheless it takes getting used to. Did you follow any of that?”

“I think so.”

“I can’t judge you, kitten. I only see you on special occasions. Perhaps your mother can judge you, and I’m by no means sure of that, but I can’t.”

“I wouldn’t have told her any of this.”

“That’s something else again.”

“I went to New York for an abortion. No, I’m all right, there was nothing to it. I was pregnant and I had the money and I took care of it, and I’m fine. I didn’t feel bad about the abortion. All I feel bad about is getting pregnant in the first place.”

“There are ways to avoid it, you know.”

“I know, but the Pill only works if you remember to take it.” She grinned suddenly. “From now on I’ll remember.”

“That’s a good idea. All right, if there’s any more to the confessional period I might as well hear it now. You dropped out of school and you’re not a virgin, and you had an abortion and what else? You’ve got ‘Property of Hell’s Angels’ tattooed on your behind.”

“Who told you?”

“Oh, it was in all the papers. Hey.”

“What?”

“I missed you. And you look good. From what you said it doesn’t sound as though you should, but you do.”

“So do you.”

“What are your plans? Assuming you have any.”

“I don’t exactly.”

“What are your inexact plans? Back to Evanston?”

“No, there’s nothing there for me. I thought I would go back to New York.”

“What’s there in that rotten town?”

“I know some people there, sort of.”

“You could spend the summer here, you know.”

“That’s what I was hoping. That’s why I came here to begin with, hoping I could stay here awhile. The only thing is I don’t know if I can.”

“Of course you can.”

“Can I?” Her eyes challenged him. “What you said. I’m not a little kid. I’m used to living a certain way, having a certain amount of freedom.”

“There are no bars on the windows, Karen.”

“I might, you know, stay out all night.”

“I think I could live with that.”

“I might even want to bring someone home with me.”

“Well, I occasionally bring someone home myself. I won’t get upset if you don’t.”

“Do you really mean it?”

“I think so, yes. You have the right to live your own life, Karen. I can’t think why you shouldn’t have the right inside this house as well as out of it. What’s so funny?”

“I was picturing the four of us at breakfast. You and someone and me and someone. Do you have someone in particular?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Well, whoever she is, remind her to take her pill. You mean it, don’t you? I can stay here?”

“Oh, baby,” he said.
SEVEN

Sully closed the bar a little earlier than usual. The crowd was light, and on such nights he rarely remained open until the legal closing hour. While the few remaining customers finished their drinks he approached one of the waitresses and told her to stick around afterward, he wanted to talk to her. He spoke in a low voice and talked out of the side of his mouth.

“I don’t know,” she said, but he was already walking away and gave no sign of having heard her.

When everyone else had gone he took her in his arms and kissed her. She did not exactly resist but he felt the stiffness of her shoulders. She was a big South Philadelphia girl with high Slavic cheekbones and a flat forehead. He put a hand on her back between her shoulder blades and ran it slowly down to her buttocks. He drew her toward him, kissing her mouth again, and the lower part of her body first moved against him, then pushed stubbornly back against his hand.

He released her. “C’mon,” he said.

“I don’t know about this.”

He ignored her and she followed him to his office. It was a small room that contained a heavy Mosler safe, a small maple kneehole desk with matching chair, three other straight chairs, and a long, deep sofa upholstered in dark-red plush. The walls were bare except for two calendars from liquor distributors and a few dozen eight-by-ten glossy photos. Periodically a minor celebrity would present Sully with an autographed photo. He always responded with effusive thanks and a drink on the house, and later he pinned the unframed photo to his office wall and forgot about it.

He closed and locked the office door and spread a towel on the couch. The girl watched him do this, her face stolid and expressionless. “I don’t know,” she said again.

He straightened up from the couch and grinned at her. “What do you have to know? You want a drink?”

“No.” “C’mere.”

“Just like that.”

“Look, don’t stay if you don’t want to.”

“And find some place else to work, huh.”

“Did I ever say that? What the hell’s the matter with you tonight?”

“Maybe I got my monthly.”

“Not you. Your forehead breaks out when you get your period.” She flushed. “Give me credit, I notice things. You want to go, the door’s over there. But don’t give me maybe you got your monthly.”

He went over and embraced her again. When he touched her breast she began to respond and was on the point of letting herself go. Then she went rigid and he let go of her and looked at her. She wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“You enjoyed yourself the other times,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“So what’s different now?”

“What’s different is I been seeing this person.”

“So?”

“So he wouldn’t like it.”

“Tell you what. I won’t tell him if you don’t.”

“I’m seeing him later tonight. You probably know who it is.”

“I probably do, and his shift don’t end until four so you got the time.”

“That’s him.”

“Listen, he’s married himself. You think he’s saving it all for you? Because why kid yourself?”

“I don’t know. Going from you to him.”

“You even got time for a shower in between, kid.” He reached for her confidently, put one hand on her shoulder and the other between her legs. Her eyes closed and the muscles in her jaw went slack. “Just tell me this don’t do a thing for you,” he said, “and you can walk right out the door.”

“Oh, shit,” she said. “Who am I kidding?” He let her go, and she began unbuttoning her uniform.

He dropped her at her rooming house in Lambertville and drove back across the river to his own house. The lights were on in the living room and bedroom. When he put the car in the garage he saw that her little red Alfa-Romeo was missing. He went directly to the bedroom and looked immediately in the closet. Her dresses were still there. That meant she would be back.

He switched on the television set and sat down on the bed to watch it. There was a remote-control unit, and he switched from channel to channel for fifteen minutes but couldn’t pay attention to any of it. He went downstairs and
poured some applejack and sat in the living room in front of the picture window, sipping applejack and waiting.

At three o’clock he went upstairs and got into bed. When he gave up and put on the light it was not quite three thirty. He’d thought it was much later. He got up and put on pajamas and a robe and went downstairs, but after a few minutes he felt uncomfortable dressed that way and went upstairs to change back into the clothes he had worn earlier. Then he returned to the living room to wait for her.

A few nights ago he had come home to an unlit house. He had undressed silently in the darkness and got in bed beside her. He was almost asleep when she spoke his name.

He said, “Hell, I tried not to wake you.”

“I was awake.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“No, I didn’t.” She put on the bedside lamp, “We have to talk.”

“In the morning, huh?”

“I was thinking you should see a doctor.”

“Come on, don’t give me all that in the middle of the night. I break my back all day—”

“Well, it’s either you or me, and you say it isn’t me, so who does that leave? So maybe you see a doctor, and he gives you a shot of something and it’s all right again.”

“It doesn’t work that way.”

“Look, are you a doctor? How do you know?”

“I don’t have to see a doctor. It’s a temporary thing, it happens to everybody. Look, Melanie, you get satisfaction, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but you don’t.”

“So maybe that’s my problem.”

“And it’s not my problem knowing I can’t do a thing for my own husband? That’s not my problem?”

“Jesus, how many times do I have to tell you—”

“Have you had this problem before, Sully?”

He hesitated, but only briefly. “Well, of course I have. After a certain age it happens to everybody from time to time. A youngster in his twenties, that’s all he thinks about. You get older and other things get on your mind, business and taxes and one thing or another, and on top of working hard you can’t unwind and for a while, you got a problem. That’s all there is to it. Now can we get some sleep?”

They left it at that, but he got little sleep that night. There were more questions that she had not asked but would not forget. And now he sat in the darkened living room waiting for her and wondering what he would say to her when she came home. The sky was light when her little sports car turned into the driveway, and he was still sitting there and still had thought of nothing to say.

He met her at the door. She told him he shouldn’t have waited up for her.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he said.

“Aren’t you going to ask?”

“What should I ask? All right, I’m asking.”

“Well, you already know the answer. You know what I did, you just don’t know who with.”

“Who was it?”

“I’m not going to tell you that. It doesn’t matter anyway, does it?”

“No, I don’t suppose it does,” he said. He walked away from her and sat down on the living-room couch with his hands cupped over his knees. She followed him and sat in a chair across from him. He said, “I hope you enjoyed yourself.”

“Sure, I enjoyed myself.”

“That’s good.”

“He wasn’t as good as you, but I enjoyed myself. And he enjoyed himself, and I needed that.”

“Yeah, I suppose you did.”

“So now you got an excuse,” she said. He looked al her. “To divorce me. I went out like a tramp and got screwed all night and now you got an excuse to divorce me. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“No. No, that’s not what I wanted.”

“I’m not so sure of that.”

“Is that what you want? A divorce?”

“What I want is for you to want to screw me, and you won’t, so let’s not talk about what I want.”

“I told you—”

“I know what you told me. You told me a lot of shit about business and taxes. All your headaches, but you only get those headaches at home. Those headaches don’t get in the way when you’re with one of your other girls.”
“I don’t have any other girls.”
“I know I’m stupid, Sully, but you can’t think I’m stupid enough to believe that. Don’t you think I know you better than that? You’ll fuck anything that’s warm. You’ve had your girls since we were married. I always knew about it.”
“And it didn’t bother you?”
“Just at the beginning, but I got over it right away. I knew what you were like before I married you. And I thought why the hell should it bother me when you and I had such a good thing going. You always had it for me, so if you had some left over for the rest of the world that was your business. Wait a minute. Jesus, I’m stupid, all right.”
“What?”
“This always happens, doesn’t it? With your other three wives. The same thing. All of a sudden they don’t turn you on anymore. It’s not you trading them in when you’re bored. It’s you not being able to do anything and then the whole thing goes to hell from that point. Tell me if I’m wrong.”
He had closed his eyes and he kept them closed now. “You’re not wrong.”
“Something else I just realized, and I’ll bet I’m right. You never wanted a divorce. You don’t want to divorce me and you didn’t want to divorce them. It was their idea.”
He nodded.
“Tell me something else. You never had this conversation with any of them, did you?”
“No.”
“Well, that’s something.”
“It is? Why?”
“I’m not sure but it is. I’m gonna make some coffee. You want a cup? I’ll just make instant.”
“If you’re having some.”
When she brought the coffee she sat beside him on the couch. After awhile she said, “There’s doctors for kind of thing, too. You know. Psychiatrists.”
“They don’t do any good.”
“You tried?”
“With my first wife I would of tried anything. The guy kept asking me all this crap about my childhood. Things I couldn’t remember if my life depended on it. Finally he told me the one sensible thing he ever said, which was that I should try it with another girl and see if it was the same. By that time I had already figured that out for myself and I tried it and I was my usual self. So I decided that it had to be her, something gone wrong between us.”
“And when it happened the second time? With your second wife, I mean.”
“Then I had to face facts, that it was me.”
She put her cup down and turned to him. “This is very interesting,” she said. “I’m glad we’re talking. You ever have trouble with other girls?”
“Never.”
“It always works. They don’t have to do anything special or anything.”
“All they have to do is be there.”
“Uh-huh.”
“Same as it used to be with us.”
She looked at him thoughtfully for a long moment, then turned away and sipped coffee. Without looking at him she said, “Truth time. Do you want a divorce?”
“No. Unless you do, in which case you’ve got it. For me, no.”
“Even if I screwed a guy tonight?”
“Even if you did. I hate it that you did, but what right have I got?”
“Suppose I made a habit of it.”
“You mean with one particular guy?”
“No, I don’t mean with one particular guy and I don’t mean walking around town with a mattress on my back. I mean doing what you do.”
“Sauce for the goose,” he said.
“Not exactly, but I’ll tell you, I needed what I got tonight.”
“Uh-huh. Well, as to how would I feel, I don’t know how to answer you. As far as people talking I never paid attention yet, but how I’d feel, hell, I don’t know.”
“I don’t know.” She got to her feet. “I’m kinda sleepy,” she said. “How about you?”
“I don’t know. Tired, but I don’t know if I could sleep. But I know I should. I’ll come up with you.”
He lay in bed beside her trying to figure out how he felt. It was a strange feeling and he could not understand it. She had been with another man and he felt that it ought to bother him more than it did. It was on his mind, it was
very much on his mind, yet it did not genuinely bother him, and he wondered why that should be.

After awhile he said, “You won’t tell me who it was?”

“No. Would you tell me who was the last girl you laid?”

“You tell me and I’ll tell you. No, come to think of it, I see what you mean. Tell me this. Do I know him?”

“I don’t know who you know and who you don’t know.”

“Well, tell me who he is and I’ll clear that little point up for you. Just joking. Where did you go with him?”

“A motel.”

“Meaning he’s married. If people stopped fucking each other’s wives they’d take motels and make parking lots out of them. Was he good? You already said he was good. What motel did you go to?”

“So you can check the register?”

“Jesus, I wouldn’t do that. I don’t even know why I asked. I was just trying to picture it.”

“Well, just picture me in a room with somebody and let it go at that.”

“How many times?”

She sat up. “Hey, what is this?”

“How many times did he screw you?”

“What do you want to know that for? Twice.”

“Two times. You come both times? I guess you did, enjoying it that much.”

She was silent for a few moments. Then she said, “I came the first time and not the second time. I don’t have to come to enjoy it.”

“He go down on you?”

“Next time I’ll take movies. I don’t—”

“Did he or didn’t he?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“Some gentleman you picked. How about you? You go down on him?”

“Jesus, I don’t believe it. Yes, as a matter of fact I did. What’s the next question? Was he circumcised? Yes, he was. Did he come in my mouth? No, he didn’t. I don’t get it with these questions.”

“I don’t get it myself,” he said. A few minutes later he touched her arm and said, “Come here a minute.”

“I was just falling asleep.”

“Not until you see the present I brought you.”

He took her hand and put it on his penis.

“Well, what do you know about that?” she said. “Where did that come from?”

“Damned if I know. Is two times all you can handle tonight, or do you want to see what happens?”

“Let’s see what happens.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

Afterward she lit a cigarette and offered it to him. He shook his head. She took another drag and put it out.

She said, “What did it?”

“Damned if I know.”

“Thinking about me with him? That must of been what did it.”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Well, whatever it was, I’m not complaining. Tell me something and make it the absolute truth.”

“Did this ever happen before? That’s the question, isn’t it? The answer is no, it never did.”

“Once you couldn’t make it with them, you could never make it at all.”

“Right.”

“Then I wonder what it means.”

“Beats me,” he said.
EIGHT

One Sunday Linda met Tanya in the hall. The actress had just closed Bill Donatelli’s door. “He wants to get some painting done,” she said. “He says I distract him.”

“I imagine you do.”

“I wanted him to paint me. He only does abstracts, but I thought I could pose nude and he could look at me while he painted an abstract, and it would give him inspiration. He said it always gave him the wrong kind of inspiration.”

“I didn’t know he ever said that many words all at once.”

“Billie talks to me. He’s very shy with most people, but he talks to me. By the way, I guess you took my advice.”

“What advice was that?”

“About, you know, physical needs.”

She was confused at first, her mind fixating on a conversation she had had with someone recently who had been trying to convince her of the virtues of organic vitamins and a vegetarian diet. Then she remembered Tanya’s theories of sexual requirements. Her advice, as far as Linda could remember, was that she ought to go out and get laid.

She said, “What makes you think I took your advice?”

“Well, I’m not saying it was anything I said that made you change your mind. It was a matter of speaking. You know, to make conversation. Not that I had anything to do with what you’re doing.”

“What am I doing?”

“You’re sleeping with Peter Nicholas.”

“I’m what?”

“Sleeping with—”

“Where did you hear that?”

“You’re not?”

(Of course not. Who told you that?)

“Gee, Linda, don’t bite my head off. Nobody told me anything. It’s just that he’s up here all the time two of you spending so much time together Gretchen the way she is and I put two and together.”

“First you have to know how to add.”

“Linda—”

“Because I know it must be news to you, but it’s possible for a man and a woman to spend time together with, out having sex together. That may come as a shock to you. Two people in a room without so much as a television set and yet they manage to keep their clothes on. Strange as it may seem—”

“Linda, what did I do?”

The girl looked on the point of tears. “I’m sorry, Tanya,” she said.

“I mean I didn’t do anything.”

“I know you didn’t, and I’m sorry. It just threw me. Peter’s the one person I can relax with completely, the one man, because he wants my company but doesn’t want anything more than that.”

“Well, I didn’t know, Linda.”

“I hope you didn’t say anything to anybody.”

“Of course not. Well, except for Billie.”

“I guess the secret’s safe with him, since you’re the only human being he talks to. Not that there’s a secret to be kept safe.”

It was two nights before she saw Peter. She was on the point of mentioning Tanya’s conversation to him and his mood changed her mind. Gretchen had had a bad day and when Gretchen had a bad day, Peter wound up in a bad mood.

Often she thought how unusual was her own special perspective on the situation. No one heard so much about the ups and downs of Gretchen Vann and spent so little time with the woman. She was often invited to stop at their apartment or to accompany them to the Raparound. At first she had tended to accept those invitations, and then she began to find excuses to decline them. She baby-sat for them occasionally, enjoying Robin’s company and happy to do them a favor, but she spent less and less time in Gretchen’s actual company.

The woman made her uncomfortable. She recognized this before she knew why. Gretchen was brittle and unstable, an enervating companion on her best days, but that didn’t explain it. Later she sorted it out. She didn’t like Gretchen’s company because Gretchen disliked her, and ultimately she guessed the reason for Gretchen’s dislike. It was suddenly obvious.

“Gretchen doesn’t like me,” she told Peter. “No, I’m serious, she doesn’t.”
“It’s just her way.”
“It’s more than that. God knows she has the right to like and dislike whomever she wants. But when I know someone dislikes me I can’t enjoy their company much.”
“Why would she—”
“Because she’s jealous.”
“Of you?”
“That’s not the point.”
“Of you and me.”
He was incredulous. “But that’s ridiculous!”
“Of course it is, but she doesn’t think so.”
“She knows we talk all the time, she knows it’s innocent, she never says anything—”
“And she can’t stand me. Didn’t she pull a scene awhile ago with Warren Ormont?”
“I don’t think that was jealousy, for God’s sake.”
“Well, you said he’s always making a play for you.”
“Oh, that’s just Warren’s way.”
“Yes, that’s Warren’s way and the other is Gretchen’s way. She doesn’t like Warren or me because she’s jealous, and of course it’s ridiculous but that doesn’t change the way she feels. Peter, she’s fifteen years older than you. That might not matter to either of you and there’s no reason why it has to but don’t think she’s ever going to forget about it. She’s not able to forget it. And the fact that I’m older than you myself won’t mean anything to her, because all she can see is that I’m still ten years younger than she is.”

He thought it over. “I guess I ought to stop inviting you to join us, then.”
“I don’t think that was jealousy, for God’s sake.”
“Darling, we have to stop meeting like this.”
“No, I won’t buy that. That’s a little too much.”

Well, at least don’t keep telling her how relaxed we are with one another and how easy it is for us to talk to each other. We are and it is, and the reason is we’re friends and couldn’t ever be more than friends. Gretchen is never going to see it that way.”
“You may have a point there.”

So she still kept posted on Gretchen’s emotional equilibrium but saw very little of it first hand. Item: Gretchen was off speed completely and clean. Item; Gretchen was cutting down on the tranquilizers. Item: Gretchen was working and the work was going well. Item: Gretchen was not satisfied with the work. Item: Gretchen had yelled at Robin. Item: Gretchen had met him after the play and they had gone to Sully’s with some members of the company, and she had handled herself very well. Item: Gretchen had been very good with Robin and seemed to be taking a genuine interest in the child for the first time in a long time. Item: Gretchen was drinking. Item: Gretchen was still drinking but seemed to be able to handle it. Item: Gretchen had left Robin alone for three hours one afternoon. Item: Gretchen had gone drunk to her shop on the Towpath, where she smashed the piece of work she had been so proud of, along with all her other ceramic work and various craft items on consignment from other artisans.

There was one item after another, until sometimes Linda wondered if she really wanted to be kept so well posted on Gretchen’s rise and fall. Peter’s own views on Gretchen (and Gretchen’s Problem) varied with whether the most recent item was good or bad. When it was good his optimism was heartwarming, if not precisely contagious; Linda doubted the woman would ever achieve anything approaching stability. When the item was on the minus side, Peter would turn moody and introspective, admitting that Gretchen and he and Robin in the bargain, were trapped in an up-and-down cycle that had no end to it.

While she sometimes found Gretchen less than fascinating as a primary topic of conversation, she never tried to change the subject at those times when Peter needed someone to talk to. He could talk to her, and evidently could talk as intimately to no one else. His confidences concerned the present, or at least were limited in time to the extent of his relationship with Gretchen. Her own, on the other hand, hardly ever concerned the present, or even the immediate past. When she felt the need to talk she was more likely to speak of something that had happened in childhood or adolescence or, on one occasion, of her marriage to Alan. At such times he was more than an interested listener. Without seeming to probe, he could draw her out so that she could say the things she wanted or needed to say.

They were friends, and yet they were more than friends because they performed a service for one other which transcended simple friendship. She thought it might be said that they played a mutually psychoanalytic role with one other, the part of therapist shuttling back and forth between them. Or was that a common function of friendship? She had never had that sort of friendship before, but then she wondered if any of her past associations had been a true friendship at all. She thought of Olive McIntyre as a friend, felt that she could turn to the woman if she ever had to,
enjoyed her company immensely, and yet Olive’s conversation comprised little more than a compendium of the most scandalous Bucks County gossip of the past several decades. Linda enjoyed it well enough, found it increased her sense of belonging in and to the town, but she could not reply in kind and indeed barely replied at all. A conversation with Olive was essentially a monologue.

It did not fail to amuse her that her first genuine friend in twenty-seven years was a young former homosexual living with a thirty-seven-year-old emotional basket case.

She was at the shop on a midweek afternoon when a man walked in and began to browse the shelves. He looked faintly familiar, but after a second look she decided it was the type that was familiar and not the individual. He looked around forty-five and had a vaguely professorial aspect to him. He wore an Irish tweed jacket with leather elbow patches and a pair of faded chinos. He had glasses with heavy rims and a small beard confined to his chin and upper lip. He carried but was not smoking a large briar pipe with a curved stem.

She noticed that much about him and then ignored him, because she knew he was not going to buy anything. She could not automatically spot a buyer, that was impossible, but she could identify a non-buyer, and he was definitely one. He had time to kill and was killing it in the Lemon Tree. That was all right, and might lead to a sale sometime in the future, but it meant she could safely ignore him unless he happened to request her attention. She did so, returning to the novel she had been reading.

“Why waste your time on Markarian?”

She looked up at the interruption. It was the man with the patched elbows and he was pointing to her book.

“I realize he’s local talent in these parts,” he continued. “But that’s no reason to subject yourself to that garbage. Which one is that? Caleb’s House. I think I missed that one, praise be to God.”

Gratuitous conversation was one of the hazards of the job. Sometimes, if you ignored these people, they went away. She nodded pleasantly and said, “I see,” and turned her eyes back to the page. But he didn’t go away. She had rather thought he wouldn’t.

“You read much of his stuff?”

“I think I read one or two others.”

“Glutton for punishment. Enjoying that one?”

“It’s interesting.”

“Cardboard characters and predictable themes. A book a year out of his assembly line, and every year he writes more and more about less and less. What do you like about him?”

This was annoying. She kept her eyes on the page and said, “He takes my mind off things that bore me.”

“By boring you in black and white? That’s a small blessing. What do you like about his books?”

“The stories are interesting. In this one, anyway. I get interested in what happens to the people. I’m not an intellectual.”

“Whatever that means.”

“Whatever it means, I’m not one. I gather you are.”

He grinned. “I suppose I come closer to the category than Hugh Markarian, for whatever that’s worth. He did write one good book, though.”

“Did he.”

“You must have read it. One If by Land.”

“I haven’t read it.”

“His first novel, the war novel. Of course you read it.”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“The World War Two novel.”

“I’m not really interested in World War Two.” She looked up from the book and made her expression as unpleasant as she knew how. “It’s one of the things that bore me. There are other things.”

He seemed immune to insult. “In that case I’ll tell you a secret. One If by Land is even worse than the rest of his swill. The critics are just denser than the reading public, that’s all. You’re lucky you never read it. Have the sense to stay away from it”

And he left.

He returned the next day about the same time, wearing the same jacket and carrying what looked like the same pipe. She was within twenty pages of the end of Caleb’s House when he popped in.

“I see you’re still wasting your time with the same mind rot,” he said. “At least it’s a library copy, and you’re not contributing to his royalties.”

She raised her eyes and gazed benevolently at him. “I think you’re making a mistake,” she said.

“How so?”

“Confusing the author with his books.”
“Oh, I’m willing to concede he may be a decent enough fellow. That’s neither here—"

“No, it’s the other way around.”

“Oh?"

“I think so,” she said, thoughtfully. “After what you said yesterday I read the rest of the book more carefully. With the idea of trying to figure out the man who wrote it.”

“And what did you figure out?”

“That his books are a great deal better than he is. And that what might seem to be flaws or weaknesses in his writing are just the flaws of his own personality coming out.”

“How so?”

“Oh, I don’t know where to start. His whole concept of women, for example.

“The standard Male Chauvinist Pig?”

“No, I’m not talking about that kind of crap. But this total inability to relate to women stands out on page. He needs women but he’s afraid of them. He believe they’re really people. Every female character his is either too good or too bad. They come alive anyway because of his craft as a writer but he puts impossible speeches in their mouths and impossible ideas in their heads. I’ll bet he’s never really loved a woman in his life. He may make a fool of himself over a woman now and then but never knows her enough to love her on an adult level.”

He stroked his beard. “Interesting,” he said. “As a man, I’m less apt to pick up on that sort of thing. What else have you doped out about him?”

“Oh, it’s not fair to play detective like this,” she said, smiling. “But other things seem fairly obvious.”

“For example?”

“The usual latent homosexuality. Narcissism. And his emphasis on communal roots—I’d guess he lacks roots himself and has never gotten over the fact. Of course that would have to be the case or he wouldn’t have wound up in Bucks County.”

“You don’t think he has roots here? It seems to me he’s been here forever.”

“Not deep roots. Transplants never do, do they?”

“Interesting,” he said. He took his pipe apart and blew through the stem. “And yet you read his books.”

“They’re interesting. He’s interesting, as far as that goes, even if he’s not admirable.”

“Uh-huh. Anything else you don’t like about him?”

“Definitely.”

“Such as?”

Now she did look away from him. “His beard needs trimming,” she said, “and the patch is coming off the left sleeve of his jacket.”

When she dared to look up at him he had turned slightly to the left and was looking at the juncture of ceiling and wall. Without looking at her he said, “I’ll bet you’ve handed out a lot of coronaries in your young life.”

“You did ask for it, you know.”

“Indeed I did. But you certainly pushed enough of the right buttons. I can’t tell you how relieved I am it was a put-on, not that that will keep me from brooding for weeks about what you said.”

“Oh, I was just being a little rotten, that’s all.”

“That’s what I’ll tell myself. When did you—”

“Yesterday.”

“Before or after I left?”

“After. I’m afraid. While you were here all I knew about you was that you were the most godawful pest so far this week. Then something made me turn the book over. Why don’t you wear your glasses for photographs?”

“I think people should be able to see eyes. If they’re going to see an author at all.”

“What about his chin?”

“No one ever called the chin the window of the soul. What do you do when you’re not making people wish they were dead?”

“Nothing much. I hope it wasn’t that cruel.”

“Crueler than you could have known. Incidentally, one of us hasn’t been introduced.”

“It’s Linda Robshaw.”

He swooped to kiss her hand. “Mrs. Robshaw, the pleasure is mine.”

“Miss Robshaw. As you already know, because otherwise you would have kissed a ring.”

“I feel increasingly transparent. When do you finish work here? Which is a euphemism for when can I buy you a drink?”

“I don’t think so.”

“But coffee. Or a sandwich, or an ice-cream cone, or a—what? A ping-pong ball? A subway token? An
autographed photo of Mrs. Warren G. Harding? You need merely ask.”

She laughed aloud.

“Well?”

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“There’s no Mrs. Markarian, you know. There was, but she has a different last name now.”

“I know.”

“I have no wife, no criminal record, and no significant bad habits. I could submit character references.”

“No, it’s not that.”

“You’re involved in something.”

“It would be easy to say yes to that, wouldn’t it? Something, perhaps, but not someone, which I suppose is what you meant.” He nodded. “I’m not. I was, and now I’m not, and I’m getting over it.”

“I see.”

“Do you? I’m not sure I do myself. I’m getting more than the person I used to be involved with. It seems to be a time-consuming process. Just now I’m not ready for anything complicated.”

“Not even something as uncomplicated as a cup of coffee?”

“I think we both know it would amount to more than a cup of coffee.”

“It would, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes.”

He filled his pipe and lit it. This took a great deal of time, in the course of which she found herself constantly looking at him and then glancing nervously away. When the pipe was going well he took it from his mouth and held it at arm’s length, fixing his eyes on it.

“Fair enough,” he said. “Yesterday was my day for being a pest, and I try not to do that more than once a week. We’ll probably run into each other from time to time.”

“Yes, we probably will.”

“You threw me as wide a curve this afternoon as I’ve ever seen. Naturally I’m going to want a couple of swings at it.”

“I’m not trying to strike you out.”

“I’m not aiming to strike out. I’ll see you. Enjoy the book. The ending’s a little weak, but then so at the moment is the author. ‘Bye.”

Friday night she recapitulated both conversations with Markarian for Peter. Her report was virtually verbatim. She sat on the floor of her room and shared a bottle of wine with him and told him everything in great detail.

“I think you made an impression,” he said.

“More than I planned.”

“You couldn’t have expected him to take all that in stride.”

“I hadn’t planned on giving him all that to begin with. I got carried away.”

“So did he, from the sound of it. Has he been back since?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Which does or doesn’t please you?”

“Both.”

“That’s cool. I’m beginning to develop a taste for wine.”

“So am I.”

He had brought her the wine an hour ago on his return from the theater. Earlier he had asked if she would sit with Robin. Gretchen had gone to Philadelphia to have something complicated done to her teeth. She had been born in Philadelphia, he explained, and like many people she never got over it She still went to a Philadelphia dentist. He had booked her for Friday afternoon and Saturday morning, and there was an aunt with whom she would stay.

“Or she won’t stay with her aunt and isn’t going to the dentist, and I’ll tell you something.”

“You don’t fucking care.”

“I don’t fucking care is right. It’s good if she’s seeing the dentist because it’s a good sign if she takes an interest in that sort of thing, but all I do fucking care is that she’s off my back for a night. Robin already had dinner. All she needs is someone to keep her company and laugh at her jokes.”

“I always laugh at Robin’s jokes.”

“That’s just one of the reasons I love you. I’ll see you when I see you.”

He saw her at eleven thirty, by which time Robin had been laughed and played with and bathed and cuddled and tucked into bed. He knocked lightly on the door and when she opened it he presented the bottle of wine.


“Is that how you pronounce it?”
“It’s how I pronounce it. For me? I suppose you know you didn’t have to.”
“I know, and it’s only for you if you insist. I was thinking of it as for us.”
“This is the real stuff, isn’t it? That means a cork. I think I know where the corkscrew is. She’s out cold, one of us can check her every once in a while and she’ll be fine.”

He locked the door and they went up to her room and opened the wine. They were both light-headed and buoyant. He said he never got a cork out of a wine bottle without breaking it and she asked if he generally broke the cork or the bottle and he said nobody loved a smartass. He opened the bottle perfectly and they sat on the floor and passed it back and forth while she told, about her encounters with Hugh Markarian.

She said, “What do I do when he shows up?”
“That’s the question.”
“Uh-huh.”
“What do you think you’ll do?”
“I don’t really know, Peter. I don’t want to go out with him. Or I think I don’t.”
“Because it might turn serious. You really think it would?”
“I don’t know. Not serious serious, but maybe pretend serious. Whatever the lady means by that. What do you know about him?”

“He’s a writer and he lives a few miles out of town. I know what he looks like because somebody pointed him out once. But I never—wait a minute, I met him about a month ago. We were at the same table at Sully’s but he wasn’t saying much and I wasn’t listening closely anyway. I never read any of his books. He’s just a name to me on the list of Bucks County writers who make this place such a culture center. Pearl Buck and James Michener and S. J. Perelman—”

“Didn’t he move?”
“That’s right, he did. And who else? The tall skinny one who wrote three books set here with real people in them, that everybody’s still uptight about. I can’t remember his name.”
“Neither can I, but I know who you mean.”
“From what I’ve heard they almost rode him out of town on a rail. The guy I can’t think of, that is. Not Hugh Markarian. I suppose you can afford to turn him down a few more times. It sounds to me as though he’ll come back for more.”
“For a while. And not if I really put him down.”
“It sounds as if you have his combination, too.”
“I think I do. I was just enough of a bitch the other day. If I was a little bit more of a bitch he wouldn’t have been interested.”

“You really do have a bitch streak, don’t you? It’s hard for me to believe it.”
“I usually keep it on a leash.”

They each had some more wine and he said, “Linda? Mind a question? Even if it could be serious, so what?”
“I knew you were going to ask that.”
“I mean it’s not as if you were likely to freak. You’ve got yourself very much together.”
“And want to stay that way.”
“I think you’re worried about nothing.”

She put down the bottle and looked at him. She was beginning to feel the wine and she was enjoying what she felt. And there was something besides the wine, an extra presence in the room. No, it wasn’t a presence, it was an absence. Gretchen had always been present in their previous conversations and tonight she was in Philadelphia. “Makes the heart grow fonder,” she said.

“Huh?”
“Did I say that out loud? I must have had either too much or too little of this wine. There’s only one solution.”
“Here. What were you saying?”
“Thanks. I wasn’t saying anything, but maybe Tanya was right.”
“About what?”
“About what she said.”
“I’m starting to feel like the dentist Gretchen is going to. Pulling teeth. What did Tanya say now?”

She gave him a long look. “Well, Peter,” she said, mock serious, “I don’t think I’m going to tell you Tanya’s most recent utterance. Utterance. I don’t think I’m going to tell you now.”
“Okay.”
“Later. I may tell you later.”
“Okay.”
“But I will tell you what Tanya said before.”
“Okay. Well? What did she say before?”
“There is alcohol in this wine.”
“That’s what Tanya said?”
“That’s what I said just this minute. Or last minute. What Tanya said is that a woman has certain basic needs, and once she gets used to it she can’t get along without it, and of course I’ve lived with a man and must be able to recognize my needs, and what Tanya said in so many words is I ought to get laid.”
“Oh.”
“She said when she goes without it for a couple of days, she starts climbing the walls.”
“How would she know?”
“Do you know, I almost asked her that. I wonder what she does when she has her period.”
“Shhh, they’ll hear you.”
“If that would bother Just Plain Bill over there.”
“It might if he noticed. If he noticed.”
“He might if they showed it on television.” They went into hysterical laughter again. He got hold of himself before she did. It was just so much fun to laugh life this. When she could talk she said, “Peter, are we really this funny? Or is it just the wine?”
“I think we’re really this funny.”
“She wanted to know what I did for sex. Tanya.”
“What did you tell her?”
“I don’t remember. I made a joke and explained the joke to her and then she asked me again. She’s not too good at taking a hint.”
“Neither am I.”
“Huh?”
“What did you finally tell her?”
“Oh, I get it. That wasn’t a hint. I have to be a lot soberer than this to be subtle. Where were we? What did I tell Tanya. What I told her was I didn’t do anything for sex.” She stared owlishly at him. “What I didn’t tell her was the truth.”
“Oh.”
“Just ‘Oh’?”
“If you think I’m going to ask—”
“Then I ain’t about to tell, Massa.”
“What do you do for sex?”
“Ah plays with mahself.” In her own voice she said, “I never said that before. God knows I did it before. Do you?”
“Do I what?”
“Plays with yoreself.”
“Jesus.”
“Oh, I’m in a weird mood.”
“I’ll say.”
“It feels so good. The mood. So does playing with myself. Oh, I feel about six years old. I feel like Robin-Lobin. You better teach her another game, incidentally.”
“I know.”
“Because it doesn’t work with my name and it’s frustrating the piss out of her. Robin-Lobin and Peter-Leter and Gretchen-Letchen, and then along comes Linda-Linda, and what kind of big hairy deal is that?” She moved around the room in little two-steps. “This is Robshaw-Lobshaw speaking,” she announced, “and this is Truth Time! Do you play with yourself, yes or no, you have ten seconds to answer, bong.”
“Yes.”
“The man says yes! Now our next question. One hand or two?”
“You’re an idiot.”
“I know, isn’t it wonderful?” She plopped herself onto the floor, folded her legs. “Give me my bottle-lottle,” she demanded.
He hesitated.
“Come on.”
“Do you think you should have any more?”
“Well, I don’t think I should have any less. You can’t save wine, you know. Or it tastes corked or something. I’m sure you can’t save Valipo, Vapilo—I can’t say it, Peter.”
“If you can’t say it you can’t drink it.”
“Valpolicella. There. See, I’m not as drunk as I seem. When push comes to shove I make the grade. Fucking Peter, give me the fucking bottle!”
“Shhhhh.”
“Then give me the bottle. If you give me the bottle I’ll tell you what else Tanya said. Thank you. This is good wine. See, if this was bad wine we would be getting drunk, but the bottle’s almost empty and we’re both sober. Except I am talking very loud. Now I am not talking very loud. Is that better, Peter?”
“Uh-huh.”
“You just finished the wine. You made the wine all gone. That’s what Robin says. Peter-Leter made the wine all gone.”
“You ought to drink this stuff all the time.”
“Just what I was thinking. Don’t you want to know what Tanya said?”
“I never in my life heard her say anything worth repeating, and we’ve been talking about what she said for the past six hours.”
“She said you and I are sleeping together. Peter? You’re not laughing.”
“Tanya really said that?”
“Oh, shit. Why isn’t it funny? It was funny as hell when she said it. But I didn’t laugh then either. I blew up at her and she almost cried, and then I came home and broke up laughing, and I thought you would too if I saved it for when you were in a good mood, and all of a sudden it isn’t funny, is it, Peter?”
They looked at each other for a long time. She couldn’t get her eyes away from his. Gretchen was in Philadelphia and the room was full of her absence and the heart was growing fonder all the time.
“I have to check Robin,” he said.
“Uh-huh.”
“Anyway, it’s late.”
“Don’t be long,” she said.
She listened to his footsteps on the stairs. Don’t be long. She should not have said that and it was good he had not reacted to it. He would go downstairs and go to bed, and that was as it should be. It was a good thing one of them had sense.
She took off all her clothes. She turned on the bathroom light and left the door open a crack, then turned off the other lights. She touched herself, thinking One hand or two? and sniffed her fingers. She got in bed and covered herself only with the sheet.
She thought Don’t come back, and then she heard his footsteps on the stairs again.
He stood in the doorway with the hall light framing him from behind. He said, “I just came up to say good-night.”
“Kiss me good-night.”
“Linda, I’m scared.”
“So am I. Kiss me good-night.”
Until he sat on the bed and kissed her it was never entirely real. It was the mood and the wine and the absence of Gretchen and it was not entirely real. It was kids playing chicken. You could always change your mind at the last minute, and so it was not real.
There is always a moment when you can change your mind and a moment when you cannot, and the line that divides them holds fewer angels than a pin head. There is the moment in roulette before the ball drops. There is that instant before a trigger is quite squeezed, before a trap is sprung. On one side of the line is possibility and on the other side is certainty.
Such moments come one after another in the course of every person’s life, and in the vast majority of cases they approach and are resolved without anyone’s being truly aware of them. They are most commonly recognized after the fact, enlarged a thousand times in hindsight. That had been the turning point. There was the crisis. But even in retrospect most are shrouded from view, for one prefers to regard the good turns as planned and the bad as unavoidable.
But in this case she saw herself at a critical moment and knew that he shared this awareness. He was so close to her, they were so close to each other, and yet he could still get up and she could still turn away.
Then he did not get up, and she did not turn away, and then he kissed her, and after that everything happened just as it had to happen.
They lay a long time together, neither one willing to move first. Then they moved at so nearly the same instant that it was impossible to say who had initiated it. They disengaged and lay very close together but did not touch. She was close enough to feel the warmth of his skin but no part of her body touched his.
The silence lasted forever. Thoughts kept flooding her head and she tried to find the right words for them but
nothing seemed worth saying. There was an increasingly unbearable tension in the silence.

Finally she said, “I can’t think of anything clever.”

“I can’t think of anything. Period.”

“Oh, I can think of a ton of things. All of them wrong.”

“Oh, wow.”

“That was one I hadn’t thought of. I think maybe I should have. Oh, wow.”

“Yeah.”

“What I keep wanting to say is I never thought it would be like this but some silly cunt says it in every really bad novel I ever read. What really sucks about cliches is they’re so appropriate. I never did.”

“Neither did I.”

“Did you ever think about us? Did you ever think to yourself, ‘I wonder what it would be like to fuck Linda?’”

“No.”

“If I had any class I’d be insulted. I’m not. That doesn’t mean I don’t. Have any, I mean. Class, I mean.”

“What are you talking about?”

“How the hell do I know? You honestly never thought about it? Honestly?”

“Honestly.”

“Cross your heart and all that jazz?”

“Oh, come on.”

“I never did until Tanya. Like telling a kid don’t put beans up your nose. It would never occur to her otherwise. Did you ever tell Robin not to put beans up her nose? Up her nose, I mean. Not up yours.”

“Up yours.”

“Yeah, I was just thinking that. Did you?”

“Which? No, I never told Robin not to put anything up her anywhere. No, I never thought about us. No, I never thought it would be like this either, if that’s what you’re asking me to say, but then I didn’t think about it at all.”

“I did, and you know what I thought? Well, first of all I thought it would never happen in the first place, so it was sheer fantasy.”

“Right.”

“And then I thought it would be horribly awkward. You know what I thought? I thought it would be silly. Silly Linda and silly Peter pretending to fuck. Pretending. That’s exactly what I thought. I thought it would be the two of us pretending to be two other people fucking.”

“That’s very far-out.”

“You know what I mean, don’t you?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“But it wasn’t like that.”

“No.”

“Are you glad or sorry?”

“That it happened? I don’t know. Both.”

“I’m more glad than sorry. I think. It was something that was going to happen sooner or later. I never knew that before, but it’s true. And if it had to happen it couldn’t happen to a nicer evening. I’m not drunk anymore. I wasn’t as drunk as I acted. I don’t mean it was an act. I thought I was that drunk but I wasn’t really. Or I was drunk but it wasn’t just wine. I was drunk on us. Or on you and me. Do you know what I’m saying, because I don’t know if I do or not.”

“I think so. You’re saying that you … oh, the hell with it. I know what you mean. The hell with it.”

“Right, the hell with it. God, I’m so glad we can still laugh together. I couldn’t live if I forgot how to laugh. It keeps you going. It wasn’t being horny. I wasn’t horny, Peter, I swear I wasn’t. I didn’t have an urge to get laid. I haven’t had an honest-to-God urge to get laid since January, as a matter of fact. Are you gonna say it or am I? I guess I am. One, we won’t do this again, and two, we can still be friends. God, talk about cliches. Just go ahead and talk about clichés.”

“We won’t do it again because we don’t have to now.”

“Jesus.”

“What?”

“I do ninety-nine percent of the talking and you make ninety-nine percent of the sense. Peter? We’ll never tell anyone.”

“God knows I won’t.”

“I mean ever. No matter who we marry or where we move to or what we wind up doing. It will always be something that nobody knows about. It’s so beautiful I want to cry. I’m picturing two old people who made love
once a million years ago and never told anyone and neither of them ever forgot it. Don’t ever forget me, Peter.”
“Linda.”
“No. No, I’m all right. Do you want to sleep with me? I mean sleep. You can if you want to. No, because of Robin.”
“If she wakes up and nobody’s there—”
“I know. And we wouldn’t just sleep. I can’t talk anymore.”
“I’ll go.”
“I want you to go but I don’t want you to go. I’m glad about us. I’m going to say something once and I’ll never say it again.”
“Let me. I love you, Linda.”
“Oh, I love you.”
II

The Edge of Thought

Here’s a gray afternoon, bleak as to freeze
The edge of thought like a hacksaw. Chinese
Die in the news, this wind on them
Cold as a garden ….

—JOSEPHINE MILES
NINE

Tannhauser’s was located on the western bank of the Delaware three miles south of New Hope. A large Colonial mansion had been converted into a restaurant, with the entire eastern wall replaced by a picture window. The results of this renovation were much to the advantage of Trude Hofmeister’s patrons, who were afforded a panoramic view of the river. The view was better from the inside; across the river, New Jersey residents called Tannhauser’s “that abortion.”

Born in Bavaria two weeks to the day before Sarajevo, Trude grew up with a passion for hearty food and equally hearty music. She moved to Vienna when her schooling was completed and at the time of the Anschluss had indulged both appetites generously. A mezzosoprano, she appeared regularly in Wagnerian opera at the Vienna State Opera House. Her affection for Wagner was matched by her enthusiasm for Viennese cuisine, and her figure more than conformed to the standard for her profession. By 1938 she had acquired a strong critical reputation and a not unattractive corpulence.

She had also acquired a husband. Gunther Loebner was a respected journalist, a boulevardier, a coffeehouse habitué, a man of immense courtly charm and elegant manners. He was also a Social Democrat, and a vocal one. The day the Anschluss was signed he put his wife in a first-class compartment of a train bound for Paris. He would not be persuaded to share the ride with her.

“I have work,” he told her. “It will not take long “but it is essential that it be done. Perhaps a week, hardly more. In less than ten days I shall be with you in Montparnasse.”

“In less than ten days you will be in prison,” she said, but she did not speak the words until the train had pulled out of the station, and no tears showed in her eyes while she waved good-bye.

She was wrong. Loebner was never in prison. Two days after her arrival in Paris he was shot dead by two flint-eyed young Berliners. The official announcement had it that he had died while resisting arrest. In forty-two years Gunther Loebner had resisted any number of things, but arrest had never been among and his sole weapons of resistance had been his pen and his tongue.

In the years immediately following, the international audience for Wagnerian opera declined dramatically. Its popularity remained at peak within the Third Reich—indeed, little else was ever aired on German radio—but opera buffs in other countries seemed curiously to have lost their taste for it.

For a time Gunther Loebner’s widow lost her taste for singing in general. She canceled her engagements and spent most of her time by herself. Two months after her arrival in Paris, she was approached by a young man attached to the German embassy. He explained that he brought condolences for the death of her husband and that it was hoped she would return soon to the Fatherland. The Führer owned all her records and had several times watched her perform, both in Vienna and in Munich. It was hoped a Berlin performance could be arranged.

She said only that she had ceased to sing. But this was impossible, he told her. One could appreciate that she was bereaved, but time would end her bereavement, and she would perform better than ever.

“If I sing again,” she said icily, “I shall sing in Paris.”

He flashed a superior smile. “They sing little Wagner in Paris, Fraulein Hofmeister. Return to Berlin. In two years’ time you shall sing Wagner in Paris and it would not do to be out of practice.”

She walked into the kitchen and he followed her, talking persuasively. There was a wedge-shaped chef’s knife on the kitchen counter. For a moment she was very near to using that knife to open up his corset-flattened belly. She saw it all in her mind, the mechanics of the act, even the story of attempted rape which would satisfy the sympathetic French police.

But no. There were too many of them and they were all like this one. If one stroke of the knife would do for all of them—but it would not.

For the next few months she remembered his prediction. In two years’ time the German Army would be in Paris. She tried to forget the words but every sign and portent assured her they were true. In the spring she sailed to New York, and that September Hitler’s tanks crossed into Poland.

She spent the war in New York. She sang, but never opera. She sang Kurt Weill, and her most successful number was “Pirate Jenny” from Three-Penny Opera. There was a room in Hitler’s Museum of Decadent Arts where Der Dreigroschenoper was played continually from morning to night. It was the most popular room in the museum; it was the only place in Germany where you could hear the music.

She gave up singing professionally shortly after the war, married a wealthy German Jew who had left the country early enough to get much of his wealth out with him. He was a widower with grown children and he told her she made him alive again. He was also a great fan of Wagnerian opera; neither its political implications nor the racial theories of its creator, he insisted, had any influence on the way it sounded to him.
They spent nights listening to records together. In his company she learned to love again the music she had always loved. But she would not sing it for him. Twice he asked her, and the second time she told him of her conversation with the German attaché in Paris. He listened without comment and never repeated the request.

He died in 1956. He was hospitalized for six weeks after a heart attack and was recovering slowly but surely when his kidneys failed. She had just returned home from the hospital when the phone rang. It was the doctor, the son of close friends of her husband, telling her to come back immediately. Outside his door they told her it was a matter of an hour or so. He was not in pain, he was conscious, and there was nothing to be done.

“Leave us,” she said.

She stood at his bedside and held his hand. When she was with him an hour ago his face had life and now it was a death’s head. She said, “David? I will sing for you.”

She sang Wagner. She sang in full voice while her husband’s doctor stood outside the door with folded arms, fielding one complaint after another. She sang one aria after the next, everything she could remember, and her memory that day was unimpaired. For two full hours she sang without a break, his hand in hers. Nurses moved in and out of the room and she sang uninterrupted. She was still holding his hand and singing when a hollow-eyed nurse took her arm and told her, he was gone.

She traveled. She bought presents for his grandchildren. In 1961 she bought the present Tannhauser’s from the creditors of the man who had tried to turn it into a restaurant. He had decorated it in an American Colonial motif and matched the decor with a basic American menu. She kept the decor but substituted a Viennese menu.

She supervised every detail of the operation, bought the produce, greeted guests on arrival and departure. She even did most of the baking. Her chef, with her from the beginning, was excellent, but he could not match her sachertorte, her pfannkuchen, her strudel. She had been too busy to bake for Gunther Loebner, but David Wolf had never ceased to praise her strudel.

She had opened the restaurant as so many persons opened Bucks County establishments, hoping to enjoy themselves without too great an operating loss. At the end of the first year she was astonished when her accountant reported a net loss of less than two thousand dollars. That first year was the only time Tannhauser’s was ever in the red, and each year her net profit increased.

On weekends a pianist played old standards in the cocktail lounge from ten until one. Sometimes late at night she could be talked into a song. Something of Weill’s perhaps, or an Edith Piaf song. Never anything operatic.

Many patrons, including some who came back often, called her Frau Tannhauser. She answered to that name as well as to any other.

On the first Saturday night in June, Hugh handed his car keys to the parking-lot attendant and led Linda Robshaw up flagstone steps and into Tannhauser’s. It had rained off and on through the day, but by late afternoon the skies had cleared and now the night air was cool and refreshing. Hugh himself felt cool and refreshed. His beard was properly trimmed, its few gray hairs vainly plucked out. His cheeks and neck were clean-shaven and freshly anointed with Russian Leather.

His suit was a dove gray double-knit he had bought impulsively the previous October in New York and had never worn since he tried it on. He’d been back to work when Wallaeh’s delivered it, hitting his stride in the last stretch of his first draft, and he took it from its box and hung it in his closet without noticing what it was. If they had shipped him an evening gown by mistake he would have put it on a hanger and put it away without complaint.

Tonight he came across it in the closet, tried it on, and found it flattered him. The cut was younger and more fashionable than his usual style. On his way out the door Karen made a great show of approval. “You look fantastic,” she told him. “If Linda Robshaw isn’t here for breakfast tomorrow morning, then there’s something wrong with her. You really look great.”

He looked great and felt great. He had planned to take a week or ten days away from the book, and it had been three and a half weeks since he covered his typewriter and he had not yet uncovered it, nor did he intend to for another five days or so. He was not working and it did not bother him in the least. He looked great and felt great and he was taking a bright and charming and damned attractive young woman to dinner, and he was happier than he had been in months.

“Hugh, Hugh Markarian!” Trude boomed his name, then followed her voice across the room with arms outstretched. She hugged him furiously. “I saw your name on the reservation list and was so pleased. And you look so good! And is this Karen? Liebchen, I have not seen you—”

“This is Miss Robshaw,” he said. “Linda, this is our hostess, Trude Hofmeister.”

“Miss Robshaw,” Trude said. “But it is so difficult to distinguish between beautiful young women. Hugh, I have a table for you by the window. It is a such a beautiful night for the view.”

They went to their table and ordered drinks. Linda said, “When she drops a brick she certainly picks it back up in a hurry. Her face didn’t show a thing.”
“She’s pretty good. I doubt that she’d recognize Karen if she stepped on her, but she must have heard she was in
town and came to the obvious conclusion.”

“Do Karen and I look alike?”

“Only insofar as it is so difficult to distinguish between beautiful young women,” he said, his accent a good
imitation of Trude’s. “Does it bother you being taken gar my daughter?”

“No. Should it? It’s slightly flattering, but I own a mirror and I know I don’t look—how old is Karen? Eighteen?”

He nodded. “I’m still old enough to be your father.”

“Well, you’re not my father, and he’s almost old enough to be your father, as far as that goes. Are you feeling
very conscious of your age or is it that you’re getting a kick out of my youth?”

“Well, it can’t be the first, because I haven’t felt this good in I don’t know how long. I should have gone back to
work on the book a week ago and I haven’t even set foot in that room. Excuse me, I went in there the night before
last to look something up in the dictionary. And walked on out without even glancing at my desk.”

“And it evidently doesn’t bother you.”

“I couldn’t care less. It’s not as if I were stalled on the book, trying to get back to it and unable to get anywhere.
But it’s fine, it’s coming fine and sometime next week I’ll start working again. Meanwhile I’m getting to know my
daughter. It’s an exhilarating experience, getting to know an eighteen-year-old girl who happens to be your
daughter. Girl. I was going to say eighteen-year-old woman: Neither word is right. An eighteen-year-old female?”

“That sounds like something in a statistical abstract. The percentage of eighteen-year-old female dope peddlers in
Elyria, Ohio.”

“Girl-woman would be the word if it wasn’t so precious. What were you like when you were eighteen?”

She thought for a moment. “Not a girl-woman, certainly. Just a girl, I’m afraid. What’s Karen like?”

“You’ll have to meet her sometime, and then I can ask you the same question. I’ve been spending my time trying
to learn the answer myself. It’s—what did I call it before? An exhilarating experience. Very enjoyable, but also
something of a challenge in a way. Oh, here’s Robert. I almost didn’t recognize you with that mustache, Robert.”

“I’m not sure if I’ll keep it or not, sir.”

“Well, you want to give it a chance before you decide. Did you want to order, Linda?”

“Yes, I’m starved.”

It was an exhilarating experience, getting to know an eighteen-year-old girl-woman who happened to be your
daughter. It was exhilarating and it was a challenge. You could not pretend that she was not your daughter because
there were ghosts in every room that held the two of you. You had seen her in the nurse’s arms before they had a
chance to clean her up, still filthy with the detritus of the delivery, and that ghost was present along with the ghosts
of all the other vivid moments of the twelve years she had lived under your roof.

Of course she had shocked him. A dropout in her first year of college, living with a man, not even a man but
several men. She had smoked marijuana; she had probably tried other drugs she had not told him about. She had
become pregnant, perhaps without knowing who the father was, and had made the question of paternity academic by
obtaining an abortion.

(“One piece of advice,” he told her. “How much or how little you tell your mother is between the two of you, but
if you have any sense you won’t tell her about the abortion. She may have left the Church when she was younger
than you are now, but parts of her are more Catholic than you may realize.” She said it hadn’t kept her mother from
divorcing him. “No, but it once kept her from getting an abortion. No, not you, for God’s sake. No child was ever
more desired than you. But she became pregnant when you were ten or eleven, and the turn our marriage had taken,
a new baby was the worst possible idea. She had a miscarriage and did everything but light candles in gratitude, but
that was already after she had ruled out getting an abortion. So don’t say anything to her, will you?” She said, “Oh,
hell, she still thinks I’m a virgin.”)

She had shocked him with the first revelations and she shocked him intermittently thereafter, not with new facts
but as he increasingly discovered her as a person. It was not that she was a shocking person. Had she been the
daughter of a friend he would have found wholly admirable the very aspects that kept disconcerting him now.

And he had to suppress this shock. It was not only that he keep it hidden from her. He had to do more than that; he
had to educate himself to avoid seeing her in a harsher light because of what she was to him. Oh, it was a challenge.
Here he was with a woman a quarter of a century his junior, and of course there was nothing wrong with him dating
a woman that age and nothing wrong with Linda for going out with him. But if his daughter went out with a man as
much older than herself as he was than Linda, he doubted he could view it with equanimity. There was nothing
necessarily objectionable about a relationship between a girl of eighteen and a man of forty-three. He had picked up
a stenographer at his publisher’s office when he was several years older than forty-three, and the stenographer had
celebrated her nineteenth birthday less than a month before.

They had both been aware of the age difference, it would have been impossible not to be, but it never occurred to
them that it made it wrong for them to have dinner together. He had thought no less of her for dating him. Later that evening he went to her apartment and spent the night with her. They had both enjoyed themselves immensely, and he had in no way considered her foolish or immoral for having casual sex with a man his age. Their relationship never went any further because neither of them had wanted more from it than a night of good company and good sex. But neither thought of it as exploitative or unsound for what it was. He could not judge Karen by a harsher standard than he had judged the girl. More accurately, he could not presume to judge Karen—any more than he made that presumption with others. Intellectually he accepted everything about her as normal, even specifically desirable; for a girl her age. It was better for such a girl to have healthy sexual experience than to remain a virgin, better to try marijuana than not, better to drop out of a deadening college situation than to hang in and grimly play the game. These were positions he had taken years ago, and he was certainly not going to repudiate them now that his daughter was old enough to live out what he had endorsed in theory. Inconsistency had always irritated him, and it was never more irritating than when he recognized it in himself.

She moved into his house with the understanding that each of them was a free agent. They told each other this and joked about it. Yet neither entirely believed it. Throughout the first week she kept testing the waters, dropping elaborately casual remarks and darting sharp glances his way, looking for a reaction. He, too, was looking for a reaction; his role in the game seemed to be one of catching and squelching it before she was aware of it.

She said “fuck” a lot. The first time she used the word he was amused at his own sudden prudery, though he doubted it showed. He tried to think of anyone he had known well in the past five years who did not use the word for emphasis. Women he met at Manhattan business lunches always seemed to make a definite point of fitting the word into the first five minutes of conversation, as if it put them on an equal footing, established them as hip and tough and gutsy and to be taken seriously. There had been an undeniable revolution in speech patterns, he knew, and what it amounted to was the whole country was talking as enlisted men had talked during his days in the service. You said “fuck” a lot in the service, he remembered; you used the word as punctuation: So this fucking guy, he was walking down the fucking street, when he fucking runs into this broad—

He fed the word, and others, right back to her. In the beginning his speech was as artificial as her own, but within a week they had accomplished something; they were both talking in front of each other as they would have talked were they not father and daughter but merely friends.

The candor took a variety of forms. She went out with an apprentice from the Playhouse and told Hugh not to wait up for her—“because I might spend the night.” He told her to feel free. He was reading in the living room when she returned a few minutes after one. “He wanted to ball me,” she reported, “but I didn’t really relate to him that way, and I figured I had the right to feel free not to as far as that goes.”

Over coffee Linda said, “That’s the best meal since I came here.”

“It’s probably the first meal you’ve had in New Hope. The first decent one.”

“In a restaurant, yes.”

“You’re a good cook?”

“I’m not terrible. Why does that surprise you?”

“It doesn’t, really. I think I’m going to have a brandy. Would you like one?”

“Yes, I would.”

“One thing I can’t get used to is the fact that the kids don’t drink. I can’t conceive of, the college experience untempered by tidal waves of draft beer.”

“You went to Penn.”

“What. Not entirely the same thing.”

“No, so I hear. That’s an unusual background for a writer, isn’t it? A business school?”

“It was a logical background for a stockbroker. Which seemed like a logical profession. It’s funny. I can’t remember the person I was in college. I remember what that person did but I can’t remember being that person.”

“It changed everything, didn’t it? The war.”

“Yes, it did.”

She was holding her brandy glass and looking off over his shoulder. She said, “I wonder if it takes something that dramatic or if small things can do it. Changing a person’s life completely so that you can point to one moment and know that you were a different person ever after.”

He reached for his pipe, changed his mind and got a cigarette. She took one and he lit them both.

She said, “Before, you were saying that it was odd talking with me about Karen, because I was closer to her in age than I am to you. But that’s not so. The numbers don’t mean anything. It’s a question of identity. It may be a function of age but you don’t measure it in years.”

“It’s what you’ve been through.”

“No, it isn’t. I almost said that but it’s not it. She’s been through pregnancy and an abortion and I haven’t been
through either. I’ve been through a marriage but that didn’t make any difference. It made a difference but not the difference I’m talking about. It may be what you go through that does it, but what makes the difference is who you are.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m not saying this well because I’m working it out as I go. Karen’s your daughter.”

“So?”

“No, that wasn’t preamble. It was definition. Karen’s your daughter, that’s who she is. In terms of identity. In those terms I’m not my father’s daughter or my mother’s daughter. I’m me. I’m not anybody’s daughter. And I was for a long time. Through a marriage and afterward.”

“Were you very close to your parents?”

“We were never close. I don’t think it has anything to do with closeness. It’s involved with perception. You stop being a child when you stop being somebody’s child.”

“And become an adult.”

“I guess that’s the word for it. It’s like joining a club, isn’t it?”

“The membership requirements aren’t very strict.”

“But the dues are high,” she said. She stubbed out her cigarette. “And you keep on paying them, don’t you? I hadn’t known that. I thought you could buy life membership, but it doesn’t work that way.”

He remembered the girl she had been when he first asked her out. That had been little more than a week ago and yet she seemed to have changed in a fundamental way.

It was not just her mood that had changed. He had met her on Wednesday and asked her out on Thursday, and after she turned him down he found it impossible to shrug it off. Over breakfast Friday he recounted the incident to Karen and they laughed about it. She had wanted to know if he intended to pursue the girl. He had said he didn’t think he would bother.

Friday he walked past the mall but kept himself from going in. Saturday and Sunday he carefully avoided going to town, and Monday he drove in purposely to see her and the store was closed, all the stores were closed. He returned Tuesday late in the afternoon. He had the scene already blocked in in his mind: He would visit the shop and they would talk, and he would leave without attempting to date her. Then he would return Thursday or Friday and perhaps she would have coffee with him. If not he would ask her one more time the following week, and if she turned him down then he would say the hell with her.

So he walked into the Lemon Tree Tuesday and she greeted him with a huge smile and came out from behind the counter. “No business at all today,” she said. “How would you like to buy me that cup of coffee give me an excuse to take a break?”

A cup of coffee Tuesday, with effortless conversation as an accompaniment. Thursday he dropped over to the shop at six and had the uncanny feeling that she had postponed her break and expected him. They had coffee and sandwiches and he asked her to dinner Saturday night. “I’d like that very much,” she said.

Something had happened to change her mind. One day she had decided to discourage him and a few days later she did precisely the reverse.

Without intending to he said, “How come you’re here?”

“You invited me.”

“I know.”

“How come I accepted? I ought to invent something plausible but I can’t think of anything offhand.”

“Then let me withdraw the question.”

“Oh, I’ll answer it, if you’ll let me be cryptic. I’ve been in the stages of something, and it seems to have run its course. Or part of its course.”

“That’s cryptic, all right.”

“I decided you were safe. Unthreatening. Easy to handle. Like that better?”

“Bitch.”

“More of a bitch than I ever knew. You seem to bring out the bitch in me, and I don’t know if that’s good or bad. Could we go, do you think?”

He raised a hand for the check.

He drove slowly, disliking the feel of the heavy car. He was driving the Buick. For the past half year he had barely driven it enough to keep the battery charged, but Karen preferred the VW so he had used the Buick since her arrival. He pulled into the driveway. The lights were on in Mrs. Kleinschmidt’s quarters over the garage. He pressed a button on the dashboard and the garage door swung up and back.

He stopped the car in front of the garage. She asked him what was the matter.

“The Volks is gone,” he said. “That means Karen’s out”
“I thought you were busy not playing the heavy father?”
“That’s not the point. I brought you here to meet her.”
“And now it looks like a setup to get me to your lair.”
“Doesn’t it?”
“That’s exactly what it looks like, except I saw your face when the car wasn’t in the garage, and you couldn’t
have faked such a complete look of where-do-we-go-from-here? without acting lessons.”
“Where do we go from here?”
“Can I say I’d like to see your house without dragging myself into your lair? I’d like to see your house.”
He showed her the house. In the office she gestured toward the desk. “Does anyone ever get to read novels in
progress? Or do I have to wait until it comes out?”
“You have to wait until it’s finished.”
“Nobody gets to read it until it’s finished?”
“When do you go from here?”
“Anita used to. My wife. Ex-wife. At the beginning I almost forced her to. She was very helpful then; she saw
weaknesses that I wasn’t aware of. But then she kept on like that and in the meantime I had learned more about the
craft of writing, and I knew more than she did. So she would offer criticism and it drove me crazy. Ultimately she
learned to keep her mouth shut. Now nobody reads the stuff until it’s done.”
“Even if they promised to keep their mouth shut?”
“Even then. A book sort of grows, and it has to belong to its author until it’s done.”
“And then it’s nobody’s child anymore and it can join the club.”
“You know, that’s out of left field but it makes a certain amount of sense. Would you like to hear some music?
What would you like to hear?”
They listened to music but did more talking than listening. It was a relaxing and comfortable evening but he was
not relaxed and did not know why. After three records had played he got up to turn the stack over. When he returned
she was on her feet, and before he knew what was happening she was in his arms and he was kissing her.
The kiss was long and thorough. When it ended she stepped back and let out her breath. He extended his arms for
her, but she shook, her head so decisively his arms dropped at once to his sides.
“I really am a bitch, aren’t I? I’m sorry, Hugh, I really am. Would you take me home now?”
“If you want me to.”
“What I want—never mind. Yes, please take me home.”
They drove all the way in silence. He worked out conversational openers in his head, a great variety of them, but
none of them seemed worthwhile. As he pulled up in front of the Shithouse she said, “I owe you an explanation.”
“Nobody ever owes anybody an explanation.”
“I wanted to find out if we had anything for each other. No. I knew we did but I wanted to prove it to myself. And
I did, and then I also knew that I didn’t want to do anything about it. Yet.”
“You’re not a bitch, but if you were—”
“—I’d be a good one. I know. I certainly don’t want to be a cockteaser.”
“I can’t remember the last time I heard that word.”
“I can’t remember the last time I used it. If I ever did. I don’t think I ever did. Hell. All of a sudden I wanted to be
home.”
“You’re here.”
“Yes.” She opened the car door but made no move to get out of it. “Maybe it’s that I’d like to have my clothes on
the first time I meet your daughter. What’s so funny?”
“On my way out she said she’d look forward to meeting you at breakfast tomorrow.”
“She said that? I’m sorry to disappoint her. And to disappoint you. But I have the feeling that you didn’t
particularly want to go to bed with me tonight, did you?”
“Of course I did.”
“But not overwhelmingly. Oh, forget it, I’m not making any sense. I enjoyed myself, Hugh. Thank you.”
“When will I see you?”
“Are you sure you want to? I don’t know. I’m really impossible, aren’t I? Give me a couple of days.”
“All right.”
He drove home trying to decide whether he was pleased or disappointed with the way the evening had
Somewhere in the course of it he had lost control of the situation, if he could ever have been said to have been in
control.
She had wanted him physically, and that was good. And he was getting to know her and sensed that she would
take a great deal of knowing. It was more important to know her than to make love to her, although the two did go
hand in hand to a degree. She was right—his interest in her was not that specifically sexual. Had she not attracted
him sexually he would never have thought to want to know her. That was at the bottom of it, it was always at the bottom of it, but here it played a secondary role. She had told him she was afraid of involvement, and now, despite the obscure changes she seemed to have undergone, she still seemed hesitant.

He was ready to get involved and wondered how much of this was attributable to the girl, this particular girl. She seemed very right. Yet he knew himself rather well and for long had subjected himself to motivational probing and analysis not unlike that he leveled upon the characters in his books. He had been looking for someone. He had not known it then, but he had been looking for someone.

Back in his living room he made himself a fresh drink and picked up a half-finished detective story. Around three he realized he had been waiting for Karen to come home. He closed the book, annoyed with himself, and went upstairs. The stairs seemed steeper than they had for the past week. He was a long time falling asleep and did not sleep well.

He made his own breakfast. Mrs. Kleinschmidt had Sundays off, and before Hugh awoke her daughter-in-law had come to take her to church. She would spend the day with her children and grandchildren. Karen’s bedroom door was closed when he passed it. He did not knock, but before putting up coffee he went out and checked the garage. The VW was still gone.

He was on his second cup of coffee when he heard her turn into the driveway. She came directly into the kitchen, pert and bright-eyed, neat and trim in faded jeans and a striped T-shirt. She said, “Shit, I missed breakfast. I hope there’s coffee.”

“A full pot. What do you want? I’ll fix something.”

“I think I’ll just have toast. Have you got a cigarette? I’ve been smoking mentholated ones and I can’t stand them.” She sat down, poured coffee and smoked one of his cigarettes while the bread toasted. “It was late and I was too stoned to drive home,” she said. “A combination of tired and stoned, actually. I wasn’t that stoned. I was hoping I’d have breakfast with you and Linda.”

“Linda didn’t stay over.”

“Karen did. She was here then, huh? Or you wouldn’t have said it that way.”

“As a matter of fact she was. I brought her here to meet you but you weren’t here.”

She grinned. “That’s a fresh approach. I guess it worked out well enough, didn’t it?”

“You could say so.”

“Well, I told you she wouldn’t be able to resist you. Not in that suit.”

She took it for granted that he had made love to Linda. To correct that impression he would have had to say more than he wanted to say, so he let it stand. She assumed an act had taken place and seemed pleased, even proud of him, and he told himself there was no harm in his enjoying her admiration even under false pretenses. A child, he assured himself, ought to be allowed to cherish certain illusions about her father. Even if they were not the orthodox ones.

They spent the afternoon walking in the woods. She talked at length about various people she had known at Northwestern. College had been a great change for her and he wondered if she could appreciate how radically different the environment had been. Anita and her husband were determinedly modern parents, desperately enlightened, but their automatic liberalism and furious sincerity had not altered the fact that a middle-class white suburban high school in Arizona was more than miles away from a large Midwestern university. Karen’s recent visits to him in New Hope were better preparation, in a way; she told him how the people she had met on campus reminded her of street people she had run across on earlier vacations in the village.

They ate fried chicken and drank root beer at a roadplace on 202. Back at the house he made them each a drink. A drink together, generally before dinner when Mrs. Kleinschmidt was home to prepare the evening meal, had become an unannounced ritual for the two of them. “If you’re going to drink at all,” he’d told her, “you ought to do it properly. You don’t like straight whiskey, and it’s a bad idea anyway until you have a fair idea of your capacity. Learn to get used to it with water or soda. One advantage of soda is that it’s consistent. You can’t get a drink of scotch and water in a town where the water’s bad, not any more than you can get a decent cup of coffee.”

He put on the radio and they listened to an FM rock station. As she finished her drink she announced that she would be going out; she’d promised to meet “some people” in town.

“You can bring home anyone you like, you know.”

“So you can meet him at breakfast?”

“I suppose I could stand it if he can.”

She looked at him thoughtfully. “I wonder,” she said.

“If he could stand it?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s funny.”

“What is?”

“All of this. The process of getting used to each other, I guess. If Mother had any idea. She already knew I wasn’t
going back home for the summer. We had that out long ago. She didn’t quite say it, not in those words, but she’s glad I’m here where at least you can keep an eye on me.”

She had said it in precisely those words, to Hugh if not to Karen, but he had not reported on the conversation. Karen tended to make a game out of the two of them combining to deceive Anita, and he did not want to encourage this.

He was vaguely disappointed when she left. He picked up the detective story he had given up on the night before but it did not engage his interest. He tried other books with the same result. He was lonely, he realized, and restless. He could not sit still and his hands fidgeted with pipes and other small objects. He thought of Linda. “Give me a couple of days.” Yeah, he thought, but what about tonight? And smiled at the old joke, the inconsolable widower on the night of his wife’s funeral, the friend gently trying to ease his bereavement. “Time heals all wounds. In not too many months you’ll be over the shock, you’ll go out and socialize, you’ll meet a woman, in a year or two you’ll be married again.” “Yeah, but what about tonight?”

Well, what about tonight? He walked toward the bar then changed his mind. Drinking would fit his mood, but solitary drinking would be a bad idea. He had to be among people.

He drove the Buick across the bridge and parked across the street from a tavern in Lambertville. Liquor could not be sold in Pennsylvania on a Sunday; the old law was still on the books, although each year there was word it would be repealed. This was no great hardship for New Hope drinkers, given their access to taverns on the Jersey side, all of which consequently did almost as good volume Sundays as Saturdays. Several Lambertville restaurants would only sell drinks to dinner patrons on Sunday, but the bulk of the taverns had no such restriction.

Hugh ordered a scotch and soda and drank it at the bar. Two men a few stools away were discussing baseball, and neither seemed to be paying any attention to what the other said. One reminisced about the great Yankee teams of his youth while the other went on about what was wrong with the Phillies this season. Someone played a Tammy Wynette record on the jukebox. His restlessness did not dissipate. He stayed at the bar for half an hour, then left it and walked around the corner to another place. After two more drinks and a little less than an hour he was ready to get moving again. He bought a fresh pack of cigarettes from a machine, lit one, and walked out into the cool night air.

Yeah, but what about tonight?

He could go to Trenton. There were bars there where people on the prowl were apt to run across one another. He did not know Trenton well, but he knew of a few places downtown off State Street that had that sort of reputation.

But he had never liked Trenton, and didn’t feel like driving that far now. He had already had several drinks, and although he was by no means drunk neither was he entirely sober. The drive to Trenton would be no problem in and of itself. He was in decent shape to drive. If he went, though, he would have several more drinks in Trenton, probably one or two in each of the bars he would go to. At that point it would be no pleasure to drive home, and might not be safe.

Nor had he ever been much good at picking up strangers. Even on the rare occasions when he had done so successfully, the evening had never been what he had hoped it might be. He always kept a part of himself guarded, nervous that his partner might suddenly turn out to be insane or criminal, that a husband or lover might turn up at any moment, either genuinely jealous or in some prearranged variant of the badger game. If the woman was interested in simple uncomplicated emotionless sex, he either suspected her motives or felt himself degraded by the experience. If she showed some personal interest in him that extended beyond the arena of the bedroom, he couldn’t help worrying she would try to trap him into something he did not want.

Lambertville was unlikely territory for pickups. Unescorted women were rare in the bars and cocktail lounges. Trenton was not all that far. He was a safe driver, and drink never made him abandon safe habits; if anything, he drove more slowly and carefully when aware he had had too much. And one never knew what one might find in a downtown bar, and if nothing else the drive there and the barhopping and the drive back would burn off some of the nervous energy that ran through him.

He walked almost to the car before changing his mind. No, he decided. Not tonight.

He walked back to the main drag into the bar of the Lambertville House. The place had been a hotel since Revolutionary times. It was now largely residential, renting the bulk of its rooms inexpensively to pensioners. The public rooms downstairs were comfortably and attractively furnished, and the restaurant did a brisk lunch business through the week. The bar, modern and not too brightly lit, was less crowded than he had thought it would be. He stopped briefly at a table to exchange a few words with two couples he knew slightly, sloughed off an invitation to join them, and made his way to the back of the bar. The bartender had just placed his drink in front of him when someone spoke his name.

He turned. There was a woman in the corner booth looking his way. She looked familiar but he could not place her. He picked up his drink and carried it to the booth.
“You are Hugh Markarian, aren’t you? I thought I recognized you. I don’t think we’ve met, but you were pointed out to me once or twice. I’m Melanie Jaeger.”

“How do you do?”

“Sully Jaeger’s wife.”

“Oh, Sully’s wife. The name didn’t register at first. I gather you and your husband are put scouting the competition.”

“No, I’m alone,” she said.

“Oh.”

“I’m not sure where Sully is,” she said. She pushed a strand of light brown hair out of her eyes. “I felt like getting out on my own for a change. I think people ought to do that now and then. Don’t you, Hugh?”

“Why not?”

“Oh, Sully’s wife. Not only Sully but Sully’s wife must be above suspicion—

“Yes,” he said levelly. “I think I’d enjoy it.”

“Then sit here next to me. These booths are small. I sort of shoved the table that way to give myself more room.”

“People need all the room they can get.”

“I know. I try to give myself all the room I need. You didn’t recognize me at first, did you? Of course not, since you never met me. Of course someone may have pointed me out to you, the way you were pointed out to me.”

“No. I would have remembered.”

“Because you have a wonderful memory?”

“Because you’re wonderfully memorable.”

She leaned toward him, smiled warmly at him. She was wearing cocoa brown hot pants and a matching top. Her midriff was bare, and her skin looked to have the texture of velvet. She was slender and compactly built, and her breasts looked disproportionately large for her frame.

“I’m not wearing a bra,” she said.

“I didn’t think you were.”

“I saw you looking and I thought you might be wondering. But I’m not. See?”

She leaned against him, her breast pressing against his upper arm. The warmth of her flesh was delicious.

He began talking, hardly sure what he was saying. Something about the town or the weather, something meaningless. She put her hand on his thigh and squeezed, and he stopped in mid-sentence.

“It’s silly for us to waste time talking to each other, isn’t it? We don’t have anything to talk about, really. No, I don’t want another drink. I didn’t really want this one. I didn’t come here to talk and I didn’t come here to drink. I already found what I came here for.”

“Oh?”

Her hand moved, cupped him. He felt himself growing under her touch. He was staring hard at the opposite side of the booth. He couldn’t speak.

“I don’t want people talking. They will anyway but there’s no point encouraging them. Where did you park your car?”

“Forsythe Street. Just across from the funeral parlor.”

“What kind of car?”

“A Buick. A white Buick.”

“Sit in your car and wait for me. Give me five minutes. All right?”

“Sure.”

She gave him a little squeeze, bounced her breast a second time against his arm. “Five minutes,” she said.

He sat in the car with the lights out and the motor running and felt like a Hollywood spy. “I don’t want people talking.” He thought of Mrs. Kleinschmidt: Tongues will wag. Not only Sully but Sully’s wife—

God, what a forward little piece she was. Hello, you’re Hugh Markarian, let’s fuck. A firm pillow of a tit against his arm and a greedy little hand between his legs and give me five minutes. He would slip into her, and could imagine nothing more comfortable than that.

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel. He told himself that he did not expect her to show up. When people came on that strong they were likely to be more interested in the game than anything else. It was unlikely that she would deliver. It was not as if he been singularly dynamic, charming her off her feet into his bed. Nor had she come
looking for him. For someone, yes, but not for him. She had as much as said that she had come to the Lambertville House specifically to find a man. He had been in the right place at the right time, that was all.

He thought of Sully and smiled. If ever a man deserved to be cuckolded, Sully was the man. And maybe that was the motive, for that matter. Maybe Melanie had finally found out that her great hairy bear of a husband was running all over town screwing everything with a hole in it, and had decided to get some of her own back. Which was understandable, but it still left room for her to get cold feet and change her mind.

He saw her turn the corner and let out his breath. He’d been unaware he was holding it. He blinked the lights once at her and saw her smile. He drove up, stopped for her, and she hopped in beside him and drew the door quickly shut.

“I was afraid you weren’t coming,” he said.
“I came, though.”
“Uh-huh.”
“And not for the last time, either. I think there’s going to be a lot of coming tonight.”
Her hand found him again. “That’s dangerous,” he said.
“It is?”
“When I’m driving it is.”
Her hand did not withdraw. “Oh, I’m not worried,” she said. “This is turning you on—”
“You better believe it is.”
“—but not in a way that’s gonna make you lose control of the car. You don’t lose control of things. That’s one of the reasons I’m here.”
“How do you mean?”
“Because I think we both want the same thing out of the next couple of hours.”
“What’s that?”
“Some nice yummy fucking without any hassles. We’re a couple of strangers. I’m from Maine and you’re from California and we just met in a bar in Toledo.”
“Nobody ever met anybody like you in a bar in Toledo.”
“You never know. Where are we going?”
He was driving onto the bridge, slowing the car to the fifteen-mile-an-hour speed limit. “Where do you want to go?”
“It doesn’t matter. Your place or a motel, whichever you’d rather.”
“My place, then.”
“I left my car in New Hope. Drop me and I’ll follow you out there. Then you won’t have to take me home. That’s if I can park the car where it won’t be seen from the street.”
“There’s a big driveway, and you can’t see anything from the street.”
“Then let me get my car. If we were going to a motel, I wouldn’t want to take it, but what’s the sense of you having to get dressed and drive me home?”

He dropped her a few blocks from her house and waited with the engine idling until she backed her sports car out of the driveway. He overtook her and she followed a half block behind. All the way there he kept glancing in his rearview mirror to make sure she had not turned off.

When they were in the house he took her in his arms and kissed her. She was considerably shorter than he was and stood on her tiptoes, clinging to him with her arms around his neck. She was wearing a great deal of perfume. He had not noticed it as much in the restaurant, or even in the Buick. He wondered if she had put more on before getting in her own car.

He kissed her again and they moved over to the couch and sat down clutching at each other. “I’m glad we’re not in a motel,” she said. “Just a bed and a dresser and a chair, and all you can do is get out of your clothes and get down to business. Let’s take our time, okay?”
“Why not?”
“Let’s fool around like kids and get each other so hot we can’t stand it, and then we’ll go to your bedroom and fuck like crazy.”

They kissed. Her mouth was eager, demanding. He put a hand on her bare midriff and stroked her. Her skin was as soft as it looked and stroking her was like petting a kitten. He dipped a finger into her navel and she moaned and writhed against him.

When he reached to unclasp the halter top she shook her head. “You don’t have to take it off,” she said. “Just pull it up. See?”
She pulled the top up and her breasts popped into view beneath it. They were large and perfectly firm. He stroked them and she purred, and he lowered his head to kiss her breasts.
“See? It’s sexier with clothes on.”
She was right. He did not know her age but knew she could not be more than twenty-five; Sully’s wives were never older than that. In speech and manner she was younger still, and this urgent clothed lovemaking made him feel he was in high school again. He kissed her breasts and put a hand under the band of the hot pants. The skin on the inside of her thighs was the same perfect velvet as the rest of her.
“No panties.”
“I didn’t think you’d be wearing them.”
“I was before. They’re in the glove compartment. I took them off as soon as I got in my own car. They were already wet by then. God, you’re good. You know just what to do to me.”
“You’re beautiful.”
“Oh, are we gonna fuck. You’re getting me so hot. Anything you want to do. What’s that?”
A car had turned into the driveway, and for a moment his heart froze. He could see Sully coming through the door with a gun in his hand. Then in an instant he recognized the unmistakable sound of the Volkswagen.
“It’s all right. It’s my daughter.”
“I didn’t know you had a daughter.”
“She’s spending the summer here.”
She sat back, brushed her hair out of her face with her fingers. “You want to go upstairs before she comes in?”
“There’s no need.”
“Well, you want me to go upstairs?”
He shook his head. “We have a fairly open living arrangement here.”
“Well, open or not, you don’t want me sitting around with my tits hanging out.” She tucked herself back into the cocoa brown halter. She started to say something but stopped when the key turned in the door. He lit a cigarette and settled himself on the couch next to Melanie. He was taking a second drag when Karen and the boy came into the room. There was a glow in Karen’s cheeks and a firm smile on her face.
She said, “Dad, this is Jeffrey. Jeff, my father, Hugh Markarian. And you must be Linda.”
“That’s right,” Melanie said.
“I’m Karen, and I’m glad to meet you. Dad’s said a lot about you.”
“Well,” Hugh said. He got to his feet, shook hands with the boy. “You kids like a drink?”
“I think we’ll just go upstairs,” Karen said. “We wanted to listen to some records.”
There was no record player in Karen’s room. “Enjoy yourselves,” he said. He turned to put out his cigarette in an ashtray, and when he looked up again they were already on the stairs.
“Control.”
“How’s that?”
“What I noticed about you right away,” she said. “You stay in control. You don’t get rattled.”
He smiled. “Why should I get rattled?” He sat next to her and let his eyes note the rich young body, let his hands remember the feel of the rich young flesh.
“It didn’t bother you?”
He shook his head. “I told her she could bring people here. And that I would bring people here if I wanted.”
“Like Linda. Right. It would bother most fathers.”
“It didn’t bother me.”
“It didn’t upset you that he was black?”
“No,” he said, reaching for her. “Why should it?”
When Sully heard her car in the driveway he stayed where he was. He sat in his chair in the living room and did not move when her key turned in the lock and she entered the house. She said, “Honey? I’m home,” and he made no response. He sat in his chair and looked at nothing. There was a glass of applejack in his left hand and a cigarette in his right, but he was neither smoking nor drinking. He had poured the drink over an hour ago and had not yet taken a first sip of it. The ashtray beside him was filled with cigarette butts. He would light one and hold it until the heat of it warmed his fingers, then put it out and light another.

She came into the room and dropped down onto his lap, reaching out a hand to touch his ear and rub the back of his neck. “I’m home,” she said.

“Uh-huh.”

“Miss me?”

“You cunt.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

“No.”

“Do you want me to stop telling you about it?”

He couldn’t look at her.

“No.”

“I won’t tell you if you don’t want me to, Sully.”

She settled herself on his lap, her arms around his neck. The smell of her was heady, intoxicating. She waited, silent, and he knew he would tell her to speak and hated himself for it.

He said, “This fucking game we play.”

“You want to stop playing?”

“Shit. I do and I don’t.”

“It’s up to you, baby.”

He put out the cigarette. He raised the glass of applejack, looked at it thoughtfully, put it down untasted on the small mahogany table.

He said, “Who was it?”

“Are you sure you want to know?”

Part of the game, part of their ritual, all of it carefully evolved during the past weeks by an elaborate system of trial and error. It was more exciting when he knew. He hated himself more, hated her more, but it was more exciting and that was what seemed to count in the long run.

“Tell me” he said.

“If you’re sure.”

“Tell me.”

She licked her lips. Anticipation glowed in her eyes. This, he knew, was what she lived for. She would go out and enjoy her adventures, but they themselves were spiced by her expectations of returning home to tell him her story. She would come home with her dirty little stories and she would tell him everything in as tantalizing a manner as possible. And then he would take her, and that part of it was what she lived for. What they both lived for.

“I went to the Lambertville House,” she said. “I took a corner booth and just waited for somebody to come in.”

“Who was it?”

“I had quite a wait. There were a lot of men who gave me the eye, but I wanted just the right one.”

“Who was it?”

“Hugh Markarian.”

“Christ.”

“I remembered you pointing him out to me. He comes to the Barge a lot, doesn’t he?”

“He’s there.”

“I groped him right there at the table. He was very cool about it. It got to him in a big way but he was very cool about it.”

She went on, giving him the story an inch at a time. The words did not excite him now. That wasn’t how it worked. He would listen all the way through, feeling nothing but a slight sense of nausea, his whole being deadened by the flow of words. That was the pattern they had established. And then, as she neared the end of the story, something would happen within him that he did not begin to understand.

“Talk about cool,” she was saying. “His daughter walked in then, see, and she’s hanging on the arm of a big black nigger.”
“Oh, yeah?”

“And she takes him upstairs. And he tells me she’s free to bring friends home if she wants. Right? And he says why should it bother him if it’s a nigger. Just as cool as ice he said that, but he didn’t know I saw his face when he first caught sight of the nigger. He went white, Sully. He went absolutely white. But just for that instant, and the kid never saw it, and from then on he’s Mister Cool again.”

“Oh-huh.”

“I thought it would throw him off, you know? Not being able to get it out of his head. I mean, we went upstairs to his bedroom. And a couple doors down the hall is her bedroom, and she’s in there with the black, and he’s her father and how can he get this out of his head? But I guess I took his mind off it.”

“Oh-huh.”

“See, I really got him hot necking. With our clothes on and everything like kids in a drive-in. And by the time we were upstairs we were so hot for each other that nothing else mattered. Do you want to know what we did?”

“You know what I want.”

“Yeah. And I know what I want, too.”

“Tell me about it.”

His expression did not change while she spoke. Her eyes on him, she constructed her description of what had taken place at Hugh Markarian’s house, constructed it skillfully and deliberately. From time to time she was purposely vague, forcing him to ask questions. She never invented, never exaggerated, but stayed strictly with the exact truth as she perceived it.

After about a quarter of an hour she had finished. She thought there would be more questions from him, he seemed on the point of asking something, but he remained silent, and they sat together for several minutes without talking.

Then he said, “I guess I’ll get some sleep.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“Oh-huh.”

He got heavily to his feet. She followed him up the stairs. Her hands were trembling, she noticed, and her mouth was dry. She recognized both anticipation and fear within herself, anticipation of his lovemaking, fear that what had worked before might by now have lost its magic. She had read nothing in his face but defeat and exhaustion, both of them now echoed the slump of his shoulders as he mounted the stairs.

It might not work this time. Worse, it might provoke not lust but loathing. And that could be very dangerous for her. She looked at the size of him and remembered his strength. He had never struck her, but if he ever did—God, he was strong. It would be so easy for him to kill her with his hands.

She shivered at that thought. And wondered, fleetingly, whether there was more than fear in what she felt. The possibility was a shade more frightening than the fear which had occasioned it, and she made herself stop thinking about it.

In bed beside him, both fear and anticipation mounted while she waited to see if it would work. She wanted to reach for him but knew not to. It would be he who would reach for her. Or not reach for her.

When his hand settled on her thigh, her entire body sighed. Breath drained from her lungs and tension from her muscles. She had not realized that she had been holding her breath, nor had she been aware of the taut knots in her calves and forearms. She closed her eyes against the glow of false dawn and surrendered to the hand upon her thigh. Her mind filled with a picture of that hand. She could see it so clearly, the hairs on its back, the fading scar on the index finger. The hand moved to touch between her legs, and she gasped. Her arousal was instant and total.

He played with her for a long time. Idly, undemandingly, using only his hands. Once, as he reached for her breasts, she felt his cock press like a bar of hot iron against her leg. She wanted it in her. She felt it against her leg and saw it in her mind and ached with her own emptiness. But her hand did not reach for him. She waited.

And when he took her—and who knew how long it was, seconds or minutes or hours, who knew, who cared?—When he took her it was with strength and fury and power that took her completely out of herself. It was frightening to be fucked like this. And more frightening to think of living without it. All the women he had had, and none of them had ever been possessed as he possessed her. Oh, it was worth it. It was worth anything she had to do, anything at all.

She woke around noon, showered, dressed, put up a pot of coffee. While it was perking she heard him upstairs in the bathroom. She set two places at the breakfast room table, broke eggs into a frying pan. Then she remembered how he liked pancakes. She hadn’t made them for him in ages. In fact they rarely had breakfast together anymore. She would fry eggs for him and sit with a cup of coffee while he ate, then make herself something after he left. It wasn’t that much trouble to make a real breakfast. She’d just grown out of the habit.

She had to hunt to find the box of pancake mix. It had been in the cupboard half-empty for more than a year but it
seemed to be all right. No worms in it. The chemicals kept it from spoiling and rendered it unfit for insect consumption. Only human beings could eat it.

Apple pancakes—he loved apple pancakes. She found apples in the refrigerator and sliced them into the batter. By the time he came downstairs she had a stack of pancakes on both their plates and two mugs of coffee poured.

He said, “Well, what do you know? What’s the occasion?”

“Just breakfast.”

“You picked the right day for it. I got an appetite like I don’t know what. What’s the expression? ‘My stomach thinks my throat’s been cut.’ What did you put, apples in the coffee? I’m tasting apples from the pancakes. You put applejack in the coffee.”

“Well, I figured what wine goes with apple pancakes and I figured why not. If it’s no good, I’ll get you another cup.”

“When I finish this one you can get me another cup exactly the same. What got into you?”

“You did.”

“Yeah.” He grinned, then let the grin fade. “I guess we got things to, I don’t know, talk about. But—”

“Oh, let’s just enjoy breakfast for the time being.”

“Let’s do that.”

The day went quickly. She found things to do around the house, did some marketing, watched television. She was watching an Errol Flynn movie when he returned home. She turned off the set and went downstairs to meet him.

“You’re home,” he said.

“Yeah. Where else would I be?”

“Oh, I don’t know. You might be cooking up apple pancakes for somebody or other.”

“I bought some pure maple syrup this afternoon. It’s expensive but I figured let’s live a little.”

He reached for her suddenly, one hand on her bottom, the other between her legs. He kissed her for a long time. When he released her she was dizzy and had trouble staying on her feet.

“Just what I say,” he said. “Let’s live a little.”

“Jesus.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Just you came on me by surprise.”

“I didn’t, but it sounds like fun.”

“Huh?”

“Coming on you. Feel this, will you? I been like this all day long.”

“You should of come home for dinner.”

“I never would of gone back.”

“I never would of let you. Let’s go upstairs.”

“What, and climb all those stairs? There’s a perfectly good couch in the living room.”

The next two days held to the pattern. Breakfast together, elaborately prepared and enthusiastically received, with an almost unreal warmth between them. Lovemaking at night, his potency on honeymoon level, her own satisfaction greater than anything she had ever known. And, for prelude and aftermath, more conversation than had been their custom.

And yet it was not conversation at all. It was talk, but it was not about anything.

On Thursday night she met him at the door. There was something in his eyes. She saw it immediately. He embraced her and put his hands on her but she sensed the difference in his response and in her own.

“There’s fresh coffee.”

“Good.”

She brought two cups. She thought of putting applejack in his but didn’t. He took a cup of coffee and put the cup down. “He was in tonight,” he said.

She knew who he meant but asked anyway.

“Markarian. Came over around ten thirty with a girl, took a table on the water side. Had two rounds, left a little after eleven.”

“Was that the first time since—”

“No. He was in Monday. Came in alone and had four or five quick ones at the bar. Talked with some of the regulars. Talked with me, I talked with him. Didn’t show a thing. Couple of times I’d look his way sudden to see if he’s giving me a look. But not once. Not one time. All the shitty actors in this town, I’ll tell you, he could give them lessons.”

“I told you how cool he was.”

“He was cool and I was cool. He didn’t let a thing show. And neither did I. He’s got no idea, I know. Last night,
no, the night before. Yeah, Tuesday. He’s in there with his daughter. Karen?”

“That’s right.”

“Introduced me to her. Here she’s sitting with her Daddy and I’m seeing her in my mind with a black cock in her mouth. Not the point. Point is, she showed it.”

“Showed what?”

“Showed she knew it was my wife with her father the other night. I mean I sensed this from her that I hadn’t from him. Before that I had it in my mind that maybe you were making it up. Not really. I mean I knew it but I didn’t know it. You get me?”

“I think so.”

He started to say something, then lapsed into silence. She felt an undercurrent of nervous excitement moving inside her. It was not all she felt, there were other feelings, but it was there.

He said, “He’s cool and I’m cool and even the kid was cool. I never would have known anything from her if I didn’t know it in the first place. Everybody’s cool and I got something inside me that I don’t know what it is.”

“How do you feel about him?”

“Hi? I don’t know. What’s there to feel? Do I want to kill him? No. Do I want to take a punch at him? No. Do I want him to walk in front of a train? No. I look at him, and I see him with you, the whole scene goes through my mind, and I don’t know what I feel.”

“Does it excite you?”

“I don’t know. Does it give me a hard-on? No. There’s excitement and there’s excitement. It does something. I don’t know what It does. The point isn’t how I feel about Markarian. Fuck Markarian. I mean he’s nothing. Unless—would you see him again?”

“No.”

“So he’s one night. One particular night he happens to be a cock with a man on the end of it. The point is not how I feel about him.”

“The point’s how you feel about me.”

“I guess. No.”

“Then what?”

“It’s how I feel about me, Melanie.”

“Oh.”

“I’m not myself.”

She put her hand on his arm.

“You hear that expression all the time but I never really knew what it meant before. I’m not myself. I look the same, I act the same on the surface, but I’m walking around wearing somebody else’s head. For years I was one particular person, and now I’m not the same man anymore. I don’t know who the hell I am.”

“Are you happier or sadder or—”

“It isn’t like that. It’s something different. It’s—Melanie?”

She looked at him. She had never seen his face so open.

“Melanie, I’m afraid.”

“Tell me.”

“I’m afraid and I don’t know what of.”

“Are you worried about your mind?”

“You mean worried I’m going crazy? I don’t know. Maybe I’m crazy already. I don’t know how to say any of this because I can’t get it right in my own head to begin with. I’m afraid of not being myself. That I’m turning into a person I got no respect for. What kind of man is it that can only be a man by hearing his wife tell him what she did with somebody else? And then I’ll think that one day I’ll wake up and everything’ll be the way it used to be, I’ll be the way I was, and all of this is just something I’m going through. A stage. And when I think that I’m afraid, that makes me afraid too. Melanie, I don’t know what I want.”

“Whatever it is, you want it, but you don’t”

“Yeah.” She brought him more coffee. When she was seated beside him again he began talking about something that had happened in one of his earlier marriages. She followed the story trying to catch the point he was making, but couldn’t. When he finished he began discussing aspects of their current situation, puzzling it out, and then switched into a reminiscence of something that had happened thirty years earlier. Then she realized that the first story had had no point, that he was not telling her stories with points. He was working back and forth through his life and trying to tell her who he was.

He talked and she listened. She brought him more coffee until he said it was giving him the jitters, and then he switched to applejack. She brought the jug and a glass. He drank, but not heavily, taking small sips as punctuation as
he moved from one recollection to another.
Around daybreak he paused, and he was silent for a long while before she realized he had finished. But the
conversation was not finished. He was waiting for her to give it another direction.
She said, “Sully? I don’t have to do it anymore.”
“You could just stop.”
“Yeah.”
“You had a need, Melanie. The first time wasn’t to turn me on. It was for you.”
“So?”
“So why should you stop scratching if the itch don’t go away?”
“Maybe it went away.”
“Even if you think so—”
“How could I know for sure?”
“There’s no way.”
“I know I could stop if you want me to.”
“The question’s what you want to do.”
“I want what you want.”
“No good. Suppose you could have it either way. The Good Fairy comes and gives you a wish. You can go on
doing it with me wanting you to or you can stop with me wanting you to stop. See what I mean? That’s the question
you got to answer.”
He was right, it was the question she had to answer, but she had to think about it first.
“I would go on,” she said finally.
“Uh-huh.”
“Because I like the things it’s doing for us. Sully, I never really knew you till tonight.”
“You mean all this talking.”
“Yes, all this talking. You never talked to a woman like that, did you?”
“To anybody. No, I never did.”
“So nobody ever knew you. And nobody ever knew me. And all the girls you’ve had, none of them ever got to
you the way I do. That’s not a question either because I know it’s true. The past few nights. You never had that with
anybody else.”
“You’re right.” He looked at her. “You know something? Another thing that scares me. All my life I see a girl,
and I want her. Like you turn a faucet and water comes out. Lately nothing. The other night Markarian’s in with his
daughter, and thinking about her and the coon and about how Markarian was with you it occurs to me it would be
like turning the tables if I got to his daughter. He screws my wife so I screw his daughter. Poetic license. No, that’s
not it. Justice. Poetic justice.”
“So.”
“So you saw her, you know what she looks like. And here I’m having this thought and I look at her and it comes
to me that I don’t want to. Poetic or not, I got no urge at all for the little bitch.”
“You wouldn’t want to have her?”
“Not in the slightest. You would want me to have her?”
She licked her lips. “I would want me to have her.”
“Did you ever—”
“No. I never even wanted to until just now. I never even thought about it until just now. Lately I’ve been having
all kinds of new thoughts.”
“Welcome to the club.”
“The thought excites you, doesn’t it? Me with her.”
“Yeah, it does. Why the hell is that?”
“I don’t know.”
“You with her excites me. Me with her doesn’t. Why the hell is that?”
“Well, me with Markarian does, as far as that goes, and—”
“That’s something else worries me.”
“That you’re—”
“Not that I am. Not exactly. I mean I never felt anything that way. For another man. I can’t imagine it. But the
idea that this business of being turned on by what you do with someone else, that it’s a fag thing.”
“I don’t understand.”
“Well, skip it. I don’t understand it myself, it’s just a feeling. Just something for when there’s nothing else to
worry about, and there always is. Melanie? This I got to say because I can’t talk myself out of it. You could meet
somebody you like better.”
“No.”
“It could happen.”
“It could never happen.”
“Again, even if you believe this, how can you know?”
She said. “Jesus, I’m so tired.”
“Yeah, we’re wearing ourselves out. Let’s go to sleep, huh?”
“It’s necking,” she said.
“Huh?”
“How I know it could never happen.”
“You lost me.”
“Remember with Markarian? Necking in the living room, going through a long buildup? The whole thing was necking. Fucking him was necking.”
“I don’t—”
“Even having an orgasm, part of me wasn’t there. It was in the future.” She shook her head, impatient with herself. “Jesus, I’m so exhausted I can’t put words together. What made me hot with him was thinking how I would tell you about it. And what we would do afterward. If I’d of come home and we didn’t do anything, I’d of been ten times as frustrated as if I never left the house in the first place. Oh I want to do things, baby. Freaky things I never used to think about. Girl things. Group things. But to go out and do them and then come on home, because that’s the important part. The other is necking. What’s so funny?”
“They would lock us up. The both of us. If they could take off the tops of our heads and look at what’s inside, they’d lock us up. No question. We’re a pair of weirdos.”
“Yeah.”
“They’d lock us up,” he said.
“Just so they put us in the same cell.”
“Yeah. And just so they let you out once in a while, huh? Oh, God, am I tired. I am so tired.”
ELEVEN

That Friday morning, at about the time Sully and Melanie Jaeger headed upstairs to bed, Hugh Markarian went into his den and uncovered his typewriter. He put a fresh sheet of paper in place and typed “119.” at its top. He looked thoughtfully at the number as if waiting for it to tell him something. It occurred to him that it ought to tell him something. If nothing else, it ought to give a short nod of recognition. It was not as if he and “119.” were meeting one other for the first time. Just renewing old acquaintances.

He had first typed that particular number almost a month ago, at which time one might say it had told him something, told him it was time to take a week or so off. Then, two days ago, he had typed it again. And again yesterday morning. And now today.

He thought now of his conversation with Linda at Tannhauser’s, his buoyant assurance that he was extending his leave from the book because he was enjoying the free time, but that within a few days he would return to it with no trouble at all. One day he would simply be ready, that was all.

And true to his word, he got out of bed Wednesday morning knowing that this was the day. Even before he reached his den his fingers were anticipating the feel of the typewriter keys. Then he’d typed the damned number at the top of the damned page and waited for something to happen, and nothing did. Nor had anything happened yesterday when he repeated the performance verbatim.

Nor was anything extraordinary happening now.

Perhaps “119.” had numerological significance. Perhaps it was some sort of jinx. He couldn’t remember that the number had played any prior role in his life. It had never been his address, for example. Was it a prime number? He got a pencil and played with the number. No, it was not a prime; it was the product of 7 and 17. They in turn were both primes, but it seemed likely that a great many numbers, numbers of pages which had presented no difficulty, could make much the same statement.

Suppose he just skipped on and wrote “120.” And came back and wrote “119.” later? No, by George, because it would be more than a little trick to write a page with no idea of what might happen on the one preceding it. And if he just omitted “119.” forever, it looked to be cheating, like skipping from twelve to fourteen when numbering hotel floors. If one really wanted to be safe, one would build a hotel with a thirteenth floor and not put any rooms on it. Now, insofar as the pages of a book were concerned, on the other hand—

His mind went on playing along these lines until he told himself to stop. This was silly. There was a point to working, and there might be a point to not working, but he was deliberately thinking along unproductive lines.

He skipped down a few lines from the top of the page and typed: “Reasons why this book is not getting written.”

And below, in outline form:
(1) Other things on my mind.
   (a) Karen.
   (b) Linda.
   (c) Melanie.
(2) Problems with the book.
   (a) Too much time away from it and lost the handle.
   (b) Worried about writer’s block has indeed brought on writer’s block.
   (c) The book stinks.
(3) But he stopped there, because there was no third category, or if there was it didn’t really apply. All of the elements he had listed were valid but only one of them mattered. He did have other things on his mind, and they inevitably included Karen and Linda and might be said to include Melanie if one thought of her more as a metaphor for sex in general. And he had been too long from the book and had lost his feel for it, and blocking itself was its own cause, operating much like impotence; if you worried about your ability to write or to make love, the worry intensified the inability.

But the last item was the important one. The book stank. Or he thought it did, which came to more or less same thing. It was very difficult to go on with something in which you had to be totally involved if the suspicion kept gnawing at you that you were creating garbage.

Was it bad?

He hefted the manuscript, knowing he would have to read it again, knowing he didn’t want to. Of course he had read it Wednesday. He had thought he might be able to jump right back into it that morning, but when his fingers froze on the keys he knew he would have to read the book through and pick up its tones and highlights before he could go on. It hadn’t seemed bad then. It had pleased him. There were lines he did not remember having written,
lines and exchanges which he knew were damned good. But after having read its 118 pages, he was still no closer to writing the next page.

He moved the typewriter to one side and centered the manuscript on the desk in front of him. However good or bad it might be, he was going to hate what he read today. He’d read the thing just two days ago and on this go-through he was sure to see only the weaknesses. Still, he had to do it. Something might strike a spark, something might put him back into the book. And that was what it was all about, after all. You had to be inside what you wrote.

At first the process of reading was difficult in and of itself. His eyes scanned the pages but his mind kept slipping along other paths of thought. There were, indeed, many things to think about.

His coupling with Melanie Jaeger had been imaginative and intense, his responses sure and strong, his control certain. But it might as well have been happening to someone else. His body performed, experienced, fulfilled itself. His mind, blocked and frozen, was utterly remote. By the time her little red car pulled out of his driveway the details of their lovemaking were already receding from memory.

He went back to his bed, a bed now pungent with Melanie’s scent. He did not expect sleep would come but surprised himself by falling asleep almost at once. He slept fitfully, time after time pulling himself awake out of eternal variations of the same dream. Each time he dreamed of heights—a window ledge, a mountain precipice, a long steep endless flight of stairs, an idiot over an abyss. In each dream he would be paralyzed by fear but would force himself to edge his way along the window ledge, to descend the staircase a hesitant step at a time. He would reach his destination only to find that one window ledge led only to another, that still another flight of stairs confronted him. And then, as vertigo seized him and he was poised, about to fall, he would fight his way back to consciousness, sitting up in bed with his heart violent in his chest.

He had had these dreams for as long as he could remember, and only rarely would he recall dreams that did not have something to do with heights and falling. Sometimes the dreams held no terror and the endless descending of stairs was merely annoying and frustrating and slightly uncomfortable. On other nights, like this one, the terror was acute. And the fear would persist during the period of consciousness immediately following. If he ever fell in the course of a dream, if he ever failed to rescue himself in time—

He was not sure what the dream meant and rarely worried about them. Heights did make him uncomfortable, in or out of sleep, and he suspected that the dreams merely provided a mechanism for the unconscious expression of fear, any fear at all. Fear of death, fear of failure, any of the justified or irrational demons that curl in the corners of men’s souls.

When he awoke for the final time, the dream had no sooner receded than he thought of his daughter. She had been in several of the dreams, he seemed to remember this, although he could not recall what role she might have played. He remembered seeing her face, and that there had been a particular expression on it, but he could not remember anything about that expression.

He passed her room on the way downstairs, noting that her door was open. He paused on the stairs. The prospect of confrontation unsettled him, yet he never considered postponing the moment. He merely wanted to steady himself for a moment so that he would handle this well. It would be important to handle it well. Nor was it just a matter of handling things; at the same time he would have to be honest, and he was not entirely sure what words and attitudes on his part would constitute honesty.

She was alone at the kitchen table. She raised her eyes at his approach, and in the instant before she smiled he saw an expression on her face he had never noticed before. It struck him later that it might have been the face she had shown him in his dreams.

She said, “Hi. Is Linda coming down?”
“She didn’t stay.”
“Neither did Jeff.”
“Sleep well?”
“Oh, You?”
“Oh, not too bad.”
“She wasn’t quite what I expected.” The words came out less casually than she intended. “Linda, I mean.”
“How?”
“I don’t know exactly.”
“She also wasn’t Linda.”
“Huh? You introduced—”
“No, you did, actually. You introduced yourself and told her she must be Linda, and she agreed with you.”
“Oh, wow! I just took it for granted—”
“No harm.”
“I mean that was pretty stupid of me, wasn’t it? I just thought—except I didn’t think.”
“Forget it.”
“Anyway, I’m sorry.”
She reached for her coffee cup, and he could very nearly read the unvoiced question in a comic strip balloon over
her head. *Then who was she?*

He said, “Her name is Melanie Jaeger. She’s married; her husband runs the Barge Inn. I never spoke to her before
last night. We ran into each other in Lambertville, and she came back here with me. It wasn’t anything important to
either of us. It was uncomplicated and physical and we both seemed to require it.”

He couldn’t read her face. He wondered if he’d said too much, or if he ought to elaborate on what he’d told her.
Why did he feel he had to justify himself?

She said, “I guess that’s why she wasn’t the way I expected Linda to be.”
“Why?”

“Oh, that it wasn’t important, that it didn’t mean anything. I got the impression—this is silly, what’s the
difference what impression I got?”
“No, I’m interested.”
“Well, I had the feeling you and Linda had something heavy going on. And then meeting—what was name?”
“Melanie.”
“Well, I didn’t see her as your type, I guess. Don’t ask me why. And the general vibes. You know, it felt more
casual than—oh, I don’t know.”
“‘Heavy,’” he said. “That’s a good word.”
“I probably overuse it.”
“You did get that impression about Linda and me? I didn’t know I’d said that much. You’re right. At least I think
you might be. There’s a feeling of possibility between us.” He was not looking at Karen now, was talking as much
to himself as to her. “I think I might be ready to … get involved. I’m not sure. And it’s questionable whether she’s
ready for any sort of involvement. But what happened last night was certainly very light by comparison. Not heavy
at all.”
“This is so far-out.”
“How do you mean?”
“Oh, I don’t know.” She suddenly grinned at him. “A different woman every night. I thought men your age were
supposed to slow down.”
He drew a blank for a moment. Then it dawned on him.
“Did I say something wrong?”
“No, no. You made an assumption and I let you hang onto it. Linda and I never had sex.”
“But—”
“I brought her here. Primarily to meet you, as a matter of fact. Then sex did seem a possibility, but she decided
she wasn’t ready for it. So I drove her home. You assumed I’d been to bed with her and it seemed easier to let it go
at that than to get into an awkward conversation. Though it could hardly have been as awkward as the one we’re in
right now.”
“I know. It’s so weird how we keep learning how to relate to each other.”
“Yes, it is. I’m enjoying it, kitten.”
“So am I.”

The conversation shifted to easier areas when Mrs. Kleinschmidt made an appearance. Over breakfast they talked
easily, with Mrs. Kleinschmidt ultimately joining the conversation and, inevitably, taking it over. Hugh was grateful,
glad to let the old woman take up the burden of filling time with words.

Jeff.
The black boy.

*Man,* he supposed he meant. Only Caucasians could be referred to as boys. At what age, he wondered, did blacks
bridle at being called *boy?*

The same afternoon he was in the living room reading a magazine. He looked up when the front door opened. She
bounced into the room, asking if she was interrupting. He told her she wasn’t.

“Untrue,” she said, gaily. She dropped into his lap like a child and memories clutched at his heart. “Of course I’m
interrupting. What I meant was do you mind awfully?”
“I do not mind a bit.”
“Good. What were you reading?”
“Article about blood banks. Commercial blood banks.”
“What’s there to say about commercial blood banks besides *yecchhh?*”
“That’s about what the article said. How drunkers and junkies sell their blood and it spreads hepatitis and other
unpleasant things."

"And that’s what you were reading? I don’t think I feel at all guilty for interrupting. Actually I have an ulterior motive."

"Oh?"

"See, it’s a beautiful day, I was thinking it would be fantastic to take a walk in the woods, but suppose there are bears there? I mean, I wouldn’t feel safe unless I had company."

"I see."

"And I’m sure you would never forgive yourself," she said, "if I were eaten by a bear."

"How well you know me. If you get up, then I could get up."

"Deal."

And in the special stillness of the woods, she said, "I was thinking about a habit I have. Of jumping to conclusions. The only way to avoid it is to come out and ask, isn’t it?"

"Ask what?"

"Well, you did have sex with Melanie, didn’t you?"

He started to laugh, then assured her that he did. A few steps farther she said, "I didn’t."

"Oh?"

"With Jeff. What you didn’t do with Linda, I didn’t do with Jeff."

She straightened up and punctuated her speech with little slaps of the branch into the palm of her hand. "By the time we got upstairs I realized what I was doing. I mean I realized all along in a way but I didn’t see how rotten it was, I was doing a number."

"We’ve both been feeling each other out a lot, kitten."

"But this really sucked. It was like I was saying, ‘I’m testing you by bringing home a spade, and if you can handle this one, tomorrow I’ll bring home a kangaroo.’ And I was using Jeff. I wasn’t even using him as a person, I was using him as a spade. Which is a racist thing."

"Well—"

"It is. I was trying to show that you were a racist, or that you weren’t or … fuck it, I don’t know what I was trying to prove, I honestly don’t. But I was into a racist thing myself in doing it." She slapped the branch harder against her palm and it snapped. She stared at the piece still in her hand, then opened her hand and watched it fall.

She said, "I wonder if he knew what I was doing. He didn’t say anything but he must have picked up on it. Maybe he didn’t care. You know, anything to get laid. Do men really have that attitude?"

"Some of the time. Most of the time, maybe. More than women, certainly."

"That’s kind of depressing, that he could see what I was doing and still want to ball me. But when I saw, I don’t know, I just couldn’t do it. I don’t know what it was exactly but I couldn’t. I knew I had to get out of it without being horrible. I told him—what was it I said? I told him I couldn’t do anything with you in the house, that it just made me clutch completely. He wanted me to go somewhere else but I wouldn’t."

"I wonder if I told him the truth without meaning to! Maybe I was uptight about that without knowing it."

"It’s possible."

"I just thought of that. What I thought after he left was that maybe I was a racist in another way, that once we were upstairs there I was all alone with this black guy and I couldn’t go through with balling him because he was black. I never made it with a black person before. It’s so hard to know why you do things and what’s good and what’s bad. Sometimes I—"

"Kitten." His arm encircled her. "Just let it go. You don’t have to keep picking at scabs."

"Is that what I’m doing?"

"I think so."

"Maybe. Could we sit down for a minute? Because I’m getting tired."

"Sure."

They sat with their backs against the trunk of an oak. A breeze was blowing, and he watched the dancing pattern of sunlight filtered through the leaves overhead, bright green dots dancing on the dark green forest floor. She settled her head on his shoulder. He patted his pockets, searching for a pipe, but he hadn’t brought one. It would have been pleasant to smoke a pipe now while watching the sunlight pattern and enjoying her presence beside him.

"No bears," she said.

"Hibernating."

"This time of year?"

"I snuck into their dens in January and turned off their alarm clocks."

"When will they get up?"

"As soon as they stop hibernating."
“Daddy? Can I ask you something?”
“About bears?”
“No. Heavier than bears.”
“Bears are pretty heavy.”
“Daddy?”
“What is it, kitten?”
“I just, I don’t know—I say that all the time, don’t I? ‘I don’t know.’ I never realized I did that until the psychiatrist pointed it out. But I still say it.”
“When were you seeing a psychiatrist?”
“At school. I got … oh, things bothered me a lot. Or I thought they did. I saw him three times. No, four. He said I was all right. Daddy?”
“What?”
“Does it get easier?”
She was so vulnerable, so soft and open and vulnerable. He said, “Do you mean sex or love? Or both?”
“I mean the whole thing. You know. Life. When I was a kid I always thought when you grew up everything was perfect, and I’m eighteen years old, and I always thought eighteen was when you got to be grown up, and then, I don’t know.”
After a moment he said, “I was trying to remember what it was like when I was eighteen. It’s hard to see your own past with any real clarity. I was much less mature at your age than you are. I didn’t really get around to the kind of growth you’re going through until after the war. The war had something to do with it but not everything. Kids grow up much faster than they did. I’m not sure whether that’s good or bad.”
“Neither am I.”
“Does it get easier? That’s a good question. I don’t think it gets better. But in a way it does get easier. Because you learn things. You learn how to handle it. And it doesn’t hurt as much.”
She had taken his hand in both of hers. Now she squeezed it hard. They sat awhile in silence before heading back toward the house. He was happy, very happy, and very close to tears.
On the way back she said, “You got me out of my mood. I just wish—”
“What do you wish?”
“Oh, that I thought more of myself. I don’t think I’m a very terrific person.”
“I think you’re an utterly terrific person.”
“Well, you have to. I’m your daughter.”
He said, “If I weren’t your father, and if I had a daughter, I would give anything to have her turn out like you.”
She began to cry. He took her in his arms and held her close. She looked up at him, beaming through her tears, “You always know just the right words,” she said. “You ought to be a writer, you know that?”
The book didn’t stink.
He gathered up the manuscript, squared its edges, set it on the desk top. He had read it carefully all the way through, expecting to hate it, and it simply wasn’t awful. It was taut, spare. The characters sounded real. The scenes had life.
But it wasn’t quite right, either.
He lit a cigarette, leaned back, watched the smoke crawl toward the ceiling. This reading, he decided, had been worthwhile. He knew what was wrong with the book. It was possible that the book’s flaw was not what had mired him on its hundred and nineteenth page, but he knew that the resolution of that flaw would be enough spur to get him going again. If he could figure out what to do about it.
The book was thin. There wasn’t sufficient substance to it.
It was, very simply, the story of a woman’s life as shown in the three years before and two or three years after the death of her husband. Other parts of her life would be included in flashback and reminiscence, so that the book in total would present the woman’s entire life.
Was she a remarkable woman? He did not know that yet, and would learn only by writing her story. But he did know that her life was not remarkable. He did not know all its details—these would emerge as he wrote—but he knew that she was born on an Eastern Pennsylvania farm, went to New York to be an actress, married a boy who was killed in the war, took a second husband shortly after the war’s end. Her second husband was an advertising man in New York, who then took a job with a Philadelphia agency. They moved to a suburb of Philadelphia, had a daughter, grew toward middle age in a marriage that was neither good nor bad.
In the book’s first chapter the husband suffers a coronary thrombosis and lives through it. Over the next several hundred pages he would have two more coronaries, the last of which would kill him. And after that—well, he knew very little of what would happen after that. If the book took proper form, he would know the story’s ending when it
was time for him to write it. Somehow it lacked dimension, and he did not know exactly how or why.

A little later he put part of it together. Part of the problem—it was the wife’s story, but it was the husband who was doing the dying. So in a sense she was along for the ride, but you never saw him from the inside, never saw him except through her eyes. And yet it had to be that way; she absolutely had to be the viewpoint character.

He sat for a long time, turning the problem over and over in his mind and looking for ways out of it. His fingers never went near the keyboard, and “119.” stared back at him, along with the musings he had typed on it earlier. But he did not mind. He was working now whether he put anything on paper or not. His mind was on his work. While he looked for solutions to the problem he found various scenes sketching themselves out, heard in his mind exchanges of dialogue which would fall into place as the book progressed. He didn’t write them down. He had learned over the years to let them stay there, tucked somewhere in the cupboard of his mind. Some would be bad ideas, superfluous scenes that would only pad the script. Some would be inconsistent with the ultimate plot. The worthwhile ones would stay alive and would drop into place when the time came. When he emerged from the den, late in the afternoon, the problem itself remained unsolved. It was the man’s story and had to be, and the woman’s eyes had to be the window to his soul. He could write it that way. He could sit down and finish it, with no more worries about blocking. But there ought to be a better way.

Perhaps he’d know it the next morning. Sleep often solved that sort of problem. Unless it was too much disjointed by cliffs and ledges and endless flights of stairs.

Karen was in the living room. She said, “Mrs. Kleinschmidt said to call her when you wanted dinner. I said you might want to eat out, but she said to call her and she’ll cook for you.”

“What time is it?”

“Almost seven.”

“That’s at least four hours later than I would have guessed. I thought it was the middle of the afternoon.”

“You must have gotten a ton of work done. Should I call her or what? She made supper for the two of us, but I’ll keep you company.”

“I may just go get a hamburger. I’m not very hungry. What I am is thirsty.”

“You sit. I guess I know how to mix them.”

She brought him a drink and sat down across from him, waiting for his approval. He sipped, smiled. “El Exigente is satisfied,” he said.

She heaved a great sigh of mock relief, then drank some of her own drink. “It must be a great feeling,” she said.

“What must?”

“To be so involved with something that you lose all track of the time.”

“Oh, it is. Even if I didn’t write a word today.” He smiled at her expression. “The book had a problem,” he explained. “I spent half the day figuring out what it was and the other half looking for a way to solve it.”

“And you did?”

“No, but I will. I’m seeing it the right way now.”

“I can’t wait to read it.”

“Have you ever read any of my books?”

“All of them. Does that surprise you?”

“You never said anything.”

“Well, you never asked. And I never knew what to say or anything, so I didn’t.”

“I wonder if I ever thought of you reading them. I don’t think so. Isn’t that strange. Well? Pretty bad, huh?”

“I think they’re wonderful.” Such a heavy feeling in his chest. “I can’t judge books. I’m not that kind of a reader. All your books—I get completely wrapped up in them until it’s as if I’m not reading. I’ll think about trying to know you through your books but I just get caught up in the story and—Daddy? Did I say something wrong?”

Of course. That was the way to do it. The husband’s life, seen through other eyes. But not just the wife’s. The wife’s and the daughter’s.

The two women in his life. The two points of reference from which the man’s life could be triangulated and transfixied.

Of course. Two women knew him, and in the two ways in which a woman might know a man. He would have to scrap a great deal of what he had written. Most of it could be reworked, at least. But it would work. It would work beautifully, and if he handled it properly it would do a great deal more than reveal one man’s life.

It might be … important.

“Daddy?”

“You just solved my problem.”

“I did?”
“You damn well did.” He was standing, his drink abandoned on the coffee table. “I’ve got the whole opening now. I have to start over on page one but it’s all, right there.”

“You’re going back to work?”

“I can’t let it cool off.”

“But you already worked all day—”

“All I did was sit in a chair. I didn’t even move my fingers.”

“Do you want anything to eat? I could bring it to you.”

He shook his head. “You could bring me a thermos of coffee, though. Just don’t be hurt if I ignore you.”

“I’ll tiptoe. You won’t even know I was there.”

She did tiptoe, but he wouldn’t have noticed if she’d stamped her feet. It was all there, just as he’d said, and it flowed. At four o’clock he pushed himself away from his desk with thirty-two pages written and huge chunks of the rest of the book etched vividly in his mind.

He had made it a rule for many years now not to do more than twenty pages a day. But it was absurd to keep to that rule in a situation like this. The sooner he got it all down, the better it would be.

Thirty-two pages, and he didn’t have to look at them to know they were good.

And the dedication page was no longer blank.
TWELVE

When Gretchen Vann strode into the Lemon Tree, Linda did not notice her immediately. It was a Friday night. The weather had been good all day, the sky clear and the sun not too hot, and the town was packed with tourists. The Lemon Tree had been getting its share all day. Now, while Olive was in the back room showing Central American wood carvings to a rather intense young couple, Linda was at the desk watching a long-haired boy contemplate shoplifting. There was a bracelet of polished bits of rose quartz which he kept picking up and putting down, and she was certain he was trying to decide whether or not he liked it well enough to drop it in his pocket.

She decided to approach him. Once it was in his pocket there wasn’t much she could do. Olive had told her not to bother much about minor pilferage; it wasn’t worth the nuisance of running for a policeman, and while she was thus engaged other more ambitious browsers could empty half the store. She had learned, though, that it was easy to stop most shoplifters in advance. If you just went up to them and gave a sales pitch for whatever you figured they were about to steal, it generally routed them from the store without making a scene.

“I know what you’re trying to do.”

The words, spoken sharply and bitterly, came just as she was about to step out from behind the counter. For an instant she thought she had said them herself, and the long-haired boy evidently had no doubt they were meant for him; he straightened up, dropped the bracelet back where it had come from and walked nervously away from it.

“You think you’re fooling me, don’t you?”

She turned toward the voice and saw Gretchen. The woman’s drab blond hair hung flat and lifeless, framing a face that was drawn and haggard. Her skin had the dull sheen of wax fruit. Her eyes were unlike anything Linda had ever seen, wide and wild, slipping in and out of focus, madness gleaming in them.

“You and Peter are not fooling me, not for one moment. You treacherous cunt.”

Conversation died throughout the shop. Some customers began edging toward the door. Others stayed to watch the show. In the hallway outside, a crowd began to gather.

“Gretchen—”

“First it was just you, and then you managed to steal Peter away from me. You trapped him between your legs.” She thrust a forefinger in Linda’s face, shook it vigorously at her. The nail had been chewed ragged halfway to the cuticle. “And now the two of you are conspiring against me. But what you don’t realize is that I’m on to you. I know!”

Out of the corner of her eye Linda saw Olive McIntyre halfway down the aisle, a questioning look on her face. But no, she thought, I ought to be able to handle this myself.

“There’s nothing to know, Gretchen,” she said reasonably. “There’s nothing between Peter and me. I don’t think I’ve spoken two words to him in the past week. We’re friends but it’s never been more than that.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“It happens to be the truth.”

A peal of harsh laughter, rising hysterically at the end.

“Gretchen—”

“Pretending to be working at the theater. But I know he’s with you instead. Do you know something?” She leaned forward, clutching her hands together, making nervous washing movements with them. “I could live with that. But not what you’re trying to do next.”

“What are we trying to do, Gretchen?”

“As if you didn’t know!”

“Tell me.”

Her voice dropped to a conversational tone. “You’re trying to take Robin away from me,” she said. “You see, I do know, don’t I?”

“What makes you think—”

“Peter can’t take her from me. He’s not her father. He may try to poison her mind but I won’t let him. Do you know what Robin means to me?”

Very little, as far as Linda had ever been able to determine. But she said, “No one will ever take Robin away from you, Gretchen.”

“They can’t!”

“Of course not. Now—”

“Because I’m going to tell you something that very few people know. Robin did not have a father.”

“I see.”

“I was never with a man for the entire year before Robin’s birth. I purified myself. I thought temptation for an
entire year. And then Robin was born.”

“I see,” she said again. The shop was virtually empty now, the performance evidently too embarrassing even for those who had been delighted spectators at the onset. Olive stood with her hands planted on her solid hips, rolling her eyes expressively heavenward.

Gretchen said, “I suppose you know what that means.”

That there was a bright star over Bethlehem, Linda thought. Or, at the very least, Allentown. But she said, “I’m not sure I understand, Gretchen.”

“Oh, you think you’re so fucking smart.”

“I—”

“You think I’m crazy.”

“No, I don’t.”

“That’s part of the plan, isn’t it? You had to try something when the poison didn’t work. Oh, it would work if I took it. But I know better than to eat anything Peter cooks for me. I’m not a fool. So the next step is to get me locked up in an insane asylum where they can burn out my brain with laser beams.” She put a hand palm down on the counter, sighed. “I don’t blame you for this. It’s Peter’s doing, isn’t it? He’s managed to convince you I’m crazy.”

“Peter loves you, Gretchen.”

She didn’t seem to hear the words. “What I told you before. About Robin?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, you think you’re so fucking smart.”

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She never knew how long the conversation might have continued, or what turn it would have taken next, because at that point Olive put an arm around Gretchen’s shoulders and steered her toward the door.

“Clem keeps a bottle in back. You’re going to have a little glass of whiskey.”

“I don’t need it.”

“Don’t argue. No one ever got anywhere arguing with an arrogant old woman and you won’t be the first.”

The drink did seem to steady her. She drained the glass, stubbed out her cigarette. “I’ve never seen her like that before,” she said.

“Well, I’ve seen that particular bit of bad news in some pretty strange situations, but I’ll have to go along with you. I think that’s about as far around the bend as she’s ever been.”

“Do you think she’s dangerous?”
“I think she’s been dangerous from the day she was born. The first time I set eyes on her I knew I was looking at an accident looking for a place to happen; and she’s been happening all over the place ever since. God knows she picked the right place for it. She can live here and nobody thinks anything of it. Anywhere else in the world they’d have the presence of mind to lock her up.”

“But do you think she could be violent?”

“Now that’s harder to say. I would think that anybody who’s that far out in left field might turn violent for lack of knowing what was going on. I certainly wouldn’t be inclined to sell her a gun. Are you thinking she might come after you?”

“I was afraid of that while she was in here. I didn’t know what she would do next. I kept my hand near the ashtray so I could hit her with it if I had to.”

“Well, I had my hand wrapped around one of those alabaster owls, ready to pitch it at her if push came to shove. Which I’m glad they didn’t, as I’d have likely brained you instead of her. I used to have a good throwing arm but you lose your touch over the years. I don’t suppose she’s too likely to do anything violent. Her little performance tonight sounded like a pretty clear example of paranoia, but she didn’t have one particular fantasy to stay with. She kept shifting around. Still, I’d give her a wide berth. Goes without saying, doesn’t it?”

“I just hope she’s not dangerous to Robin.”

“Dangerous or not, she’s plainly unfit to care for her. If they don’t lock Gretchen up they should at least take the child away from her. And God pity Peter Nicholas if she decides to take back the penis she thinks she gave him.”

“Oh, God!”

“You’d think a man would get involved with her and then turn queer afterward instead of the other way around. But he went and leaped out of the fire and into the frying pan. There’s no place on earth like New Hope for being a ragbag of cripples. Well, here’s a piece of advice for you. From now on draw the shades and lock the door before you hop into bed with Peter.”

“What do you—”

“Now don’t tell me that lunatic had a kernel of truth to work on. I thought Mr. Wealthy Writer was taking up the bulk of your time. You don’t mean to say you’ve got time left over to rob Gretchen Vann’s cradle, do you?”

She fought a blush. “No, of course not. Peter and I are friends. We became very close because he needs someone to talk to.”

“I suppose that’s as good a way as any for it to start.”

“Oh, stop, Olive. I could never feel that way about Peter. Or vice versa. And lately I’ve hardly even seen him at all.”

Olive rubbed the point of her chin. “Now if I were guessing—”

“There’s nothing to guess.”

“—I would have to guess that you’ve already been to bed with him. But you haven’t.”

“No.”

“And, since I know for a fact that you’re clearly incapable of falsehood, that’s the end of the matter. But there’s one thing I’ll tell you. The older I get, the more certain I become that there’s only one thing that’s sufficient cause to keep a person going. And that’s the pleasure of laughing your head off from time to time, and the only thing worth laughing at is the goddamned incredible things people find to do with their lives. The average human being is miles funnier than all the monkeys in the circus.”

“But sometimes you can’t laugh.”

“The older you get, the more you have to.”

After the show that night Peter stopped at the Raparound for a Coke. The girl who brought it seemed on the point of saying something but walked away without speaking. He looked after her, wondering. Probably stoned, he decided. Which struck him as not a bad idea at all. Head back home, blow a couple of jays, and slide inside of his skull to find out what was happening.

He hadn’t smoked in weeks, not since the day after That Night. The night with Linda. And smoking had turned out to be a bad idea then, taking him places he did not want to go.

Had the night with Linda been a bad idea, too? He didn’t know. There had been such magic that night. He could close his eyes now and bring every bit of it back, every inane word either of them had spoken, every bit of shading and nuance. It had been the best thing that had ever happened to him and he hoped the memory of it would stay as vivid for the rest of his life.

He made circles on the table top with his glass, a row of overlapping circles like penmanship exercises. A perfect night, and he treasured it, but since then his relationship with Linda had changed. As of course it had to change.

They were wary of each other now. They talked warmly when they met each other in the hallways or on the street. Now and then she watched Robin for him. On slow afternoons he might drop in on her at the Lemon Tree. But they
held back, and if they did not consciously avoid each other, still their long conversations were less frequent, and not as long as they had been.

Neither had spoken of That Night. But it was there, it existed, it had happened, and now it constituted a barrier between them. He sensed she regretted their love-making, and the thought saddened him. It—

“Peter? Got a minute?”

It was Anne. “Oh, hi,” he said, and she dropped into the chair across from him. There was a film of perspiration on her forehead and her waitress uniform was visibly damp under the arms.

She said, “God, what a night.”

“Rough, huh?”

“Danny’s lucky I’ve got tomorrow off, because otherwise I’d quit. How are things with you, Peter?”

“Oh, no complaints.”

She picked up his glass, sipped some of his Coke. “I guess I’d better tell you, then. Gretchen had a couple of bad hours tonight. No, everything’s all right now; home, Robin’s all right, everything’s all right.”

“What happened?”

“I got all this second hand. Or maybe tenth hand.”

“Meaning everybody’s talking about it.” So his waitress hadn’t been stoned, just off-balance. Though of course she might have been stoned too. “Shit,” he said. “Fuck all of this, anyway.” Tourists at the next table turned at his words, and he glared viciously at them until they looked away, embarrassed.

“Fucking busybodies,” he said softly.

Anne didn’t say anything.

“I guess you’d better tell me.”

He propped his head on one hand and listened while she gave him a sketchy but reasonably accurate account of Gretchen’s behavior. She had paced back and forth on Main Street for awhile, talking to herself, obviously disoriented. Then she went to the Lemon Tree and confronted Linda. After Olive McIntyre got her back on the street again, she began accosting passersby and demanding that they help her find her son. Someone finally called one of the local cops, who couldn’t make up his mind whether to take her into custody or leave her alone. While he was still thinking about it, the woman at the candle shop took Gretchen inside, gave her a glass of water, and calmed her down.

“And then she snapped out of it,” Anne said. “She just got herself together and said that she had to get home and take care of Robin. She evidently was completely rational again.”

“They let her go home?”

“A couple of people walked her back to the place. They made sure that the kid was all right and that Gretchen had really settled down.”

“And they left her there?”

“Somebody’s staying with her until you get back. I don’t know who.”

“Whoever it is can stay there forever. I just want to get on a plane and get the hell away from all of this. I wish those clowns would stare at me again. It would be such a pleasure to hit somebody.”

“You okay, Peter?”

“Oh, sure,” he said. He got to his feet, put money on the table, pushed his unfinished Coke over to Anne. “Sure I’m a fucking tower of strength,” he said.

The woman who was keeping Gretchen company was stocky and fiftyish, with something of the look of a jail matron about her. At least they’d had the sense to post someone there who could handle her physically. Not that Gretchen looked hard to handle now. She was sitting on their bed, legs crossed, shoulders slumped, her arms folded over her breasts. She did not look up when Peter entered.

The other woman started to explain the situation, but Peter cut her off, saying he had heard all about it. He was being curt and knew it but didn’t much care. He just wanted the woman to go away.

“Well then. Mrs. Vann is fine now.”

“If she.”

“She’s been resting, and—”

“And she’s fine. She’s getting ready to be the poster girl for the National Institute for Mental Health.”

“I guess I’ll be going, then.”

Then go, he wanted to scream. But he made himself mumble something vaguely thankful. She left and he closed the door after her.

“They tell you what happened, Petey?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m rational now. I didn’t need that old battle-ax standing guard over me, but the only way to get rid of her
would have been to talk to her, and I couldn’t hack it. So I sat here while she put Robin to bed and then she sat over there and I sat here and I pretended I was alone. She talked, but I didn’t listen.”

She had her chin on her chest now. She had not met his eyes since he walked in. Her pose reminded him of photographs of Hindu mystics, and her bony gauntness was consistent with the image.

“I don’t know what happened. It’s all very vague in my mind. I’m completely rational now. I just came out of it all at once and I was standing in the candle shop drinking a glass of water. It was like waking up from a dream, but instead of being in bed I was in the candle shop.”

“Do you remember what happened?”

“The way you remember a dream. I threw a big with your girl. I remember that much.”

“She’s not my girl, Gretchen. But you go ahead and believe whatever you want.”

“No, I’ll believe whatever you tell me. It’s easier that way. Petey, I am a jigsaw puzzle all taken apart again. I’m a box of jumbled pieces but they won’t put the cover back on. I don’t know what happened.”

“Do you know why you flipped out that way?”

“The Devil made me do it.”

“I’m serious.”

“Oh, shit, so am I. I was not behind a fucking thing if that’s what you mean. I’ve been a wreck lately, and I haven’t taken so much as an aspirin in days. You know the Yoga trippers and their big shtick about how you can get high without drugs? They’re absolutely right. You can also freak out without drugs. I’m glad I’m dying because I can’t take much more of this.”

“Oh, come on, Gretchen.”

“’Come on, Gretchen.’ I am too dying.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you.”

She looked up at him for the first time. “Right,” she said. “Nothing wrong with me. Picture of fucking health. I mean who are we kidding. Who are we kidding.” She plucked at the skin on her thighs. “Glowing pink complexion. Firm muscle tone. Here she is, ladies and gentlemen—Miss Dachau of 19—”

“That’s because you don’t eat.”

“So I’m dying of not eating, Petey.”

“That’s not a disease, for God’s sake. All you have to—”

“All my teeth are going to go. I’m losing my teeth.”

“That’s not what the dentist said.”

“He’s my fucking dentist, I ought to know what he fucking said. He said—”

“He said you have great teeth and sound gums but you have to take care of them or you’ll have problems. That’s not the same as saying you’re going to lose your teeth.”

“It’s exactly the same because I am not going to take the vitamins and have the balanced diet, so what do you mean it’s not the same thing?”

“Whatsoever you say.”

“Also I think my hair is getting thin.”

“It is not.”

“I really think it is.”

“All right, you’re dying, and your teeth and hair are falling out. Whatever you say.”

“When I’m dead you can marry Linda and adopt Robin and you’ll have everything you ever wanted.”

“You’re completely rational.”

“That’s right.”

“Uh-huh. Whatever you say.” He got out of his clothes, used the bathroom, returned to the bed.

“Are you going to sleep now, Petey?”

“That’s exactly right.”

“You’re tired, huh.”

“Right.”

“Okay. I’ll sleep too.”

He stretched out, closed his eyes. After a few moments he said, “Why don’t you lie down, Gretch?”

“Yeah, in a minute.”

“I mean you can’t sleep in the lotus position.”

“Don’t you think I know that? Just don’t rush me, will you? I’ll lie down in a minute.”

“All right.”

“It’s a question of working up to it.”

He let that one pass, gave up, willed everything out of his mind. She was still sitting with folded arms and legs
when he dropped off to sleep, but when he awoke in the morning she was lying at his side, one thin arm draped across his chest.

“IT’s actually quite simple,” Warren Ormont told him. “On the one hand, you have to take Robin away from Gretchen. On the other—”

“I don’t see how I can do that.”

“Exactly. That’s precisely what’s on the other hand. On the other hand, you cannot take Robin away from her. Gretchen is the child’s natural mother—and if that isn’t a semantic absurdity I’ve never encountered one. Unnatural mother is rather more like it.” He waved a hand impatiently. “Neither here nor there. Gretchen is Robin’s mother. You are not Robin’s father, whose name seems to be legion. Or God, if Gretchen’s most recent outburst is to be believed.”

“She didn’t know what she was saying.”

Warren sighed. “No, and she rarely does. Still, she is Robin’s mother. Which gives her certain rights, the most among them being that of custody of Robin. If you took the girl and vanished into the wilderness, you would be guilty of kidnapping. I doubt you’d have to worry seriously about criminal charges but you would have to worry that at any point Gretchen could have you arrested and retrieve Robin, none of which would come under the heading of positive experiences for impressionable young female children. So as things shape up—”

“Suppose I had her committed?”

“Yes, you could do that. It’s more than possible you ought to. If it weren’t for Robin, that’s exactly what you ought to do.”

“Gretchen gets completely paranoid if I so much as mention a psychiatrist.”

“She’s had bad experiences in that area.” Warren hesitated for a moment, then shook his head shortly. “No, that’s not even a consideration, is it? To hell, for a moment, with what Gretchen wants or doesn’t want.”

“If it would help her—”

“To hell with that, too. I think it’s illusory to think of hospitalization as potentially helpful. In cases like Gretchen’s, the rate of failure is beyond belief. No, the important question is the effect not on Gretchen but on the rest of the world.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “Life is for the living,” he went on. “It’s the survivors who have to be considered.”

“And?”

“If Gretchen were committed, that doesn’t mean you would get custody of Robin. In all probability, Robin would be made a ward of the court. Which would probably entail internment in an orphanage or something of the sort. Placement in a foster home, perhaps. No, you see, commitment might be a good idea if Robin were not in the picture.”

Warren went on talking, explaining what Peter had to do to ensure Robin’s safety within the existing relationship. Peter nodded along, barely able to concentrate on the flow of words. There was little that Warren was saying now that other friends had not recently said, little that had not occurred to Peter himself. Robin could not be left alone with Gretchen. Gretchen could not be counted upon to assume any responsibility. And Peter, in the course of this, had to go on working, had to go on living his own life—

“There’s one thing I could do,” he cut in.

“What’s that, pray tell?”

“I could marry Gretchen.”

“Do that and I’d personally sign commitment papers. And not for Gretchen, dear boy. For you.”

“I’m serious.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“I wouldn’t want to do it. I could marry her and then adopt Robin legally.”

“Ah, I’m beginning to see.” Warren ran a hand through his hair. “And, as adoptive father, claim custody of the child. I doubt it would work. It might in a short-term sense, but at any point Gretchen could decide to be sane again, hire a lawyer, and sue for custody. And probably get it—the silver cord tying mother to child has a powerful grip on the American judicial imagination. But even if this were possible, Peterkin, it’s a hell of a bad reason to get married. I don’t know of any overwhelmingly good ones, but that’s worse than most. There’s a limit to how thoroughly you can fuck up your own life on Robin’s behalf, you know.”

“I’m not sure it can be fucked up much worse than it already is.”

“No.” Warren shook his head. “No, things can always get worse. That’s how one sustains oneself in this vale of tears, Peter my lad. With the knowledge, that bad as things are, they can get worse.”

But how much worse could they get?

Gradually he began to organize his life so that Robin was protected from Gretchen. Whenever possible, he kept the child in his own company. When he had to work, Robin would wait at the Lemon Tree, or at the Raparound, or
with Tanya or Linda or Anne. Once he took the girl to the theater with him. Robin kept remarkably quiet, but Tony Bartholomew had not been amused and Peter was given to understand that he could not baby-sit and light a show at the same time.

“You know,” Tanya told him, “it’s sort of a nice feeling, isn’t it? I mean it’s tragic and all, but if you look at it a certain way, it’s like Robin is being brought up by the town of New Hope. And it gives me a kind warm feeling, if you know what I mean.”

Later he reported that conversation to Anne. He had come to collect Robin after a show and was sitting over a cup of coffee, postponing as usual the return to the apartment and to Gretchen. Anne fixed her large dark eyes on him, then suddenly erupted in laughter.

“Oh, God,” she said. “I can see it now—a title in a true confessions magazine. ‘I Was Brought Up by the Town of New Hope.’ Talk about unfit parents. This whole town is an unfit mother.”

Yet it was working out. And each time he returned to the apartment, each time he returned to Gretchen, he recalled Warren’s words. Things could always get worse.

The thought did not sustain him. Rather, it terrified him. Because things would get worse. They had to get worse. It was inevitable. Things were working out for the time being because Gretchen was inactive, silent, acquiescent, a human vegetable. She never interfered with his caring for Robin, never left the apartment, never attempted to break the living pattern he had established.

“Someday you’ll come home and find me dead, Petey.”

He could not open the door to the apartment without that shadow passing over him. She would not literally starve herself to death; in her current passivity she accepted enough of the food he prepared for her to sustain her life. But she might kill herself. She talked about it occasionally, and the threat of finding her there, hanging or wrists slashed or dead through any of the devices that his imagination constantly provided, was on his mind whenever he stood before that door with Robin’s small hand clutched in his.

“I wish you would kill me, Petey.” That was a number she got off on one night, stringing it out endlessly until he managed to shut her up. “I want to die but I’ll never have the nerve to do it myself. But you could do it for me. You always do things for me, Petey. You could do this for me. I would help. We could make it look like suicide. We could figure out a plan. You’re good at plans, Petey. You could come up with a good plan.” And she went on telling him how much better it would be for everyone if she were dead. Better for her, because this was no way to live, no way to go on. And better for him and better for Robin and better for Linda, because he and Linda could get married and Robin could be their little girl and everyone could devote themselves to forgetting that Gretchen Vann ever lived.

Until one day, as he walked alone along the Towpath, he realized something.

He wanted her dead.

The thought caught him, sent a chill through him. He tried to get it out of his mind by force of will but it echoed in his brain and would not go away. In his mind he heard his own voice, cold and brittle: I want her to die.
**THIRTEEN**

Warren put his car in the driveway, walked to the front door of his house and fitted his key in the lock. As he opened the door, he heard Bert at the piano. He smiled and eased the door open slowly, silently. He padded softly across the plush powder-blue carpet and stopped at the archway leading to the living room.

“Night and Day.” “Always True to You in My Fashion.” “You’re the Top.”

He took deep silent breaths and let the music wrap itself around him. Usually he arrived home before Bert, but tonight he had gone with a crowd to the Barge Inn, had put himself outside of a half dozen cognacs, and Bert had finished his gig at the Carversville Inn and had come home still full of music. Bert had had classical training, and had spent many drunken evenings weeping over his wasted life, sure that he ought to be playing Mozart and Chopin on recital stages. But Warren knew that his special magic was with the material he performed routinely while people drank and talked over the notes he played. Cole Porter, Rodgers, and Hart, Harold Arlen—Bert’s fingers (not long and graceful, not at all, rather short and stubby but so sure of themselves, so certain at the keyboard) gave standards and show tunes a special grace.

Bert played for him, and often. But it was moments like these that Warren particularly treasured, when Bert was unaware of any audience. He liked to stand in shadow and listen. It was Cole Porter tonight, one song after another. “Anything Goes.” “Let’s Do It.” “Begin the Beguine”—

Finally, as a song ended, he cleared his throat and stepped into the room where Bert could see him. The dark head raised itself from the keys; the long saturnine face was creased with a smile. Warren applauded furiously and Bert lowered his head in a brief bow.

“Magnificent,” Warren said reverently.

“Devil. How long were you hulking there?”

“I don’t hulk. Since ‘Night and Day,’ I think.”

“Enjoy the concert?”

“More than I can say. If you would sing in public and if you were black, Bobby Short would have to find other way to make a living.”

“I doubt that he’s trembling at the prospect. How did, it go tonight?”

“It went. I was brilliant. The rest of the company was reassuringly adequate.”

“How comforting for you.”

“One lives for small triumphs.”

“Why don’t you make us drinks to honor the occasion?”

“When I arrive home first,” Warren said, “I see to it that drinks are waiting upon your return. Yet on those rare occasions when your return precedes my own—”

“I greet you with a concert.”

“A good point,” he conceded. “Better a concert than a Cognac. One understands.”

“I’d make the drinks now, but I’m playing the piano.”

“A noble cause. A noble savage. Odets, where is thy sting? You persist in the notion that the martini is a civilized drink at this hour.”

“There is no clock on my palate, love.”

“I shall do the honors, such as they are. Martinis and music. If they be the food of love, play on!”

It was just one of those things

Just one of those fabulous flings

One of those bells that now and then rings

Just one of those things… .

In the kitchen, he poured Bombay gin into a pitcher, added ice and a drop of scotch. The scotch, he had established, was better than vermouth at masking the sharpness of the gin. He stirred the mixture gently with a long silver spoon.

… just one of those nights

Just one of those fabulous flights

A trip to the moon on gossamer wings

Just one of those things… .

He strained the martinis into a pair of large stemmed crystal goblets, added a slender shaving of lemon peel to each glass. The house was Warren’s, and all its furnishings, with the exception of Bert’s piano and a writing desk that had belonged to Bert’s mother, had been carefully selected and purchased by Warren. The house itself was
unprepossessing enough on the outside, a small frame house on the northern edge of New Hope that differed little from its neighbors on either side. Inside it was a refuge, with every object within its walls carefully chosen to reflect Warren’s taste and provide his life with a framework of order and dignity. It was, indeed, a refuge he rarely sought; he preferred to spend his time in the company of others, over drinks or cups of coffee. But when he did come home it was important to come home to something perfect.

The house had been Warren’s before Bert entered his life, and the years Bert had spent there had had precious little impact upon it. A few objects had been shuttled about to accommodate his Regency desk and his Gulbransson spinet (a grand piano would have dislocated things badly, and Warren thanked sundry gods that Bert was content with an upright), but otherwise things stayed as they were, with Bert appreciative of pleasant surroundings but generally indifferent to them. It was Warren’s special shelter from the storm, and it would continue to shelter him when he and Bert parted company and Bert moved elsewhere. Not that Warren specifically anticipated such a parting of the ways. It was entirely possible that they would live out their lives together under this roof. But it was also possible that they would not, and Warren had learned over the years always to be prepared for such contingencies. He did not believe that heterosexual marriages were inclined to be any more permanent than homosexual alliances. But marriages had that illusion of permanence. They were bulwarked by children, reinforced by judicial recognition, predicated on the assumption that no man or woman should tear their bond asunder. They were as apt to deteriorate as any other relationship, yet when they did so it was generally a considerable shock to the participants. They hadn’t expected this, they had quite believed the till-death-do-us-part number, and they were thus unprepared. Homosexuals expected that things would ultimately go to hell, and were more inclined to be surprised when they didn’t.

When he brought the martinis into the living and placed Bert’s upon the piano, Bert was singing:

> If we’d thought a bit  
> Of the end of it  
> When we started painting the town  
> We’d have been aware  
> That our love affair  
> Was too hot not to cool down

He broke off with a quick embarrassed smile and reached for his drink, smiling again in appreciation at the first sip. Warren moved up behind him, placed his hands on Bert’s shoulders, kneaded the fine muscles.

“‘You should sing more,” he said.

“You always say that.”

“No doubt I always shall. You have a fine voice, but it’s more than that. You bring lyrics to life.”

Bert’s fingers worked on the keys. “You’re too kind.”

“I’ve told you all this before.”

“I know. It’s funny, though. I can’t sing to a roomful of people. It’s not just that it’s a mental block because I do it from time to time but it doesn’t work, I can’t really get into it. And as a result I don’t sing well.”

“Couple of acting classes might help. Some version of psychodrama. Teach you to get out of yourself.”

“That’s possible, I suppose. The odd thing is, though, that I can’t sing when I’m completely alone, either. I embarrass myself for some odd reason. I can only sing” —his hands punched out a descending chord progression —“when I’m singing for you. Odd, no?”

Warren bent, nuzzled Bert’s ear, planted a row of kisses along his throat.

“You’re changing the subject.”


“It’s odd that I love and trust anyone, don’t you think? Damn. It’s going to be hard to play this piano with an erection.”

“Doubt it’s ever been done before. Most pianists use their hands. A good idea, though. A little outré for television, but in the right club in the Village—”

“Devil. What do you know about a girl called Melanie?”

“She misses all the notes but I still like to listen to her, though I must admit I don’t know why. One gets on her side and cheers for her, I think. One hopes that, in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, she’s going to make it all the way through to the end of the song.”

“Not the singer. Melanie Jaeger, I think her name is.”

“Sully’s wife.”

“Oh, is she? I never made the connection.”

“Why?”

Bert was playing “I Get a Kick Out of You.”
“Tossed a pass my way tonight.”
“Melanie Jaeger? Where was this?”
“While I was working. Pretty obvious pitch.”
“Who was she with?”
“No one. Came alone, sat at the bar, and cruised the room like a piranha. She made her drinks last a long time. She wasn’t there for drinks or music. She was looking for someone to go home with. Found someone, too. No one I ever saw before, but she scored and took him right on out of there.”
“’I’ll be damned. Melanie Jaeger. You’re sure she wasn’t meeting someone?’”
“Not a chance. Nice little bit, too. Predatory cheekbones, and something special in her eyes.”
“One begins to visualize certain possibilities.”
“Just what I thought.”
Warren’s voice dropped an octave. “Why don’t you stop abusing that piano,” he murmured, “and abuse me a little instead.”
“I thought you’d never ask.”

A month after Bertram Ryder LeGrand’s second birthday, his father put the family Buick into a curve at seventy miles an hour. The car left the road and stopped abruptly when it came to a tree. The steering column crushed Jack LeGrand’s chest and killed him instantly. The girl who had been on the seat beside him went through the windshield and bled to death from a slashed jugular vein. The first state trooper on the scene had never seen a car so utterly demolished. The only undamaged object was a pint bottle of corn whiskey which had somehow survived the impact. There was an inch left in it, and after a look at the car’s two occupants, the trooper felt the need to finish the bottle himself.

Bert had no true memories of his father, but it seemed to him that the ghost of Smilin’ Jack LeGrand was always present in the brooding Victorian house in downtown Charleston where he grew up. It was his grandmother’s house and he lived there with his mother and grandmother and was nourished on the stories his mother told of his father. Smilin’ Jack had been an athlete, a hard drinker, at once a man’s man and a ladies’ man. Sarah Ryder seemed as proud of his faults as of his virtues. He had been the first man in her life and was to be the last. She had loved him completely, and yet it seemed to Bert in later years that his abrupt death must have been a relief to her. She was a shy, timid girl, and it could not have been easy for her to be the wife of such a man. It was infinitely easier to be his widow.

She raised him in his father’s shadow and at the same time did everything she could to ensure against his growing into a copy of Smilin’ Jack. She protected him, smothered him, kept him at the piano while other boys were on the ballfield, and while she did this she told glowing stories of his father’s accomplishments. “You’re a Ryder,” she told him often. “Your father was a LeGrand, he had all the strengths and weaknesses of his blood, but you’ve always favored my side of the family. You’re a Ryder to the core.”

It was a hollow core for the first seventeen years of his life. When he looked back on those years he found he could remember very little besides music and books. At first he practiced the piano primarily to please his mother, but as time passed he could shut out the rest of the world effortlessly by sitting on that flat bench and letting his fingers work upon the keys. His training was all classical, and he practiced his classical pieces diligently, but when he had finished he worked at pop tunes, picking out melodies and figuring out harmonics by ear.

All through those years he existed in a social vacuum, friendless and unnoticed by his classmates. “I would have been gay then,” he said years later, “if anyone had taken the trouble. I was such an ugly skinny kid it never occurred to anyone to make a play for me. God, all the ingredients were there. The introverted kid with the protective mother and the dead idealized father—it was all there, but I wasn’t bright enough to figure it out for myself and nobody was interested in educating me.”

Throughout high school he dreamed of girls and never dared date one. He told himself that his entire life would change when he went away to college. He would emerge from the cocoon; he would be bright and witty and charming and debonair; he would have all the women he wanted and would want every woman he saw. He told himself all of this, and he could not make himself believe a word of it, and he graduated from high school and went to William and Mary on scholarship and was astonished to find that the dreams came true.

It never ceased to astonish him in retrospect. The caterpillar-to-butterfly metaphor was inescapable, except that it was not so much changes in himself as changes in his environment; the poise and assurance that he instantly acquired were taken on in response to his altered environment. What had been faults in a Charleston high school classroom were suddenly strengths. He had grown into his long, thin face, and what he’d thought of as ugliness was now seen as interesting and commanding, a face with character and presence. His intellect, which he’d willingly submerged before, was now respected and admired. Boys liked him. Girls were drawn to him. Even his piano playing, merely a curiosity in Charleston, was of social value now.
He was accepted, and discovered he thrived on acceptance. He pledged a good fraternity and found among his fraternity brothers the first friends he had had in his entire life. His classes were provocative as high school classes had never been. He wore the unofficial campus uniform, white bucks and chinos and button-down oxford cloth shirts, but he wore his hair long and carefully combed, a distinguishing characteristic in a swarm of shaggy crew cuts. Even as a freshman he was noticed, and noticed favorably.

But it was with girls that his success most astonished him. He couldn’t believe how easy it was to get them and how good he seemed to be at the whole business. He appeared to have a natural aptitude for the game. The easy banter came automatically to his tongue, and he intuitively struck the attitudes which would have the proper effect. The first girl he kissed had no idea of his inexperience. The first girl he had intercourse with would have been astonished to know she was claiming his virginity.

“I gather it’s different now,” he once told “The college kids have a much more mature attitude toward sex than we did. More mature, and at the sand time more idealistic. There’s this emphasis placed on honesty. Open and honest relationships openly and honestly arrived at. The only honesty I remember in sex at college was that you were supposed to tell the truth when you talked to your buddies about it afterward, Maybe the girls had the same code among themselves. I don’t know. But there was certainly no honesty between male and female. The guy was out to get as much as possible from her with the minimum emotional commitment, and the girl was looking for a fraternity pin or an engagement ring or a Mrs. degree. Even if all she wanted was a friendly fuck, she had to pretend differently. She might be laying a different guy every night of the week, but each time she would pretend she just got carried away and never expected to wind up with her knees pointing at the ceiling.”

He dated extensively, and most of the girls he dated obligingly ended the evening with their knees aimed skyward. The first time was in the fraternity house after a dance. He had taken his own girl home, petted furiously with her, and returned to the house. Another brother had passed out and his date was waiting around in the hope that he might get sober enough to take her back to her dormitory. Bert took her upstairs to a vacant bedroom and began necking with her, waiting for her to tell him to stop. There was a point when he realized that she was not going to stop him, and a great surge of triumph went through him—he was going to reach that impossible goal. It was going to happen; it was happening now.

None of the fears associated with the magic moment ever materialized. He was fully potent and able to sustain the act effortlessly. He brought her easily to orgasm, then erupted himself, emptying his passion into the warmth of her. Afterward there was a heady glow that lasted for several hours. For some moments, alone in his own room, the girl mercifully gone, he managed to convince himself that he loved her. The notion passed rather quickly and he laughed at the thought of it. She was just a tramp, he decided. Her own date had passed out on her so she screwed the first person who asked her.

There were other girls, a great many of them. It was easy once you knew the moves. And, as the novelty of it wore off, so did much of the excitement. He never felt himself drawn to any of the girls he had sex with. They were vehicles for his own pleasure, and once he had used them he had little desire to see them again. He was not compulsive about this; there were girls he saw more than once, but he would withdraw from them completely and shut them out of his life once he sensed they wanted an emotional commitment from him. There was a danger in their moist warmth; it could capture a man by his private parts and suck him in like quicksand.

“It doesn’t mean all that much to me,” he said one night to a friend. “All through high school I walked around with a hard-on dreaming about what it would be like to get laid. And now it’s sort of a letdown, you know, discovering that that’s all there is to it.”

“Oh, come off it. Mr. Nonchalance.”

“No, I’m serious.”

“Well, you can afford to say it, for Christ’s sake. I mean, the amount of action you get.”

“All it is is action.”

“Bullshit. Then how come you’re chasing it as much as you do? When’s the last weekend you weren’t out there going after a piece?”

“I’m not saying I don’t like it.”

“White of you, LeGrand. Let’s hire a skywriter—‘LeGrand doesn’t dislike pussy.’ Christ on a crutch.”

“I mean, it beats doing without. Or jerking off.”

Except that it didn’t, not really. There were times when he would masturbate in his room, touching himself while he listened to music, timing his strokes to the music, purposely delaying the orgasm as long as possible. Often he would refrain from orgasm, stimulating himself to the very edge of it time after time, then letting his passion ebb unfulfilled. His fantasies at such times were abstract and diffuse. Sometimes there were no fantasies whatsoever, only the physical fact of his manual manipulations.

And it was often better than what he achieved with girls. He did not require it as compulsively as he seemed to
require girls. He was not driven to it. But there was something he could give himself which girls could not give him. He did not understand what it was or he could not deny its existence.

There was an uncertain point where his perception of the sex act shifted. At the beginning he saw it as an act in which the female was exploited, used for his pleasure by the male. He felt no guilt over this exploitation, rather, it seemed to him that the male role had to be asserted in such a fashion, that women were designed by a bearded God to be tricked and used. The idea was not uniquely his but was rolled out time and time again at bull sessions. The more intellectual brothers quoted Nietzsche.

But as time passed, his vision of who was the exploiter did an about-face. He began to regard the girls with whom he slept as bottomless pits in which he had to plunge himself forever. They took from him, they drained him, and all he got out of it was a momentary feeling of relief backed by the illusion of conquest.

“Of course you repressed it,” he said, “but you must have felt it. All those late-night gabfests, all that beery intimacy. Sweaty young bodies in the locker room—”

“I never saw a locker room, Warren. You don’t get sweaty bodies over a bridge table. The only sweaty bodies I came across were female.”

“But you must have had a yen for someone now and then. Pushed it out of your mind, of course. Natural enough under the circumstances. But I can’t believe you were that utterly unaware of the whole idea of it.”

Yet he had been just that unaware. There were a few men on campus who were generally presumed to be homosexual. A botany professor, an assistant in the psychology department, a couple of effeminate students. If Bert had spared a moment for a thought of any sort about any of these men, he could not recall it.

Then, the summer before his senior year, he found out who he was.

He was spending the summer at Virginia Beach as a bellhop in a resort hotel. The hours were long but the work was easy and pleasant enough and the tips were fairly good. There were girls—waitresses at his hotel and college girls on summer vacation. There were also older women, wives whose husbands left them there all summer and commuted from Richmond or Charlotte for the weekends. The older women were better in bed than the girls and less demanding out of it, but there was one very bad moment in the aftermath of sex when his partner’s face had become, for the briefest instant, the face of his mother.

One hot night in mid-July he wanted to be by himself. He had found himself in this sort of mood lately, wanting only to go somewhere dark and quiet and listen to the jukebox and drink. He never drank too much but managed to drink enough so that sleep would come quickly when he returned to the hotel.

In the third bar he hit there was a piano player, and when Bert sat at the bar and listened to the music the rest of the world went away. The pianist had light-brown hair receding in front and a quick, elusive smile, as though aware of a bitter private joke. His hands were large and strong, their backs hairless. He played good cocktail piano and sang along in an easy bouncy style that reminded Bert of Bobby Troup. He was taking requests, and after awhile Bert called out a couple of numbers. Each of his requests was greeted with a quick smile and a raised eyebrow.

“Let me buy you a drink,” he said. “It’s a rare pleasure to have someone who’s really listening.”

“Well, it’s a rarer pleasure to hear someone who knows how to play. And what to play.”

“How do you play yourself?”

“I haven’t been near a piano all summer. I’m toting hags at the Ocean View.”

“Don’t they have a piano?”

“Not for the help. They made that clear.”

“I haven’t been near a piano all summer. I’m toting hags at the Ocean View.”

“Don’t they have a piano?”

“Not for the help. They made that clear.”

“Yeah, those pricks would. Look, I’ve got an upright at my place. It’s a little tinny but at least it’s in tune. I play one more set and that’s all she wrote.”

“A flash of the private smile. “You could drop over. We’ll do in a fifth of something and you can find out if your fingers still work. How about it?”

“Not for the help. They made that clear.”

“If you’re terrible I'll put cotton in my ears. What say?”

“The pianist—his name was Buddy—said he didn’t go with women much more. He’d been divorced, he said, and was still over it Bert said he wasn’t sure how he felt about women himself. He seemed to need them, but more and more they left him feeling empty.

“I know what you mean, man. They don’t do you any good, but try doing without ‘em. Dig?”

“Dig.”

“And they always want something from you.”

“That’s the truth.”

“But just try going without. Hey, will you look at me? And that’s just from talking about it.”
He looked where Buddy was pointing, saw the bulge in the man’s pants. He wanted to avert his eyes but somehow couldn’t.

“How about you, Bert? The topic of conversation having the same effect on you?”

A large hairless hand dropped casually upon Bert’s groin. The fingers moved, handling him, and something within his head vibrated like a tuning fork. His mouth was dry. A pulse worked in his throat. And he felt him self growing, stiffening, in response to the ministrations of that hand.

“Yeah, I can see you’re in the same kind of mood I am,” Buddy was saying, his voice different now. “You must be feeling kinda cramped in those pants. I know I am.”

Buddy got to his feet, began to undress. Bert began to remove his own clothes. The whole thing had a dreamlike quality to it. He felt utterly bereft of will; he could only play out his part, could not affect the outcome in any way. He disrobed, and Buddy reached for him, positioned him on the couch, knelt beside him and went down on him.

Girls had done this. Not often, and never this well, but they had done this to him from time to time. It had been nothing like this. Nothing had been like this, nothing in his lifetime. He thought God, God, and then thought stopped and he gave himself over entirely to sensation.

After, still in a dream, still without thought, he knelt before Buddy and took the man’s penis into his mouth. As he did so a feeling of contentment filled him. He could not identify the feeling, and he realized afterward that it was because he had never been contented before.

Fresh drinks afterward, and cigarettes, and for a long time he sat wordless at the piano, playing songs he had played often before. For a long time he played and Buddy listened and neither of them spoke.

After awhile he said, “I guess you figured on this all along, huh? Back at the bar?”

“I thought we both figured on it, Bert.”

“No. I never … hell. I hate to sound like an idiot. It’s just that I’m finding out something about myself, and it’s taking time getting used to it. You thought I was queer right off, huh?”

“Gay’s a better word for it. Yeah, I thought so. Maybe I just wanted you to be or maybe I sensed something that was there. I wouldn’t have pitched you if I didn’t think it was what you were looking for. You’re crazy to waste the summer hopping suitcases. Can you use a fakebook?”

“I don’t need one. If I know a melody I can play anything.”

“Do you realize you’re ahead of sixty percent of the guys working this kind of gig? I’m serious. It doesn’t seem like an accomplishment to you because it comes naturally, it’s something you can do. There’s a club a few blocks from the joint I’m at, the guy’s looking to replace a guy who quit on him a few days ago. You don’t think you’re good enough but you’re better than the guy you’d be following. You won’t get rich but it’s a better way to spend the summer than what you’re doing.”

“I don’t know. I get my room and board and all.”

“Well, you could stay here, Bert.”

“Oh, I see.”

“No, you don’t see. You see strings attached and there aren’t any. All I’ll be doing is taking you to the club and telling the prick who owns it to listen to you, and I don’t want anything in return for that. You can buy me a drink because that’s as much of a favor as it amounts to. I’m saying you could live here because I think maybe you want to.”

“Maybe I do.”

‘Play ‘Laura,’ why don’t you? I never play it, it’s a private thing, but I like to listen to it. ‘Play it Sam.’ Yeah, that’s nice. I like that.”

The next afternoon he took a job at Bobo’s Club. He went back to the hotel and told them to shove their job, and moved his clothes to Buddy’s apartment. In September he went back to college for his final year. No one noticed any difference in him. He was very careful to behave as he had always behaved. Sometimes, but not often, he would experience urgent sexual yearnings for certain men on campus. Now and then he sensed that these feelings were reciprocated, but in any event he avoided acting on them. Instead, he dated girls as he had always dated girls, and he took these girls to bed and performed as he had always performed. There was no difficulty in performing with them. There never had been any difficulty and there was none now. As before, there was a certain amount of pleasure in the act; as before, it brought no contentment, no real satisfaction.

Periodically he would go to Richmond for a night or a weekend. He knew what he was looking for, and, thanks to the experience of the summer, he knew how and where to find it.

Warren said, “You’re sure it was Melanie Jaeger.”

“That’s the name she gave. I suppose there could be more than one Melanie Jaeger in Buck’s County—”

“It’s surprising enough that there’s one. The likelihood of two strikes me as infinitesimal. Melanie Jaeger. And she was definitely on the prowl.”
“Absolutely. She had that look in her eye that said she was out to find a man and didn’t much care who he was. And something else, too.”

“What?”

“This is just intuition.”

“Your intuition’s usually good.”

“You say the nicest things. I had the feeling she was ready to let go. That the wilder a scene was, the more she would dig it.”

“Interesting.”

“Yes, isn’t it?”

Warren lit a cigarette. “We haven’t made a scene like that in a good long while, have we?”

“No.”

“I think it might be nice.”

“So do I.”

“There’s a special poetry to it, you know. Sully’s cuckolded half the married men in the county. He’s spent twenty years establishing a reputation of screwing anything with a hole in it. Trading his wives in every five years, fucking his waitresses. Hmmm. It would be very satisfying to pin a huge pair of horns on that ursine head.”

“Ursine?”

“Bearish. As in Ursa Major, the Big Bear. That’s Sully. Big old horny bear! Time to pin a perfect pair of horns on the horny old bear.” He laughed, stretched out on the king-size bed, yawned luxuriously. “I’ll have to find out more about her. I haven’t heard anything, and it’s the sort of thing one would expect to hear. But the possibilities are delicious.”

“They seem to be having an effect on you.”

“How cunning of you to notice. Do you think there’s anything you could do about it?”

“I’ll think of something,” Bert said.
FOURTEEN

Gretchen Vann lay awake in the night, conscious of the warmth of Peter’s still body beside her. She put a hand on his shoulder and he did not stir. She ran the hand across his smooth chest, down over his stomach to his loins. Her fingers encircled him and still he slept.

He was sleeping more lately, and sleeping very soundly. He was stealing her sleep, she thought. Taking the sleep that ought to be hers and adding it onto his own, so that each night she slept less and each night he slept more. He was a sleep thief, filching her rest piece by precious piece.

Across the room in her own small bed Robin turned over in her sleep and made a slight sighing sound. Robin, too, Gretchen thought. Another thief of sleep. The child slept like a child, Peter slept like a child, they all slept like children while she lay awake like—like what? Like an adult? No, not that. Like what, then?

There were no pills. Pills would make her sleep. However far she might be from the brink of sleep, Seconal would rush her to the edge and throw her over, blanketing her in fuzzy darkness for eight or ten hours. Of course it was never true sleep. It was merely a bandage on the wound of insomnia, a couple of stitches in time bridging the gap between tonight and tomorrow.

She had not really wanted pills lately. She found this strange and could only conclude that it meant she really did not want to sleep. Nor was she particularly restless. She did not toss or turn, had no urge to desert the bed and pace the floor or roam the darkened streets. It was easier to lie quite still at Peter’s side while the hours passed, while tonight inch by inch became tomorrow.

Except, of course, that there was no tomorrow. She thought of the song—“There’s No Tomorrow”—heard it in her brain in a rich lush baritone, and thought of the particular truth of its title. Tomorrows never existed. By the time you reached them they had become present time, and the whole concept of tomorrowness was merely a carrot held before the myopic donkey of the present.

The past, on the other hand, not only existed but with each passing day the past became a day larger and longer, another twenty-four hours more oppressive. It did not seem fair: There was no future, and the present kept turning into the past.

Not fair at all.

Her legs brushed Peter’s as she got out of bed. He slept on. She got her cigarettes, went into the bathroom. She left the door open, lit a cigarette, sat on the toilet, and let her water flow noisily into the center of the bowl. When she was done with her cigarette she put it between her legs and let it fall into the toilet. Its end singed the tips of several of her pubic hairs en route, and her nostrils wrinkled to catch the singular smell of scorched hair. Years ago she had read a description of tortures inflicted by French paratroops upon female Algerian insurgents, and still recalled how the paras had butted their cigarettes upon the private parts of the women. On occasion she had tried to make herself burn her pubic mound but had never been able to do it.

Now she remembered a man many years ago who had liked to burn her with his cigarettes. But she could not make herself remember whether she had enjoyed the experience or not. It seemed the sort of thing one ought to remember but her memory had been markedly uncooperative lately, and certainly not to be trusted.

She flushed the toilet and listened to the roar of the water. Peter and Robin slept on without noticing it. Often at times like this she itched to disturb their sleep but could not bring herself to awaken them directly. Instead she left the door open and peed and flushed noisily and clomped heavily around the room, but none of the things she did were loud enough to intrude upon their sleep.

She got back in bed, again brushing her legs over Peter’s, and lay on her back with her hands folded neatly on her flat stomach. Her eyes were wide. After a few moments she let her hands roam over her own body. She touched herself, not to excite but to explore. But her hands were barely aware of the skin they touched, her flesh barely aware of the hands that touched it. There was a partial numbness that had characterized every aspect of her life lately, as though all sensation were experienced through a veil. She could not really see or hear or smell or taste. She was not dead, but neither was she truly alive.

And around her they slept, and stole her sleep.

She seemed to remember a book, a spy novel, about a man who could not sleep. A part of his brain, the sleep center, had been destroyed, and he had not slept in almost twenty years. At the time she had read this as fantasy, but now she recalled it and wondered if it might not be possible. Of course, she was not entirely sleepless. At some indeterminate point after dawn broke she would slip under, and for a couple of hours she would be asleep. It was never good sleep, though. It was just a slightly deeper dream level than she experienced while awake.

So hard of late to know what she had dreamed and what had actually happened. To tell past events of the real world from past events of the almost as real world of dreams. Some days ago Peter had mentioned Warren Ormont
in conversation, and she had gaped at him and said, “But Warren’s dead, isn’t he? He was stabbed to death; he picked up a sailor in a bar and was stabbed to death. Wasn’t he?”

Peter had had little trouble convincing her that Warren was alive. Because she had learned not to trust memory, had learned to doubt her own ability to be sure. Warren was alive, though she had dreamed him dead. Her dreams did not have the power to kill.

Perhaps she had not even had that conversation with Peter. Perhaps that too had been a dream—

She got out of bed again and crossed the room to Robin’s side. She knelt beside her daughter’s bed and listened to her steady breathing. Devil’s daughter, she thought. Spawn of the Devil, thief of sleep. How many times had she dreamed Robin dead? How often had she killed her in her dreams? In some dreams Robin ceased to exist entirely; Gretchen edited the past and killed her by an abortion. In other dreams Fate did the deed—Robin would die in a car wreck, or drown in the canal, or be carried off by a mysterious fever. And in still other dreams Gretchen bloodied her own hands, wringing that little neck, slashing the throat, going berserk and beating the little one to death.

“Oh, baby,” she said softly. “Oh baby, you know what scares me? Someday I’ll think I’m dreaming and won’t be, because I can’t tell the difference anymore. Christ, baby, don’t let me do it—”

Robin grunted softly, shifted position. Gretchen leaned over and kissed her lightly on her lips. pointed her index finger and brought it to her own lips, kissing the tip. “This is a knife,” she whispered. She traced a line across Robin’s throat with her fingertip and dreamed a fountain of scarlet blood. She snapped her eyes shut and the scarlet fountain gushed more vividly; then opened her eyes wide to calm herself with the sight of the sleeping and undamaged child.

“Oh, God,” she said.

She returned to Peter’s side and lay on her back for a few more minutes, trying to will the disturbing image out of her mind. It was difficult to do this. Sometimes they tried to take control and it was very difficult to keep them from overpowering her. She was so afraid of what she might someday do. There would come a night when; instead of believing her finger to be a knife, she would hold a knife and believe it to be her finger. And it was so hard, so unbearably hard, to know what was real and what was not.

Time to be the succubus.

She breathed deeply in and out, in and out. It was indeed time to be the succubus. She always put off this moment as long as she dared because it was the one thing that calmed and reassured her, and thus she would wait until the most desperate part of the night so that afterward she would not have long to wait before sleep saved her. But it was time now, and his sleep was deep and easy, and it was time.

_Succubus. Suck. Suck you. Bus, a Greyhound, she herself lean and sleek and spare as a greyhound, the succubus._

First she touched him, her hand fastening immediately upon his penis. For a time she merely held him in her hand, held the soft harmless sleeping cock in her hand. Then slowly and carefully she shifted position at his side and breathed her warm breath over him.

_The succubus. The devil’s spawn, the succubus, sucking men’s souls from their bodies while they slept. Steal my sleep, Petey, and in return I steal your soul. The succubus, stealing your soul, sucking it out through your sleeping cock._

Her mouth claimed what her hand released. She took all of him into her mouth, at first just holding him for long moments in the moist warmth. There was a time when he seemed on the point of stirring but it passed and his sleep continued as before. Gradually, with her considerable skill, she began to use her mouth to excite him.

This was what she liked best. These special moments, when his body responded while his mind remained utterly unaware of what was taking place. She felt him growing in her mouth and her heart thrilled. Bit by bit he grew until his cock was rigid and pulsing in her mouth. She kept her hands from his body and inclined her head so that only her mouth touched him. She bobbed up and down, sliding him in and out of her mouth, teasing purposefully with her tongue, establishing a single incessant rhythm and matching that rhythm perfectly to the rhythm of his breathing.

Visions burned behind her closed eyelids. Visions of her teeth closing and snapping neatly and effortlessly through his column of flesh, the donkey at last catching the carrot of future time, biting him off and swallowing him and retaining him forever. Visions of her mouth clamped to his emasculated form, greedily and endlessly sucking, sucking blood and liquefied bone through the hole where his cock had been, sucking him inside out until every atom of his being had vanished down her throat to fill her bottomless vacuum.

_I am the succubus, thief of souls._

She brought him skillfully to climax, gulped down his soul as it spurted into her mouth. His orgasms were never shattering when she took him in this fashion. They were pure and perfect but unlike his waking climaxes, they involved no part of his mind and little of his body, just its specifically sexual apparatus. He had never awakened at such moments and he did not do so now. He moaned in his sleep as he came and the sound vibrated magically in her ears. But the moan was quickly over and he returned to a sleep as deep as he had been in previously.
She uncurled and lay once more on her back, eyes closed now, mind more nearly at peace. She gave herself up to
the taste of his seed, of his soul, the taste of him in her mouth and in her throat. At certain times—this was one of
them—she even fancied she could taste him in her belly. His cells, his soul, deep within her.

She did this every night. Took him in sleep and j the soul from him. He had never caught her at it and she had
never told him of it afterward. It was, she felt, a perfect unspoken bargain. Every night he stole her sleep and every
night she retaliated with the theft of his manhood, his essence. His essential soul.

Now she began to feel herself relaxing, felt her body and brain finding the way to let go. It would not be a
complete letting go, of course. That much she knew. But it would be a descent into a realm where dreams soon
thoroughly overcame reality than in her waking hours. She lay still, eyes closed, hands folded on her stomach, and
let herself float on the tide.
FIFTEEN

When the phone rang, Olive answered it. She said, “Just a moment,” and motioned to Linda. It was Hugh. She listened to him for a few moments. Then she said, “No, don’t be silly. It’s perfectly all right. I understand. No, it’s more important. I think you should stick with it. . . . Are you sure? Well, all right, but feel free to change your mind.”

She cradled the phone. “There goes dinner,” she said.

“The book takes precedence?”

She nodded. “But he’s definitely going to break by nine o’clock and he’ll pick me up then. In the meantime it’s going well, and he wants to stay with it.”

“What if it’s still going well at nine o’clock?”

“That’s what I was trying to tell him. To stay with it as long as he wants, but he insisted he’ll be done by nine one way or the other. And he will, because he told me to wait outside my building for him and he wouldn’t stand me up. Not after postponing it once already.”

“Unless he just gets so absorbed—”

“No, he’ll be there.”

Olive regarded her quizzically. “You don’t seem furious.”

“Why should I be furious?”

“I don’t guess you should, but not all women have your sort of cool and logical mind. You don’t mind playing second fiddle to a book?”

“No. At least I don’t think I do.”

“Hmmmm.”

“What does that mean, Mrs. McIntyre, ma’am?”

“Just ‘hmmmm.’”

“I heard the word well enough. I was curious about the punctuation. Is that ‘hmmmm’ with a question mark or ‘hmmmm’ with an exclamation point?”

“With a period. No. With three dots.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I have the feeling you’re waiting for me to pry, Linda, but I’m not entirely certain.”

“Neither am I.”

“Where was he planning to take you to dinner?”

“An Italian place in Lambertville. Not fancy but good home cooking, I think that’s how he described it. He said the name I don’t remember it.”

“That sounds like Gus and Josie’s.”

“I think that might be it.”

“Well, come on, then. You might as well have an Italian dinner bought for you. Clem said not to expect him for dinner, and I was just going to have a sandwich down the block and come back here for a couple of hours. I don’t imagine I’ll miss much business closing early.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Of course I don’t, but I want to. I hope you don’t mind walking. I feel like stretching my legs.”

The restaurant was an unprepossessing place on a side street, tucked between a delicatessen and a laundry and across the street from a funeral parlor. All but four of the twenty tables were empty. There were long fluorescent lights overhead, patterned linoleum underfoot, glass vases of plastic flowers on the tables. The service, provided by one of Gus Pucarelli’s daughters, was eager if unprofessional. The food—they both had linguine with white clam sauce—was excellent.

They shared a bottle of Soave, with Linda drinking the greater portion of it. The conversation flowed easily and comfortably but remained quite impersonal throughout the meal. When the coffee came Linda lit a cigarette and leaned back in her chair.

“Prying time,” she said.

“You seem a little unsure with our Mr. Hemingway.”

“Unsure? I guess I am.”

“Unsure of him or unsure of yourself?”


“And?”

“You know, right now is an impossible time to come to any conclusions about anything. He’s completely
involved with this book. He says it’s the best thing he’s ever written, the first important thing he’s attempted since 
One If by Land. That was his first book—"

“I know.”

“And so he’s completely wrapped up in it. I’m not objecting to this. I honestly don’t think I resent it. In fact I’m 
sad. For him, and also I think it’s a way to get to know him—I would think a creative person would live more 
vividly while he’s creating. More intensely.”

“That would stand to reason.”

“The only thing is that sometimes we’re together and he’s not really there. I can tell that he’s not really listening. 
He’s hearing some conversation his characters are going to be having in the next chapter.”

“What’s the book about?”

“He doesn’t like to talk about it. So I don’t ask. I asked him the title and he said Two If by Sea, but he was joking. 
Of course. I don’t think it’s about the war. I don’t know what it’s about.”

“Maybe it’s about you.”

“What a thought. No, I don’t think so. I think it’s about him.”

“Isn’t every book about its author?”

“I mean that it’s a more personal book than he usually writes. He’s as much as said so. That he’s getting into, 
things more deeply than he ever has before. I think he means he’s giving more of himself.” She put out her cigarette. 
“I’ll get to read it as soon as he’s through with the first draft. I’m not sure when that will be. I’m very anxious to 
read it, and at the same time it scares me.”

“How?”

“I don’t know exactly. I’m afraid I won’t like it, for one thing, and then what do I say?”

“That you like it.”

“Isn’t it better to be honest?”

“No. It’s been my observation that honesty is rarely to be treasured in human relationships. Writers and artists 
don’t want honesty, anyway. They want praise. There are a few masochists who truly want constructive criticism, 
whatever that means, but they’re few and far between.”

“Suppose your husband—”

“Paints something dreadful? What do I say to him? Why, I tell him I think it’s very sensitive and forceful and 
effective, of course. In the first place I don’t trust my own artistic judgment enough to say otherwise, and in the 
second place dispassionate criticism is supposed to come from dispassionate people. Strangers. The people who love 
you are supposed to give you support.”

Linda considered this. “I think I’ll probably like the book, anyway, I’ve liked all his earlier work, and he’s too 
much a professional to like a book as much likes this one and be dead wrong about it.”

“It doesn’t always work that way, but I suspect right in this case. That’s not really what you’re worried about 
anyway, is it?”

“No, I guess it isn’t. I guess what it comes down to is that I want him to be finished with the book and I don’t 
want him to be finished with the book.”

“Why?”

“When he finishes it he’s going to ask me to marry him.” She lowered her eyes, not wanting to see Olive’s 
reaction. “He hasn’t said anything. Not exactly. And I may be capable of misreading things, God knows I’ve been 
capable of misreading all kinds of things in the past, but I think I’m right this time. There are things he’s said. 
Feelings I can’t help picking up. I don’t know how much of it is me and how much of it is the right place and the 
right time. He’s been divorced a long time and he’s ready to get married again. He’ll talk about the loneliness of that 
big house of his. Nothing concrete, but just a lot of remarks he wouldn’t make to me unless he had marriage in mind. 
He’s too conscious of the effect of words to say these things otherwise.” She thought for a moment. “I think she’s 
got a lot to do with it.”

“Anita?”

“Who?”

“His ex-wife.”

“Oh. I don’t think he ever referred to her by name, Anita? No, I was thinking of Karen. His daughter.”

“How does she—”

“I think he’s starting to see himself as a father, as a part of a family. I can’t explain this very well. I’m just barely 
aware of the pieces, I don’t know how they fit together. Or if they really do.”

“You’ve met her?”

“Several times. And I feel I know her better than I do because he talks about her a great deal. They have this very 
open relationship. She can stay out all night or bring boys home with her, and everything is open and aboveboard.
He takes a great deal of pride in this.”
“You sound unconvinced.”
“Maybe because it’s so impossible to imagine having that kind of relationship with my own parents. Maybe I’m envious, as far as that goes.”
“Do you like her?”
“Surprisingly enough I do.”
“Why is that surprising?”
“You know, I don’t know why I said that. I suppose because it’s traditional for a daughter to resent her father’s female friends. ‘Female friends’—what a stilted phrase. But it’s natural for there to be resentment. And vice versa. I don’t think she resents me, and I like her well enough. One thing—she makes me feel old. Not because I’m going out with her father. I don’t think that’s what it is. And not because she relates to me like a mother substitute, because she doesn’t. I think it’s just that she’s so much younger. So much less mature.”
“And he wants to marry you.”
“Yes, I’m sure he does. And I’m pretty sure he knows he does.”
“So the question is—”
“Do I want to marry him? Yes, that’s the question. And I’m not sure of the answer. Do I love him? That’s another question and I’m not sure of the answer to that one either. I enjoy being with him. I care about him. I feel … important when I’m with him. And comfortable. I don’t know if that adds up to love. I’m not sure I have the capacity for a more total sort of love. I know I’m sick of floating, of everything being temporary. It would be very secure to marry Hugh.”
“It would certainly be financially secure.”
“Yes, and I’m not sure how important that is.”
“Very important.”
“But also secure in other ways. I love his house. I love the grounds, the woods. The whole way of living. I can see myself being a part of that. Very easily, I can see myself being a part of that.”
“I gather you’re sleeping with him.”
“Not literally. I’ve been to bed with him. I haven’t slept over.”
“Because of the daughter?”
“Oh, no. She knows we go to bed. That’s part of their beautiful open relationship. They don’t have to keep secrets from each other. It works both ways. No, I go home at night so that he can go straight to the typewriter in the morning. To tell you the truth, I think I prefer it that way. The cozy family group around the breakfast table the next day, I don’t know that I’m ready for that togetherness.”
“No, I don’t think I should be, either. Suppose you married him. Would the breakfast table scene bother you then?”
“I don’t think so. I think I could handle them now, as far as that goes, but until he’s done with the book it’s a moot point.”
“So the question is whether or not you want to marry him. Not that you have to have the answer yet, not until you’re asked, but it’s still something you’d want to settle ahead of time in your own mind. As much as you can. Is the bed part good? Because it won’t be a good marriage if it isn’t, and it’s not something that gets better with time. Either it’s there from the beginning or it never comes around.”
“It’s good. He’s very good for me that way. Am I blushing?”
“Not that I can see.”
“I feel as though I am. No, that part is good.” Her mind filled suddenly with an image, a memory, Hugh touching her in a certain way and her own electric response, and now she knew she was blushing. “It’s fine,” she said. “Just fine.”
“Well, what are the other traditional tests? Would you use his toothbrush? That’s supposed to be an acid test, although I can’t see it myself. It strikes me as old-fashioned. Would you want to have his children?”
“If I wanted to have any children, which is something I’m not sure of either way. But if I did, yes, I’d want to have his.”
“Would you want your children to look like him?”
“Oh, definitely. He’s a very handsome, man. I like his looks. I’d certainly rather have my children look like him than like me.”
“Oh, Linda, that’s ridiculous. You’re a very attractive woman.”
“I’m not unattractive, I know that. And I don’t detest my own looks, but I’ve always felt I wouldn’t want to have children who look like me. Make of that what you will, good Dr. McIntyre.”
“Hmmm. Well, I make it that we ought to get the check and take a walk over the bridge, don’t you think? He’s
picking you up at nine, and you’ll want time to get ready.”

The sky was starting to darken as they left the restaurant. The air was still warm but the heat of the day had passed and there was a breeze coming off the river. They walked almost to the bridge in silence.

Then Olive said, “Let me tell you a story. I don’t suppose you ever heard mention of Jimmy Doerfer. No reason why you should have. He lived with his mother a few miles the other side of Doylestown. Country people, Bucks residents for generations on both sides. Henrietta Doerfer was widowed when the boy was about six years old. An only child.

“The father, also named Jimmy, was known as a womanizer, which will give you an idea how long ago this happened. I can’t recall how long it’s been since I’ve heard that word spoken seriously. Well, everyone felt properly sorry for Henrietta, having to put up with this, but there’s no record that she ever voiced any objection. The point is that James Senior’s death was on the colorful side. A farmer up around Allentown caught James Senior in bed with his wife and used a shotgun on the pair of them before putting the barrel in his mouth and blowing his own head off in the bargain. All this to the immense delight of everybody within fifty miles, as it gave them something to talk about besides aren’t we going to get any rain this summer. I could tell you the farmer’s name except that it’s slipped my mind. Couldn’t be less important, actually.

“Now Jimmy Junior grew up into a carbon copy of his father. The same sort of hell raising, after everything in skirts, married or single made no difference to him, except that he went on living at home with his mother. And how she would carry on about him. All about how she wished he’d get married and settle down and leave off chasing other men’s wives before he wound up the same way his father did. And from what she said it was obvious she knew just what the boy did and where and with whom, and after you’d heard it all a few times, you got the feeling she was proud of the little rascal.

“She couldn’t have been more than thirty-five when the farmer’s shotgun made a widow out of her, but she never remarried. Her farm was a profitable one and she was a good enough looking woman, but if any man got interested, she didn’t encourage him. She lived to over sixty and Jimmy lived with her until she died, and in all that time he went on raising hell and never gave a thought to marrying and settling down.

“Then she died, and Jimmy himself was between thirty-five and forty when they buried his mother. Two months later he married a Doylestown girl, and if he ever once stepped out on her for the rest of his life no one ever heard a word of it. Worked hard, fathered four children, and spent his nights at home. He only lived another fifteen years but as long as he lived I think he would have been true to that woman. His heart finally killed him. There were rumors it was the late stages of syphilis that were responsible, that he’d had from his younger days, but you have rumors all the time in cases like that.”

They walked for a few minutes in silence. Then Linda said, “Are you going to tell me the point of the story or do I have to work it out for myself?”

“I’d tell you if I knew what it was. Stories don’t always have a point, do they?”

“I have a feeling this one does.”

“Well, I have the same feeling, but I can’t put my finger on it. Something we talked about earlier must have put it in my head, but I’d be hard put to say how or what or why. Easy enough to say it’s just another example of the strange things people find to do with their lives and let it go at that.”

“I could read all sorts of things into that story if I wanted to.”

“You could, and it might be a good idea and it might be a bad one. Well, that was a better meal than I’d have had alone, Linda. Thank you for keeping me company.”

“It’s my place to thank you, and you know it.”

“You needn’t thank me for the story, though.”

“I hadn’t intended to,” said Linda Robshaw.

When he picked her up she told him she didn’t want to make it a late night. “I haven’t felt well today,” she said. “What’s the matter?”

“Well, cramps, actually. It’s that phase of the moon. I suppose it’s not so bad, especially when I consider the alternative.”

“The alternative? Oh, I see.”

But it wasn’t that time of the month, not quite. Her period was not due for two days, and she had had no cramps. She wondered why she said she did. Because she did not want to make love, obviously. And yet she had said the words before she had consciously realized that she did not want to make love,

He asked her if it bothered her to sit in the car, and she said it didn’t, and he suggested a ride up Route 32 along the river. She asked how the book had gone, the inevitable question, and he answered that it had gone very well, which had lately been the inevitable answer. He turned north on Main and drove north along the Pennsylvania side of the river, along a winding tree-shaded road banked here and there with old stone houses.
Some twenty miles up they stopped for a drink at a Colonial tavern. They sat at a table in a dark corner and nursed scotch and sodas. He lit her cigarettes and kept his pipe going.

He did most of the talking. This night he talked not about the book and not about his daughter. Instead he was telling her a great deal about his earlier life. The vague and aimless period after the war. The first novel, and his marriage, and elements of his life that followed. She sensed that he was purposely showing her parts of himself which he habitually kept concealed, and she found herself wondering how many other women had found him as open as she did. It was impossible for her to know this, but she felt there had been few, very few. It was a conceit to think that no woman since his wife had known him as well as she herself did now, and yet although she recognized it as a conceit she could not avoid it. The thought pleased her, even warmed her, and at the same time in some indeterminate way it unsettled her.

Her mind kept picking up threads of the story Olive had told her. There was the suggestion of an obvious parallel there, but she suspected the story’s relevance might lie elsewhere. And she did not want to think about it. She knew that much, that she did not want to think about it.

He did want to marry her. She had been quite certain of this, although perhaps less certain than she had let on to Olive. His conversation tonight made his intent unmistakable.

It would be very pleasant to be his wife. He was a thoughtful man and a good lover. He would cherish her. That was a good word—cherish. No man had ever cherished her, no man had ever thought her someone to cherish.

And it would be secure to be his wife, both financially (which Olive said was important, and which probably was) and emotionally. There would be stability in her life, and she had lived too long with too little that could be called stable. She could belong to that fine old house. She could put down roots in those woods. His home could be her home as no place had ever been home to her. And it seemed now that she had never had a home. The house in which she grew up, even that had never been her home.

Did she love him? Well, she supposed that she did. She loved him but was not in love with him—the schoolgirl distinction which somehow persisted over the years. But had she ever been in love with anyone? She rather thought not, although she had thought herself thus from time to time. Did she love him enough to be married to him? Now that was another question, wasn’t it?

She had been married once. She could review that marriage, as she so often had done. She could try to see it in the context of the love that had or had not been there, as she could review her relationship with Marc. But it was hard now even to remember that marriage, and there were times when an accurate memory of her time with Marc seemed similarly elusive. It was hard to remember what it was like at the time, hard to summon up the person she herself had then been. And whoever she had been, she was in so many ways different now.

Would she want to have his children? Yes, if she wanted to have children at all. Would she want her children to look like him? She regarded him thoughtfully, projecting his strong features onto the countenances of children. Yes, she would like to have a son who looked like this man. Or a daughter—a daughter in his image would be unquestionably attractive, she thought, and then realized that he already had a daughter in his image. Karen had his features down to the last decimal place.

Karen. Was that the problem? Was that what bothered her? It seemed to be the point of Olive’s story, certainly, some aspect of the father-daughter relationship.

He asked if she was feeling better, and for an instant she forgot her story about menstrual cramps. Then she remembered, and said that she was feeling a good deal better, that he seemed to be good for her. His smile told her she had found the right thing to say.

“But I’d better get you home,” he said. “It’s getting late.”

On the way back her thoughts turned unpredictably to Peter Nicholas. She remembered their one night and felt herself responding to the memory. How unfair, she thought, to force Hugh to compete with ghosts. Because that was what the night had been. A phantom experience, shadow rather than substance. Hugh was a better lover than Peter, an infinitely better lover for her than Peter, but the night with Peter had been forbidden, the love they shared doomed in advance. Thus there had been nothing held in reserve, no worry about where the relationship might lead because it was a foregone conclusion that it could lead nowhere.

And yet. And yet——

As they reached the outskirts of New Hope she realized, quite suddenly, that she wanted him to make love to her. She was sitting close to him, her head on his shoulder, her seat belt gloriously unfastened, and his arm was around her and the wind was in her hair and she felt the moon drawing tides in her liquid flesh. When he parked in front of her building, she kissed him with a special urgency, pressing her body to him and clutching him. He held back at first, then matched her passion. Boldly she dropped a hand into his lap and took hold of him.

“Oh,” she said.

“You’ve awakened the sleeping giant.”
“Oh, my.” Cramps, yet. Christ. “Can I do something about that?”
“It’s not necessary.”
“But I want to.”
But he was moving her hand from him, shaking his head gently. “Not here,” he said. “Not here, not now.”
“I’m sorry if I—”
“Don’t be silly. I’ll call you.”
On the way upstairs she thought of a dozen things could have said, ranging from a frank explanation of her lie to some gibberish about the cramps normally preceding the onset of her period. There were any number of things she could have said to cover herself, but they were all things she had not been able to think of until his car had pulled away.

She took a shower, washed her hair. She tried listening to the radio but couldn’t find a station she could stand. She wanted to talk to someone and there was no one she could talk to. She looked up Hugh’s number in the phone book and sat at the telephone for twenty minutes before she realized she could not possibly call him, could not possibly find anything to say to him.

She was so fucking neurotic. That was the trouble—she was so fucking neurotic. He had not proposed to her, had not begun to propose to her, and her anxiety about what she might do if he did, her stupid neurotic anxiety, was getting in the way of everything.

In bed, she could not keep her hands off herself. She tried. She did not want to touch herself. Somehow she seemed to have evolved a double standard for masturbation: It was all right in the absence of an outlet, but forbidden if there was someone you were sleeping with. Going to bed with, she corrected herself. She had not yet slept with Hugh.

She gave in ultimately, using her fingers quickly and deftly, her mind blank of fantasies, her manipulation wholly physical. She reached climax quickly but it didn’t seem to do her any good; the same tensions were still there when she had finished.

When he entered the living room Karen closed her book and got up from his chair. “Home early,” she said.
“Linda wasn’t feeling well.”
“Is she all right?”
“Uh-huh. Drinking alone? That’s a hell of a note.”
“Well, you’ve been teaching me bad habits. Is it awful to drink alone?”
“I never saw anything wrong with it. The world is filled to overflowing with men and women who seek out boring company to avoid the stigma of solitary drinking. You could mix me one, though, and that would solve the problem.”

She made him a drink and freshened her own. He sat on the couch and she took a seat beside him. “I thought you were going out,” he said.
“I drove around town but I didn’t see anybody I wanted to spend any time with. It’s all the same people and I didn’t feel like that kind of company.”
“Is it starting to get to you?”
“What? All the same people? Not exactly. Just that most of the time I’d rather sit around here. Am I getting in the way?”
“That’s good, isn’t it?”
“You’re not. On the way back here tonight I was hoping your car would be in the garage. I had to take Linda home early, and I hate being alone on nights like this. I can’t get the damned book out of my head.”
“That’s good, isn’t it?”
“It’s a good sign but it’s not much fun. I’ll have scenes running through my head, whole patches of dialogue, and I can’t shut them off. Ninety percent of the time it’s stuff I’ve already got planned out well enough, or material that happens offstage, conversations that will never wind up in the book anyway. Sitting down at the typewriter doesn’t do any good. I’m already written out for the day and anything I did now would be second-rate. But I can’t get the words out of my mind.”
“It sounds like a speed high.”
“Another part of the collegiate experience?”
“Not in a heavy way. I guess there were kids who were borderline speed freaks. Just on pills, I never knew anybody who shot crystal or anything.”
“Which is crystal?”
“Methedrine. I used to take Dex some of the time. Not for a high but to study for a test. Back when I bothered studying for tests.”
“Did it do you any good?”

“Oh, tons of good. But after awhile it backs up on you. Your mind starts curving in on itself. You get hung up on trivia. Spend hours cleaning the dirt out of your typewriter keys or arranging books on a shelf. Or running one phrase through your mind and getting all sorts of different vibrations out of it, but afterward none of them mean anything.”

“I took some of your mother’s pills once when she dieting. Those would be amphetamine, wouldn’t they?”

“Probably.”

“Then I see what you mean. There was too much mental energy and no place for it to go. It’s something like that now. I haven’t had this feeling on a book in years, and by God it’s a good feeling, but I’d like to be able to close the door on it when the day’s over.”

“Oh, you had some phone calls. Mentioning Mother reminded me. She called.”

“What did she want?”

“Also Mary Fradin.”

“Again? I hope I’m not supposed to call her.”

“Just a minute, I wrote it down. No, you don’t have to call her. She thinks she has a three-book contract almost nailed down with Huber and Lazarus, whoever they are.”

“A publishing house.”

“Also she had a feeler from somebody interested in making a television movie of Caleb’s House. She’ll report on that if there’s anything definite.”

“Then why bother me with it in the meantime?” He drank half his drink. Mary had been calling far more frequently than usual lately, ever since he had spoken to her about The Edge of Thought. Evidently she had caught his own enthusiasm for the book and felt it might serve as a turning point in his career. A week ago she had reported that his most recent editor had left Hugh’s publishers for a position at another house. Hugh’s publishers had recently had an especially high turnover rate in an industry where musical chairs was a way of life, so Hugh had not been surprised.

“Well, I won’t much miss him,” he had said. “Editors come and editors go but Markarian is here to stay. The one constant in a world of change.”

“Maybe it’s time for you to be a rat.”

“And leave the ship? I didn’t know that boat was sinking.”

“I think it is as far as you’re concerned,” Mary had said. “They’ve been taking you for granted for years.”

“I’m easy to take for granted.”

“Only because they’re in a position to do it. I’ve had interest from other houses on and off over the years. I never bothered you about it because I didn’t think it was worthwhile. But right about now might be a good time. I ought to be able to get you a three or four-book contract with a healthy advance. A very healthy advance, I’m thinking in terms of six figures.”

“That’s healthy, but isn’t that just numbers? I don’t have any particular need for cash at the moment.”

“Lucky you. It isn’t just numbers. It’s an investment on their part. If they put up that kind of money in front, they have to back it up with the kind of advertising and promotion you deserve. And which you’re not getting from you-know-who. All we need is the right book to make the jump with, and I think you’re writing that book right now.”

“I haven’t even let on what it’s about.”

“No, but how long have I known you, Hugh? You’ve never been this excited about anything you’ve done. That’s good enough for me.”

“Your faith is reassuring, but—”

“Cut the crap. The only thing I have faith in is that ten percent of six figures is five figures. And this new one—damn it, I can’t think of the title—”

“I never told you the title. Nice try, Mary.”

“Why don’t you tell me the title, lamb?”

“No.”

“Jesus, give me something to play with. The title, the theme, something. You’re a pro, for Christ’s sake. You’re not going to lose the handle this late in the game. You sound like one of those baseball players who won’t change their socks while the team’s on a winning streak.”

But he had been adamant and she had stopped trying to push him. Still, she kept finding excuses to call him, dangling possible deals in front of him every chance she got. He was pleased by her enthusiasm and knew it would still be there when the book was done. As far as a switch in publishers was concerned, he had told her to use her own judgment and get what she felt were the best terms at the best house.

“You’re the agent,” he had said.
“I just wanted to make sure you weren’t constitutionally opposed to a jump.”
“Why should I be?”
“The usual loyalty horseshit.”
“What’s there to be loyal to? There’s nobody who was there five years ago. I can’t even be loyal to the corporation since that conglomerate took it over.”
“Now you’re talking. You write, and I’ll scheme, and we’ll both get rich.”

The money did not much matter. It was nothing if not professional to concentrate on the money, to take the cash and let the credit go. But money as an incentive had long since failed to stir him. He had not been poor enough long enough to take real pleasure in the simple accumulation of wealth. Thus money was of value only in terms of what it could buy, and there was little he wanted to buy.

But he could not pretend that he did not want the glory. He could tell himself he wrote for his own pleasure, or for the small circle of perceptive readers, yet he recognized he wanted to be important, to be esteemed. And recognized, too, that this was a yearning one could never acknowledge.

Now he said, “What did Anita want?”
“To talk to me, mostly. She asked to talk to you, but she didn’t seem upset that you were out. I asked her if you should call her back, but she said it wasn’t important.”

“Good.”
“She seemed worried about me.”
“How so?”
“Oh, I don’t know. You know, things like what I’m going to do next. I tried to tell her that I didn’t know what I’m going to do next. That it’s a waste of time to be hung up on what I’m going to do next. She didn’t understand.”
“No, I don’t suppose she would. She’s always been the sort to think in terms of goals.”
“So you could spend your entire life thinking where you’re going next and never concentrating on where you are now. I can’t see it.”

“I’m not sure the reverse is perfect either. Spending all your time concentrating on the present and letting the future just happen.”

She nodded agreement. “Oh, I know it. But right now, the stage I’m in. The last thing I want to do is get hung up on tomorrow.” She hesitated. “I don’t think she likes the idea of me being here.”

“Thinks I’m a bad influence?”
“No, not exactly. I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t understand her at all. I compare the two of you, you and Mother, and it’s weird.”

“How so?”
“Just weird. You’re both so different. I remember when you got divorced. I couldn’t believe it. I was shocked. Not the idea of divorce. Everybody’s parents were getting divorced; it was something that happened all over the place. But the two of you. I couldn’t handle it. I suppose it’s that way for every kid because you can only think of your parents as being together because you always knew them that way. For the longest time I kept thinking you would get back together again. Even after she married him I used to think that, even though I knew it wasn’t going to happen.”

“So did I.”
“You did? I thought—”
“What?”
“Oh, that was your idea.” He didn’t say anything, and she said, “Did you love her very much?”
“Yes.”
“And now?”
“I don’t know her now,” he said. “I haven’t known your mother for years.”
“What I was thinking. When I was a kid, while all this was happening, I thought how perfect you were for each other. Because I saw you that way. And now I see the two of you as being so completely different. Are you going to marry Linda?”

“Where did that question come from?”
“I don’t know. I guess I shouldn’t have asked it.”

“Why not? I’ve been asking myself. I find myself thinking about getting married again. It’s something I haven’t thought of in a long time. It’s probably your fault.”

“My fault?”
“I think I’ll have one more of these before I turn in. Can I fix you another?”
“All right.”
When he returned with the drinks she said, “How is it my fault?”
“You’ve made me realize how lonely I was living by myself.”
“Is it just the loneliness, or is it something special with Linda? I guess that’s nosy.”
“I guess it is, but it’s a good question. I suppose it’s probably a combination of the two. Most things are, you know.”
“The first time I was in love, later on I realized it was because I was ready to be in love.”
“Sure.”
She grinned suddenly. “When I was very little,” she said, “I thought I would get married to you when I grew up. Before I knew you couldn’t do that. Marry your father. I guess all little girls go through that, don’t they?”
“So I understand.”
SIXTEEN

Ever since he and Bert had talked about her, Warren Ormont had taken an interest in Melanie Jaeger. At first this consisted of little more than finding a way to drop her name into casual conversations and see where those conversations led. The result was largely a matter of inference. No one actually came right out and said anything, but from a throwaway line here and a raised eyebrow there, Warren was able to piece things together. The conclusion was what he had hoped it would be. In a selective and reasonably discreet fashion, Melanie was offering her ass around all over the place.

On several occasions he managed to be near her, close enough to watch the way she handled herself in public. She did not flirt, he noticed, and she seemed impervious to the casual flattery she frequently attracted. Warren registered this and approved. She was not easy, then, not a mindless little cunt who could be caught on an un-baited fishhook. No, it was Melanie who did the selecting, Melanie who determined the occasions for her adultery. She was looking for something new, he guessed. Something special, something out of the ordinary. Something—if one could countenance the word—something perverse.

This, as much as her unquestionable physical appeal, particularly attracted Warren. While he frequently found women attractive, he was rarely moved to act on his feelings. As comfortable as he was with female bodies, he was rarely at ease with the minds that inhabited them. The thought of living with a woman appalled him. It was difficult enough to live with a man, even a man as temperamentally suited to him as Bert, but with any woman ever born it would have been quite impossible.

On a simpler plane, he had found that the discomfort of intimate female company generally outweighed the pleasure of occasional affairs with women. It was one thing to fuck them, another thing entirely to have them that close to you. The sort of closeness which he treasured with male lovers was upsetting with females.

The more he saw of Melanie, and the more he thought about her, the less he felt such considerations be operative in her case. She wanted thrills—he was sure of this, and no less sure because he had reached this conclusion largely through intuition. He had learned over the years to trust his intuition, had found it more reliable in most instances than reason. His intuition, given free rein, supplied him with a fairly detailed portrait of Melanie before he exchanged a single word with her.

That first exchange took place on a Tuesday morning. They passed on the street, she with a bag of groceries, he en route to the laundry with a half dozen dirty shirts in a paper bag. “Why, it’s Melanie Jaeger,” he said enthusiastically. “Warren Ormont. I believe we did meet once, but I doubt you’d remember.”

“Of course I do,” she said. “And I’ve seen you onstage at the Playhouse.”

“We’ll, I’m sure I was giving a ghastly performance, and I hope I won’t be judged on the basis of that.”

“No, I—”

“I won’t keep you,” he said. He deliberately let his eyes travel down her body, then up again to meet her eyes. She did not flush. He gave her a smile, put a little extra into it. “It’s so good seeing you,” he said.

He had been stopping at Sully’s fairly regularly. Now he made it a point to have a drink there every night, deliberately studying the man behind the bar. If Melanie’s behavior had worked any changes in her husband, Warren was unable to spot them. “He is the same old hairy bear,” he confided to Bert. “I’m told the husband is always the last to know, but it’s hard to believe he doesn’t have an inkling.”

“Maybe he doesn’t care.”

“He does tend to lose interest in his little wedded playmates. But generally he just detaches them and sends them on their way, suitably equipped with a handsome settlement. And there’s never been the slightest breath of scandal. Goodness, hear me talking in clichés. Never the slightest breath. Of course there’s no scandal with Miss Fancy Pants, come to think. I wonder just how available she’s made herself.”

“We’d better have her soon.”

“Don’t I just know it. But the waiting adds to it, don’t you think? I like to scheme, you know. I’d have made a marvelous Renaissance courtier. ‘Love is a precious thing, love is a poison ring… Getting there is half the fun, you know. Suppose you had brought her home that first night.”

“Oh, I could never have done that.”

“Why, she was cruising, for heaven’s sake.”

“Yes, but you know I’m incapable of arranging things like that. It’s your province, Warren.”

“My innocent flower. But taking it as an hypothesis that you conquered your stage fright and brought Melanie Melontits home to bed, we would have missed out on all this delicious intrigue. Do you remember that biker?”

“Of course. I don’t remember his name, but I remember him.”

“I don’t think he had a name. I brought him home and we had a marvelous trio, in spite of the fact that I couldn’t
wait to get the little devil out of the house. Boys like that are divine to fuck but they shouldn’t be allowed to speak. ‘Duh, duh, um, far out, duh, outasight, duh.’ Marlon fucking Brando sans talent. If I become very very rich some day, Bert, I intend to subsidize a foundation dedicated to removing the vocal cords of motorcycle boys. I wish you would write all of this down. I don’t need a pianist, damn it, I need a Boswell. All this sparkling wit lost to the ages.”

“You’re outrageous.”

“I suspect I am. But you do remember Hell’s Little Angel, don’t you? Now if we’d had such a much with dear Mrs. Jaeger, we’d have missed all this. Hunger makes the meal, lover. And her time shall come soon. Count on it.”

It was over a week before he managed to run into Melanie again. He was very busy, performing at night and rehearsing another play afternoons. Ultimately he did encounter her again, once again meeting her on the street.

“Ah, the fair Melanie,” he said. “Here, let me carry that for you.” He took the package from her without waiting for her reply. “There we are. Now lead, kindly light, and I shall follow.”

“My car is just around the corner.”

“Scarcely far enough.” His eyes caught hers. “Let me buy you a cup of coffee first. I have to carry this awkward bundle more than a few steps in order for the task count as exercise. And my doctor is always telling me to get more exercise, so you’ll be performing a medical good deed.”

“Well—”

“It’s perfectly safe, you know.” Once again his eyes did their trick of running up and down her body, then fastening directly upon hers. “Nothing bolsters a woman’s reputation like keeping public company with an obvious faggot. And, come to think of it, there’s nothing better for a faggot’s public image than being seen in the company of a stunning young woman. Come. We shall talk in present tenses. Do you know that song? ‘Chelsea Morning’? Joni Mitchell?”

“I don’t think so.”

He took her to the Raparound, held a chair for her, sat down opposite from her. It was a weekday morning and the tourists had not yet begun to flood the town. There were a few regulars having breakfast and conversation at the Raparound, and Warren greeted them briefly, then ordered two coffees from the waitress.

He squared his shoulders, folded his hands on the table in front of him, and beamed smartly at Melanie. “Well,” he said. “Well.”

“Well what?”

“Just well.”

She started to say something, then waited while the girl put cups of coffee before them. Then Warren lifted his cup in a toast. “To the possibilities,” he said.

“I don’t understand.”

“You will.”

She worried her upper lip with her tongue. Again she was about to say something, and again he didn’t give her the chance. He began pitching small talk at her, theater gossip, various presumably amusing anecdotes. He was quite good at this, and before long he worked past her reserve and she was involved with the conversation at hand.

As she was finishing her coffee he said, “The final curtain is at eleven seventeen tonight. By eleven thirty I’ll have my clothes changed and my makeup removed. I’ll be at the Barge Inn a few minutes after that to pay my respects to your worthy husband.”

“At midnight I’ll ring your doorbell.”

Her tongue teased her lip again. He decided that the gesture was indescribably sensuous. She said, “You must be thinking of someone else.”

“Au contraire. I’m thinking of you.”

“I don’t know what this is all about.”

“Don’t you?” He did a number with his eyes again, then broke it off with a wide smile. “We’ll go to the Inn in Carversville,” he said levelly. “I believe you’ve been there. A friend of mine plays piano there. I believe you’ve heard him play. He plays other things besides the piano.”

She watched him, waited him out.

“His name is Bert,” he went on. “He lives with me. We enjoy living together. We enjoy sharing things.”

She was nodding, taking it all in.

“Sometimes we share a meal, or an evening in New York, or a bed. Sometimes we share a person.”

“I don’t—”

“Of course you do.”

“What I mean is why me?”
“Why, there are several reasons,” he said. “One is that I’ve attained an erection just sitting across a table from you. A rather dramatic one, actually. If you’d care to put your foot in my lap you could reassure yourself on that point. For another thing, I—oh, my. I didn’t expect you to do that.”

“You suggested it.”

“Yes, I did, didn’t I?”

“Do you like this? Yes, you damn well like it. I could get you off with my toes.”

“You are full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“I have very limber toes.”

“You do.” He took hold of her foot and stroked it “I think we should stop this.”

“I think I’m getting as hot as you are. I thought you were supposed to be a faggot.”

“Nobody’s supposed to be a faggot. It’s not something you prepare for at a trade school. No, by George, that’s precisely what it is, come to think. I’ll come by at midnight.”

“No. I’ll meet you there.”

“The Carversville Inn.”

“Yes, I know. Warren? How did you know?”

“About you? Oh, intuition.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.”

“I’ll meet you there between twelve and twelve thirty. It will be his last set. We can have a drink and then you can come home with us.”

“What’s his name?”


“He has very nice hands.”

“Yes, I rather fancy them myself.”

“He has very nice hands,” Melanie said. “Yes, I remember his hands.”

After he had paid the check and carried her package to her car, Melanie got into the little Alfa and sagged behind the wheel. She was trembling uncontrollably with a mixture of excitement and fear. Both emotions had begun shortly after Warren took her to the Raparound, and she felt she had held them both nicely in check. Now, alone, she could give in to them, could hardly avoid giving in.

She started the car. Instead of driving home she headed west on 202, pushing the little red car hard, using it deliberately as an outlet for what she felt. She turned around just short of Doylestown, the greater portion of her anxiety spent in the act of driving. She felt the sun on her face and hands, the wind in her hair. At a stoplight she fished a cigarette out of her bag and pushed in the dashboard cigarette lighter. The light changed. She crossed the intersection. When the lighter popped out to announce its readiness she lit her cigarette, then shook the lighter absently like a match and flipped it over the side of the car.

She had gone almost a mile before she realized what she had done, and laughter immediately overwhelmed her. She had to pull off the road, she was laughing so hard.

When Sully came home for dinner she told him about it, and broke up again recounting the episode.

“You must of had your mind in the clouds,” he said. “I can just picture that. You didn’t go back and have a look around for it?”

“No chance. I don’t know exactly where it was, and it’s all high weeds at the side of the road.”

“Well, they don’t cost much to replace. You can tell him the heating element burned out.”

“Why not tell him I threw it away?”

“Because it’s bad enough I know you’re a nut, you don’t want the whole world to know. I heard of a guy doing that with a Zippo lighter. Borrowed the lighter off a friend and then threw it the hell out the window. I wasn’t there to see it but I can picture it in my mind clear enough. What were you doing up around Doylestown?”

“Just driving around.”

“That’s what the car’s for, I guess. Just driving?”

“What else?”

He looked at her, then looked away.

“I’ll be going out tonight,” she said.

“Oh?”

“For a drive.”

“For a drive,” he echoed. “You be home by the time I close the joint?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Oh, a late evening, huh?”

“That’s right.”
“Just gonna see what you come up with, huh?”
“Not exactly.”
“Oh?”
“I have a date.”
“A date.”
“Yes.”
“Who’s the lucky—”
“I’ll tell you later.”
“Tell me now.”
“No.”
He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Very softly he said, “You cunt.”
“Do you want to go upstairs?”
“Not now.”
“When I come home, then.”
“You fucking cunt.”
“Are you going? You didn’t have dessert.”
“I don’t want any.”
“Sully—”
He turned in the doorway. “I didn’t mean to call you that. It’s just—I’ll wait up for you, baby.”
“I like it when you call me a cunt.”
“I’ll wait for you.”
“Good.”

The evening crawled and she could not make it hurry. She washed the dinner dishes, then went upstairs and took a long soak in the tub. The hot water baked the tension out of her muscles but new tension had taken its place before she had toweled herself dry. She wrapped herself up in a terrycloth robe of Sully’s and sat in front of the television set without paying any attention to the program on the screen.

Cunt.

That was what she was. Perhaps it was what she had always been, although it did not seem to her that this was the case. It was true that she had always enjoyed sex. She could not remember when she had first become aware of the difference between little boys and little girls, but as long as she had been aware of this difference she had been enthusiastically in favor of it. An attractive girl, an outgoing and popular girl, she had been the frequent recipient of sexual overtures from an early age. She had found all aspects of this enjoyable, from kissing games at children’s parties to fumbling adolescent petting and beyond.

But it had always been an easy enjoyment, a carefree enjoyment. This compulsion that she had found within herself was new, and although it brought her great pleasure it also frightened her. She was afraid of both what she herself was becoming and what might happen to her.

Sully was hard to understand, so very hard for her to understand. Everything she did was ultimately for him, and he knew this, but his immediate reaction each time was one of loathing and bitter contempt. You fucking cunt. She sensed that he had to despise her for what she did, that this was a part of the magic that flowed between them. So far his rage was always quiet and smoldering, never harsh and violent, but how could she be sure it would never change its form? He was a big man, a powerful man. He had always been beautifully gentle with her. If he ever turned violent, she was certain he could kill her with a single blow of one of those heavy hands.

The thought of dying beneath Sully’s rage chilled her, but she could not really make herself believe it was more than a fraction of a possibility. Thus it bothered her less than the question of the sort of person into which she herself was evolving.

Or was that really it? She frowned, challenging herself. She was becoming a swinger, a sexual experimenter, and this did not bother her in and of itself. On the contrary, she was surprised how easy it was for her to accept these changes in her own attitudes. As long as she and Sully were content with the pattern of life they led, nothing else really mattered much to her. She had no friends, and since she had married Sully she had never been unpleasantly conscious of the absence of friends.

She closed her eyes tightly, then opened them wide. She knew what it was.

What bothered her was the thought of other people knowing. What bothered her, what summed it all up, was that Warren Ormont had been able to approach her out of the blue with total assurance that she would be game for what he and his friend had in mind. She did not know Warren Ormont. And he did not know her. Yet he had known.

She positioned herself in front of her mirror and studied herself very carefully. She had examined herself in this fashion at other times in her life. When she got her period for the first time. When she lost her virginity. On each
all of possibilities, none of them had reality because of her own ignorance.

She had done nothing about this. She could not think what to do about it, or how to go about doing it, but the

thoughts would not go away. Had Sully ever had strange thoughts like this about another man? Had he ever done

She even had the woman in mind. Every time she saw Karen Markarian on the street a delicious shiver went through

very little you could be sure of. She tried to imagine Sully with another man. She tried to picture him on his knees

she had gone there only once, and she had not thought her availability was quite that obvious. Even if he had reported that

would not go away. Had Sully ever had strange thoughts like this about another man? Had he ever done

in the way he had handled her foot. And nothing equivocal in her response to that handling.

She turned off the television set, went downstairs, fixed herself a cup of instant coffee. Then she made a pot of

regular coffee so that it would be there for Sully when he came home. He would sit around drinking coffee and

waiting for her while she played bizarre games with a couple of faggots. It seemed that making the coffee for him

was the least she could do.

Faggots.

This puzzled her. She had never known a homosexual well, and she had always taken it for granted that a faggot

was a faggot and that they only did it with each other. They were not supposed to be interested in women. But

Warren had been unmistakably interested in her. She remembered the expression on his face when she had taken

him up on his invitation to examine his erection with her foot. She had instantly kicked off her shoe and plopped her

foot in his lap, and he had obviously never expected her to do so. His face, however, had shown surprisingly little of

his surprise. Well, perhaps that was to be expected; he was an actor, after all.

Not even an actor could will an erection into existence. And that erection had been real enough, big and hard,

warm when her toes gripped it.

She could have done him with her toes. The current that flowed between them then had been that strong. And she

remembered his hand on her foot. He had stroked her foot as any lover might have done. There was nothing faggoty

in the way he had handled her foot. And nothing equivocal in her response to that handling.

She pictured Warren now, the eyes glinting at her through the rimless eyeglasses, the high forehead, the sharp

hawk nose. She heard his voice in memory, caught all the special inflections, the campy mannerisms. Everything

about him proclaimed his homosexuality, and it was absurd to imagine herself responding to this proclamation. And

yet she had responded and could not deny it. Part of the response, of course, was excitement over the underlying

kinkiness of the situation. But not all of it, for a part of it was a response to his very definite masculinity.

There was so much she did not know, not merely about herself but about the way people behaved in general. So

very much she did not understand.

Had Sully ever done things with another man? Earlier the thought would have been laughable, but now she was

not so sure. How could anyone be sure of anything? If she had learned nothing else, she had learned that there was

very little you could be sure of. She tried to imagine Sully with another man. She tried to picture him on his knees

before another man, with the man’s cock in his mouth. But she could not bring the picture into focus.

Either he had seen something or he had heard something, and in either case she was troubled. Of course the most

obvious explanation lay in the fact that Bert must have noticed her weeks ago at the Carversville Inn. But she had

gone there only once, and she had not thought her availability was quite that obvious. Even if he had reported that

she had gone out looking for a man, why would that lead them to believe she was looking for far-out sex? Why?

It was this goddamned town, she thought suddenly. New York or Chicago or Los Angeles none of this would be a

problem. There she and Sully could choose their friends and acquaintances from people like themselves. Or they
could have no friends, could take their sexual pleasure with strangers and be utterly ignored by neighbors. But in a
town the size of New Hope there was no such compartmentalization. Men with whom she slept would turn up at the
Barge Inn for a drink, and she would run into their wives at the market or under the dryer. That added spice, but it
also added an unmistakable element of danger.

Did everyone know? Was the whole town talking about her? Men did talk. You couldn’t expect them all to keep
silent. Sooner or later it was inevitable that she would be talked about throughout the county. She wondered if she
could handle that. She wondered if Sully could handle it. If worse came to worst, they could move, they had already
discussed the possibility, but she did not want to move and neither did he.

And she certainly did not want to have to move.

She turned off the television set, went downstairs, fixed herself a cup of instant coffee. Then she made a pot of

and the few times they had spoken she walked away with the feeling that her desires were reciprocated.

She had done nothing about this. She could not think what to do about it, or how to go about doing it, but the

thoughts would not go away. Had Sully ever had strange thoughts like this about another man? Had he ever done

anything about them? She pictured Warren again and began to imagine him in bed. She tried to bring Bert into the
picture but could not manage it. She did not know what they would to do, or how, and although she could imagine
all of possibilities, none of them had reality because of her own ignorance.
Well, she would find out, and soon.

She could not remember what Bert looked like. She had seen him one time, and she remembered the evening well enough, the drive to Carversville, the solitary drinks, the exploration of possibilities. She remembered vividly the man she had ultimately picked up, remembered even more vividly the ecstasy she had shared with her husband afterward. But she could not remember Bert LeGrand. She did remember his hands, their assurance on the keys, the power of them, and mixed with that memory was the feel of Warren’s hand on her foot. Did a man like Warren touch a male foot and a female foot in the same way? Or was there a difference?

Again she let her mind drift to the scene at the Raparound, her foot in his lap, her toes working to excite his cock. She touched herself for an instant to heighten the memory but it was unnecessary, the memory was vivid enough without such enhancement. She found herself wrapping words around the memory, putting lyrics to its music, the words she would use when she told Sully about it.

For she would tell him all of it. From the overtures on the street to the wildness which she herself was not yet able to imagine. She would tell him all of it

Soon enough.
SEVENTEEN

The last of the sunset glowed red in the west as Karen left the house and headed back into the woods. She had paused first at the door of her father’s study, heard the typewriter chatter, pause, then start tentatively up again. She wished he would finish the book so that she could read it. It wouldn’t be much longer, she thought. He was working steadily, working every day, and sometimes she would stand silently outside his door and hear the typewriter keys click away without interruption for ten or fifteen minutes at a time.

When he was out of the house she was occasionally tempted to peek at the manuscript. Once she had entered the study in his absence but had been unable to make herself look at what he had written. It could do no harm so long as he did not know that she had read it, but still she felt it would be a dishonorable act on her part.

She walked only a few yards into the woods. It was light out now but would be dark before long, and she did not want to be confronted with a long walk in the dark. That might be an unpleasant experience at any time, and would be especially unpleasant stoned. If the grass took her in the wrong direction, she might really find herself imagining that there were bears in those woods, or that the trees and vines were actively conspiring against her.

Her fingers found the little foil packet in the pocket of her jeans. She left it where it was while she smoked a regular cigarette, sitting with her legs crossed and her back against a tree. She smoked the cigarette all the way to the filter, then carefully stubbed it out on the sole of her shoe. In her mind, Smoky the Bear frowned and shook a warning finger at her.

“Only you can prevent forest fires,” she said aloud. “Only forest fires can prevent bears.”

She took out the packet, unwrapped the aluminum foil, let the two neatly rolled joints fall into the palm of her hand. A boy in town had given them to her almost a week ago and she had been saving them. She was in the right kind of mood now and the woods seemed a perfect place to smoke. It was a natural act that ought to be performed in natural surroundings.

She could have smoked in the house. In her own room or in the living room. Her father knew she had smoked, they had talked about it, and he didn’t seem to object to grass. He had smoked himself on occasion, although she gathered he had not had any grass in a long time. Christ, everyone smoked. People on Social Security were lighting up and blowing the tops of their heads off. She had known kids at Northwestern who had turned their parents on, and one kid who had been turned on by his parents. “Families that blast together last together.” Even her mother smoked, and anything that woman could do couldn’t possibly be hip by definition.

Her mother’s words on the subject struck her as one of the most extraordinary cop-out speeches she had ever heard. “Now I know very well that marijuana is harmless, Karen. It’s probably less injurious than alcohol, although the data are not yet conclusive. A lot of testing remains to be done. And Wayne and I have experimented with marijuana. The fact remains that it is against the law. The law may be a bad one but that’s neither here nor there. It’s the law, and violating that law can lead to a great deal of sheer heartache for young people. Also, I think it’s inadvisable in any event for adolescents to become involved with a drug like marijuana before they have the maturity to handle it. It’s the same as with alcoholic beverages. In fact I very much hope the powers that be will legalize marijuana so that its use can be controlled, limited to adults. I don’t suppose I can tell you what to do, Karen, because there are certain decisions you will no doubt make for yourself, decisions you will have to make for yourself, but I would strongly, very strongly, advise you to stay away from ‘pot’ until you’re over twenty-one.”

And of course she called it pot and used pauses to put invisible quotation marks around the word.

What bullshit! What complete and total bullshit! It’s harmless and everybody’s doing it but it’s illegal, so don’t do it until you’re over twenty-one. The advice was not only bullshit. It was also a little late; she had been smoking for almost a year before she got that particular lecture.

Now she put one of the joints between her lips and struck a match. She took a long easy drag, inhaled deeply, leaned her head back against the tree trunk and closed her eyes. She got a hit almost immediately and her mouth relaxed in a smile. The boy who had made her a present of the two jays had said it was dynamite, and it had been no exaggeration. She exhaled through pursed lips, then opened her eyes and wrapped the second cigarette in the foil and returned it to her pocket. She wouldn’t need them both tonight. One would be plenty.

Why had she decided not to smoke in the house? For the same reason, she thought, that she should not have brought the black boy home. Because it was silly to lay any trips on her father. It was immature and unnecessary, and she didn’t have to play those games anymore.

It would be fun to turn him on, though. Not now, of course. His book was going well, and the last thing he needed was anything that might push his mind in a new direction before he had finished his work. When the book was done, then perhaps they could smoke together. At that stage it might even be valuable for him. A good head-type high might give him some new perspectives, so that when he went over the book, he might be able to see it from a
different angle.

And it would be very heavy, too, the two of them sitting around smoking. He had taught her how to drink, and she cherished the time the two of them sat together drinking highballs and rapping. She had never understood the special pleasures of alcohol before, perhaps because she associated it on the one hand, with her mother and Wayne and their friends and on the other hand with the fraternity-type jocks and their vomitous beer blasts. Perhaps she could return the favor by teaching her father how to smoke, how to go with it and let it take him into his head.

There was a time, before she went away to college, when she had had similar hope for her mother. It was shortly after her own initiation to grass, and she had managed to half convince herself that a few tokes was all her mother needed to turn her head around. Further reflection had forced her to realize that there were certain things grass just couldn’t do, and that this was of them. By the time her mother delivered her little sermon and confessed her own “experimentation” with “pot,” Karen had more or less guessed that the woman must have tried the stuff at one time or another, and that it obviously hadn’t done any good.

She took another drag and let herself go with it. Her mother and Wayne—there were two live ones, she thought. And the most depressing thing about it was that they thought they were so fucking hip. They wore the loud elaborately casual suburban clothes straight out of Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice, they subscribed to Ramparts and the Free Press, they bought and read all the right books, they went to cocktail parties to raise money for Eugene McCarthy and the Black Panthers and whatever Asian country had most recently had an earthquake or typhoon or famine. They carefully salted their conversation with all the words that had gone out of style about a year ago. Christ, they were depressing.

They thought they were involved. If there was one word her mother would pick to describe herself, that would be the word. Involved. The most totally out-of-it person on the fucking earth, and she thought she was involved.

Too much.

Eyes closed, nape of neck brushing the craggy bark of the tree behind her, she flashed on something she had never put together before. The reason she had taken it for granted that her father had wanted the divorce was that she just couldn’t feature it the other way around. Why would she have wanted to leave him?

She had learned pieces of the answer over the years, and she giggled now at the absurdity of it. Mommy had left Daddy because Daddy was not involved and Mommy craved a life of meaningful involvement. She ran the thought through her brain and worked changes on it and giggled again, hysterical at the whole number. Her father was this enormously together person, doing something was very much his own particular thing, grooving with a beautiful life that all fit perfectly together, and her mother was out in Arizona in the middle of the fucking desert, wearing bells that were too tight in the ass and a peace symbol on a leather thong and running off to Esalen for encounter groups, and that made her the involved one.

And she had an involved husband, too. Wayward Wayne, boy architect. Wayne and Anita got into things together, that was what was supposed to be so beautiful about their marriage. But did Involved Liberal Anita know that Involved Liberal Wayne liked to play cuddle with Karen’s friends? A little fanny patting now and then, and when a girl named Patsy MacGowan had given him a little encouragement he’d had a hand up her skirt and his tongue halfway down her throat before the kid knew what was going down. “I was just flirting a little,” Patsy had told her, white-faced. “I thought, you know, we were just kidding around, then it turns out that he’s not kidding and I thought I was going to get raped.”

She giggled again. The tip of the jay was warm between her fingers, and she butted it carefully against her shoe and tucked it into the foil, refolded the foil and put it in her pocket. She didn’t need any more tonight. She was just about as high as she wanted to be, and with her eyes closed and her muscles loose and easy she would let herself float just a little bit higher. And what a nice high it was. The boy had told her it was happy grass. She wasn’t sure if it worked that way or not. It seemed to her that the mood you were in had more to do with what kind of a trip you took than the grass itself. She was happy now, though, loose and easy and giggly.

Anita and Wayne, so uptight in spite of themselves. She could have had Wayne herself—she had realized as much the last time she was home. There was no grabbing, no coy little tongue kissing, but by then she had learned to recognize the hints in men’s eyes, and they were all present in Wayne’s glance. The prospect held a certain appeal at the time; she’d been fighting with her mother, and the idea of taking a man away from Anita had a degree of charm to it. She never seriously considered it, though. Wayne himself was just too much of a turn-off for her to really think about going through with it. It would have to be a monumental down.

She sat up against the tree for a long time, letting the smoke work on her head, thinking her own private thoughts. At one point she unlaced her shoes and did a little dance in the soft grass. She danced herself into exhaustion, then sprawled full length on the ground. She flashed on an imaginary conversation: “Karen? You didn’t hear about her? Like she sold out completely, man. Lives with her father, drinks scotch and soda, even cut her hair. When she had that abortion they must have taken out part of her brain, can you dig it?”
The thought delighted her and she laughed loud and hard, laughed until the muscles in her belly ached wonderfully from the exertion of laughter. Oh, I am so stoned, she thought.

When she left the woods and walked back to the house her high was mostly gone, all but a slight buzz that she could easily control.

Did Anita and Wayne go to wife-swap parties? That would probably be just about their speed, she decided. And Anita would go for it, too—all you had to do was tell her it was the latest thing and made for genuinely meaningful interpersonal relations. That would be all the encouragement she would need.

And she could imagine those parties. Wayne and Anita and all their depressing friends. The swapping would really be pointless in that set. Like, how could you tell the difference between them?

She giggled again, but had no trouble getting control of herself as she entered the house. On her way upstairs she paused outside her father’s door. There was silence at first, and then she heard the rattle of his typewriter. She smiled.
EIGHTEEN

At ten minutes past midnight Melanie Jaeger backed out of the driveway, drove through town and headed north along the river toward Carversville. It was a dark night and the road had little illumination once she had cleared the outskirts of New Hope. She itched to drive fast, just as she had itched to leave her house a full hour before she did. She forced herself to drive slowly, just as she had forced herself to delay her departure as much as possible.

She pulled into the graveled parking lot of the Inn, killed the headlights, turned off the ignition. She unrolled the window and sat behind the wheel smoking cigarettes. She watched several couples leave the Inn and drive off into the night. A car arrived and another couple went into the Inn. A young man stalked out, hands plunged into his pants pockets: he gunned his engine before driving off, and his wheels spun fiercely in the loose gravel.

Then another car pulled into a parking place on the far side of the lot and Warren Ormont emerged from it. He stopped to light a cigarette and she watched him outlined boldly in the parking-lot floodlights. He was wearing a long Edwardian jacket and pearl gray slacks. He took a handkerchief from his breast pocket, polished his glasses, put them carefully back on, folded his handkerchief and tucked it back into his pocket. He consulted his watch, then walked across the lot and up the steps and through the swinging doors of the tavern. He did not glance toward her car, did not notice her at all.

All she had to do was turn the key in the ignition and drive home. She could invent an aphrodisiacal story for Sully out of her own imagination. It would be easy enough for her to do this. She had already that evening imagined enough encounters for a dozen stories.

She laughed hard at herself. Then she got out of the car. At least she could get a drink inside, and she seemed to need one.

Couples sat at several of the round oak tables, but the bar itself was almost empty. Warren sat at one end near the piano, and there were three men she did recognize at the other end. She took a stool near the middle of the bar and ordered applejack on the rocks with a little water. The bartender brought her the drink and she sipped at it, fighting back the impulse to drink it straight down. It was commercial applejack, nowhere near as good as the kind Sully drank.

She turned toward the piano. She recognized Bert LeGrand now, remembered his face from the other time she had been here. Odd that she had been unable to remember his face, but she surely recognized it now. She looked at his hands and felt the blood surge to her face. At just that instant Bert looked at her and smiled. It was a very confident smile. A cocksure smile, she thought, and her color deepened at the word.

He played “Love for Sale,” then segued immediately into “The Lady Is a Tramp.”

“I could leave now, she thought. I could.

“Why hello there! What luck running into you here!”

She turned, smiled back at Warren’s smile. She said quietly, “You sound surprised.”

“Merely pleased. Superb timing, I might say. One more number and Bert severs his shackles and becomes a free man again. May I buy you another of those?”

“Please.”

He ordered another applejack for her, another cognac for himself. “To our possibilities,” he said.

“Yes, that’s a good toast.”

“The waiting is difficult, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.”

“I think it enhances things, though. We suffer from an embarrassment of cars, by the way. Bert has his, I have mine, and I assume you didn’t come here on foot.”

“No, I drove.” Bert wrapped up the set with “Lover,” pushing the song along at a dizzying tempo. “My car is outside.”

“I’ll finish my drink now and go outside. I’ll wait in my car. Take you time finishing your drink; then go outside, and start your engine. You can follow me back to our house. Bert will be along in no time.”

“I don’t want to leave my car on the street.”

“It’s recognizable?”

“Very.”

“No problem there. I’ll pull up in front, you run your machine into the garage, and we’ll stack ours in the driveway behind it. It will entail a certain amount of vehicular maneuvering when you’re ready to leave, but we can put up with that.”

She nodded.

“And that won’t be for hours,” he said.
What fascinated her was that she seemed to have no will of her own. This had not been the case before. Even when the men she chose were strong and self-confident, as Hugh Markarian had been, she had always been the one who initiated, and in the course of things she had been more leader than follower. Now, in the living room of Warren Ormont’s house, she felt absolutely powerless and lacking in volition.

“That’s Bert’s car now,” he was saying. “He’ll be with us in a moment.”

She nodded.

“The characteristic putt-putt-putt of Bertram’s Volkswagen. Is your car a Triumph?”

“No, it’s a disaster.” He looked at her as if astonished that she was capable of a joke. “It’s an Alfa-Romeo, actually.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. It needs a cigarette lighter.”

“Oh?”

“It had a perfectly good one but I threw it away this afternoon.”

“How bizarre.”

“I must of had something on my mind.”

“So it would seem,” he said. The VW engine died, and she heard a car door open and close. Warren reached for her, and she went to him. She was still off-balance and uncertain until his mouth found hers. Then her lips parted for his tongue, and her body pressed against him and her uncertainties dissolved in the familiar assurance of passion.

She heard the door open and tensed momentarily when Bert entered the room. But Warren did not release her so she returned to the security of his embrace. One of his hands closed on her buttock, squeezing, and his leg insinuated itself between hers. His thigh pressed her pubic mound and she felt his erection against her stomach. Bert moved around the room, dimming lights, stacking records on the stereo. She heard piano music thought at first that he was playing, then realized it was a record.

Warren had both his hands on her behind now, holding her in an almost painful grip and rotating his lips, grinding himself against her. She put her tongue tentatively into his mouth and he sucked on it immediately, and in her mind’s eye she saw him sucking thus upon a penis and her head swam. Hands opened the clasp of her dress at the nape of her neck. She thought they were Warren’s hands at first, but Warren’s hands still gripped her buttocks, and she realized it was Bert who was now undoing her zipper and easing her dress over her shoulder. Warren went on kissing her and Bert was tugging the dress free from her body and kissing the back of her neck. His hands moved in front of her, moved between her body and Warren’s and found her breasts. Her dress had dropped to the floor and Warren’s hands once again found her buttocks, stroking, pulling and pressing while Bert kneaded her breasts.

Warren released her, disengaged himself. He took a step backward and she swayed for him but Bert caught her and spun her toward him. He was naked. She had not realized this before. Her eyes darted immediately to his penis. He was erect, his penis very long and quite slender. Her hands reached for his penis as he drew her close and kissed her. She tried to insert him but he was too tall, so she settled for leaning against him and rubbing herself against the base of his penis.

Behind her she heard Warren undressing. She went on rubbing against Bert, trying desperately to reach an orgasm. She was almost there, almost there, when Bert released her and gave her back to Warren.

“Oh, God, fuck me,” she said.

“Patience, little one.”

“Don’t tease me.”

“We’ll both fuck you, little one. Just be patient. The night is young.”

“I can’t wait—”

“All hot and bothered?” His finger found her, penetrated. “Oh, yes, very warm indeed.” He held his finger out to Bert, and she saw Bert take Warren’s finger into his mouth and suck the taste of her from it. It seemed to her the most erotic gesture she had ever seen in her life. Her knees were weak. She could barely stand on her feet, and she swayed again, and Warren caught her.

On the stereo Dave Van Ronk sang:

Mama, Mama, take a look at Sis
She’s down on the levee and she’s dancin’ like this
Now come here, Sis, and come here fas’
And leave off shakin’ your yaas-yaas-yas . . . .

They were walking her to the bedroom. Warren was on her right and Bert on her left and each had an arm around her waist, like two men helping a drunken friend home. And she felt drunk, dizzy drunk. Her arms hung loose at her side. As they reached the bedroom she reached out with both hands at the same time and took hold of a penis in each hand. Warren’s was thicker, she noted almost clinically, while Bert’s was longer. Her hands worked rhythmically,
pumping both organs simultaneously. They walked her over to the big double bed. The covers were already turned down. Hands lifted her, placed her in the middle of the bed. She squirmed, unable to stay still, but they did not come to her. Instead she stared as they embraced at the side of the bed. She watched them kiss, watched Warren’s hands roam Bert’s body, watched Bert’s hands on Warren’s penis.

Mr. Dillinger drove up to a gasoline station
He said, “This looks like a mighty fine location.”
The attendant said, “Do you want any gas?”
“Well, it’s either your gas or your yaas-yas-yas… .”

Somehow she had not expected that they would kiss each other. The specifically sexual acts she had had no trouble anticipating, visualizing, but she had not expected this sort of loveplay. At first it simply astonished her. Then she found it adding to her own excitement She had never been a spectator at other people’s love-making before.

But they did not ignore her for long. They drew apart—reluctantly, it seemed to her—and they joined her on the bed, one on each side of her. Two mouths began to kiss her while four hands acquainted themselves with her body. She closed her eyes and abandoned herself to sensation. A mouth on each of her breasts, both of them sucking her at once. Hands everywhere, fingers in her lower parts, both front and back, both of these powerful men busying themselves with all of her.

Oh, way down yonder in St. Augustine
A black cat sat down on a sewin’ machine
Now that machine, it sewed so fas’
It took ninety-nine stitches in his yaas-yas-yas… .

She had a whole little fleet of orgasms, one coming right after another. All they had to do to bring her off was touch her and they never stopped touching her. But her climaxes in no sense slowed her down. Instead they spurred her on, increasing her need for an ultimate release.

She lay with her eyes clenched shut, her hands knotted into fists at her side. A penis pressed against her lips and her mouth gaped to accept it. Another penis slithered into her vagina. She nursed on one while the other pounded at her. They both were taken away from her, and she writhed desperately until the two had changed places; one, moist with her saliva, slipped into her just as the other, slick with her juices, filled her mouth.

Until at last she was between them. Warren lay on his back and she was crouched over him, his cock buried in her cunt, and she felt Bert’s hand on her buttocks and strained to open herself to accommodate him. Sully had used her thus in the past and she had learned to make herself accessible that way. Even so it was painful at first. She fought the pain and squirmed, impaled on Warren, and then Bert was within her as well and she was filled fore and aft, filled utterly, and it was as though she had spent all her life until that moment empty.

They moved in perfect unison, like performers in a ballet, matching their strokes, thrusting and parrying expertly. She felt them on either side of the narrow membrane separating her two cavities, felt them touching each other through the medium of her flesh. Their heads were to the side of hers and their mouths were glued together; they kissed each other deeply while they plunged together in and out of her body. She felt at once utterly apart from what was taking place and simultaneously caught up in a level in involvement she had never before known.

**Sully they are fucking me one in my ass and one in my cunt and I am all filled up with cock I am overflowing with cock I am rippling like a bed of hot lava they are fucking the life out of me the soul out of me the hell out of me they are fucking the hell out of me Sully God oh God oh God I am on fire I am burning I am melting I am dying oh God fucking God fucking God—**

There was a hole in the middle of the world and she fell right through it.

When she opened her eyes Bert was sitting on the side of the bed holding a cold cloth to her forehead. Warren was in a chair with a glass of brandy in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

She said, “What happened?”
“You left us for awhile,” Warren said.
“I passed out?”
“That’s a more direct way of putting it.”
“That never happened before.” She pushed the cloth aside and sat up. “Jesus Christ,” she said.
“How do you feel?”
“That’s hard to say, A little dizzy. Have you got a cigarette? Thanks. I feel terrific. My God.”
“I knew you’d be good, Melanie Melontits. I didn’t know you’d be this good.”
“Well, life has its little surprises. Jesus. It’s so completely different.” —
“What is?”
“Three.”
“You never—”
“No, never. It’s a whole new world.”
“Another dimension.”
“Yeah, right.”

Warren drained his glass and approached the bed. “You have a fantastic body,” he told her. He reached out a hand, took her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. “I’ve never had any enormous predilection for breasts per se. Not since infancy, at any rate. But your breasts have an undeniable appeal. They have character.”

“Watch it, you’ll get me started again.”
“This is nice, too. So warm and so tight. You’ve had children, have you?”
“No.”

“Never have them. Disgusting little beasts. They’d stretch this all out of shape, and that would be a dismal shame. Have you ever considered shaving this?”

“Are you serious?”
“You ought to think about it. Give it some serious consideration. Not that this fur is without its own special charm, but if you shaved it you would look like a little girl down there. And think how much more sensitive you’d be without that hair getting in the way.”

“I’m too damn sensitive as it is. Hey, don’t do that. You’ll get me all worked up.”
“You mean this will get you worked up?”
“Jesus—”

“Why, that’s the whole idea, you silly thing!”
“Hey!” She drew away. “I’ve got to get home.”

“Why, Bert and I have been boggling down Vitamin E all day long in preparation for the great event. And you’re hot as a cheap stove, Melanie. But there’s something you’re afraid of, isn’t there?”

She nodded.

“Do you want to say what it is? Never mind, I don’t think you have to. So let me tell you a thing or three. You don’t have to worry that Bert and I are going to wind up owning your soul. Is that part of it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because this is just one night. There won’t be any repeats. This is not how we normally live, Melanie. We normally live normally, as it happens. This is excess. There is a place for excess, anything worth doing is worth doing to excess, but even excess has a place and must be kept in its place. Are any of my words penetrating that charming little dumpling of a head?”

“I’m not as stupid as you think I am, Warren.”

“As a matter of fact I think you’re probably brighter than you know yourself, Melanie.” He looked away for a moment, then fixed his eyes on hers again. “To continue. This is one night and that’s all. So we might as well use it all up while we have the chance. And we will not talk about this, Melanie. Not to your husband, not to anyone else.”

“I wasn’t worried about that.”

“It’s probably something you should worry about. Not in our case, but generally.”

“That’s my business.”

“Of course it is. What are you worried about, Melanie?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re trying to think. That’s the whole problem, you know.”

“Is it?”

“Oh.”

“And now I’ll play with you some more to keep your little mind out of mischief. What a sweet little cunt you are. Why don’t you give Bert some head while I do this? He generally likes it. That’s right. You have an aptitude for this sort of thing, don’t you, Melanie? A rare attribute among women. Don’t be shy, go right ahead. One of us will be sure to tell you if you do anything wrong.”
It was after four when she left. Warren and Bert backed their cars out of the driveway, then pulled in again after she had driven off. They walked back to the house in silence.

Bert said, “I really felt like putting clothes on and doing an automobile juggling act.”

“You could have given her the keys and told her to move them herself.”

“You know I’m nothing if not a gentleman.”

“Oh, I know that, all right. God, isn’t she incredible?”

“That’s a good word for her.”

“Absolutely incredible. Now she goes back home to the hairy old bear with sperm running out of every part of her. I can’t understand why she wouldn’t shower.”

“Maybe she likes to smell like a whorehouse towel.”

“What a thought.”

“Well, to go home to her husband like that—”

“Maybe he’s not living at home. Or maybe she said she was spending the night with a girlfriend and she’s on her way to a motel or some such. Lord, her eyes were swimming in sperm.”

“That’s a beautiful image.”

“Henry Miller thought of it first. Although I’m sure it would have occurred to me sooner or later. It would probably have occurred to me tonight, as a matter of fact. I wonder what’s going to happen to that little girl.”

“No more than she deserves, I trust.”

“And no less, I hope.” Warren sighed heavily. “Actually I think we ought to adopt her. We could keep her as a pet. Dress her in pretty clothes—”

“Walk her on a leash—”

“Don’t be such a bitch. She’d be fun to have around, don’t you think?”

“I don’t think my heart could take it.”

“Christ, nor mine either. I don’t want to so much as hear the word ‘fuck’ for at least a month.”

“Well, you won’t hear it from me.”

“I couldn’t abide as much as a handshake. Unlike Miss Melontits, I think I’m going to treat myself to a shower. My skin has a skin of its own and I just hope soap and water will get rid of it. Perhaps I ought to use Clorox. Ugh. I don’t want company in the shower, in case you thought that might be a cozy idea.”

“I think it’s a revolting idea. You’re perfectly safe in the shower. Just don’t use all the hot water.”

“Bert?”

“Hmm?”

“A memorable evening, what?”

“It’s been that. It’s certainly been that.”

She had intended to drive straight home. Halfway there she was shaking so badly she had to stop the car, She pulled the car over to the side and gripped the steering wheel tight in both hands.

Images battered her mind. She thought of everything that had happened, saw it all as if it were a movie, tried to find a way to fit herself into the picture. It was hard to do this. She could see herself in that movie but she could not understand how it had been her.

She turned the car around, found an all-night diner on 202 and stopped for a cup of coffee. All she wanted to do was to get home to Sully, but she knew that if she went home right away she wouldn’t be in shape to see him. She smoked and drank two cups of coffee and felt the aspects of herself beginning to fit themselves together again.

Before it had consistently been Sully who had been shaken by the new direction their lives had taken. She had been quite calm, quite unshaken. If anything she had wondered at her evident ability to take everything in her stride.

Now things had changed.

She paid the check, ignored the speculative stare of the rheumy-eyed cashier. She did not need his glance to tell her what she looked like. She could guess well enough what she looked like.

That was the song he had played when she walked into the Carversville Inn, and no one could have believed it was coincidental. It had begun as a tactic, a way of holding onto her husband, but after tonight there was no pretending that it was only that. It had become more, much more. She had discovered an appetite she had never realized she had, and every time she fed it it grew stronger, more intense more demanding.
That’s why the lady is a tramp

Back into the car, back on the road. She pictured Sully in his chair, eyes dull, but the dullness backed by a hidden glint of anticipation, the ashtray beside him overflowing with butts, his hand wrapped around a cup of coffee or a glass of applejack.
Waiting for her.

That’s why the lady

She saw herself springing from the ear; hurrying to the door and into the house. The question in his eyes, a quick shake of her head. And urgently she would say to him, “No, not now, I can’t talk about it now. Just hold me, baby. Just grab me and hold me, just hold me, just take me upstairs and fuck me, do everything to me, fuck me, just fuck me, I can’t talk now, not now, just fuck me.”

the lady is

And then she was home, and out of the car and into the house, and he was sitting as she had pictured him, the expression on his face precisely the expression she had visualized.
But she was saying, “Hi, baby. Is there more coffee? Don’t get up, I’ll get it myself.”
And sitting with coffee in the chair across from him; she elaborately crossed one leg over the other and let her tongue play with her upper lip.
“Who?” he said.
“Oh, it was the oddest thing,” she said lightly. “I was shopping this morning, and I was walking along Main Street to where I parked the car, and—”
“Who was it?”
“Oh, I’ll get to that,” she said.
III

_A Fire in the Garden_

*Zsa Zsa Gabor:* And so ze entire house was destroyed, darling, everyzing burnt to ze ground. All zat was left was ze garden.

*Jayne Mansfield:* Well, um, a garden is better than no garden at all.

—An exchange on _The Jack Paar Show_, 1963
The rains came in the last week of July. Either July or August was apt to be a fairly wet month, but every few years wet weather struck the Delaware Valley with a vengeance. It was a region not much given to extremes. The heat of summer was always somewhat modulated by the rolling hills and valleys, while in winter the temperature rarely dropped below zero and snow was not often too deep or long-lasting. Rain, endless rain whipped along by high winds, was the greatest source of climatic peril.

By the fifth day of heavy rainfall, local wits made repeated allusions to the biblical precedent of forty days and forty nights. When the rain had continued another three days, the joke no longer seemed remotely humorous. Instead references were made to the summer of ’55, when the swollen Delaware overflowed its banks as if it were the Mississippi in the springtime. Residents with antediluvian memories dined out on anecdotes of the Great Flood, and local newspapers kept their memories alive with photographs of flood damage under headlines like CAN IT HAPPEN AGAIN? The answer to the question seemed to be that it could, and that it was damned well going to.

Recently planted vegetable gardens washed out of the ground. Tomato vines collapsed, their fruits splitting and rotting on the soil. Fruit trees lost the bulk of their ripening crops to the winds, while an excess of moisture in the earth caused them to drop their leaves. The remaining apples and pears cracked and died, and the trees, along with spring-flowering shrubs, went into an unseasonal second bloom. Other trees lost limbs or were uprooted completely.

An ancient hickory fell across a secondary road outside of Upper Black Eddy, and the highway crew dispatched to deal with it skidded into a drainage ditch brimful of rushing water.

North of Lambertville, a young novelist and his English wife had invested the proceeds of a Hollywood sale in an almost baronial estate. They had moved in that spring and had devoted all of their time to remodeling and restoration. When the rains came, they discovered the special charm of a sheltered valley on the shores of a rushing stream. Day after day, the stream rushed into the house itself, bubbling up under the wide board pine floors. A tree collapsed onto the house, another upon the guest cottage. The timbers in the pool house, already weak with dry rot, gave up the job and floated downstream. A bridge washed out. An other, just constructed that spring, stayed majestically in place while the stream permanently diverted itself, so that the rugged redwood span now stopped abruptly in midair above the furious waters, resembling nothing so much as an old Roman road, still straight as an arrow and flat as a pancake but going from nowhere to nowhere. “We’ll fix this place up again,” the writer said to his wife. “Don’t worry about a thing. We’ll fix this place up perfectly, and then we’ll sell this fucking place, and we’ll move back to New York where we belong.”

Business in New Hope fell off sharply. The bulk of weekend trade consisted of visitors from Philadelphia and New York who came to spend a day or two or three walking along the town’s determinedly quaint streets and browsing its little shops. As neither of those activities was much suited to a downpour, those tourists remained in Philadelphia or New York. Others, who liked Bucks County as a stopping place between Washington and New England, tended to stay in their cars and keep on the road; if they did stay a night, the hotel bar would get all their trade.

There were a clutch of bright days in early August. Then the rains came again, and the winds took down electric lines faster than the power company could tack them back up again. A dairy farmer on the Titusville-Pennington Road in New Jersey shot to death his entire herd of milkers, several barn cats, his wife’s bantam hens, a collie-shepherd cross, two of his three sons (the third was in Vietnam), his wife, and himself. Acquaintances said he’d always been a trifle strange, but a majority of people held the weather at least partly accountable for his behavior. It was generally agreed that it was a hell of a shame about the cows, as they’d been one of the best Holstein herds in the county.

Times of tragedy draw people together, and if the Delaware had given up and overflowed its banks, this might well have been the case. But the interminable rain was not sufficiently dramatic a tragedy. The rain continued for a period of almost four full weeks, but each time it broke just long enough for the river to do its job of running off the water. The promise of catastrophe hung in the humid air, while on a day-to-day basis life was less tragic than inconvenient. People were not drawn together. Rather, they were kept apart, staying in their own houses and contending with the incessant parade of minor irritations in their own lives. Basements were pumped dry, fallen trees sectioned and stored for firewood, dollars stretched, and homeowners sat with pencil and paper working out ways to transform flood damage (uninsured) into wind damage (fully covered).

Until, late in August, the rain stopped. This, too, was less dramatic than it might have been. No dove returned bearing an olive branch. There was one day with a little rain, another day with less, and then a day when, although clouds blocked the sun, no rain fell at all. When a full week passed without anything falling from the skies but pollution, the valley realized that it was over. The rains had come and gone, the river had held, and a repetition of
'55 was postponed for at least another year.

“Well, it’s over and we got through it,” they said. “As bad a season as we’ve seen in years, and God willing we won’t see it as bad again for some years to come.” They said this and meant it, and thanked God it hadn’t been worse than it was. And yet there was an undercurrent to the words, never voiced but almost always present, a resentment after the fact that the level of catastrophe had never been quite attained. If the governors of two states had declared the valley a disaster area, this was small comfort; the residents knew what true disaster was supposed to look like, and they had fallen short of it. There would be few stories to tell of this summer, and few ears interested in hearing them. They had endured, to be sure, but endurance, if easier in present time, is less thrilling in retrospect than survival. What might have been a moment in their lives of triumph and heroism was to have been no more than discomfort. So they resented this, and felt guilty at their resentment, and stood outside in the warmth of the sun.
TWENTY

She stood on the sidewalk in front of the Shithouse watching Hugh’s Buick until it took a right at the corner and vanished from her sight. She took a last puff on her cigarette and let it fall from her fingers to the pavement, then ground it underfoot. It was early, not yet midnight, and she did not feel like going to sleep. Nor did she feel like staying awake in the loneliness of her room. It seemed that there ought to be somewhere to go, someone to whom she would want to talk. But she could think of no logical destination and no suitable companion.

She was discontented, and wondered why. The evening had been a pleasant one. A good dinner at Tannhauser’s, a drive in the country, a walk in his woods where they had lazily undressed before making gentle love in soft grass. It was a perfect night for outdoor lovemaking and their bodies had worked together to match the mood of the evening. It had been good for her and good for him, and after it they had gone into his house for a drink and his daughter Karen had joined them. Then Karen went diplomatically and with little awkwardness to her room, and they might have made love again, she might even have stayed the night, but the discontent set in and she wound up pleading tiredness. She had asked to be taken home, and now she was home, and if she had felt tired before she was certainly not tired now.

“Linda?”

She started at her name, then recognized Tanya Leopold.

“You were just standing there staring,” the little actress said. “You okay?”

“I was just thinking about something.”

“What was it? Not to be prying but you had this really intense expression on your face, and I was wondering how it got there. This play I’m in, Veil, not the one I’m in now but the one we’re rehearsing, we’re doing it next week, and I’ve got this one scene where I’m supposed look pensive, and I don’t have it down yet. Looking pensive. And you know, the Method, all of that, I oughta be able to find something to use to look pensive, so thought, oh, but what makes you look pensive wouldn’t do me any good, would it?”

“I don’t really know.”

“The thing is to find something in my past that had me looking pensive, but I could go bananas trying to think of something. Unless that would work. Do you think so?”

“Do I think what would work?”

“Trying to think of something to use. Did I look pensive to you just then?”

“In a way.”

“I think the problem is I don’t think very much. It blows my mind that some people will just sit still for hours, and all that time they’re thinking, thoughts are running through their brains. Are you going upstairs now or what?”

“That’s what I was trying to decide. Whether to go up now or not.”

“You got that look on your face just from whether or not you’re going upstairs?”

“More or less.” She smiled suddenly. “That’s what it boils down to, anyway. In a very pensive way, evidently. Are you going up? I’ll walk with you.”

On the way up the stairs Tanya said, “You’re looking so good lately, Linda.”

“I am? Why, thank you.”

“I’m glad you’ve got somebody,” she went on, avoiding Linda’s eyes. “What I said that other time—”

“Oh, forget that, Tanya.”

“I felt awful afterward. I just jump in and say things before I think about them. Do you think you’ll move in with him?”

“Oh, I don’t know. He’s working on a book now, you know.”

“Bill’s always painting. At least he always was before the rain. Did the rain stop Hugh from writing?”

“I think it slowed him down some. It slowed every body down.”

“It stopped Bill cold. But even if he’s working, you know, he wants me with him. I couldn’t imagine not living with somebody.”

“I guess I’ve gotten used to it.”

“I don’t just mean the sex. It probably sounds as though I just mean the sex, huh?”

“Oh, I don’t—”

“But I mean having somebody to be with. But maybe getting used to it makes a difference. I hope I never have to find out, to tell you the truth.”

Tanya went on chattering as they climbed the stairs to their floor. The girl was just the sort of companion Linda needed at the moment, and she smiled at the discovery. It seemed paradoxical, as Tanya’s conversation centered on precisely those subjects Linda would have preferred not to think about, but she was able to bathe in the rushing
stream of Tanya’s words so that they oddly took her mind off what Tanya was saying. The girl would never look pensive, Linda thought, because the girl could never hold a thought in her little head without marveling at the fact that she was thinking.

On impulse she asked Tanya to come in for coffee. “Well, if Billie wants to,” she said. “Unless you wouldn’t want him.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know. He makes some people sort of nervous, not talking and all. I guess I talk enough to make up for it. I’ll ask him, okay?” She knocked on the door while Linda was fitting her key into her own lock. “That’s funny,” Tanya said. “He wouldn’t go to sleep so early. Bill?”

“Maybe he stepped out.”

“He hardly ever goes anywhere. But maybe he did. He’s been in this mood.”

“Do you have a key?”

“Yeah, in my purse somewhere. You go ahead, Linda. If he’s out I’ll leave a note and be over in minute.”

She opened her own door, switched on the light. Then Tanya’s scream cut through her like a sword.

She spun around. Across the hall Tanya was framed in the doorway, facing into the room. Over her shoulder Linda could see Bill Donatelli swinging on a rope from the overhead light fixture. His tongue, black and obscenely swollen, projected between enlarged purple lips.

His whole face was tones of blue and purple and his bulged from his head and his body swung in slow circles. Tanya screamed and screamed.

Afterward she could never be certain of the sequence of things. Her memory would hold scenes and flashes of scenes, jumbled together like bits of intercut film. The room and hallway filled up with people. How they got there or the order of their coming she never knew.

Two men from the second floor stood arguing, one determined to right the chair overturned at Bill Donatelli’s feet so that he could climb on it and cut him down, the other insistent that nothing be touched or moved until the police arrived.

“He’s obviously dead, man. You can’t help him by cutting him down.”

“Well, forget the police, man. I mean that’s suicide, man. I mean forget television, I mean it’s suicide, that’s all it is, and what you do is you cut him down just in case and get that fucking rope off his fucking neck.”

“Man, how you gonna help a dead man?”

“You keep saying dead, but how do you know he’s dead? Like how many dead men did you ever see?”

“Man, the first spade I saw, I knew right in front he was black. Anything looks like that is fucking dead, baby.”

Linda’s own role was never in doubt. Throughout it all she stood holding Tanya in her arms, patting her back, holding her while she cried, listening to her when words spilled from her.

“It was the rain. He couldn’t paint because of the rain. He would sometimes say it was the light but it wasn’t the light, it was what the rain did to his head. He got so down. And then it stopped and I thought it would be all right but he said whenever he went to paint all he could see in his head was the rain, just rain coming down all the time. But I thought he was getting better. I should of known because he couldn’t ball. He would get excited and then we would start to do it and he would get soft and start crying and telling me that he couldn’t do anything anymore, but there’s no more rain, it’s all over, the rain, the rain is over, Bill is over, it’s all over. I never had that abortion but he wanted me to. He told me I had to have the abortion. He didn’t want a baby. I didn’t want one either, but I want one now, I wish I had his baby now. Oh, my God, his poor face. I hope he never knew what it would make him look like. He was so beautiful, and I try to see his face in my mind and all I see is the way he looks now, God, and I don’t have a single picture of him, not a single one....”

It was Clyde Herman, the night shift policeman, who cut the body down, George Perlmutter, the doctor, who examined the grotesque naked corpse and pronounced him officially dead. And it was Warren Ormont who somehow stepped into the center of things to take charge, dealing in turn with the policeman and the doctor and Tanya herself.

“Now Miss Leopold, I’m going to need a statement from you, and I know it’s a difficult situation for you right now, but if you could just—”

“It was that fucking rain.”

“The rain. Let me get this right, your name is Tina Leopold, now if you could spell that—”

“No, Tanya, but that’s a stage—”

“Clyde, for heaven’s sake stop doing your Joe Friday number, won’t you?”

“Look here, Warren—”

“Oh, look here yourself, for the love of God. The girl’s in no condition to talk and you’re barely in condition to listen. You’ll get her statement in the morning. You act as though you’ve never seen a suicide in your life.”
“Maybe it’s supposed to look like a suicide.”
“When all the time it’s an elaborate locked-room murder. And you’re Dr. Gideon Fell himself.”
“All the same, I’d be happier with a note.”
“He wasn’t a writer, Clyde.”
“Huh?”
“Writers leave notes. Then they wash sleeping pills down with booze, but not until they’ve done half a, dozen drafts of the note. Doctors shoot themselves. They have dozens of neat painless methods at their disposal and, invariably blow their brains out with revolvers. Painters take off all their clothes and hang themselves.”
“How do you know all this, Warren?”
“I’ve made a study of it. Self-destruction fascinated—I can’t imagine why anyone would hurry it, though, instead of carefully stretching it out over a lifetime.”
“How do actors do it?”
“In front of an audience. They call an ex-lover in the middle of the night and announce they’ve already taken pills, and after they hang up they actually take the pills. Or they excuse themselves, go to another room, and use a knife or a gun. It depends how they perceive their roles. Donatelli never used words in his life, Clyde. Not even in conversation. Anyway, there’s his note.”
He pointed to an easel, where an abstract canvas was quartered by a black X.
“That’s a note? I get the point, but maybe that was his idea of how he wanted the picture to look.”
“I’ll pretend you didn’t even say that, Clyde. Why don’t you take some pictures and make some chalk marks on the floor? Miss Leopold will talk to you in the morning. And that will be on doctor’s orders as soon as I get the good doctor’s eye. George? Could you give your attention to one of the survivors for a moment? Miss Leopold is in something of a state, and I think you’ll agree with me that she doesn’t want to talk to any municipal employees right now. How would you like to supply a dreamy little sedative and we’ll tuck this poor child into bed. And not that bed, perish the thought. Could she stay with you, Linda?”

In her own room, Linda helped Tanya off with her clothes, got her into bed, and drew the covers over her. The doctor injected her with morphine. She kept talking, not even wincing at the needle’s jab, until her words abruptly trailed off and her eyes closed. George Perlmutter raised one of her eyelids, let it drop back in place. He turned to Linda and asked her if she wanted something to help her sleep. She said she didn’t. He offered a tranquilizer and she shook her head. He told her she was in light shock and a tranquilizer would help her to relax, but when she refused again he did not insist. Tanya, he said, would sleep for a minimum of eight hours.

After he had left, Warren cleared the hallway. “Now I know you’re all motivated solely by the desire to help,” he announced, “but some might mistake your interest for morbid curiosity. Please go home. Now.”
And they went. As the hallway emptied Warren moved to take Linda’s aim. He asked her where she would sleep.
“Oh,” she said. “Here, I guess.”
“You’re welcome to stay at my house. I can assure you it’s safe. Or I can get you a room at the Logan.”
“I want to be here when Tanya wakes up.”
“I was thinking that I would sit up with her myself.”
“No, I’ll stay. I don’t mind.”

He studied her thoughtfully. “That’s probably the best idea, if you’re sure you don’t mind. But you do need a tranquilizer, you know. George would have handed you a Miltown or Valium or some other mysterious chemical. My prescription would be along organic lines.”
“What do you mean?”
“Alcohol. Come to Sully’s with me.”
“I don’t—”
“She’ll be out for the next eight hours, and the bar will close long before then. I won’t let you stay here alone now, Linda, and I need a drink if you don’t. Come along.”
“I suppose a drink is a good idea,” she said.
“It generally is,” Warren said.

He was as smoothly capable at the Barge Inn as he had been earlier. He selected a remote table, ordered Cognac for both of them, and effortlessly got rid of any number of persons who wanted to join them. Some had heard about Bill Donatelli’s death and wanted to discuss it; others simply wanted conversation with Warren. He disposed of all of them easily and efficiently.

At one point she said, “I didn’t even know him. I think that’s the worst part.”
“I doubt anyone knew him. Or is that what you meant?”
“I think it is. He was the silent man across the hall who did nothing but paint strange pictures and watch television.
and sleep with Tanya. Peter and I used to joke about him. About them. Those jokes—"

“You can’t regret them after the fact. Everyone’s mortal and sooner or later you could never say anything vicious about anyone on the chance he or she might ultimately die.”

“I guess Tanya knew him.”

“Do you think so? I would suppose she knew him as completely as one could. I was going to say that they lived on the same level, but I’m sure that’s not true. They lived with each other on the same level.”

“Yes, I see what you mean.”

“But she’s so much better a person.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because she would never have done what he did.”

“No, I can’t imagine her committing suicide, but—”

He was shaking his head. “Nor can I, but neither of us can know that. But that’s not what I mean. He set things up so that she would walk in and find him like that. That was the last picture he painted, and he let her have first look at it, so that every time she thinks of him for the rest of her life she’s going to visualize that squalid little tableau. Nothing on earth could make Tanya do that.”

“God, I didn’t think of that.”

“I can think of little else. Which will make it rather difficult for me to shed tears for him.”

“Maybe he just didn’t think.”

“Even so. Even so. Tanya would have thought.”

“She was saying something tonight on the way upstairs. That some people can sit and think for hours and that she hardly ever thinks.”

“What brought that on?”

“Something about a role she’s rehearsing—”

“Oh, of course. She’s supposed to look pensive and she heard the word today for the first time. The ass of a director translated it as thoughtful, which of course is all wrong. Tanya could never look pensive, but she’s one of the most genuinely thoughtful people I know. And without thinking about it.”

“Yes.” She picked up her glass, drank. “God, it was awful. Everything.”

“Yes.”

“You were so perfect” He started. “You were. You … handled everything.”

“The actor in my soul.”

“No one else knew what to do.”

“So I leaped into the role. Far too great an opportunity to be missed.”

“Well, then it was a good performance.” She lowered her eyes. “You don’t have to do this, Warren.”

“How’s that?”

“I mean, I’m all right now.”

“Oh, I know that.” He flashed that peculiar sardonic smile of his. “You know, that’s the marvelous thing about being a nelly old aunt. One can behave chivalrously with beautiful women without worrying about the purity of one’s motives. And I cannot think offhand of a more powerful argument for homosexuality. Oh, there’s Peter Nicholas. You know him, don’t you? Of course you do, what am I thinking of? Peter! Come join us, why don’t you? And see if you can catch that trollop’s eye and order up another round.”

It was Peter who walked home with her. They left the Barge Inn together while Warren stayed behind, moving to join a crowd at the bar. The air outside was cool and fresh after the close atmosphere within. She walked along at Peter’s side, breathing deeply. She had had just the right amount to drink, enough to relax her but too little to make her the slightest bit drunk.

“The perfect tranquilizer,” she said aloud.

“What?”

“Oh, I was thinking out loud. The doctor offered me a tranquilizer but I wasn’t having any. Then Warren prescribed a few drinks, and he was right. God, it was awful. Were you there?”

“I ran upstairs to see what was happening, but I didn’t hang around.” They walked a little farther in silence before he said, “We haven’t really seen each other in a long time, have we?”

“No, we haven’t.”

“I’ve missed it.”

She didn’t say anything.

“I guess you have a good thing going. With Hugh Markarian.”

“I guess so.”

“I’m happy for you. Seriously.”
“I’m not sure if it’s that good a thing.”

“Oh? I’m sorry, I don’t mean to pry.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Right now it’s more a question of knowing what I want. Oh, Christ!”

All at once she was crying. He reached to comfort and she turned from him. “I’m all right. I was thinking. Tanya was the one person I know who really knew what she wanted and look what she got. Just look what she got!”

“She’ll be okay, Linda.”

“She will?”

“She’ll be living with someone else inside of a month.”

“That’s a hell of a thing to say. That is a hell of a thing to say.”

“Why is it? I almost didn’t say it for just that reason, but why not say it? I’m not saying it to her, for God’s sake. But why shouldn’t I be saying it to you? It’s what she needs; it’s the best thing for her. I don’t know if either of them loved the other but even if they did. Do you think she’s going to wear black? Do you think she should?”

“She was saying just tonight that she couldn’t imagine anyone living alone.”

“Well, I can. God, can I imagine living alone.” She shuddered at the bitterness in his voice. “But I can’t imagine Tanya living alone. Can you?”

“No, I can’t.”

“She’ll be all right. That’s all that matters.”

“Yes, it’s all that matters.”

They walked the rest of the way without speaking, entered the building, climbed the stairs. When they reached the floor where he and Gretchen and Robin lived, he hesitated only an instant before continuing up the stairs with her. She meant to say something but let the moment pass.

At her door he said, “I wish I could come in.”

“Tanya’s in there.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“We couldn’t talk with her in there. I didn’t think you meant—”

“Well, in a way I probably did, as far as that goes. I’m in a mood myself, Linda, or I wouldn’t be talking like this.

Do you want to know something? That one night—”

“Peter, please let’s not talk about it.”

“Just let me say this. It was the best thing in my life. I’m serious, maybe I haven’t had so much of a life but it was the best thing in it—”

“Peter—”

“but sometimes I wish it never happened. I miss you, Linda.”

“Nothing’s changed.”

“Oh, shit. Come on. Everything’s changed.”

“I’m going inside now, Peter. I have to. I’m tired, and I want to be able to wake up when Tanya wakes up. I’m going inside now.”

“All right.”

“And you’d better go downstairs.”

“I don’t know which I want more. To go in there with you or to not go back downstairs. It’s getting so bad lately, Linda.”

“Oh, Peter.”

“Oh, hell. I really pick the perfect nights to lay my trips on other people.” He flashed a sudden brightening grin, then turned and was gone.

Tanya was sleeping soundly in the middle of the bed. Linda moved her over to one side and the girl did not even stir in her sleep. Linda got in beside her, her body rigid, thinking how bad everything was and how tense she felt. But then the tension began to drain from her and she realized that at this moment she felt nothing, nothing at all. It was all gone and she felt merely exhausted and empty, so empty, and within minutes she was asleep.
TWENTY-ONE

Peter took the stairs quickly. But once he had reached his own floor his steps halted abruptly. It was just a few yards to the door of his apartment, but he took longer to traverse that distance than he had taken descending the stairs. And when he reached the door he stood for several long minutes in front of it.

He couldn’t get the image out of his head. He would open the door and she would be hanging there, her face hideously swollen and discolored. Bill Donatelli had used the Venetian blind cord, and he could see her standing on tiptoes to cut the cord with a kitchen knife, then climbing the rickety ladder-back chair, wrapping the cord first around the light fixture and then around her throat, then kicking the chair away and dangling in midair, feet dancing in midair. God, was her weight enough to strangle her? She was so thin, so fragile. God, she could dance there for an eternity while the cord grew tighter and tighter without ever growing tight enough—

He made himself open the door.

For one impossible instant he saw her as he had envisioned her. The suggestion was that powerful. A scream rang in his head, a silent shriek, before his eyes caught hold of reality. There was no body swinging from the ceiling. She was where he always found her these days, sitting in their bed with her knees drawn up. Her skin shone in the dim light that came through the partially open bathroom door.

She said, “I’m sorry, Petey.”

“Sorry?”

“Sorry I’m not dead like the boy upstairs. The painter. Didn’t you paint a little picture of Gretchen dead? Oh, you did, Petey, I know you did. But I would never hang myself, baby. I would find a better way.”

“Gretchen, stop it.”

“Don’t be afraid, Petey. I didn’t do it.”

“Don’t even talk that way.” He stepped into the room, closed and bolted the door. His hands trembling and his heartbeat seemed almost audible.

“Or isn’t that what you’re afraid of? You were afraid I would be alive, Petey, and I am, I am. Poor Petey, coming back to his Gretchen and the bitch hasn’t had the simple decency to die.”

“Stop it,” he said. He closed his eyes, made fists of his hands. “Just stop it.”

And she surprised him by doing just that. “I’m sorry,” she said, in a child’s small voice this time. “I’ll go to sleep now, Petey. I was just waiting for you to come home to me is all. But I’m tired and I’ll go to sleep now.”

And she lay down and closed her eyes at once.

He undressed quickly, turned off the bathroom light; lay down in bed beside her. She did not move or say a word, and her breathing became deep and regular. He knew, though, that she was not asleep. She would feign sleep, but he could always tell her real sleep from the imitation she gave, and he knew that he always fell asleep before her these summer nights. And it would be so again this evening, for already he felt the powerful pull of sleep. He did not even want to sleep now. There were thoughts that he wanted to think, that he had to think, but in spite of them the impulse to sleep drew him like a small boat to a whirlpool.

She was right, of course. He had hoped to find her dead. The wish had fathered the thought, and it had been his desire that gave him that incredibly vivid sight of her hanging as Donatelli had hung, dead as Donatelli had died. He had not consciously realized this before but felt now as though he must somehow have known it all along.

The realization did not make sleep impossible now, did not even postpone its onset more than a matter of seconds. He had recently faced his desire for her death too many times to be overly upset by each new form it took. He wanted her to die not so much out of malice but because nothing but her death would so utterly solve his problems. And it would solve her problems in the bargain, and if anything hers were more blindingly unsolvable than his own. Donatelli’s suicide baffled him. Gretchen’s would seem no more than logical. She had no life at all, at least none worth living. She was constantly miserable with no way out. Why shouldn’t she kill herself—for everyone’s sake?

In the morning he awoke coming out of a dream, a dream that slipped from his memory even as he emerged from the shadow of sleep. At first he thought he had merely found his way from one dream to another. The blinds were drawn, sunlight flooding the room. There was a smell of bacon permeating the room. He looked around and saw that Robin’s bed was made and the piles of dirty clothes that customarily littered the floor had been put away.

When Gretchen emerged, hair combed, wearing a yellow blouse and red plaid skirt, he knew not only that he was dreaming but that the dream was one he did not want to wake up from.

“The coffee’s perking,” she said. “I thought fried eggs this morning, unless you’d rather have them scrambled.”

“Fried is fine,” he said automatically. He blinked, rubbed his eyes. He was awake. This was not a dream. This was happening. “Where’s Robin?”

“I gave her her breakfast and let her play outside with one of her friends. You were sleeping so nicely I didn’t
have the heart to wake you. Let me get you some coffee.”

“Gretchen—”

“Just a second.”

She came back with a mug of coffee. “I’m all right now,” she said, her voice very matter-of-fact. “I know you’ve heard that before but this time it’s true. I woke up this morning, and everything was different. It was, you know, I don’t know how to put it. Like taking off sunglasses indoors. That’s not really good. I can’t think of a good way to put it. But it’s true, Petey. I’m all better.”

“Jesus.”

“I’m not even going to apologize. I don’t know what happened and I don’t know how you put up with me but it’s over.”

He got up, reached out a hand for her. He said, “I’ll help you make it, baby.”

“But I don’t need help,” she said. She smiled radiantly, and he tried to guess how long it had been since he had seen her face aglow like this. “I mean it,” went on. “I don’t need any help. I don’t know what was, but whatever it was, it’s all over now.”

“God, I hope so.”

“I know so.”

“It’s such a lightning thing.”

“I know. I went to sleep with something and it was gone when I woke up.” She frowned in thought. “I think it was the death.”

“Last night?”

“Whatever his name was. Something Italian.”

“Bill Donatelli.”

“That’s right. Donatelli. I’m sorry for him, except that I’m not really sorry, I never knew him, and I can’t be sorry about anything that snapped me out of it. I don’t know how it happened. I guess it took a death to bring something home to me. How important life is, maybe.” She thought about this for another moment, then shrugged. “Doesn’t matter what done dood it, does it? Thing is, it’s done. Christ, baby, I’m ravenous. I already ate and I’m gonna eat all over again. Eggs for you and another batch of eggs for Mama Gretchen. And how would you feel about running down the street for some English muffins?”

“I think we have some.”

“I think we had some. Robin had one and I had three. Get some jelly, too. There’s a little left but I don’t intend it to last long. Get lots of things, come to think of it. I’ll eat anything you bring back. Look at me. I look like total hell.”

“You look beautiful.”

“I guess you still love me if you can say that. I look like a Vogue model who didn’t know when to quit. You know that line from ‘Cocaine Blues’? ‘Woke up this mornin’ and my nose was gone.’ Well I woke up this morning and my tits were gone. Among other flesh. These clothes are the closest I’ve got to the right size and there’s room for a couple of extra people in here. Go. Get food. Much food. Go!”

There had been other transformations, an endless parade of New Gretches, but none had ever been like this. Each time she had pulled herself back together with an agonizing effort, fighting long odds, doing a little at a time in the attempt to overcome whatever it was that was dragging her down. Now there seemed to be no discernible struggle at all. She was simply herself again. She had taken time off to be someone else and now she was once again herself.

At first he had tried to make her take things a little at a time. That first morning she had insisted on going to her shop and straightening it up. “Give it a few days,” he advised her. “Get used to being you.”

“I’ve had years of experience being me,” she replied. “It’s like swimming or fucking, you don’t forget how. I’m not trying to be Wonder Woman, Petey. I know I must be weakened physically even if I don’t happen to feel it at the moment. I’m not going to try to do everything at once, but I’m not going to work up to normal life like a paraplegic learning to walk, because I just don’t have to.”

If she was capable of an overnight change, he himself was not. On the contrary, he was very cautious about changing the living pattern he had devised as insurance against her unreliability. He still left Robin at Raparound while he was at the theater. Gretchen knew why he did this; more surprisingly, she took no offense. “I wouldn’t trust me either,” she told him, winking. “I can know damn well I’m all right, but there’s no reason why you should buy the whole trip the first day out of port. I’ll let you believe it a little at a time, baby. No problem.”

He stopped at Raparound to inform Anne the first night he left Robin with Gretchen. The waitress seemed dubious.

“You haven’t seen her,” he insisted. “I can hardly believe it myself, but it’s real.”

“I could go over once or twice and look in on them.”
“She’d know why you were doing it.”
“Maybe I’d better not, then.”
“The thing is, I don’t think she’d mind. She really has herself together.”
Anne laid a hand on his arm. “I’m so happy for you, Pete.”
“But was he happy?”
There were irritating moments when it seemed to him that he was not. He could not understand these moments, did not know what might be causing them.
And then he dreamed the dream.
It was more perfectly detailed than most of his dreams. In it, he returned home from an evening at the theater with Gretchen. She had come to watch the show while he lit it. They stopped for a bite of food on the way home, then returned to the apartment, dismissed the baby, sitter, and made sure that Robin was sound asleep.
Then he went into the kitchen and picked up a sharp knife. She asked him what the knife was for but he did not answer. Instead he used it to cut a length of cord from the Venetian blinds. She asked him what the cord was for, and again he made no response.
He positioned a chair beneath the lighting fixture and told her to take off all her clothes. She did so, asking him if he was going to make love to her. He did not answer. When she was naked he told her to stand on the chair. She asked why, and again he failed to answer, and she obediently mounted the chair.
As he wrapped the cord first around her neck and then around the fixture, she asked him very reasonably why he was going to kill her this way. This time he tried to answer but could not form the words. He got down from the chair, and she told him that it was all right, that she could understand the way he felt, that he should not feel bad about it. He tugged the chair out from under her and watched in fascination as she danced on air. The twitching of her legs slowed, then stopped. He turned from her, and in the open doorway stood everyone he had ever known in his life. Their fingers pointed at him, and just then the dream ended and he was awake.
The meaning of the dream was too hideously obvious to him. Dreams should form themselves in subtle symbols, he thought, so that one would not have to bear the brunt of their awful truth.
He wanted her dead. He had wanted her dead when she was insane, and now, although she had recovered, he still wished for the liberation her death would bring him. He did not love her, sane or mad; sane or mad he did not want her.
His immediate impulse was to leave. He loved the child, wanted to be close to the child, but with Gretchen sane and functioning as a capable mother he no longer had an overwhelming responsibility to the child. All he had to do was pack up and go, and surely it was a greater kindness to do that than to go on living with a woman you’d rather see dead.
But if he left, Gretchen would probably go mad again. He could not make himself believe otherwise. And so if he left, Robin would be without him and without an adequate mother at the same time, and—
And he realized, now, why it occasionally had seemed to him that he was not happy.
It was hard for him to know just when he began to suspect that she was not sane after all. More than that—it was impossible to know, because when the thoughts began to come, he brushed them impatiently away. Once again, he was sure, the wish had fathered the thought. It was unthinkable that he not love her if she were mentally healthy; therefore, he was attempting to convince himself that she was not.
But gradually the impressions built. He would glance at her and catch the shadow of an expression on her face that did not belong there. He would awaken at night and sense that she was feigning sleep, as she had done during her worst periods. And there were other little particles of inconsistency, none enormously significant in and of itself but all of them combining like dots in a pointillist landscape to present an image of madness.
He played with it and found it made sense to him. Her recovery had been total and instantaneous because it had been no recovery at all. Before she had been mad; now she was a madwoman feigning sanity as she feigned sleep. A true recovery would have had to be halting and tentative, as her attempts had been in the past. But a false recovery was something different. It came naturally to her because she had woven it to mesh with the fabric of her insanity, had made it a part of that insanity.
Or had she?
Or was he the madman, building his own fantasies, to fit the dimensions of his own delusion? How could you tell? How could you possibly tell?
On the first Thursday after Labor Day, Linda sat at the desk in the Lemon Tree balancing her checkbook. There should have been nothing to it, as she had opened her account at the Solebury National Bank less than a month ago. This was the first statement she had received, and it contained the three checks she had thus far written. According to the bank, she had a balance of $142.58. According to her own records, her balance was $143.28. The ninety-cent difference seemed unimportant enough, but it gallèd her that she could not see where either she or the bank had gone wrong. She stopped to explain to a tight-faced woman that there was no public rest room, then went back to her calculations. She caught the error at last and of course it was her error and not the bank’s. She had assumed as much from the beginning and now made the appropriate corrections in her checkbook.

It was pleasant having a bank account. The convenience, so widely heralded in bank advertising, was not what pleased her most; it had been convenient enough for her to settle her accounts in cash, and postal money orders were easily obtained if she needed to send money through the mails. But the simple possession of a checkbook gave her a feeling of substance, as insubstantial as her own balance might be. More, it gave her a feeling of belonging to the community, a feeling that had grown over the recent months. Now the building on the northeast corner of Bridge and Main was not merely the bank. It was her bank.

She glanced at her watch. It was just past six and Olive McIntyre had not yet arrived. Olive had been due at six, and Linda could not remember the woman having been late more than half a dozen times, and never by more than a handful of minutes. Olive was almost invariably early, and often by as much as an hour. She would always offer to take over upon her arrival, and more often than not Linda would stay to keep her company. They both enjoyed the easy conversation that passed during their moments together at the shop.

She wondered how long Olive would be able to work full time. Labor Day weekend, a maddeningly hectic four days, had come and gone, and with its passing the heaviest of the summer traffic was over for another year. According to Olive, the greatest reduction would be in human volume rather than dollar volume. Serious customers would be as numerous as ever during the fall months, while the number of casual browsers would drop sharply.

“How do you do in the fall depends on the sort of business you’re in,” Olive had told her. “The ice-cream shop has a big decline in sales because their volume is tied directly to the number of clowns wandering the streets, not to mention that ice cream has less appeal in colder weather. The art galleries and antique shops drop on the ground and thank the Lord when Labor Day is over and done with. Once the gawkers are out of the way they have time to take care of their serious customers. We’re somewhere in the middle. We’ll sell fewer dollar and two-dollar items with less tourists to sell them to, but the big-ticket sales will stay about the same. And for a month before Christmas we’ll do our best business in the items running from ten dollars up. Of course for three months after Christmas you can go all day without seeing anything but a stray dog on the streets.”

The phone rang. She picked it up, said, “Good evening, Lemon Tree.”

“Yes?”

“It’s Olive, Linda.”

“Oh, I didn’t recognize your voice.” There was a pause, and she said, “Is everything all right?”


“He’s not—”

“No, he’s not.” Another pause, and a sigh. “He started hemorrhaging a little after eleven this morning. It’s his liver, of course. He’s all right now. He’s had transfusions all day, God knows how many pints of blood. He’s unconscious and he looks like pure hell but he’s going to make it.”

“Thank God.”

“I’ve been alternately thanking and cursing Him all afternoon. Clem will be staying in the hospital for at least another week, possibly as much as two weeks. They’re putting a second bed in his room and I’m staying with him.” She snorted. “They tried to tell me that would be against the rules. It’s nothing short of amazing the variety of horse manure people think they can get away with. I told them just what I would do and who I would call and they went into a huddle and decided the rule never existed in the first place. They told me they would have to charge me the same rates as if I were a patient. I said that was perfectly all right, that I would simply deduct the sum from my annual contribution. And I suggested they might like to look up my annual contribution just to put things in perspective. They’ve been so sweet ever since that I may vomit. Well, let me get to the point. I obviously won’t be around for at least a week. Just put all the mail somewhere in the back and ignore it. If anything comes up that needs handling, use your own judgment. It’s sure to be more reliable than mine for the time being. Work whatever hours you want, your regular hours and as much of mine as you feel like. Just keep a record so that you’ll know how much
money you have coming to you. Are you short on money?”

“No.”

“You may be by the time I get around to writing you a check. If that happens, just pay yourself out of the cash
drawer and leave a memo of what you took. I’ll be in touch when I can. I don’t have your home phone number with
me—could you let me have it?”

She gave her number.

“Fine. Don’t feel you have to put in more hours than you want, Linda. I really don’t give an earthly damn how
business goes just now. Arrange your hours to suit yourself. I meant to call you earlier today. I hope I didn’t keep
you from an appointment?”

“Oh, no.”

“You can close up now if you want.”

“No, I think I’ll stay around for an hour or so.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Olive? I hope everything’s all right.”

“Well, George Perlmutter’s been around and says he’s out of the woods now. The other clowns say the same
thing, but I wouldn’t trust them for a minute. I know George too well for him to lie to me. All Clem has to do is stop
drinking for the rest of his life and he’s got nothing to worry about.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

“And all I have to do is grow wings and I can fly like an eagle. I have to go now. Linda. ’Bye.”

For the fifteen minutes following Olive’s call she sat in the little shop and thought about death. The hour from six
to seven was always quiet. Most of the shops on the mall closed for dinner, so even if one stayed open, passersby
were not likely to drop in. Olive normally devoted that hour to paper work and dusting. There was no paper work for
Linda to do but there was always dusting. Instead she stayed seated and thought of death.

Clem would die. That seemed to be what Olive had been saying at the end. He had nothing to worry about if he
stopped drinking for the rest of his life, but Olive would not grow wings like an eagle and Clement McIntyre would
not stop drinking, and so he would die.

She thought back to the first time she had genuinely realized that she herself would someday die. It seemed
incomprehensible in retrospect. She had known since childhood that everyone died sooner or later, but until not too
many years ago this knowledge had held no personal meaning for her. Death was always something that happened to
other people. Occasional family deaths—her grandparents, an uncle, a friend of her father’s—had left her
untouched. And then one spring morning a donkey walked across her grave, and the shivers stayed with her for a
full week.

She had been married then. Married to Alan, and although she could not recall the year she knew it must have
been late in their brief marriage because they would not otherwise have bought the gerbils. Neither of them had
quite voiced the thought, but they had bought the little rodents to hold their marriage together. It was starting to
come unglued, starting to reveal itself as having been a gross error from the beginning, but had not yet reached the
point where they could face the fact that there was nothing there worth saving. It had seemed a little extreme to have
a child to save the marriage. Gerbils, allegedly silent and odorless and able to thrive on an occasional handful of
sunflower seeds, seemed a more moderate and equally feasible solution.

They had purchased a male and female gerbil, and the gerbils had done what she and Alan had virtually ceased to
do, and had done so without benefit of birth control. The female gerbil grew fatter than seemed possible ultimately
producing a litter of five hairless and blind little creatures. The thrill of the birth had quite overwhelmed Linda, and
for the next few days it seemed to her that she and Alan truly loved each other.

Then one day the mother gerbil died. They never learned how or why. The babies were about a week old; two had
their eyes open already. They were a week old, and their mother was dead, and Alan ran around to veterinarians
trying to get a formula for a gerbil milk substitute, then tried pet shops in the hope that a gerbil mother who had lost
her young might be enlisted to wet-nurse the little things. In the end they warmed Similac to body temperature and
tried to feed it to the babies with a tiny eyedropper from a child’s nurse kit. One by one the baby gerbils went cold
and stiff. The first one died six hours after they found the mother dead. The fifth and last died around dawn the next
day.

She and Alan had an apartment. There was no yard, so she took the little corpses to Central Park and buried them,
digging tiny graves with a soup spoon. She wept over their graves as she had never wept in her life.

The next day Alan wanted to buy another female gerbil. “Oh, no,” she cried. “Never.”

“But Eddie will be lonely now,” Alan had said. They’d named the gerbils Eddie and Wallie, for the Duke and
Duchess of Windsor. “The poor old guy can’t just sit alone for the rest of his life.”

And then it hit her—the realization that everything died, that everyone died, that she would die. It was a
realization that had to come to everyone sooner or later, and that everyone got over, as she in time got over it herself. But from that moment on her marriage was finished. It would have been finished anyway, would have ended even if they had been up to their necks in thriving hopping odorless gerbils, but that was the point where she herself knew that she had to leave him. She did not do so at once. She waited for quite awhile, but waited with no hope whatsoever.

Eddie remained with Alan when she left. She wondered what had become of him. He had almost certainly died by now, she thought. Gerbils didn’t live very long.

She went out for a sandwich and a cup of coffee, picked up a magazine, and was back at the desk by seven. A few minutes before eight a voice spoke her name. She looked up from her magazine at Karen Markarian.

“I hope I’m not bugging you,” Karen said. “I was in town with nothing to do and I thought maybe you’d like company.”

“I’m glad you did.” She closed the magazine and put it aside. “There’s never anything to read in this anyway. I don’t know why I bought it. I was just looking at the ads.”

“If you’re sure you don’t mind.”

“Of course I’m sure. Pull up a chair. There’s one over there.”

“It’s all right to move the chair?”

“Well, sure.”

Karen brought the chair over and sat down alongside the desk. “I went to your apartment first,” she said. “Then when you weren’t there I thought maybe you were finishing up over here. I didn’t mean to interrupt your work.”

“There’s hardly any work to interrupt. Olive couldn’t come in this evening and I had no place better to go so I thought I’d stay open. Cigarette?”

“Thanks.” She inhaled deeply, blew out smoke. “Hugh’s working tonight. I didn’t feel like sitting around alone and I couldn’t think of anyone in town I wanted to see. And then I thought of you.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“He’s really spending tons of time in front of that typewriter. Sometimes I’ll just stand outside his door and listen. He’ll go full blast for like fifteen minutes at a clip, just stopping to change pages, and then other times he’ll sit there without a sound for an hour at a time.”

“It must be very difficult.”

“I don’t know how he does it.”

“Neither do I.”

“I really mean it. When I grew up, you know, he was a writer, but a kid doesn’t think anything about that. He went into a room and made noises on a machine, you know, so big deal. I mean, I don’t know, when you’re a kid you don’t see anything special about it.”

“That’s interesting. I never thought of that.”

“What does your father do?”

“He’s in real estate.”

“In Ohio somewhere, I think you said?”

“Dayton.”

“Real estate. So at least as a kid you could understand what it was that he does. Showing houses to people and that sort of thing. He went certain places and he did certain things; it was the sort of thing that made sense to a kid.”

“I suppose so, yes.”

“Are you very close to him?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“That’s sad,” Karen said. She thought for a moment. “But what I was saying. I used to take it for granted. He went in there and he wrote. But now I don’t know how he does it. As a matter of fact I don’t really know how anybody does anything. Not selling houses or like that, but I don’t know how a writer writes books or how a painter paints pictures. How you get the ideas and decide how to make them happen. Or a composer, that’s the most impossible thing of all to understand. Imagine sitting down to write a piece of classical music. Not just finding the tunes but fitting everything together so that it adds up to something. Figuring out what each instrument in the orchestra is going to do and how to put them all together to get the sound you have in mind. I wonder if it always works out right.”

“How do you mean?”

“Oh, Hugh was saying once that the book he writes is never quite as good as the book he had in mind. That sometimes parts of it will actually come out better than what he planned, but that it’s never exactly the way he intended it to be. And I was thinking about music and wondering if it’s the same. Say you’re composing a symphony, and you can hear a certain passage in your mind and you work it out with pencil and paper and then an
orchestra performs it, and everybody says it’s terrific and all, but you’re the composer and you hear it performed and it’s not the way you expected it to sound. It may be better or it may be worse, but it’s not the way you expected it to be.”

“I never thought of that.”
“No, neither did I until just now. Oh, Jesus, Beethoven.”
“What about him?”
“Well, he was deaf, right?”
“Toward the end of his life, yes.”
“Well, see, that’s so far-out. He heard it all in his head and put it down, and then he never got to hear it performed, so it could have been miles away from what he figured on and he would never have any way of knowing.”
“That’s a very strange idea.”
“It is, isn’t it?”
Linda nodded. “It’s almost frightening.”
“You know what it is? It’s a stoned idea.”
She thought for a moment, remembering the special paths her mind had taken on grass. Then she nodded. “You see what I mean?”
“Yes. It’s a stoned idea.”
“And I’m not even stoned. You’re not, are you?”
“Me? No.”
“You said that as if it’s impossible. Don’t you even smoke?”
“Not recently. There was a time when I smoked quite frequently, but I can’t remember the last time now.”
“Didn’t you like it?”
“Sometimes I did. At first I always did.”
“Then what happened? Bummers?”
“Occasionally.”
“Some people I know who’ve done acid say you learn as much from the bummers as from the good trips.”
“I’ve never had acid.”
“Neither have I. Is that why you stopped? Bummers?”
“Not exactly. I guess I reached a point where I didn’t like being high. And I didn’t like being around people who were high all the time.”
“Oh, I can dig it. People who are constantly stoned are a down. I mean, they never do anything.”
She nodded, but thought that wasn’t exactly what she had meant. She had been thinking of Marc, and it was not so much that he didn’t do anything as that she had been unable to avoid the feeling that nobody was home, that Marc was permanently out to lunch. But perhaps that amounted to the same thing.
“I’d like to get stoned with you sometime,” Karen was saying. “Just slightly stoned. Sometime when you think you feel like it.”
“Why?”
“I don’t know. Yes I do. It’s that people can get to know each other better that way. Sometimes. Other times they just shut each other off. It depends on who they are and where their heads are at. I wish I knew you better.”
“We’re getting to know each other, Karen.”
“I suppose. It’s just—” She hesitated for a long moment, then changed course. “Have you read any of the new book?”
“Your father’s book? No. He doesn’t want me to read anything until it’s finished.”
“Same here. I thought maybe you might have read it. Does he talk about it with you?”
“Just in very general terms. He’ll say that he had a good day or a bad day. Or that he’s hung up on a scene, or got over being hung up on a scene, but he’s never said anything more specific than that.”
“He’ll tell me about certain problems but it’s always vague. I don’t know anything about what it’s about, really. Just the title.”
“What’s the title?”
“The Edge of Thought. He didn’t mention it? Well, anyway, it’s just a working title. That means he may change it later, or the publishers may want to change it, but he has to have a title typed on the first page or he can’t get started with the writing. I don’t know whether you would call it a superstition or what.”
“It’s not a bad title. The Edge of Thought.”
“It’s from a poem but I forget who by. Have you read Capital Reward?”
“That’s the newest one, isn’t it? I thought it wasn’t coming out until November.”
“A week before Thanksgiving. I read the galleys. That’s long sheets from the printer that you check to make sure the type is right before the book goes to press.”

“I know.”

“I did the proofreading. It’s harder to enjoy a book that way because you have to read so slowly, so first I read a copy of the manuscript straight through and then I went through the galleys and checked them against the manuscript. He hates to read galleys. Especially, he’s working on something else. Usually he just initials them and sends them back because the publisher’s proofreaders catch most of the mistakes, but I didn’t mind doing it. You know, something to do.”

“How’s the book?”

“Oh, I think it’s sensational, but I’m prejudiced. Of course I guess you’ll be getting an autographed copy as soon as it comes out.”

“That would be exciting.”

“Linda? What do you think of Hugh?”

“As a writer?”

“Uh-huh. No, wait a minute, that’s not what I mean, I mean as a person.” She put her face in her hands. “Oh, wow,” she said. “Oh, wow, this is heavy.”

“Are you all right, Karen?”

“Me? Sure.” She fastened troubled eyes on Linda. “I mean how do you feel about him, that’s what I meant.”

“This is an odd conversation.”

“It’s heavy. If it’s too heavy I could split.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“This is so hard to handle. I’m not such a kid, but I keep feeling like one all of a sudden. This is reality weird. You don’t have to answer the question.”

“Why shouldn’t I answer it? I like your father very much. I don’t know if that’s the answer you—”

“What’s really weird is I keep saying Hugh and you keep saying your father.”

“Well, I—”

“Are you going to marry him?”

“Not before I’m asked.”

“He hasn’t asked you? I thought maybe he did. I think he will.”

“Well, I can’t really—”

“Suppose he does.”

The conversation had been faintly uncomfortable from the beginning and was getting more and more difficult for her. Why didn’t customers come in when you wanted them to? Not even customers—it would have been a pleasure just then to explain to some cretin that there was no public rest room in the Mall. At this point any interruption would be a deliverance.

“I’m sure he’ll ask you,” Karen was saying. “And I hope you’ll say yes.”

“Do you?”

“Oh, God, yes.”

“That surprises me.”

“It does? Maybe we’re not communicating at all. It’s my fault. I never should have gotten into all this.” She stood up suddenly. “I guess I’ll split.”

“Don’t go, Karen.”

But she had to; she was fighting back tears. “I just think you would be very good for each other,” she said. “That’s all. I think you could make each other happy. And what this is all about, what everything’s all about, is that I’m just trying to find a way to tell you that you don’t have to worry about me. Like I won’t be in the way or anything, that’s all, that’s the only thing I was trying to say.”

“Karen, sit down for a minute.”

“I’m going now.”

“Karen—.”

“I’m all right, Linda.”

“I know you are.”

“I mean I’m all right, I’m not going to cry or anything. You don’t have to worry.”

“I wasn’t worried.”

“I didn’t mean to run a whole number on you like that. I got carried away.”

“It’s nothing.”

Those eyes, so much like Hugh’s, bored into hers. It was almost painful to meet the girl’s gaze.
“I’m not a child, Linda.”
“I know that.”
“I’m not a child. You make me act like one, but I’m not. I don’t know what it is. Look, I’m sorry.”
“It’s cool.”
“Thanks.”
TWENTY-THREE

Melanie was upstairs watching television when the doorbell rang. She came down the staircase slowly, trying to guess who it might be and whether she ought to answer the bell at all. Salesmen and assorted door-to-door pests were creatures of the morning and afternoon and it was close to eight thirty; the program she was watching had gone on at eight o’clock and was more than half over.

It wouldn’t be Sully. He always used his key. But it might be some other man. There had been several over the past few weeks, one of them a door-to-door pest, an insurance snoop who had learned nothing from her about the couple next door but a great deal about horizontal pleasures. As well as she could determine, he was the only man she’d had sex with since Warren and Bert who knew her address. The others were all strangers who would have trouble tracking her down. Nor did it seem likely that the insurance snoop would risk turning up unannounced. She had attempted to ward off such a return visit with a story about her husband’s two strongest attributes: his rabid jealousy and his prowess with handguns.

It might be Warren, though. Or it might be any man who had heard her name mentioned and wanted to try his luck.

The bell sounded again. She did not want to see anyone tonight, but refusing to open the door would only postpone whatever problem might be in the offing. She went to the door, drew a quick breath, and opened it.

“Mrs. Jaeger?”

Not a man at all. A girl. The face was familiar, she had seen it before, and now she tried to place it.

“I don’t know if you remember me, but—”

Of course! “Why, of course I do,” she said, smiling brilliantly. “You’re Hugh Markarian’s daughter.”

“That’s right.”

“Of course I remember you, Linda.”

The girl’s eyes sparkled. “Far-out,” she said, thing is, you were Linda. I’m Karen.”

“I—”

“The thing is, I goofed by calling you Linda. But it’s not really important. Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I think so.” She swallowed. “Why don’t you come inside?”

“Thanks. This is a very nice house.”

“Thank you. I’m afraid my husband isn’t home right now.”

“I know.” Her eyes met Melanie’s. “I stopped at the Barge to check and I saw he was working.”

“Oh.”

“I hope I’m not keeping you from anything, Melanie. Is it all right to call you Melanie?”

“I don’t see why not. Better than Linda. And no, you’re not keeping me from anything. I’m just going to run upstairs and turn off the TV. I wasn’t even looking at it, just something to do. Why don’t you have a seat, I’ll be right down, okay?”

But she stopped in the upstairs john to check her hair, splash cold water on her face, freshen her lipstick. What on earth did the girl want? To warn her away from her father? That seemed completely crazy unless the girl herself was off her nut, and she seemed sane enough. Besides, she was being as well mannered as could be.

To set up a date for her with Markarian? That seemed even less plausible. In the first place, she doubted Hugh wanted to see her again any more than she wanted to see him. It had been a pleasant enough means for her to a dramatically agreeable end, and for Markarian it had no doubt been better than solitary drinking, but after the embarrassment with Karen and her black boyfriend she couldn’t imagine him wanting to renew their acquaintance. They had passed on the street once or twice since then and neither had said hello. In short, it had turned out precisely as she had hoped it would, a one-night fling that had served its purpose without getting her involved in anything more extensive.

Then what in hell did Karen Markarian want from her young life?

She went downstairs, hoping she looked more poised and self-assured than she felt. Karen was sitting on the sofa, legs crossed, smoking a cigarette. The tight dungarees showed off her legs nicely, Melanie noticed, and there was obviously no bra under Karen’s tie-dyed T-shirt. Well, there was no bra under her own blouse, as far as that went, but Karen’s T-shirt was more revealing even if the younger girl had substantially less to reveal.

“Would you like some coffee, Karen?”

“Not now. It’s kind of warm for coffee.”

“A cold drink?”

“Maybe a Coke or something.”

“I think there’s Pepsi.”
“That would be great.” She fussed in the kitchen, filling two tall glasses with ice cubes, pouring the Pepsis. Returning, she said, “I decided to have one myself. It’s Diet Pepsi, actually. I figure why take on the extra calories when you can’t taste the difference anyway.”

“With a figure like yours you don’t have to worry.”

“I ought to lose a few pounds.”

“I don’t see where.” She could almost feel the girl’s eyes on her body. “Anyway, I don’t think I could hassle with that whole routine of watching weight. My mother is always on a diet and always gaining die weight back and I don’t see what good it does her. I’d rather be a few pounds overweight than go through all that.”

“You don’t have to worry.”

“I’m probably thinner than I ought to be, I guess.”

“Not too thin, though.” She put her glass down on the coffee table. “It gets harder when you get to be a few years older.”

“How old are you, Melanie?”

“Twenty-five. Why?”

“No reason. I was nineteen last month. Melanie? My father doesn’t know I’m here. Not that it’s any big deal, but just that it isn’t about him or anything.”

“Oh.”

“In case you were wondering.”

“Well, I guess I was.”

“I was in town with nothing to do and I sort of thought of you. I thought maybe you get lonely sitting here all night while your old man is working.”

“Sometimes I do.”

“I get lonely myself sometimes.”

“I see.”

“Do you?”

The girl’s stare, so open and so penetrating, was to meet and harder still to turn away from. The voice, so flat and frank and … and young, went through her like a pin fixing a butterfly to a board. She remembered discussing this girl with Sully, remembered teasing him with the thought that she might make love to Karen as she had made love to Hugh.

The idea had excited Sully. But it had excited her as well, both at the time and in retrospect. And after she had been with Bert and Warren, her mind had several times been intrigued by the thought of sex with another woman. Now and then her partner in her fantasy had been Karen.

Would she have ever thought to act on it? She could not deny the possibility, for she had already found herself capable of a variety of actions she would never have imagined herself taking. But—

“It was funny, you calling me Linda. I just saw her a little while ago.”

“Linda?”

“Linda Robshaw. Hugh’s been going with her lately. He went out with her the first time the night before you were over at our house, that was why I made my brilliant foot-in-mouth play. She’s nice, I think. But I get very uptight being with her.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know exactly. I don’t think it’s anything that she does, but she makes me feel like a kid.”

“That’s funny.”

“What is?”

She started to moisten her lips with her tongue, then stopped herself when she realized what she was doing. “That she makes you feel like a kid. You make me feel like a kid.”

“How?”

“Hell, I don’t know. Maybe because you know what this is all about and I don’t.”

“Don’t you, Melanie?”

“No.” She reached for a cigarette, lit it. “Would you like some more Pepsi?”

“I still have some. What sign are you, Melanie?”

“Capricorn.”

“Sure, that figures.”

“It does? I don’t know much about it.”

“Tenacious, stubborn, honest, hardworking toward a goal. I don’t know much about it either but those are the main tendencies. I’m Virgo on the Leo cusp. Virgo is honest and direct and literal-minded and Leo is dramatic and
sort of loud. It’s supposed to be kind of an interesting combination.”
“I guess it would be.”
“I’m also devious, though, and that doesn’t seem to fit in. Virgo and Capricorn are supposed to be compatible.”
“That’s interesting.”
“Yes, I think it’s very interesting. Why don’t you sit next to me, Melanie?”
She looked into those steady eyes and felt her own face softening, melting.
“Sit next to me.”
“I don’t know if I should.” She hardly recognized her own voice, so soft and liquid, so young.
“It’s not what you should do. It’s what you want to do.”
“I don’t know what I want.”
“Come over here.”
“Yes, all right. Maybe I should have a drink. Maybe we should both have a drink.”
“How pretty you are. Karen? Have you ever—”
“Yes.”
“I never have.”
“I knew that.”
“How can you tell?”
“I don’t know. I just can. You’re very beautiful.”
They kissed. She expected it to be strange and was struck by the familiarity of the experience, one she had never had before. It was not a feeling that she had done this before but that she had known all her life what it would be like. She felt the tips of Karen’s fingers trace a line down her cheek and across her shoulder, felt Karen’s hand close around her breast.
Not excitement but longing, yearning. How different. How utterly different.
“Kiss me some more, Melanie.”
“Oh, yes. Yes.”
“You don’t need a drink now, do you?”
“No.”
“You need me. We need each other.”
“Yes.”
“You’re like silk here.”
“God, how that feels.”
“So soft and silky.”
“Someone once wanted me to shave it”
“A man?”
“Of course a man. I never—”
“God, don’t ever do it.”
“I won’t. Oh, Karen.”
“Can we go upstairs now?”
“Yes.”
She worried on the way to the bedroom that she would not know what to do, but it turned out that there was very little for her to do. Karen undressed her, positioned her on her back on the bed. Karen talked to her, talked gently, feeding her lines to which she could respond without thinking. Karen stripped and joined her on the bed, their bodies barely touching at first. Karen kissed her, long deep kisses, and Karen’s hands touched her body with the special knowledge male hands could not have. She had touched her own body in this fashion, with this same special knowledge, and Karen’s hands were like her own hands and yet they were not her own hands, they were Karen’s hands, and they worked magic upon her skin.
Karen’s mouth kissed her breasts, then burrowed downward, not too quickly, not too slowly. Karen knelt between her legs so that only Karen’s mouth touched her, Karen’s mouth upon her cunt and Karen’s soft girl’s cheeks like feathers against the insides of her thighs.
For a long time she held a portion of herself in reserve, kept part of her being from letting go. But Karen’s mouth kept assuring her in silent speech that there was no hurry, there was no rush, there was all the time in the world. There was no urgency in this. No one had to catch a train or keep a lunch date. There was time, worlds of time, and all you had to do was float on the wave, float on the wave—
Until without knowing it she let go, let go all the way, and she was there.
“Oh, how wonderful. How perfect.”
“You’re so fantastic, Melanie.”
“Me? All I did was lie there.”
“Oh, no. You don’t understand.”
“I mean, what did I do?”
“Never mind. You’re beautiful.”
“Am I?”
“Oh, come on. You can’t not know it.”
“I know I turn men on.”
“You turn girls on, too.” Karen touched her breast, stroked it not with passion but with admiration. “You must have had girls come on to you before.”
“I don’t think so. Not that I was ever aware of. I suppose I was never looking for it and might not have known. Is that possible?”
“It’s possible.” Karen curled up next to her. Melanie closed her eyes. She was almost asleep when she heard Karen speak her name. She opened her eyes.
“It’s your turn, Melanie.”
She had known this. The knowledge was what made sleep such a temptation. She rolled onto her side and covered her hesitation with a smile. “I suppose fair is fair, huh?”
“Oh, Melanie!”
“I was kidding, honey, I—”
Karen’s eyes were wide. The girl’s hands fastened on Melanie’s shoulders, drew their bodies close together.
“You don’t understand,” Karen said.
“Sure I do.”
“No, no you don’t. Oh, wow! I mean, doing it is the whole point. That’s what it’s about. The other part, you’ve had that before.”
“I told you I never—”
“I mean with a man.”
“It’s not the same. You must know that.
“It’s not the same, no, of course it’s not, but it’s the same idea. It’s the same act. But when you do it, you get to be on the other side of the mirror. You can’t do it for me, Melanie, baby. You have to do it for yourself.”
“I don’t know if it’ll work that way.”
“I know more about this than you do.”
“Yeah, I’ll buy that.”
“It’s better to give than to receive. Better because it feels better. That’s absolutely what it’s all about, just have to get into it.”
“But I don’t know how.”
“Just do what you like doing. Just start and see what happens. Do what you’d like if it was your body. As if both of us were you.”
“Oh.”
“Did I find the right words? Does that put it together for you?”
I
I
I
“Yes, of course it does.”
Afterward she felt a kind of peace she had never known before. She had found herself in Karen’s body and knew herself in a wholly new way. She remained still for an indeterminable period of time, curled up at Karen’s feet. Then she got up from the bed.
“Where are you going, Melanie?”
“I need a drink, and not a Pepsi. Can I get you something?”
“Do you have scotch?”
“I’m pretty sure all we have is applejack.”
“What’s that?”
“Brandy made from apples.”
“What do you mix it with? Does it go with soda?”
“It might, but we don’t have any. Water?”
“Sure.”
She poured the drinks, Karen’s with ice and water, her own neat. She drank hers straight down and poured herself
another before returning to the bedroom.

Karen said, “I think I like this better than scotch. It has a cider taste along with a booze taste. What’s it like straight?”

“Try some.”

“It’s not bad. I’d have to get used to it.”

“Yeah, some things take getting used to.”

“And some people get used to certain things pretty quickly. You’re blushing, Melanie.”

“I know it and it’s crazy. I shouldn’t be able to blush in front of you. You’re my sister.”

“That’s what it’s like, isn’t it?”

“That’s exactly what it’s like.”

“You came, didn’t you?”

“God, did I ever! I never thought.”

“I knew you would. But I couldn’t tell you, I couldn’t, because you had to find your way there by yourself.”

“I never dreamed you could come from doing it.” “Don’t you with men?”

“Sometimes. Once in a while. Not like that, though. Karen?”

“I bet I know the question. How many girls have I done this with?”

“You don’t have to answer.”

“Why not? Two. Well, three. You’re the third.”

“Is that all?”

“Uh-huh. I’m mostly into guys. With a girl I have to have a special feeling. Well, with guys, too, but it’s a different feeling with girls. There aren’t as many girls that I have that feeling for.” She thought for a moment. “I didn’t know that I had it for you. You don’t have to believe it if you don’t want to, but I didn’t come with this in mind. Not consciously in mind, anyway. I really came over to talk with you.” A soft smile. “It didn’t take me long to get in the mood, did it?”

“Or me. I … thought about this before.”

“Before I made a pass? I know when you thought about it. I saw it in your face. When we were talking about being lonely.”

“You saw that? But I mean before tonight. I thought about making love to you. I don’t think I would have done anything. I just kept it in my mind. I never thought you would go for it.”

“That is really far-out.”

“Yeah.”

“It really is.”

“Could I ask you about the other two girls? Did they have experience?”

“The second one did.”

“Not the first? Jesus, how did either of you know what to do?”

“It was kind of funny. But, you know, we had both read things. Books. We knew what to do; it was a question of knowing how to get into it. We thought the best way would be sixty-nine, but it turned out to be a down. You can’t get into both things at the same time.”

“I was wondering about that.”

“It’s the same as with a man, you’re trying to hold two things in your mind at the same time. It’s easier to get it together behind grass but even then it’s better to take turns.”

“What’s it like with a nigger? I mean with somebody black.”

“One word’s as good as another, I guess.”

“I don’t really like that word. I say it sometimes; though. What’s it like?”

“Both of the girls were white.”

“I mean a black man.”

“I never made it with a spade. Oh, you mean the guy I brought home. I can’t think of his name.”

“Jeff.”

“You remembered and I didn’t. No, we didn’t make it. I was going to and I got uptight. Either because he was black or because I brought him home because he was black and that was dishonest and it bothered me. You never made that scene?”

“No. Sometimes I think I want to and sometimes I think I don’t.”

“I fooled around with some black guys at college. It never got past, you know, hand jobs. No particular reason. There’s not much difference. No, that’s bullshit, there’s a tremendous difference. At least for me, because you keep being conscious of the color. Not constantly but now you are and now you aren’t. For a minute you’ll be into the person and the color gets out of the way, and then it keeps fading back in on you. Maybe you get used to it. I didn’t,
because I guess I turned out to be more hung up on race than I thought I was.”

“That’s very honest.”

“Well, Virgo.”

“I would never get past the color. I would keep hearing the word ‘nigger’ over and over in my head. If I got
turned on that would be what turned me on. Don’t they have bigger cocks?”

“Not the ones I knew. Bigger when they were soft but about the same hard.”

“I’m only interested when they’re hard.”

“So am I.”

They giggled together. Then Melanie said, “Were both the girls at college with you?”

“Oh-huh. I learned a lot at college, but not what they wrote about in the catalog.”

“Were you in love with either of them?”

“Both of them. I don’t like to ball if I’m not. Oh, I see. Sure, I’m in love with you, Melanie.”

“Jesus, don’t even say that!”

“And you’re in love with me. What’s wrong with that? Oh, wow, you’ve got more hangups than I thought. Do
you really think you can only love one person?”

“Well, one person at a time.”

“Do you love your husband? Are you in love with him?”

“Yes, very much.”

“But you ball other guys.”

“There’s no love in it.”

“Isn’t that kind of sad?”

“Yeah. Maybe. I don’t know. I’d be afraid.”

“Isn’t it worse to ball them and not feel anything? I don’t mean in a moral way. I mean how you wind up feeling
about yourself.”

She closed her eyes and thought about the question.

“You can always tell me to cool it with the questions, Melanie. Just because I’ll answer just about anything
doesn’t mean you have to.”

“That’s not it. I’m just not sure of the answer.”

“Well, that’s cool. I can dig it. Hey, what time is it, do you happen to know?”

“Let me see. It says a quarter to ten but that clock’s a little fast. Do you have to be somewhere? I wish you would
stay.”

“I was thinking about your old man.”

“Oh, he won’t be home for hours. Tonight’s Thursday? We have hours.”

“Because I was wondering what he would do if he walked in and found us like this.”

She couldn’t help laughing. Karen joined her, and when the laughter subsided the girl said, “I guess he’d have a
fit.”

“Oh, no. Not Sully.”

“You mean he’d dig it? I’ve heard that. That it turns men on. And they don’t consider other chicks as a threat, not
as if it was another man.”

“No, that’s only part of it.”

“Huh?”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Do you want to know something? I’ve been going out of fucking
mind lately.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know if I can tell you. I never told anyone. That’s what’s killing me, wanting to tell somebody and
there’s nobody in the world to tell. I mean a woman, it’s nothing to talk about with a man. Or maybe it is but not in
the same way.” She studied Karen thoughtfully. “What we said before about being sisters. I still feel that. But I
couldn’t tell this to a sister, I mean a regular sister. I have this feeling that I could tell you.”

“I would never repeat anything.”

“Oh, I know that, you don’t have to tell me that. I have the feeling that I could tell you this and it wouldn’t shock
you.”

“I was going to say nothing could shock me, but that’s bullshit. Some things shock me. But never the things you
would expect. I think you better tell me before you explode, whatever it is. I guess it has to do with sex.”

“Yes, sure, what else.” She pointed to the pack of cigarettes. Karen passed her one, lit it for her. “I don’t know
where to start.”

“Anyplace.”
“Yeah, I guess.”

It surprised her how easy it was to talk about it. The words flowed in a steady stream. She began with Sully’s first problems with impotence and worked her way straight through to the present. Karen never interrupted, never said a word. Sometimes Melanie averted her own gaze when she spoke about certain things, but when her eyes returned to Karen, the younger girl was always gazing straight into them, her expression one of total interest and total acceptance.

It was as if she were talking to herself, much as making love to Karen had had an autoerotic element to it. At the same time it was far more than talking to herself, even as their lovemaking had been worlds beyond simple masturbation. Karen’s ears gathered her words as Karen’s eyes gathered her own eyes, as Karen’s loins had gathered and drunk the reverse, unknown side of her womanhood.

“You get to be on the other side of the mirror.”

That had been Karen’s phrase, and Melanie had caught portions of its meaning when she heard the words but could not understand all of it until she had taken the looking-glass trip herself. She had reached the other side of the mirror in lovemaking. Now she was reaching it in speech. It seemed incredible to her that she had never done this before. It was so vital to do this. If you never looked through from the other side of the mirror then you never saw yourself plain. All you ever looked at was your reflection.

When she had finished talking, when the words ran out, she sat in silence. She was waiting, but not for Karen to speak. She was waiting to hear the echo of her own words. Then something within her that had been tight was suddenly loose, something that had been a knot untied herself. She sat perfectly still, silent, not sobbing, and tears fell out of her eyes.

When the tears stopped, she got up without a word and went down for fresh drinks. She did not wipe her tears away. When she was back in bed Karen wiped them with a touch as soft as petals.

Melanie said, “Well?”

“What a thing to keep inside you.”

“I couldn’t do it. You saw that I couldn’t.”

“What a string of changes to go through. It’s all so far-out. I’m sick of that expression but nothing else fits. It’s so completely far-out.”

“And I didn’t shock you?”

“Do I look shocked?”

“But what do you really think, Karen?”

“You probably know.”

“I have to hear it.”

“Right. Well, I think you have a beautiful thing. The thing is it works for you.”

“Sometimes I’m so disgusted with myself. And with him.”

“For putting up with it?”

“For wanting it.”

“Putting up with it might be sick. But not wanting it.”

“I know, but sometimes—”

“Sure.”

Later she said, “Karen? Could we?”

“You have to say you love me.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“I love you, you know.”

“It’s the words, it’s getting the words out. Oh, God, what you do to me. The way you touch me. I love you. Was that what you want to hear?”

“I want to hear it a lot.”

“Oh, God, God, I do. I love you.”

And afterward, “Will you tell him about this, Melanie?”

“I was just thinking that.”

“It wouldn’t bother me.”


“Why?”

“Because I love you. Because this is ours. Do you know something? I am cheating on him for the first time. But it still isn’t cheating, is it? Will we see each other sometime?”
“Yes.”
“Do you have anybody else?”
“Not right now, but I will. You’re thinking that that will bother you. But it won’t.”
“I feel so strange.”
“I know.”
“So very strange.”
“I know.”
TWENTY-FOUR

Nude, Gretchen stepped onto the bathroom scale. It was new; Peter had bought it for her when she first began to gain weight. She noted now that she had only gained a pound since the last time she weighed herself. She was not sure just how long it had been, but it didn’t seem as though it could have been very long. She was always getting on that scale these days; it was something she found herself doing every time she had her clothes off.

She dressed now, humming softly to herself. This was the perfect afternoon for what she had to do. She had dropped a load of wash at the laundromat when she took Robin to play with some other children. The clothes would be ready to go in the dryer now, and on the way back she could stop at the Raparound for a cup of hot chocolate and a piece of crumb cake. Three tasks would be handled on one trip. She would be concerning herself with the business of maintaining her household, the business of gaining weight, and the business of guarding her flanks.

It was simply a matter of organization, of using time properly. Of course you had to be very intelligent to manage it and you had to possess an iron will. But none of what she was doing would be possible without an iron will.

There were times when it seemed that gaining weight was the hardest part of all. Eating was no problem. Here was where will came into play. The ordinary person ate when he was hungry and confined himself to food he enjoyed eating. But this would not do in her case. She was never hungry; she could never abide the taste of food. So she rose above herself and ate anyway, pretending to enjoy every bite she swallowed. And it was working. She was still thin but she was gaining weight.

But so slowly! Of course it was all part of the plan. They never made it easy for you. If you were overweight, then even a starvation diet brought little weight loss, while the least bit of eating shot your weight up again. If you were underweight, you had to gorge yourself put any weight on your bones, and if you relaxed vigil the pounds melted away before you knew it. It was doubly hard for her because she had to concentrate so hard. The concentration burned off valuable calories, but she didn’t dare relax her concentration for a moment.

Anything was possible if you concentrated. Anything. She could gain weight, she could manage the household, she could cook meals, she could be loving with Robin, and she could be precisely the person Peter wanted her to be. She could stay away from pills and alcohol. She could even stay away from cigarettes but had decided it might be too abrupt for her to quit smoking.

The hardest part was sleeping, but even that could be achieved by concentration. By mind over matter, or was it more accurate to call it mind over mind?

No never mind, she thought. No matter. No mind matter. No matter mind.

She had to choke back a giggle. She was alone, of course, and she might have treated herself to a giggle, but it was vital to maintain discipline. If you did so while alone, it was all the more easy to do so in company.

And how could you ever be absolutely certain you were alone? They could go anywhere; they could take all sorts of forms. You might well be alone but could not be sure of it, so you had to behave all the time as if they were watching. Even in sleep, even when Peter and Robin were themselves asleep.

She couldn’t steal his soul anymore while he slept. It was unsafe. But it was also unnecessary, for she had stolen back her sleep. Not always; there were nights when her most intense concentration would not make sleep come. But she was getting better and better at it, and soon she would have the knack mastered.

She left the building and walked quickly to the laundromat. The sun was glaring down, but all she had to do was tell herself not to feel the heat and it ceased to bother her. Everything was simple when you knew what to do.

She transferred the load of clothes to the dryer, put in three dimes for thirty minutes, and walked back through the heat (which she did not feel) to the Raparound. The fat swarthy waitress was the only one on duty, which suited her plans perfectly. She glanced around, recognized two people whom she knew, and greeted them perfectly—a quick word, a pleasant smile, enough enthusiasm but not too much. Then she took a table by herself, selecting one as far from the couple she knew as possible.

When the waitress came over Gretchen beamed at her. “Why, hello, Anne,” she said. “I’d like a piece of crumb cake and a cup of hot chocolate.”

“Oh, I don’t mind the heat,” she said. While she waited for her food she smoked a cigarette and considered the cleverness of the girl. Oh, she was clever; she’d been well prepared. Hot chocolate in this weather? Not clever enough, though. Not nearly clever enough.

Her order came quickly, another mark of Anne’s cleverness. “Why, thank you,” Gretchen told her. “Won’t you sit for a moment?”

“Well, I shouldn’t.”

“I’d appreciate it. And I purposely came at a time when you wouldn’t be too busy.”
“You did?”

You did? A neat trap, that one, designed to lead her down conversational detours. But she was good enough at dodging such traps.

“I’ve been wanting to tell you how much I appreciate everything you’ve done for us, Anne.”

“I really didn’t do anything.”

“Of course that little bit of difficulty is over now.”

“Oh, I know, and I’m so pleased for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes, I think it’s wonderful.”

“You perspire a great deal, don’t you, Anne?” The girl colored under her olive skin.

“It’s this heat. I don’t know what I’m gonna do if it keeps up. I almost liked the rain better.”

“Just look at you.” She smiled warmly and matched the smile with the warmth of her voice. “Sweat stains under your arms. Filthy nauseating stains under your arms.

“I—”

“Don’t you use a deodorant?”

“I’m allergic. But I don’t—”

“And your skin is so dark. Are you part nigger, Anne? That would explain a lot of things.”

The girl’s face was a study, mouth hanging open like a ruptured cow. She was on the ropes now. All that was necessary was to keep up the pressure.

“You must have nigger blood, Anne. Your last name is Tedesco, isn’t it? That means ‘German’ in Italian. That’s a very clever ruse. I’m one of the few people likely to see through it. But it’s all so hopeless, isn’t it?” The smile again, and she let the poor stupid thing gape and babble while she took a large bite of crumb cake and washed it down with a sip of hot chocolate. As hard as she was concentrating on Anne, she was still able to get the food down without noticing any taste whatsoever. It was all a matter of concentration and discipline. When you had that, nothing on earth could stop you.

Now the final touch.

“Absolutely hopeless. Peter would never have anything to do with a sweating nigger. They fooled you into thinking so, they’re clever, but you must know better. You don’t have the slightest chance. You see, I know everything.” She squared her shoulders, beaming benevolently in triumph. “And I have the final trump card. If you ever came close to getting Robin, I would kill her. Just kill her. After all, she’s the Devil’s daughter, or didn’t they tell you that?”

She paused, deliberately offering the opportunity for a rejoinder. But Anne wasn’t capable of one. She was utterly defeated.

“So there’s no way you can win. You’d better tell them you don’t want to try anymore. For your own sake. You’d better leave my table now before we’re noticed. I’ll go as soon as I’ve finished my cake and coffee. I’ll pay you now. Here’s a dollar. You may keep the change. You see, I don’t hold it against you, Anne. You were misinformed. It’s not really your fault.”

She took just the right amount of time finishing her snack. There was no point in arousing suspicions. And this way her timing would be perfect; she would get back to the laundromat just as the dryer finished its thirty minute cycle.

A wave of pride lifted her. She gave herself a moment to relish it, then pushed it carefully aside. Pride was said to precede a fall, and she had no intention of falling. Ever.

Anne Tedesco did not see Gretchen leave. She had gone directly from Gretchen’s table to the employees’ lavatory and was still there when Gretchen departed. Even so, she barely reached the little room in time. Perspiration gushed from her skin. It seemed as though every pore she owned had opened to its fullest diameter. She was nauseous and almost too dizzy to stay upright. She leaned over the toilet bowl, retching uncontrollably. Nothing came up, nothing would come up, but the nausea took forever to abate.

When she was finally able to leave the lavatory, Danny caught her on her way back through the kitchen. He said, “What the hell took you so long? I thought you … hey, Annie, you all right?”

“No.”

“You look like hell. You want to lie down upstairs?”

“I can’t,” she said. She took off her apron, mopped her face with it, set it on the counter. “I can’t hack it today,” she said. “I’ll be in tomorrow.”

“You go straight home and get in bed. Listen, maybe you better see a doctor.”

“No.”

“Straight home. And don’t worry about tomorrow, you understand?”
But she did not walk home. She walked to the corner and stood there, trying to focus her thoughts. Another wave of nausea struck her as she reviewed what Gretchen had said. It was not just the words. It was the way they combined with that beaming face, that charming voice.

She crossed the street and walked to the theater.
TWENTY-FIVE

When the evening performance ended Peter stayed at the board and looked at his watch. Two minutes, he thought. But it was less than a minute and a half before Tony Bartholomew burst in on him. Peter focused his gaze on the producer’s white linen ascot and let the words go past him. He caught disjointed phrases: “Worst fucking display … absolute incompetence … abysmal . . . throwing actors off-stride . . . ruin every fucking effect…”

When Tony stopped for breath, Peter said, “I know just how bad it was, Tony. I know better than you do, and you don’t have to tell me about it.”

“I want an explanation, you insolent son of a bitch!”

“Well, we all have our hangups, Tony.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to, you little cock-sucker?”

“I gave that up a long time ago.” He almost grinned at the man’s blank stare, but he could no more manage a grin than he could change the flat level deadness of his voice. “It’s a waste of breath giving me hell, Tony. I got enough of it already.”

“Personal problems are one thing—”

“They certainly are. Look, punch me out if you want, I can’t stop you, but don’t yell at me. You can’t fire me.”

“Because I quit.”

“The hell you quit. The fucking hell you quit. Did you ever hear an expression called ‘The show must go on’? I don’t suppose you did. I don’t suppose—”

“Yeah, I heard it. That’s why I didn’t cut out this afternoon when I wanted to. That expression never made any sense in the first place but I didn’t want to fuck everybody up. Well, a blind chimpanzee would have done the show more good than I did. Good-bye, Tony.”

“Wait a minute!”

“Fuck you.”

“What?”

“I said go fuck yourself. You’re a fatass cocksucker and your mother eats pig prick. You’re a thief and a liar and a disgrace to the theater, Tony. Fuck you. Drop dead.” The words were without meaning to him and he spoke them without venom. They achieved their purpose. Tony Bartholomew fell back as if kicked, and Peter wasted no time in getting past him and out the door. On his way through the parking lot he heard people calling his name but didn’t stop to see who they were. He walked on as if he heard nothing, nothing at all. He just kept walking without paying any attention to where he was going. At one point, as he crossed a street in mid-block, a driver hit his brakes hard and swerved to miss him. He kept walking, heading away from the driver’s curses, walking as if nothing had happened.

It didn’t matter where he went because there was no place to go. There was never any place to go, so it didn’t matter where you went. It hardly mattered whether or not you kept moving, but it was easier than standing still.

When Warren finally found him he was leaning against the cannon with his hands in his pockets and his head tilted up toward the stars.

“How did you happen to know that Tony Bart’s mother eats pig prick? It’s supposed to be a closely guarded secret, and now absolutely everybody knows.”

“Is that what I said?”

“Among other bon mots.”

“I don’t even remember.”

“What really struck home was when you called him a thief and a liar and a disgrace to the performing arts. He’s all those things and knows it, but it still troubles him to have it brought to his attention. I’ve been looking all over hell and gone for you, you know.”

“I guess I’ve been waiting for you to find me.”

“We ought to establish a secret rendezvous spot for just such contingencies. And a less public one than that which you’ve chosen this time. My car’s across the street. We can go to my house or drive around. I’d vote for driving around.”

“Sure.”

“And you can tell Aunt Warren all about it.”

“What good will it do?”

“Bloody little, probably. But you’ve nothing better to do than talk, and I’ve nothing better to do than listen.”

But he didn’t start talking until Warren had driven for half a dozen blocks. He put his head back on the seat and
closed his eyes and reeled off everything that Anne had told him.

“You haven’t seen Gretchen since then?”

“No.”

“You’ve just had Anne Tedesco’s word, and she was in a state at the time.”

“She was hysterical, Warren, and I don’t blame her. But she wasn’t crazy.”

“But you didn’t go back to see Gretchen.”

“I couldn’t.”

“I see. And until Anne reported to you, you had no reason to doubt that Gretchen was completely recovered?”

“You sound like a lawyer, Warren.”

“I am trying to sound like a lawyer, Peter, for precisely the reason that lawyers try to sound like lawyers. Answer the question.”

“Now you sound like the judge. When does my lawyer get a chance to object?”

“Please don’t stall.”

“I don’t know if I had reason to doubt or not. But I doubted. From about the third or fourth day on.”

“I never heard you say a thing to that effect.”

“I didn’t dare.” He explained the hints he had put together, the clues that had been enough to convince him, explained too his fear that his suspicions were a form of wish fulfillment. “And what Anne said fit in perfectly. It was just what I would figure her to do, just what she would come up with if the whole thing’s an act.”

“Oh, hell,” Warren said.

“Yeah, that’s what it is, and I got the warmest chair.”

“You know that she has to be committed.”

“How could I commit her when she’s acting sane for the first time in her life?”

“Do you think she could fool a trained psychiatrist?”

“I think she could fool God and Perry Mason.”

“That does complicate things. And neither of us are relative, and we can’t produce a psychiatrist who’s familiar with her case. Peter, I’m very concerned.”

“So am I.”

“Let me think for a minute. Christ, I wish she’d hanged herself so I’d be obliged merely to comfort you and disperse a crowd or two. I’m better equipped that sort of thing. No, there’s no question about it. The woman has to be committed. I’m not a psychiatrist, but sometimes I think I ought to have been one. So many lives I could have led. It’s hell being limited to just one of them. Of course you know what’s wrong with her.”

“Yeah, she’s out of her fucking tree.”

“That’s probably as valid as the clinical terminology. She’s a paranoid schizophrenic with delusions of grandeur, Peterkin, which is idiot talk for a combination of split personality, persecution complex and a tendency to confuse oneself with God.” He inhaled through clenched teeth. “This is not a thumbnail diagnosis. She showed symptoms of all of that months ago, and her little Main Street performance would have drawn that diagnosis from any halfway-bright premed major at Whitewater State.”

“So why is it so much more serious now?”

“Because before she was weak and now she’s strong. She was passive before, and dangerous only to herself. And now she’s active.”

“And dangerous to others?”

“She could be. Sooner or later she’ll almost have to be. Right now she’s busy playing a role and fooling the world. She can’t play it forever. Sooner or later she has to break. In fact she’s broken already. Not in front of you; that was just the mask glimpsed from an angle, that combined with your own sensitivity to the woman. But she certainly broke in front of Anne. Anne hardly knows her at all but knew she was face to face with a maniac.”

“She couldn’t help knowing.”

“Obviously. The point is that Gretchen doesn’t know she took her mask off. She thought she was still in her role and never realized the script didn’t make any sense. The danger is that she’ll slip and know it. Oh, I don’t have the clinical background for this, and anyway not even the best shrinks can agree on anything, let alone just what a person in her condition might do. Or when she might decide to do it.”

“Robin’s with her now.”

“I know.” “Well?”

“No, I wouldn’t worry about it. Peter, I have to think. I have a lot of scraps and shreds that I have to put into some semblance of order. I’m going to drive around for a little while. I’ll be talking to myself. It’s a useful mechanism but considered antisocial. I’ll say any number of things and you’re not to comment or interrupt. I want to be able to pretend you’re not here at all. Do you understand?”
“No, but I’ll shut up, if that’s what you mean.”

“It is. Not another word … I should have been a psychiatrist. And a lawyer, and a judge, and Hamlet’s father’s ghost. Not Prince Hamlet nor was meant to be … I should have been a pair of ragged claws … Or a criminal, a master criminal. A con man, an illusionist … Had to be an actor. Other men have to live one life all the way to the grave. Actor lives a thousand lives and never has one of his own … Brave man never tastes of death but once … Hi-diddly-dee, an actor’s life for me … We’ll go to Paradise Island, Peternocchio, and let our noses grow, and we won’t be back for donkey’s years … You can’t kid a kidder, but God never made an actress who couldn’t be upstaged. Or upstaged an actress who couldn’t be made … What it comes down to is illusion, one against the other. Not what you know but who you look like … Turn it around and look at it backwards. Suppose the place was a Mooreeffoc, and Dickens got tricked into thinking it was a coffee room? Never would have been the wiser, Bud. Older Budweiser … I grow stout, I shall wear the bottom of my trousers out … In the room the women belch and fart, talking of Jean-Paul Sartre … It’s the morality of it that’s the sticking point. You can’t play God unless you’re Charlton Heston … Damned sight easier on the stage …”

At last he was silent for a long time. Peter sensed he was finished, but many of his silences had been almost as long, and he did not want to interrupt. Ultimately Warren said, “Game’s over, lad. If I ever hear any of that gibberish repeated I’ll stop loving you forever.”

“Some of it sounded really great. Did it mean anything in particular?”

“Think of it as background music. Would you mind awfully if I went and looked in on Gretchen?”

“Now?”

“Yes. If for no other reason, to supply her with a useful explanation for your absence. I gather you don’t want to play the dutiful lover right at the moment.”

“Or ever.”

“That’s understandable, but it might shatter her if you stay out all night without a word.”

“Christ, I never even thought——”

“I’ll find a thing to tell her. And I want to look at her myself. I believe you, Peter. And I believe Anne. But I believe my own eyes more.”

“And you think you’ll be able to tell?”

“I know I will.”

He waited in Warren’s car. It took Warren less than ten minutes. He came back wearing an expression Peter had not seen before. His face was pale, with spots of color in his cheeks that looked like rouge hastily applied. And there was the trace of a smile on his lips.

“Well?”

“Yes, of course. I found just what I expected to find. Just what you and Anne described.”

“What happened?”

“Why, nothing at all.” He turned the ignition key, pulled away from the curb. “She played her part perfectly. I told her you’d had trouble at the theater. Tony Bart attacked you for no reason at all. She wasn’t surprised, it meshed perfectly with her paranoia. I explained I was organizing a committee to get you rehired, and failing that, I might be able to find you something better. She said not to worry about her and she’ll let you sleep late in the morning.”

“Where did she slip up?”

“She didn’t.” Warren ran his hand over his forehead. “She showed me the same face she’s shown you and the rest of the world. She was the old Gretchen, fully recovered, calm and collected and sensitive and aware. She met me head on with the mask perfectly in place.”

“Then how did you know it was a mask?”

“Because I’ve known her since you were in diapers, Peter. And there never was an old Gretchen. She was never like that in her life. She greeted me as if I were her dearest friend on earth. And she has hated me consistently for more years than I care to remember. That was really all I had to see.”

“Why does she hate you?”

“I’m taking you to my house,” Warren went on. “I told Gretchen we’d be there and I want you to be able to receive any phone calls she might think to make. And I have some calls of my own to make. I worked something out before. It’s shocking. It will surely be the worst thing I’ve ever done in my life and I doubt I’ll outdo myself in the years remaining to me. But I also think it will work, and I can’t think of anything else that has a shadow of a chance.”

“What is it?”

“In due time. You’ll have a part in it. You played some walk-ons before you inherited the light board, didn’t you? Were you any good?”

“I was never onstage long enough to tell.”
“Did you live those roles?”
“There was nothing to live.”
“Then you’ve answered my question. You’re not an actor.”
“I never said I was.”
“No, but you’re going to have to be one for … perhaps two days. Can you play a part, Peter?”
“I’ve been playing one for weeks.”
“But you weren’t absolutely sure it was a role. And now you are. Can you act the same as you did?”
“I think so.”
“And can you lie?”
“I guess so.”
“You won’t have lines to learn. Strictly improv. The curtain goes up tomorrow morning and the last act ends probably on Sunday.”
“I can try, Warren.”
“You may not want to. Even if you’re able, you may not be willing. We have to create an illusion, we have to write a script her part won’t play against. I had to see her face to face before I could talk myself into it.”
“Warren?”
“When we get there. Not now. I’m going to need a drink first.” “Something else. I asked you a question before.”
“I know you did.”
“You never answered it.”
“No, I didn’t. Why does she hate me? Oh, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t know. It’s common knowledge; you’d have heard it yourself except it happened—too long ago to be interesting. We were lovers once.”
“You and Gretchen?”
“Is it all that hard to imagine? Yes, she and I.”
“When I was still in diapers.”
“When you weren’t long out of them. She was very beautiful then, and utterly damned. The madness was always there. It was less sharply defined but it was always there. I think I sensed it. Perhaps I did, perhaps that’s hindsight. I left her for … oh, for a man.”
“Oh.”
“Don’t say it so heavily. I had come out long before that. And I had gone through heterosexual phases before Gretchen. None after her, though. Not really.” A pause. “I had to leave her. It seemed less disloyal to leave her for a man than for another woman. I’m afraid she never saw it that way.”
“You and Gretchen.”
“She and I. The Odd Couple—we could each have played either part.”
“You still love her.”
“Yes, of course. I never stopped loving her and she never stopped hating me. There are two sorts of people in the world, those who go on loving and those who hate. It’s always seemed to me that the former half tend to be male and the latter half female, but perhaps that’s just my own special perspective coming to bear.”
“I never would have guessed any of this.”
“Probably not. And neither she nor I ever dreamed of telling you, which is something worth consideration when we have world enough and time. We have neither at the moment, thank God. We have arrived. You’ve never been here, have you? That’s Bert’s piano. It’s only a shame he can’t be here to play it for you.”
“When will he be home?”
“Tomorrow night, I think. Tonight, actually. It’s already Saturday morning. He went to New York some eighteen hours ago on a secret mission. I’m supposed to believe that an aunt of his is critically ill. I hope you can lie better than B. R. LeGrand, Peter, or our mission is doomed in advance. He’s as opaque as a broken window, and I’ll have the job of pretending shock and dismay when he comes home and announces he’s leaving me. Don’t be downcast. It falls miles short of tragedy. And don’t worry that this is all a scheme to put your fair white body next to mine.”
“Christ, Warren. I never thought that.”
“I know. Well, your virtue’s safe. All you can lose tonight is your immortal soul.”
TWENTY-SIX

By five o’clock Saturday morning Peter was in bed at Gretchen’s side. She had not stirred when he entered the room, nor had she made any response when he stood at her side and spoke her name. He had done so on the chance that she was awake, hoping that even so she would pretend to be sleeping. After a few minutes in bed with her he relaxed. This time she was genuinely asleep. He had learned to tell the difference.

He would not sleep himself. He was keyed so tightly that sleep might have been impossible in any case, and the fifteen-milligram spansule of Dexedrine he had swallowed an hour earlier had eliminated any possibility of sleep. He felt the speed working within him now. His mind was working with the clarity that nothing else on earth could supply. He was so much smarter now, so much more capable. And that, of course, was the drug’s blessing and its curse. You could not function so perfectly without wanting that perfection to last forever, and so you piled speed on speed until your system over-amped and your mind’s legs ran out from under you.

Warren had given him a handful of the pills. They’d been discussing the role he had to play, had spent hours putting the details together and fitting them in place, until Peter mentioned that, in his few appearances onstage, he had always felt more competent and surer of himself when he was behind a little speed.

“Then by all means drop some,” Warren had said. “We need all the help we can get.”

“The thing is, I was into it pretty heavily at one time. It took a long time to crash completely. What I’m getting at is I’m a little afraid of it.”

“Can you get hooked in thirty-six hours? I really don’t think you can. I don’t doubt it will improve your performance. It would do that much if it merely increased your confidence. And it does boost IQ by around ten points in test situations.”

“I’ve heard that.”

“It also comes closer than anything else to duplicating the symptoms of schizophrenia. Have you heard that?”

“No. That explains why total speed freaks are such terrific company, wouldn’t it? That’s just what we need. I’ll turn into a temporary Gretchen.”

“Not in the dosage you’ll get. But consider the part you’ll be playing. If it gives you just the slightest nudge in that direction, you’ll be more convincing, and you’ll also be more sensitive to Gretchen herself.”

“Right. I can dig it.”

He would also be awake until it was over. He was already exhausted, running on nerves, and the drug would keep him running. It was worth it. He did not want to be asleep while Gretchen was awake. If she flipped, he wanted to be able to handle it.

Assuming that he could handle it. He was slight, and by no means strong. She was not strong herself; the weight she had put on was a great improvement over the way she had been, but she was still in far from perfect physical shape. She would have the strength of madness, and Warren had assured him that this was no myth. She would not hold back, she would act flat out with nothing held in reserve, and this would make her faster and stronger and more deadly.

Well, at least he would be awake. The drug in his bloodstream would see to that, and when it began to wear off another pill would reinforce it. And it would give him a little bit of an edge if he needed it; he, too, would be a little faster, a little stronger, a little deadlier.

But he knew he would feel better once Robin was out of her reach.

At daybreak Clem McIntyre spoke his wife’s name. She woke instantly in the bed across the room from him.

She said, “I’m right here, darling.”

“You ought to be at home, baby.”

“We both ought to be at home. It won’t be much longer. How do you feel?”

“A little better.”

“We’ll be out of here in a few days, darling. Because you’re getting better.”

He was silent for a few minutes. She eased her legs over the side of the hospital bed and got to her feet. She stood at his bedside looking down at him, then seated herself in the chair at the side of his bed.

He said, “We’ve never played games with each other, Olive. This is no time to start.”

“I thought you’d gone back to sleep.”

“Just ran out of words. I’m not getting better. I know what cirrhosis is. You don’t have to be a doctor to know what it’s all about. Every alcoholic knows the prognosis and it ain’t good. When the liver goes it’s time to make reservations at the boneyard.”

“I’ll make you a deal.”

“What?”
“I won’t talk about getting better if you won’t talk about getting worse.”
“You’re some woman.”
“Deal?”
“Deal.”
“And you’ve got a hell of a nerve anyway, Clem. Saying we never played games with each other. We played a
game the first day we met.”
“A game?” He closed his eyes for a moment. His color was better today, she noticed. Not good, but better. “Yes, I
guess you would have to call that a game. We both knew the rules right from the beginning.”
“And we both won.”
“And we both won. That was a good day, wasn’t it?”
“They’re all good days,” said Olive McIntyre.
When Gretchen got out of bed Peter was instantly wide awake. Until then he had coasted in a waking dream,
running Warren’s plan through his mind, hearing voices speak the various lines until what he was going through was
closer to dream than thought. Her movements snapped him out of all that, and he was alert.
It was a temptation to pretend to be asleep, to squeeze out an extra hour before he had to step onto the stage. He
knew better. He was not at all certain that he could act the part of a sleeper well enough to fool Gretchen, and the
most important thing he could do was make sure his own mask stayed in place.
He got out of bed just as she was emerging from the bathroom. He met her in the middle of the room and took her
in his arms and kissed her. He had thought this would be difficult. The ease of it surprised him.
“You’re up early. I was creeping like a mouse. I thought I would let you sleep.”
“I’m surprised I slept as long as I did.”
“How long was that?”
“What time is it now? Seven thirty? It was around five when I got home, so what does that make it? Two and a
half hours.”
“Christ, Petey. You want to crawl back in bed?”
“No, I couldn’t.”
“I mean, less than three hours.”
“I’m all right, though.”
“Warren told me that something went wrong at the Playhouse. Is that why you can’t sleep? Shit, baby, it’s just a
job.”
“Something went wrong, all right.” He lowered his eyes and let anxiety show on his face. “Something went
wrong. And it’s a lot more than a job.”
“What do you mean?”
He hesitated. “Warren and I were up the whole night,” he said. “Gretchen, it wasn’t an accident that I was fired.”
“I don’t—”
“I have to tell you this. And I’m not sure I know how.”
“You can tell me anything.”
“I know that.”
“I’m myself again, baby. I’m a very strong person, stronger than I ever knew.”
“I know you are, Gretch.” He drew a breath, “There’s a plot against us. That’s why I lost the job last night. That’s
why a lot of things have happened There’s a plot and we’re the ones it’s aimed at.”
“Oh my God.”
“I just found out last night. That’s why I’m a little shaky. You’ve known all along, haven’t you?”
“For a long time, yes.”
“I wish I could have known earlier.”
She bit her lip. “I tried to tell you. But I was afraid. That you would think—”
“That it was part of what was wrong with you before?”
“Yes. And in a way it was. They made me the way was, until I learned discipline and concentration. Discipline
and concentration bring control, you know.”
“I know.”
“Oh, God, Petey, I’m so relieved. I can’t tell you how relieved I am. I thought—I can’t even say it.”
“That I was in on it.”
She nodded furiously. “Yes, yes, yes. I couldn’t make myself believe that, though. I knew it was what they
wanted me to believe and I knew you loved me. But I thought they might have found a way to turn you against me.
They’re very clever. I thought they might have duped you.”
“They almost did.”
“We have so much to talk about now. Christ, I haven’t been able to relax in ages.” Her face clouded for a moment. “I still can’t relax, can I? That’s what they wait for. But at least there’s one person on earth I can trust. Oh, we have so much to tell each other.”

“You know more than I do. And I’ll want to hear all of it. But it had better wait. I think Robin’s waking up.”

“You don’t mean—”

“No. God, no. She’s part of their scheme, though. In fact I think it’s aimed at her almost more than at either of us.”

“The thoughts they’ve made me have about her—”

“But we can control our thoughts now, can’t we?” She nodded, beaming, and he felt like a pupil who had come up with the right answer. He took hold of her and kissed her again, and she clung to him with a fierce grip.

He said, “We’d better not talk right now. For Robin’s sake.”

“You’re right. Are you hungry, Petey?”

If he could have had an appetite, the Dexedrine had banished it. “I’m starving,” he said, and read her face just in time. He glanced toward the window, cupped a hand to his ear, put his forefinger to his lips. Then he put his arm around her waist and led her into the bathroom, closed the door, turned on the sink taps and the shower.

He whispered, “I have no appetite but I didn’t want to say it.”

“I should have thought of that. Sometimes it’s almost impossible to think of everything.”

“Well, at least there are two of us working on it now.”

“You’ll be able to eat. It’s a matter of will.”

“I know.”

“That’s the most important thing.”

“The will?”

“Eating. That’s how they get to you. They starved me to death. It’s taking forever for me to get weight back. But there’s a trick. If you concentrate, you don’t even taste the food. It goes right down and you don’t have to taste it.”

“It’s the taste that’s so awful.”

“I know. But you’ll get past that in no time, Petey, Trust me.”

“I do.”

He washed his face and brushed his teeth before turning off the sink and shower. They left the bathroom together.

Robin was standing by the side of her bed rubbing sleep from her eyes. “Breakfast time!” Gretchen sang out gaily.

“Hungry, Robin baby?”

“Uh-huh.”

“So’s Mommy. Mommy could eat a horse,” she said, winking at Peter.

Robin said, “Eat a horse!” and burst into giggles.

For breakfast, Peter and Gretchen between them ate nine eggs, five pancakes with syrup, a half pound of bacon, and three English muffins with butter and jam. They drank several cups of coffee with cream and sugar.

David Loewenstein took as much time cleaning his pipe as it had taken him to smoke it. He separated the bowl and stem, knocked the dottle into an ashtray, twisted pipe cleaners into various shapes and employed them in various stages of the operation. Warren watched, fascinated. It was a shame, in a way, that Loewenstein’s most obvious idiosyncrasy was one any fourth-rate actor would have invented on his own; all psychiatrists smoked pipes and they all made a ritual of it.

Loewenstein was a tall man, a little taller and a little leaner than Warren. His dark-brown beard was bushy, his hair neatly combed but shaggy in the back. Pipe ashes had burned several holes in his shirt and tie.

When he was done with the pipe he said, “I have to tell you I don’t like a single bit of this.”

“I know what you have to tell me, David.”

“A figure of speech. I am serious, Warren. I disapprove.”

“It’s not your approval I require, David.”

“Merely my cooperation.”

“I rather prefer acquiescence.”

“And I in turn could prefer a phrase like accessory before the fact. Cooperation seemed a neutral meeting place. You require my cooperation. I don’t see how I can give it.”

“Will it work, David?”

The psychiatrist made a tent of his fingertips. “Yes, of course it will work,” he said at length. “Your objective is so easily attained. It is criminally easy.” He smiled without humor. “What you are planning to do, that too is criminal.”

“It was criminal for us to make love, David.”

“You must know that there is a limit to what you can draw from that particular account.”
“I wasn’t doing that. I was merely putting the concept of criminality into some perspective.”
“And perhaps telling me at the same time that I am not a stickler for the law?”
“You’ve always been too clever for me, David.”
“Oh? And for so many years I’ve thought it was the other way around. Let it go. I grant that laws do not demand devotion. Laws are one thing. Ethics another.”
Warren rolled his eyes.
“I am not scoring debating points, my good friend. I take ethics seriously.”
“I’m not asking you to violate them.”
“But that is precisely what—”
“Merely to bend them.”
“I am afraid they are not that flexible.”
“Oh?” He noted that he’d unconsciously given the word the same inflection Loewenstein used. “Bend them and they snap?”
“I am afraid so.”
“David, there is no place for ethics in relations between friends. Don’t look at me like that. You know it’s true. Ethics exist to codify behavior between persons who are otherwise not obligated to one another. And I am not asking you to violate the Hippocratic oath. I am merely—what is it?”
“I was remembering the language of the oath. Let me think a moment. You know, I believe you are correct.”
“I know I am. I read the oath last night after I spoke with you.”
He went on, making points, countering objections, taking more time than he wanted to take. The psychiatrist liked to take arguments apart with the same thoroughness with which he cleaned his pipes.
Finally Warren broke in. “David, let’s shorten this. There’s only one question that applies. Is there another way of doing what has to be done?”
“Speaking as a psychiatrist—”
“No. Speak as yourself.”
“I am a psychiatrist. It’s difficult not to speak as one.”
“It’s easier if you don’t attach that preface to your speech.”
“Hell. Shit. I could commit her.”
“With no firsthand knowledge of the case?”
“Yes. It is improper but I would go that far with you. It would not stand up. But it would not have to stand up. Once she’s in there long enough for them to look at her—”
“Your colleagues are not universally competent. I’m only repeating what you’ve said to me. And simply committing her leaves too many loose ends. We have been over them, David. You are stalling.”
Loewenstein picked up his pipe, took it apart, put it back together again.
Warren said, “It’s a lovely briar, David.”
“Mmmm. Hell.” He put the pipe down and glared at it, then heaved a sigh. “Go over it again,” he said. “Not the situation. Just what you expect of me.” And after Warren had finished he said, “Not my car.”
“You could report it as stolen.”
“In the first place, no. In the second place, the whole idea is excessively dramatic, it risks more than it seeks to safeguard, it’s an antiballistic missile system built to protect a dog kennel. In the—”
“You have a talent for metaphor.”
“And you for obfuscation. In the third place, no again.”
“Then the license plates.”
“I do not want to be connected with this, Warren, and you seem to fail to understand that. No one will check your license plates.”
“Swear to it?”
“Damn you. How am I to drive around without plates? And I intend to drive my whole family to Philadelphia and spend the entire day in the company of friends.”
“I was going to suggest that.”
“Well?”
“I’ll switch plates with you.”
“And if I’m stopped? And if the plates do not match with the registration?”
“You left your registration at home.”
“I want my plates back on my car by Monday morning.”
“Certainly. And drive carefully, David.”
“Go to hell.”
“David? Don’t you have a second car? Couldn’t you use one car while I use the plates of—” He let the sentence trail off, entranced at the furious scowl that etched itself into his friend’s features. Then, before the scowl had a chance to fade, the psychiatrist erupted in laughter fiercer than the scowl. He roared.

“Schemes,” he said finally. “Plans, mechanisms, fucking clevernesses. The wise men of Chelm who could tell the horses apart because the black one was an inch and a half taller than the white one.”

“Drive carefully just the same,” Warren said.

“Peter? There’s one thing that bothers me.”

“What’s that, love?”

“Warren Ormont.”

“He was the one who explained the plot to me, Gretchen. We can trust him.”

“He might have had a reason. They’re unbelievably devious, you know.”

“I know, but not Warren.”

“I’ve known him longer than you, Peter. I’ve had my bitter experiences with Warren Ormont.”

He worked on it for a minute, then said, “I know about all that, Gretch.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“He told you?”

“Last night he had to. I’m almost afraid to tell you the rest of it.”

“I want to know, Petey.”

“All right. When Warren stopped seeing you, it wasn’t because he wanted to.” Her eyes were wide, her mouth half-open. “He was being used.”

“You don’t mean—”

“I’m afraid so. They turned him against you, Gretch.”

“But that was years ago. That was so long ago. You mean it’s been going on that long? It was going on for years before I had any idea. They must have known about Robin ages before she was born. My God, how can you fight them when they have resources like that?”

“But we’re learning more and more about them, Gretch.”

“Yes!” Her forefinger stabbed the air. “Yes! That’s right! We’re growing stronger and they’re beginning to weaken.” Her expression softened. “But poor Warren. He must have just found out. I’ve been hateful to him for years. It’s all so awful.”

“You drew strength from that hatred through the years.”

“That’s very true.”

“And now he’s on our side.”

“Oh, thank God for Warren,” she said.

At twenty minutes after eleven Sully Jaeger got up from the table and yawned. He said, “I feel like the end of the day and it’s just the beginning.”

“If you weren’t a sex maniac you wouldn’t be tired in the mornings.”

“Yeah, and if you weren’t a sex maniac, I wouldn’t be a sex maniac. And if it’s a choice between that and being wide awake in the mornings then the hell with being wide awake in the mornings.” He yawned. “I guess I’ll get over there. Saturday it starts early. Everybody has to be good and drunk before it’s Sunday. You got any plans for the day?”

“No, why?”

“Just curious.”

“No plans for the day. I was thinking I might go for a ride this evening.”

“I was wondering if you might.”

“You sound pleased.”

“I’m always pleased.”

“But with something else mixed in usually.”

“Not today.” He yawned again, stretching his arms high overhead. “What is it the kids say? I’m getting my head straight. That what they say?”

“I think so.”

“So it’s nuts to hate something and love it at the same time, and if you can’t stop loving it and loving it makes you feel better than hating it, the thing to do is stop hating it, am I right or am I right?”

“You’re right.”

“See? I’m just a big kid getting his head straight. I’ll be up when you come home. In more ways than one. You better have a good story.”
“I’ll take notes.”
“I just thought what I’m going to buy you. What’s open tomorrow? Major’s? I think I’ll take a run up to Major’s
tomorrow.”
“What for?”
“No, I’m not telling. The idea just came to me and if you can’t figure it out you’ll have to wait until tomorrow to
find out.”
“Fucker.”
“Cunt. Give me a kiss good-bye, cunt.”
“Gretch, I’m worried about Robin. The next few days are going to make the difference. The plan Warren and I
worked out is our one chance of ending this thing once and for all. And you know what that means.”
“It means we can start to live for the first time in our lives.”
“It also means they’re going to get desperate. And where will they strike?”
“Oh, God. Maybe I shouldn’t have let her play with those children. What defense can a child’s mind have against
them?”
“She’s not safe here, either. And we’re going to have to have freedom of movement, and we can’t risk bringing
her with us.”
“Let me think, Petey.”
“There is one answer,” he said. He put his finger his lips and got pencil and paper. He wrote: “Warren’s house.
They can’t penetrate it.”
She snatched the pencil and wrote: “But who will stay with her?”
“Anne Tedesco.”
“She’s one of them! Just yesterday.”
He took the pencil from her. “I know about that,” he said aloud. He wrote: “She told me what happened. You
handled her perfectly. She was a minor dupe just as you thought, and you brought her to her senses.”
She read this and said, “You would have been proud of me, baby.”
“I’m damn proud of you,” he said, while he wrote: “Anne wants to make up for what she did. She will watch
Robin at Warren’s. I will take her to Anne now. It’s all arranged.”
She took this in and frowned in concentration. She reached for the pencil but he shook his head. He was going
bananas already with the fucking pencil, his hand felt as though it had been tied in knots, and she was having so
much fun playing counterspy she would probably go on passing notes all day.
He pointed to the window, indicating that what he was going to say was for the benefit of other ears. He said,
“You know what I think I’ll do? I’ll go over to the Raparound for a bite. I’m still hungry.” She nodded approval at
that one. “Maybe I’ll see if Robin wants to keep me company. And then maybe I’ll see Tony and find out if I can get
my job back.”
A few more exchanges and he was on his way out of there. She called him just as he was drawing the door, shut.
She was at the table writing furiously.
“I just wanted to kiss you good-bye,” she said. They kissed, and then she showed him what she had written:
“While you’re gone I’ll burn this and flush the ashes down the toilet.”
It was a relief to be out of the apartment, a further relief to be out of the building. But it was not until he had
picked up Robin and turned her over to Warren and Anne that he felt the tension drain off. Only then did he realize
what a strain he had been under.
And the extraordinary thing was that it had not seemed such a strain at the time. There was something almost
enjoyable about it. And that, of course, was the most horrible part of all.
It was a game. Gretchen played it like a game with the deadly seriousness of a child at play, played it like a game
despite the absolute reality it held for her. And he, too, played it as a game and did so with the same intensity. It was
real for him, too, but their two realities had nothing in common. She at least could devote herself completely to the
world she lived in. He had to match her commitment to that fantasy world in a way that would never arouse her
suspicions—and suspicion was a way of life to her—and while he did so he had to keep in touch with reality.
Whatever in hell reality was.
His mind began to play little games with him. Paranoia was tempting; he had never before realized how seductive
it could be. Once you bought the first premise you could fit absolutely anything into your theory. The villains could
be anyone—the Communists, the Elders of Zion, the Martians, anyone at all. People who did one thing were villains
or dupes. People who did the opposite were playing along in order to deceive you. It had been startlingly easy for
him to revise her fantasies along the lines he wanted to. And he had not by any means anticipated all her questions
and reservations. She’d been throwing him curves all morning, and he’d gotten wood on every last one of them.
It scared him that he was able to do this. Did his mind work that much like hers?
And it upset him that everything he did worked primarily not because of any brilliance of his, but because of her trust in him. She trusted him. He fought his way out of those thoughts. It was the speed talking, he knew. There was some truth in there that he could worry about later, but the speed was turning things in on themselves, and that was no good.

He heard the noon whistle. The spansules were supposed to deliver a balanced dose of speed over an eight-hour period. He had taken one at four, so it was time to take another. Of course the eight-hour thing was approximate. And if you took them too closely together, they could jam up on you, and if you waited too long, they could drop you and leave you strung out.

He swallowed a pill. Twelve o’clock, the end of the longest morning of his life. He could kill an hour now, maybe a little more than that. He could explain that long an absence in any of a hundred plausible ways.

But there was no way to make an hour last forever. Sooner or later he would have to climb those stairs and be with her again, and he wasn’t sure he could do it.
TWENTY-SEVEN

When the nurse came to give Clem his bath, Olive excused herself. “I don’t know if I dare leave the two of you alone,” she said, “but there’s a call I have to make.” She turned, a smile on her lips, and left the hospital room.

A young nurse’s aide passed her in the corridor and almost dropped her bedpan. What she witnessed was transformation that looked like a camera trick worked by means of time-lapse photography. An attractive middle-aged woman emerged from a room, shoulders squared, eyes bright, face radiant. In an instant she changed into a hopeless old woman. Her shoulders slumped, her eyes were vacant and dull, her face was lined with grief, and she walked wearily as if with great effort.

At the pay telephone Olive brought herself back to life again. She dropped a coin into the slot, dialed a number. An operator asked for more money, and she deposited another coin.

When Linda answered, she said briskly, “Olive, Linda. How’s business?”

Business, it seemed, was going well enough. “Then I won’t keep you,” she said. “I’m still at Doylestown General. He’s coming along nicely, but I’ll be here another week at the least. Just carry on in your usual capable fashion. Oh, there is one thing. Don’t sell any of Clem’s paintings.”

“IT’s good you told me. Someone almost bought one about an hour ago. He was going to bring his wife back after dinner, but I’ll tell him it’s not for sale.”

“No, don’t do that. That’s not what I meant.” Her voice almost broke; she stopped herself in time and waited for a moment. “Not what I meant at all. I want you to give them away.”

“Pardon me?”

“Whenever anyone admires one, give it away free of charge. Only if the admiration is serious. Take the tags off, and if anyone asks the price find out if they’re really interested, and then make them a gift of whatever it is. Just one to a customer, though.”

“I think I understand. Just the ones on the wall or the ones in back as well?”

“All of them. There are only a few in back.” She chuckled. “At these prices they ought to move quickly. There’s a key to my house in the lockbox in back. Could you do me a favor? If you start to run out of canvases, take a run over to my place and replenish the supply. Start with the unframed canvases in the little room off the kitchen. Those should last out the week, but if they don’t, you can help yourself to the ones on the walls downstairs.”

“Won’t you want to keep some of them?”

“My favorites are upstairs on the second floor. I’d like to see the others given the widest possible exposure.”

“Olive—”

“I can’t talk anymore, Linda. You’ll do that for me, won’t you? Thank you.”

Her hand shook as she replaced the receiver. She walked back down the corridor as she had walked to the phone, slowly, wearily, a picture of resignation. But another transformation occurred before she reached the door of their room, and it was as if the film the nurse’s aide had seen were run in reverse. She entered smiling and had already thought of a bright and cheerful opening line.

Warren folded the piece of paper and tucked it into the inside breast pocket of his jacket. He drank some coffee, checked his watch, looked across the table at Peter.

“You had no trouble getting it?”

“She got the point right away. If they had Robin’s birth certificate we were in deep trouble. I’m glad she didn’t ask why. I guess I would have come up with something but God knows what.”

Warren nodded.

“Then she couldn’t find it. She was looking in the wrong drawer and she figured out that they already had the fucking thing and was sure we were going to be completely shafted. You want to hear something crazy? She had me terrified. I was dreaming up all kinds of shit—that they really had it and there really was a conspiracy—”

“Good grief.”

“I don’t think I ever really believed that. I was just afraid I was going to start believing it any minute. And I also thought she saw through everything and was stringing me along and purposely not finding the birth certificate. I may be more paranoid than she is.”

“But she did find it. That’s a blessing. Robin is quite content to be with Anne. A remarkably agreeable girl.”

“Well, she knows Anne. That helps.”

“I was speaking of Anne, though Robin is agreeable, too, I’ll admit. Anne’s rather extraordinary. I’ve told her everything, by the way. I saw no reason to keep any of it back. As far as Danny’s concerned, she went to her doctor, and he sent her to a clinic for tests, and I gave her a ride there in my car. So there are four of us who know about this. You and I and Anne and the good Dr. Loewenstein.”
“Will anyone else have to know?”

“I sincerely hope not. It would simplify my life enormously if Tony could know, but nothing on earth would
persuade me to tell him. Instead he simply thinks the world’s gone mad. Your performance last night, and now I’m
missing rehearsal. And I never miss rehearsals. I simply gave no explanation at all. They can put anyone up here to
read my lines off a script. It’s no great hardship.” He grimaced. “But I can’t miss tonight’s performance. Thank all
Gods there’s no matinee tomorrow.” He checked his watch again. “I think I’ll go see how the girls are getting along.
And closet myself in my bedroom to practice my couchside manner. You’re holding up well, aren’t you?”

“Am I? I guess I am.”

“It gets easier as it goes along. Like sodomy. Pay for my coffee, will you? I’m off.”

She was wrapping a painting when she saw Tanya outside in the hallway. The young actress was walking arm in
arm with a tall boy with long hair and a Zapata mustache. Linda had seen them together before.

The painting’s new owner was reluctant to leave. She kept saying how willing she would have been to pay for it.
“I feel so guilty,” she kept saying. “Could I buy one of the others? This is my favorite, but there are others I like as
well.”

Linda explained that she couldn’t take money for any of them and that they were one to a customer. The woman
assured her that she hadn’t been trying to make off with another free one and ultimately left saying that she would
donate the price of the painting to charity.

The shop was empty of customers, and Linda was grateful. She sat down and put her head in her hand. She
thought she knew why Olive wanted her to give the paintings away and only wished it were not so depressing. It
would have been bad enough if people would just take the things and be grateful, but they always wanted to talk
about it and she couldn’t bring herself to explain the situation.

On a better day she would have invented a story. But this was not one of her better days. There had been few
enough of those lately. Everything got to her.

Tanya, for example. Tanya had a boyfriend, and that almost certainly meant that Tanya had a lover; the girl was
hardly the sort given to long courtship or platonic relationships. Bill Donatelli had been replaced while his body was
still warm.

Well, she admitted, that was not quite true. And Tanya was not yet living with the new one. She was still sleeping
nights in her room at the Shithouse. She had moved back in after that one night in Linda’s bed—and how she could
have managed that was another thing Linda did not understand. In a while Tanya might move in with her new lover,
or he might move in with her, but for the time being Tanya slept alone.

But why did this bother her? A new love was just what Tanya needed, and it was healthy that she was able to
accept it. Linda had no loyalty to Bill Donatelli’s memory. So why should she find the sight of the two of them, arm
in arm and obviously delighted with each other, so personally disturbing?

She thought of Tanya and Bill and Olive and Clem. She thought of love and death and how the two seemed to go
together in a hideous progression. Love and Death walked arm in arm, as obviously delighted with each other as
Tanya and the boy with the mustache.

The phone rang. Hugh. He had just finished work for the day. The book was going well; it was going better than
that; he was just pages from the end and would finish it tomorrow. And a premature celebration was just what he
was in the mood for, and would she have dinner with him?

“I can’t,” she said; “I have to work tonight.”

Well, how about a late dinner? Or just a few drinks after she closed for the night?

“I’m exhausted already. I wouldn’t be good company.”

But there was something he wanted to discuss with her, something that wouldn’t work at all over the phone.
Couldn’t he just see her for half an hour? He could even come to the shop if she wanted.

She gritted her teeth. People just wouldn’t leave you alone. Over the telephone, face to face, anywhere. They
wouldn’t leave you alone. You couldn’t give them free paintings and shove them out the door. You couldn’t turn
down a dinner or a drink or a marriage proposal, couldn’t get them off the phone.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice firmer than she had intended. “Not tonight. It’s impossible; everything is
impossible.”

She broke the connection before he could force any more words into her head. There were too many words there
already. She couldn’t handle the ones she had.

She didn’t want to marry him. She didn’t want to be his wife or Karen’s mother. She didn’t want to be anybody’s
anything.

People never left you alone.

“Wasn’t that a dynamite dinner, Petey?”

“Just sensational.”
“I’m still a little hungry, though. Maybe we could go out for a milk shake. Would you like that?”
“Well—”
“A milk shake’s just what I want.”
A milk shake was not just what he wanted. What he wanted, what he really wanted, was to go somewhere private and vomit up the mountain of food he had just finished stuffing down his throat. It would be such an overwhelming sensual pleasure to vomit. He had never before appreciated the potential enjoyment of nausea.
“Then milk shakes are what we’re going to have,” he said. “Let’s go someplace good.”
Someplace with a men’s room. If he could get to it first, he could make room for the milk shake.
Karen came down the stairs and pulled up short when she saw her father. He was sitting in the living room with the telephone receiver in one hand, and he looked as though he had been sitting in that position for some time.
She said, “Daddy?”
He looked up, his eyes blank for a moment. “Oh,” he said. “Hello there.”
“Hello. Is something the matter?”
“Just lost in thought. Brown-study time.” He became aware that he was holding the telephone receiver, looked at it, hung it up. “Maybe something is the matter. I don’t know. I was talking to Linda and I didn’t like the way she sounded.”
She listened as he recounted the conversation.
“I’m a little worried about her,” he added. “She didn’t sound right at all. She seemed very troubled. I wonder if I shouldn’t drive over there and make sure she’s all right.”
“From what she said—”
“She said not to, I know, but it might be right for me to ignore that. Sometimes people say things in the hope that they’ll be ignored.”
“I don’t know if I should say anything or not.”
“What do you mean, kitten?”
“I don’t know. If it’s my place to say anything.”
“Please do.”
She hesitated, working things out in her mind first. She said, “Well, I dropped in on Linda awhile ago. I stop in and see her every once in awhile when I’m in the neighborhood. And we got to talking.”
“And?”
“She told me not to say anything. What it is, she likes you very much. But she doesn’t want to get serious. She didn’t say it that way but that was what she was saying, if that makes any sense.”
“It makes a lot of sense.”
“She doesn’t want to be rushed. She isn’t ready for it.”
“She said that when I first started seeing her.”
“And she … well, she’s also seeing somebody else. She didn’t come right out and say it but that’s what’s happening.”
“Oh.”
“I don’t think she’s serious about him or anything. I think she’s seeing him mostly because she doesn’t want to be seeing just one man. I’m just guessing, but … I guess I shouldn’t have said anything.”
“Well, I’m glad you did. I’m very buoyant right now because of the book and it’s made it hard for me to judge things properly in other areas.” He picked his pipe off the table. “I’ll be finishing it tomorrow.”
“Hey, that’s terrific!”
He brightened. “It is, isn’t it? I could have been done a long time ago, you know. I usually just get a first draft done and go back to it later. But this time I kept thinking of things I wanted to change and reworking earlier stuff.”
“I can’t wait to read it.”
“You won’t have long to wait. Hey, you know something, kitten? I still feel like a premature celebration. How about if you put on something beautiful and I’ll buy you a fancy dinner?”
“I had a sandwich while you were working.”
“Understandable. So let me have a sandwich myself and we’ll go out and do the town. What there is of it.”
She chewed her lip. “Well, I sort of have a date.”
“Just sort of?”
“There’s this girl, I was going to go over to her house for a few hours. Oh, there’s no reason not to say it. It’s Melanie Jaeger.”
“I didn’t know you were friendly with her.”
“I run into her in town now and then, and lately we’ve gotten to talking. She’s sort of interesting. Now that the summer people are gone there aren’t that many fascinating heads in town.” She hesitated. “I could call her up and
tell her to make it some other time, I suppose.”

“No, don’t do that.”

“The thing is, I’d rather celebrate after you finish the book. And after I read it.”

“You may not feel like celebrating then.” He got to his feet. “But I’ll hold you to it,” he said. “You can read the
book tomorrow afternoon and tomorrow night we’ll go out for dinner. Deal?”

“Will it be done by then?”

“I’m going to finish it tonight,” he said. “I’m not going to be able to unwind unless I drink too much, and I don’t
feel like it. The only way I’ll get the book out of my head is by finishing it. Is there arty coffee?”

“I’ll make some. I’ll bring it to you.”

Hours later she got out of Melanie’s bed and took a shower. She toweled herself dry, then called out, “Hey, is it
okay to use your toothbrush?”

Melanie burst out laughing.

“I’m hip, it’s a terrible question. Which one is yours?”

“The yellow one.”

As she was dressing, Melanie said, “I’m not going to brush my teeth. I want him to taste you on me.”

“Wow, that’s kinky. But you weren’t going to tell him about us.”

“Oh.”

“I mean, do what you want.”

“No, I’ll have to make up something.”

“Look, tell him the whole thing but make me some stranger you picked up in a gay bar in Trenton or something.
Describe me and everything, but make me someone you don’t know and never saw before or since. You let me pick
you up and you brought me back here and we made it in your bed, the whole trip just the way it happened.”

“And then you used my toothbrush.”

“Right.”

“You are devious,” Melanie said.

“I’m more devious than I used to think. It almost scares me how devious I am.”

Warren drove directly home from the theater, brushing off several cast members who wanted him to join them for
a drink. By the time he got to his house Robin had been sleeping for hours and Anne Tedesco was yawning. He
talked to her long enough to learn that everything was all right, then sent her off to bed.

So Bert’s entrance, fifteen minutes later, could not have been better timed. He was sitting in a corner of the living
room when Bert walked in, and after one glance he knew that his assumption had been correct; Bert was leaving
him, and with any encouragement whatsoever Bert would tell him so tonight.

“The prodigal returns,” he said. “I hope Aunt Elizabeth is feeling better.”

“She’s going to be all right.”

“She’s going to be all right.”

“It must be quite a change for her, though.” Bert looked puzzled. “A whole identity crisis,” he explained. “Her
name was Aunt Harriet the last time we discussed her.”

“That’s sneaky, Warren.”

“That’s sneaky? Physician, heal thyself.”

“I was going to tell you. I need a drink.”

“You can fill my glass while you’re at it. Unless they taught you at women’s lib to stop waiting on men.”

“You don’t have to be a bitch, Warren.”

“I know. We can be civilized.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“Oh?”

“Not entirely what you think.”

Warren let him tell it. A week ago an agent from New York had heard him play at the Inn. The agent had told him
he was wasting himself, that he could be playing decent clubs in New York, making better money and being heard
by influential people. And of course Bert had given him an unequivocal no at first, but after some thought he had
realized that his career was vitally important to him and that he did not want to spend the rest of his life playing
music for Bucks County drunks to talk over.

“I gather there’s a qualitative difference between Bucks County drunks and Manhattan drunks,” Warren said.

“No, don’t let me interrupt you. Carry on.”

So he had called the agent, and the agent had arranged auditions Friday afternoon and evening and this afternoon,
and he already had one booking and the promise of a second. And he knew how Warren felt about New York, and of
course he couldn’t possibly commute, and their relationship had about run its course anyway, and—

“So it’s not another man,” Warren said.
“That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”
“You didn’t ball anybody in New York.”
“No, I didn’t.”
“I assume your new agent is a woman.”
“No, a man. What has that got—”
“A heterosexual man, however.”
“Cut the shit, will you. Warren?”
He stared moodily into his glass. Without looking up, he said, “When are you moving?”
“I was thinking of leaving tomorrow.”
“Why, that’s a rush engagement, isn’t it? Audition one day and start work the next. Your agent’s a whiz.”
“I have to get an apartment, I have to get settled.”
“One must get settled. You’ll be leaving your present employers high and dry, won’t you? Maybe you could call them now and let them know.”
“Well, I—”
“Because they won’t be open tomorrow.”
“Goddamn you, Warren.”
“When did you give notice? The night your nelly agent propositioned you?”
“The next day.”
“That’s splendid. And I have a splendid idea. Why don’t you pack a few things and fly away? I’ll ship the rest as soon as I have an address for you. Or do you already have an address?”
“No, I’ll be living alone.”
“Poor thing. Is there a place you can stay tonight?”
“You cocksucker. Yes, there’s a place where I can stay tonight. And I don’t have to pack a few things because I had the foresight to pack a few things yesterday because it occurred to me that you might pull this sort of shit. It’s just as easy for things to end pleasantly, Warren, but you never forget you’re an actor. You always have to play to an audience even when you’re all by yourself in an empty theater.”
“Wait a minute.”
“What for?”
“For nothing, I suppose. I don’t know. I’m sorry, Bert. It hurts a bit so I try to hurt back. Childish.”
“I’m sorry, too.”
“I’ll tell you what. Let’s neither of us be sorry. It was fun while it lasted, and I’ll always settle for that as an epitaph. For a life or for a love affair. It was fun while it lasted. There’s just one problem. Where do you drop the curtain?”
“You just lost me.”
“We’ve already established that, silly. No, it goes back to what you said about my weakness for the dramatic. The charge is true enough. But don’t you see, it’s so much more awkward to part on good terms. Neither party ever knows when to get off the stage. Much simpler with a lot of door slamming and name calling. Still, we ought to be able to work something out. I think I have it. You play the piano. And sing, I do want to hear you sing. I’ll miss that. You play and sing, and I’ll sit in a dark corner listening to you. Before you quite finish I’ll have gone upstairs, and when you finish you may steal off into the night.”
Bert started to say something, then changed his mind. He seated himself at the piano and studied the keys. Softly he said, “What would you like to hear?”
“Oh, are you taking requests tonight?”
“Just so long as it’s not ‘Melancholy Baby.’”
“Lord. No, you’re better far than I at matching songs with moods. Something that achieves sorrow without reaching slush.”
“Smiling through tears? That effect?”
“Winking through tears.”
He knew it from the first bars of the introduction and thought that Bert had chosen wisely. “Just One of Those Things.” Yes, that was right, every line in it was right. It described a romance that burned itself out quickly, and theirs had been neither that intense nor that brief, and yet the song was singularly appropriate.
As the bridge ended, he got to his feet and slipped silently from the room. He waited out of sight on the stairs and listened to the song’s last verse:

So goodbye, love, and amen
Here’s hoping we meet now and then
It was great fun
But it was just one of those things.

He stood motionless on the staircase until he heard the front door drawn quietly shut. The Volkswagen engine caught, and he listened to Bert driving off. Then he climbed the stairs and went to his room.

He had wanted to make sure Bert did not stay the night. Had he done so, he would have learned that Anne and Robin were there. While his knowledge would have been dangerous only in the sense that any unnecessary complication was a hazard, that had been reason enough to make the break an immediate one.

And so he had pretended pain and bitterness that he had not felt at all. It was not a lack of feeling for Bert, he knew. It was simply that he was under too much other pressure to feel much.

Of course he had shed tears during the song. A statue could not have done less. It was fun while it lasted; and it was just one of those things. They both did nicely as epitaphs. For a love affair or for a life.

Hugh sat looking at the typewriter. There was only one more page to write, and he knew precisely what it would say. He had written it dozens of times in his head in the course of the past few months, had mentally edited and shaped it over and over. Now all he had to do was put the words on the page.

When he began to type, the words came slowly. He measured each phrase. He wanted to get it just right, and at the same time he was reluctant to write the words at all, because once they were written the book would be finished. He wanted to be finished and yet he did not want to be finished. He had thought in the past that it was not unlike sex—you wanted to come, but you didn’t want to come right away. He wrote:

And so it was over. A man had died, and living men had opened the earth for him and closed it over him. A life which had begun at one specific point in time had ended now at another specific point in time. Lives, like books, have beginnings and endings, first chapters and last chapters.

But the endings of human lives lack the precision of the endings of books. If death is a last chapter, there is still an epilogue to come.

For even physical death is a gradual process. The body itself dies piecemeal. Hair and fingernails continue to grow for a time, their functions like the reflexive twitching of a headless snake. Until they too are done.

A man had died, and was dead. But two women had known him, each in her particular way. Neither knew him as he had known himself. Perhaps their knowledge of him had great gaps in it. Perhaps in certain ways it exceeded his knowledge of himself.

But all that matters is that they did know him. And as long as either of them is alive, the man will not be utterly dead. It is not merely that he will live metaphorically in memory. His life—and now the event of his death—is a fundamental component of each of these two women. The man he had been is a part of all that they are or will be. Their lives are his epilogue.

Of course the converse is just as true. Now that the man is dead, neither the wife nor the daughter will ever be wholly alive.

THE END

He took the final page from the typewriter and read it through. It did not seem quite right, but he knew that it would not have seemed quite right no matter how he had done it.

He looked at his watch. He decided that it was not too late to call Linda and was reaching for the telephone when he remembered that it was either far too late or far too early to call Linda Robshaw. She had seemed quite important to him for quite some time, but now that he had finished the book he was unsure if her importance had been more than temporary.

He fixed himself a drink. He had finished the book, and he ought to be able to tell someone as much. He wanted to talk to someone but there was no one he wanted to talk to. Mary Fradin would be glad to know that the book was done, but there was no earthly reason to call her in the middle of the night. Karen was at Melanie Jaeger’s house and he did not want to call her there. And who else was there? Anita? There had been times, shortly after the divorce, when he had had to fight the desire to call her. He had outgrown the urge long ago, and she came to mind only to complete the list.

The women in his life. And did they know him as the dead man had been known by his wife and daughter? No, he was not going to think about such things now. There were many personal truths in this book, truths he had not known until he wrote them into his consciousness, and he had carefully held them on the edge of thought while the book evolved. The Edge of Thought. Yes, he liked that title, liked it far more now than before.

He was working on a second drink when Karen came home. Her enthusiasm took the edge off his own depression. She insisted on reading the manuscript immediately, wouldn’t wait until morning.
“It’s not that late,” she said. “I’m not the least bit sleepy. I couldn’t sleep now, not knowing it’s done and just waiting to be read.”

She had a drink with him first. He told her she could read in the study where the light was good.

“I was never allowed in there,” she said. She kissed him suddenly, her arms tight around his neck. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Will you still be proud if the book’s lousy?”

“I know it’s not.”

“Well, I’m going to bed,” he said.

She closed herself in the study and he made one more drink and took it upstairs. He did not want to go to sleep. He wanted to sit downstairs and wait while she read the book. His mind was full of thoughts, rolling in and falling back like waves.

His mind was also exhausted, weary at the end of a half year’s labor. Its hyperactivity now was an illusion, like the growth of hair and fingernails after death.

He finished his drink and got into bed, and it was not long before the thoughts softened into dreams.
TWENTY-EIGHT

On Sunday morning the sun rose into a cloudless blue sky. Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Kleinschmidt left her small apartment and cooked herself a light breakfast in Hugh Markarian’s kitchen. She did not prepare breakfast for the mister or little Karen; neither had stirred by the time her son arrived to drive her to church.

While Mrs. Kleinschmidt ate her light breakfast, Peter and Gretchen were devouring a huge one. Gretchen had slept poorly. Peter had not slept at all, and he went to the bathroom during the meal and swallowed a spansule, first chewing a few of the bitter time-release grains of Dexedrine to put them more immediately to work. He had two spansules left, and they would last the day.

Warren slept longer than the others, waking to the sound of Robin amusing herself at Bert’s piano. For a brief moment he thought that it was Bert he was hearing and that something had gone horribly wrong with Bert’s musical ability. He reminded himself that Bert was gone and ultimately guessed the source of the cacophony. Robin had an uncanny ability to strike precisely those chords which made his head vibrate, and his head was vibrating badly enough as it was. He dropped two Alka-Seltzer tablets into a glass of water, waited interminably for them to dissolve, and used them to wash down two Excedrins.

A glance out the window told him that it was a beautiful day. He couldn’t imagine why it should be. When his headache began to recede he picked up the telephone and placed a long-distance call.

Linda Robshaw was looking at her own telephone while Warren was using his. She had just awakened for the third time. Twice before she had drawn the bedsheet up over her and burrowed back to sleep. Now she was more completely awake, and it seemed as though she ought to get up and do something. She glanced at the phone and remembered her conversation the day before with Hugh, frowning at the memory of her own part in it. She had been purposely unkind, and in a way that was difficult to understand after the fact. She ought to call him now. There ought to be something she could say.

Ah, but it was easier to remain in bed, easier to close her eyes against the light, easier to make a cocoon of the bedsheet and huddle in the womblike warmth of her own body heat. Soon it would be time to get up, to dress, to eat, to open the shop, time to give away paintings. In the meantime her bed was warm and secure.

Gretchen said, “I wish I understood more of the plan. Oh, you don’t have to tell me. We can’t talk about it now.”

“Warren, you look so different. Your hair! And when did you grow that beard?”

He did look very different, so much so that Peter would have had difficulty recognizing him. His wig and neatly trimmed brown beard completely altered the shape of his face. Heavy horn-rimmed glasses replaced his usual rimless ones.

“I am ze master of ze disguise,” he said. With one hand he removed the beard. “You see? A few bits of adhesive tape hold it in place. Here beneath it all is the Warren you know and love, and now”—he fixed the beard in place once again—“we are disguised once more. You’ll excuse me if I don’t remove the wig, I trust.”

“What a perfect disguise. Petey didn’t even mention it. Isn’t it super, baby?”

He agreed that it was super. Warren went on driving, heading south and east, keeping up a running conversation with Gretchen. In a burlesque Viennese accent he told her he was Dr. David Loewenstein, the famous Austrian
mystic and psychic medium. Gretchen played along, mimicking his accent, while Peter gratefully let the two of them handle the conversation. It was a pleasure to put his mind in neutral and coast for awhile. It would have been an even greater pleasure not to be in the car at all, and he had tried to find reasons not to go along. Warren could have taken her by himself, he had told himself from time to time. But he had never managed to make himself believe this and had not even attempted to sell it to Warren. No, he had to be there. He just hoped he would be able to handle it.

At least he was past the periodic touches of mania that had afflicted him the previous afternoon. Unwelcome thoughts still came to him, questions occurred that would have troubled him, but he was having less difficulty pushing them aside now. He was growing accustomed to the drug, remembering from earlier times how to use it and how to coast with it. And he was growing similarly accustomed to the role he was playing, managing at once to fit it comfortably while holding a portion of his mind apart from it.

On the edge, of course, there was the specter of what they were doing. This would not go away. On the contrary, it drew closer with every turn of the car's wheels. He dealt with it by keeping himself strictly in present time and banishing thoughts of the future.

It was all as Gretchen said, a matter of will and concentration.

Warren stopped the car at a gas station. He told attendant to fill the tank, then excused himself to go the lavatory. First, though, he placed a telephone call. When he'd been connected to the person he had spoken to earlier, he said, "This is Dr. David Loewenstein. I'm about ten minutes from you at the moment. My patient is presently cooperative." His voice was neither his own nor the comic-opera voice he'd used with Gretchen, but was quite similar in pitch and inflection to the psychiatrist's.

"Her delusion is being supported and she does not know our true destination," he went on. "I wanted to make sure you would have restraint available. In light of her history I can't overemphasize that."

He listened for a few moments, then rang off. In the washroom he took off the false beard, peeled off the bits of adhesive tape, and fixed the beard properly in place with spirit gum. He swallowed two more Excedrins before returning to the car.

"Well, this is it," Warren said. He swung the car through the iron gates and along the narrow macadam road. "We have arrived."

Peter heard the words and looked at his own hands, surprised at their steadiness. Warren had spoken in a voice brimming with cheer and anticipation, but Peter heard them echo in his mind in another tone entirely, one of bitter resignation. Well, this is it. We have arrived.

It was not what he had expected. No guards on the gate, none of the stark gloom he had pictured. The general feel of the place was that of a college campus.

There had been a sign, though, and Gretchen had seen it. Now, as they passed between tall trees, she said, "This is the State Hospital."

"Of course it is. And ze internationally famous Dr. Loewenstein is expected at any moment. Everything's right on schedule, Gretchen."

"But why are we here?"

"Just think about it," he said. "How can they possibly get to us here?"

She thought about it, and Peter read the uncertainty in her face. The car reached the end of the narrow road, and he looked out at a broad expanse of asphalt surrounded by a rolling lawn. At the far end of the parking lot were the buildings, uniform piles of darkened red brick. He tried to keep from noticing the iron grillwork on all of the windows.

"I don't like this place," Gretchen said.

"Of course not," Warren said. "I knew you would sense it."

"Sense what?"

"The feeling of the place. It's just right, isn't it?" He swung the car into a parking spot reserved for physicians and hospital personnel. "Just come with me," he said. "They're expecting us."

"Warren, I don't want to go. Petey, tell him I don't want to go."

"You can do it, Gretch. You just have to concentrate."

"But this is crazy, Petey! I don't want to get out of the car. I'm afraid."

He said, "Warren, would it be all right if we stayed in the car while you made the arrangements?" He put his arm around her, drew her close. Over her shoulder he saw Warren give him a quick nod, then get out of the car.

She burrowed in his arms for a moment. Then she said, "That was fast thinking, Petey. I knew we should never trust that man. Now we can— Her jaw fell. "Petey! He took the keys!"

"So?"

She spun around to face him. "Don't you see? This was Warren's plan, wasn't it? He dreamed it up. And he's managed to fool you. Oh, I should have known this. Oh, my God!"
“Wait, Gretchen. Hang on.”
“Maybe we can run.”
“That would be the worst thing we could do. Don’t you see?”
“I suppose so. But—”
“You’re wrong about Warren. You’ll see.”
He held onto her, trying to calm her. “Just stay perfectly still,” he said. “If it is a trap, all we have to do is be absolutely quiet.”

He saw the doors open. Warren came through them, flanked by a stoop-shouldered doctor and a nurse with a clipboard. Behind them were two middle-aged women in white, both with prominent jaws. Warren held a pipe in one hand and was gesturing with the other as he spoke. Even his walk was different, Peter noticed.

“They’re coming,” he told Gretchen. “Don’t be afraid. Don’t ever be afraid.”

“This is Mrs. Vann,” Warren said now. “Mrs. Vann, there are some people here who want to meet you. They’re going to help you.”

“Warren, I want to go home.”

“Just come out for a moment. Then we can go.”

She looked at Peter. “Go ahead,” he said softly. “We’ll be able to handle this.”

And she trusted him. She got out of the car, crawling past the steering wheel, while Peter let himself out the other side. He walked around the car to stand beside her.

“Mrs. Gretchen Vann,” Warren was saying. “Mrs. Vann, this is Dr. Moeloth. He’s going to—”

“Why are you talking like that, Warren?”

“Try to concentrate, Mrs. Vann. I am Dr. Loewenstein. We went for a ride in the country, you and I and Robin, and now we are—”

“Dr. Moeloth?” She smiled perfectly, the panic and confusion gone from her voice now. “There’s been a rather horrible mistake and I’m sure you’ll straighten it out for us in no time at all.” The doctor was nodding with interest.

“This man is not a doctor,” she went on calmly. “He’s an actor named Warren Ormont. He managed to win the confidence of Peter and myself and now he’s trying to dupe you.” A sudden intake of breath, and she spun to face Warren.

“What did you say about Robin? Peter, we trusted this man. What has he done with Robin?”

Dr. Moeloth said, “Tell me about Robin, Mrs. Vann. Just be calm now.”

“I’m perfectly calm. Robin is my little girl.”

“Your little girl.”

“My daughter. He’s kidnapped her. First he posed as my friend and now he’s posing as a doctor. I think this is a matter for the police, Dr. Moeloth.”

Moeloth nodded encouragement. “Very interesting,” he said. “And this young man with you, Mrs. Vann. Could you tell me who this young man is?”

“This is the only person on my side.”

“I see. And his name?”

“Peter Nicholas.”

“Yes, of course, Mrs. Vann. And his relationship with you?”

She hesitated. “Well, it’s no secret. We live together.”

“You live together.”

“We are lovers. I’m not ashamed of it. We are lovers and the whole world is against us.”

Warren took a slip of paper from his pocket and passed it to Moeloth. The doctor unfolded it and studied. He read aloud, “Robin Vann, parents Harold and Gretchen, born November 17, 19—”

“That’s my daughter’s birth certificate, Dr. Moeloth. Petey, why did you give it to Warren? That’s my daughter’s certificate, Doctor.”

“Yes, of course. And your daughter is how old, Mrs. Vann?”

“She’ll be four years old in November. That’s what it says November 17th.”

“Yes, of course. November 17, 1949. What year is it now, Mrs. Vann?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Sex—male. This is the birth certificate of your son, Mrs. Vann.”

“I don’t have a son.”

“I see.”

“Only God has sons. Daughters belong to the Devil. Everyone knows that.” She fought the panic in her voice.

“He’s an actor, Dr. Moeloth. He doesn’t even have a beard. He looks like Benjamin Franklin. Look!”

She pulled Warren’s beard. He drew back after one fierce tug, and the two heavyset women in white moved easily
to take hold of her arms.

“Oh, God,” she said. “Oh, my God.”

He walked to her, saying that it was all right, that it would be all right. She said, “Oh, Petey, tell them. For God’s sake tell them!”

He reached her and took her hand. “Don’t worry.”

“Petey—”

“I’m Robin. It’s all right, Mom. Everything’s going to be all right.”

And he did not turn his eyes from hers. He let her hold his gaze, and his own expression did not change. That was the hardest part of all.

Warren was chatting easily with Moeloth. “An interesting personal mythology,” he was saying. “I only wish it would have been possible to persuade her to undergo therapy. But her refusal was consistent with her particular paranoia.” There were terms Peter did not understand; then Warren said, “There are names that will recur. Warren and Peter seem to have been former lovers of Mrs. Vann’s, but it’s unclear whether they existed other than in fantasy. They constitute a dualism for her, innocence, youth and age, good and evil—the poles seem to vary…”

Peter looked at Gretchen. She was standing a few yards away. The matrons were holding her arms but she was offering no resistance. She had fought them for a moment, fury dancing madly in her eyes, and then had suddenly gone completely acquiescent.

The nurse presented Peter with the clipboard. He signed the involuntary commitment papers, signing his name as Robin Vann and his relationship as son. The nurse moved off. Warren was still talking with Moeloth but Peter did not pay any attention. He let his eyes play around the area. Sunday was visitors’ day, and groups of people moved around the lawn. It was impossible to tell the patients from their relatives.

“Little firsthand experience with psychotics,” he heard Warren saying. “Occasional menopause psychosis and the usual run of neurotics.”

“I envy you,” Moeloth said.

“Oh? And I thought it was I who ought to envy you. It’s a rare day when I feel I’ve accomplished a thing. My patients improve or don’t and I can’t always convince myself that I’ve had any effect either way. I could as well have been a dermatologist.”

Moeloth chuckled. “Neurosis and dermatology. No one dies; no one ever gets well. Do you think we do much better? I like to think so but I couldn’t make much of a case for what we do. We keep them safe; we keep them comfortable; we keep them where they can’t do any harm. When their conditions are temporary we provide a place for them to recover. We release some who ought to stay and others who probably should not have been here in the first place. You know there’s little chance that we’ll help her at all.”

“Yes, I know that.”

“Does the boy know?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re absolutely set against shock? Both insulin and ETS?”

“Yes.”

“Despite your lack of experience with psychotics? But I’m riot trying to argue you out of it. We find it useful. It’s valuable on an institutional basis. It controls. At times perhaps it disciplines. One does not want to admit as much, but it is so.”

No shock treatments, Peter thought. Definitely not that. They had agreed on that point at the beginning.

The nurse said something to Moeloth, who turned to Peter. “Robin, your mother would like to talk to you before they show her to her quarters.”

To her cell, he thought. He looked at Gretchen. She was smiling at him.

He walked toward her.

“Oh, Robin,” she said. “It’s all so difficult. I’ve been so bad.”

“It’s all right,” he heard himself say.

“I’ve been a bad mother.”

“You’re a wonderful mother.”

“My poor baby.” She turned to one of the matrons. “Let me say good-bye to my son,” she said.

Warren was saying something cautionary. The matrons still held her arms. But Peter could not walk away, could not deny her this.

He said, “It’s all right. Please let her go, please give us a minute.” The matrons dropped their grip and moved just a few yards away. “Please,” he said to them. “Let us have some room.”

He did not know what she would do. It did not matter what she would do. He walked to her and she held out both her hands. He took them in his.
“Oh, my son,” she said, and moved to embrace him. She whispered quickly in his ear. They spoke in whispers until she released him and held his hands again. Her expression became maternal. “Mother loves you,” she said. “Always remember that, Robin.” Then she turned from him and went to join the matrons.

“How are you holding up, Peter?”

They had been driving in absolute silence for about ten minutes. He did not answer immediately and Warren had to repeat the question.

“I’m all right,” he said.

“It’s over now.”

“Yeah.”

“She even acknowledged you as her son. I wondered if she wouldn’t try that. She used it to convince them of her sanity, and all it did was reinforce the illusion.”

“That’s not why she did it.”

“It’s not?”

“No. She wanted to be able to say good-bye to me. She had something she wanted to tell me. She—”

He broke then. Warren slowed the car, pulled onto the shoulder. He reached a hand toward Peter, then withdrew it without touching him. Peter said, “You might as well drive. I’m all right.” He wiped his eyes and took a deep breath.

“She said—I don’t know if I can say this—”

“You don’t have to.”

“She said she was sorry she lost control, but she didn’t realize it was all part of the plan, and that we couldn’t tell her in advance because it would have ruined her performance. She said she understood, and she begged me to forgive her for the one moment when she stopped trusting me. And to tell you she was sorry. She was sorry.”

Warren didn’t say anything.

“She said it was wonderful of me to lead them away from Robin. That I should be very careful not to put myself in danger while I was playing the part of Robin. I don’t remember everything she said. Let me think. She’s going to keep on eating. That’s part of it. She knows she’ll be strong as long as she keeps on eating. And nothing will ever break her will. She kept saying that she was strong, and that I would have to be strong, too.”

“And you’re positive none of this was an act.”

“No, absolutely not. I didn’t realize she loved me that completely.” His voice cracked but he checked it. “It’s all so awful. She’s in there and she’ll never get out. She won’t, will she?”

“Dr. Loewenstein would offer hope. No, she’ll never get out.”

“That fucking place. Anybody could put anybody else away. You sign a slip of paper and two dykes from a ladies’ football team take her away. It shouldn’t be that easy.”

“It’s not. Give me a cigarette, will you? Thank you. It’s not that easy. I had to show identification. They were very apologetic but explained it was procedure. And then when I filled out certain forms I forgot a detail and had my nurse called at her home. Anne supplied the missing details.”

“What happens if they call the real Dr. Loewenstein?”

“He’ll have to say the right things. What possible choice does he have? David knew that when he agreed. He also knows there’s little likelihood of it. I made it clear to Moeloth that she was not to be regarded as my patient. No, it was a good charade, Peter. There was never a point this afternoon when I was worried.”

“I thought they’d see the birth certificate was phony.”

“The only changes were two numbers and a letter. The actual certificate is a mess, but the alterations don’t show on the photostat I showed Moeloth.”

“I didn’t know it was a stat. The other thing that got me was when she grabbed your beard. I kept seeing it coming off in her hand.”

“But we talked about that!”

“I know.”

“You knew I attached it properly when we stopped for gas. That was the whole idea, to have her grab it like that.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“But you forgot?”

He shook his head. “No, I was afraid you forgot. All the way there I wasn’t sure if you remembered or not, and when she grabbed it—”

“That would have been something.” He started to laugh, stopping just short of hysteria. “They would have kept all three of us,” he said. “They never would have left us out of there.”

And later: “There was something you said to that doctor. About the two of us being opposite poles in her life.”

“The two of us? Oh, the concepts of Warren and Peter, the dualism. What of it?”

“I don’t know exactly. I was just thinking. I guess we were the two men in her life she loved.”
“And the two who loved her.”
“And the two who did this to her.”
“No one else could have done it.”
“Right. You can’t be betrayed by your enemies, can you?”
“Is it betrayal? I think I did it for her, not to her. Admittedly it’s always a comfort to see things that way. I think we should declare a moratorium on the soul-searching, Peter. For the sake of our own sanity, such as it is.” He sighed heavily. “It ended well. I hadn’t even dared to hope for that.” He smiled, as if at a memory. “You left her with a kiss.”
“Yeah, me and Judas.”
“Oh, stop that, Peter. Just stop that.”
TWENTY-NINE

Hugh said, “You know what the trouble is? The trouble is it’s Sunday.”
“Is that bad?”
“Well, I’ll say it is. In Pennsylvania it is. You can’t get a drink in Pennsylvania on a Sunday. And if you don’t think that’s trouble—”
She giggled. “But we just got a drink,” she said. “Drinks. One for each of us.”
“Trude Whatmeister?”
“Not Whatmeister. Hofmeister. At Tannhauser’s.”
“Oh, right.”
“Which means that either we have dinner without wine or we go somewhere in New Jersey.”
“So?”
“So this is a celebration. The greatest author in the world and the most beautiful girl in the world are celebrating the completion of the finest novel in the world. For that we need good food and good wine. And you can’t get wine in Pennsylvania, and you can’t get a decent meal in New Jersey, and that’s all because it’s Sunday.” He raised his forefinger. “Make a note of that, Miss Markarian.”
“Yes, sir.”
“In the future, significant works of fiction are not to be completed on Saturday night.”
She wrote on the palm of her hand with her fingertip. “Not to be completed on Saturday night,” she echoed. “I shall never forget that, sir.”
“I sincerely hope not.”
“Never ever. Which’ll we do?”
“Which which?”
“Go to Tannhauser’s or go someplace in New Jersey?”
“Ah, that which. A demanding decision, Miss Markarian. I don’t think I can make a decision like that on an empty glass.”
“I’ll fill it up for you.” She walked a few steps, then turned. “You’re happy, aren’t you?”
“How in the world can you tell?”
“Because you’re so silly.”
“You silly Daddy. You used to call me that when I would joke with you.”
“I remember.”
“Yes, I’m happy, kitten. Deliriously happy. Do you know something? I have never been so happy in my life.”
This was true. There was always happiness in completing a book, always a measure of pride and satisfaction and pleasure, but in the past it had always been qualified by a feeling of loss, a vague discontent. He had often compared it to postpartum depression; a mother feels joy in having brought a living being into the world but cannot always escape the feeling of having given up a part of herself. He had come to recognize in himself that particular sensation, an empty feeling within him where there had previously been substance.
He had felt aspects of that the night before. This morning, when he awoke, he felt nothing so much as the agony of impatience. He’d gone downstairs hoping to find Karen, anxious to know what she thought of the book, and found instead that she was still asleep. The manuscript was on his desk, neatly arranged as he had left it. He assumed she had read it but could find no certain proof. And he had thought then of the mindless tricks of embryonic writers who would submit manuscripts with an occasional page inverted so that they could determine, after having been rejected, whether they had at least been read. “I always leave those pages inverted,” an editor told him once. “Let ’em hate me.”
So he had had the day’s first drink while he waited for her to wake up and come downstairs. The desire for a morning drink surprised him but did not disturb him greatly. If it was not his custom, neither was it something he had passed a personal law against. He was jittery, impatient, and a drink would sand off the sharp edges. It would have been foolish to pass it up and have coffee instead.
And then, after he had finished his drink and washed out his glass, he heard her moving around upstairs. He made himself wait for her in the kitchen, busying himself by preparing their breakfast. As she burst into the kitchen, he turned around, almost afraid to see her reaction.
And she said it was the best thing she had ever read in her life.
“I read it all the way through. I’m a fast reader but I didn’t want to miss a word, and sometimes I would go back
and read something over because there was so much to it that I wanted to absorb a second time. And when I finished
I wanted to wake you. Then I was afraid I would sleep too long and I was going to leave you a note to wake me first
thing in the morning. And then I set my alarm clock for the first time in ages and went to bed and thought maybe the
clock would go off before you were ready to get up so I shut off the alarm. There must be a thousand parts of it I
want to ask you about. Is it all right to ask things about it? Is that all right?”

It wasn’t just that she loved the book. It was that she liked it for all the right reasons. There were things he had
done not knowing whether they would work or not. Some bits and pieces were important to him but would have no
individual impact on readers. A book was always quite different for the person who wrote it. Its most perceptive
reader could not see it in the same way. He was certain it was the same with the product of anyone’s labor; the fruit
tasted differently to the man who planted the tree.

But how close she had come to reading the book through his own eyes.

They talked the day away. Much of the talk concerned The Edge of Thought. She discussed its characters as if
they existed, as they did in fact exist for him and for her. Years ago, Anita had read his books with the same single-
minded enthusiasm. But Karen read them differently. Anita had always been the critic; she had assumed the role
with One If by Land and had always felt comfortable in it. She had been a valuable critic, a sensitive one, but a critic
could never satisfy you as a fan could. Even if a critic responded with wholehearted unequivocal approval, it was
still an outside view, an objective view, and the success he wanted was of a subjective sort.

So they talked a great deal about the book, but they talked of other things as well. He had felt close to her in all
the months since she had moved into his house, had treasured this closeness as he treasured little else, and today he
felt far closer to her than ever before. They talked through breakfast, talked over coffee, talked in the garden and in
the woods. And when they returned to the house and went to the living room to talk some more she asked him if it
was too early for the first drink of the day.

“I already had the first drink of the day,” he had said, and told her how keyed up he’d been waiting for her
reaction.

“Then it can’t be too early. I’ll make them. I want to propose a toast. How do you propose a toast?”

“You just go ahead and do it.”

“To The Edge of Thought,” she said. They touched glasses and drank. “Now are we supposed to throw them in the
fireplace?”

“Mrs. Kleinschmidt wouldn’t approve.”

She started to giggle. He asked her what was funny, but she kept laughing and couldn’t stop. He laughed along
with her without having the slightest idea what he was laughing at.

She said, “I was going to say … oh, this is so silly!”

“Will you for Christ’s sake tell me what we’re both hysterical about?”

“It’s so far-out. I thought about saying, ‘Well, screw Mrs. Kleinschmidt,’ and I thought of you saying, ‘Who in
hell wants to screw Mrs. Kleinschmidt?’ and I just—”

“Well, who the hell would?”

She laughed again, spun around and pitched her glass into the fireplace. He hurled his after it.

“Screw Mrs. Kleinschmidt,” he said.

They drank their second toast to Mrs. Kleinschmidt, and this time they did not smash the glasses. Instead she
filled them again and he said something about calling Mary Fradin in the morning. She said Mary Fradin would love
the book, too, and he said it didn’t much matter if she did or not as long as she sold it properly.

“Then screw Mary Fradin,” she said.

“I’ll drink to that.”

“Why? Were you planning to screw Mary Fradin?”

“I already did,” he said.

He told her that story, and then she told him a story about Anita’s husband and one of her girlfriends, and he told
another story and she told another story, and then he observed that it was Sunday and that one should never finish a
book on Saturday night. Happy? No man on earth had ever been so happy.

When they returned from dinner she automatically made drinks while he filled a pipe. They had both been
reasonably drunk when they left for dinner, but their euphoria was so great that the alcohol did not slow them down.
He felt that he could drink all night without getting tired or thick-tongued. All the liquor did was heighten their
mood.

“We should have had wine,” he said.

“It was a dynamite dinner.”

“Uh-huh. Would have been better with wine, though.”

She considered. “You know what would have been great? Better than wine? Grass.”
“At Tannhauser’s? I can just see Trude passing around joints. What’s the matter?”
“I was picturing it. Offering them around in that apple strudel accent. No, not with dinner. Before dinner. It really
does fantastic things for the taste of food.”
“I never heard that.”
“Oh, sure. It makes you more aware. Even with rotten food. I mean like school cafeteria food. Not all the time,
but if you happened to be into a food thing. Like one time I had this salmon croquette. They always had things like
that, salmon croquettes, stuffed beef heart, all this gloop, and I was really wrecked one day and I got into this salmon
croquette with this goopy yellow sauce all over it, and I could taste like all the different things that were happening
there. And at the same time I was aware that it was cruddy. I kept thinking, wow, this is delicious, and wouldn’t it be
great if I was eating something I liked?”
“I remember it works that way with music,” he said. “I never thought of it in connection with food.”
“It’s the same idea. Getting right down into things.”
“I guess that makes sense.”
“Oh, wow!”
“What?”
“What you said. Do you smoke?”
“Before you were born,” he said. “But not since.”
“Really?”
He nodded. “Ages ago. After the war, when I was living in the Village. Just two or three times. At parties.”
“I didn’t realize people were into grass in those days.”
“‘Those days.’ Yes, back before the Flood.”
“I mean—”
“It was part of the Bohemian scene, although that word was beginning to die out by then. And I was never that
much of a Bohemian. I never knew anyone who smoked very frequently. It was hard to get unless you had friends
who were jazz musicians or unless you knew people in Harlem.”
“And you never smoked after that.”
“No. It wasn’t really a part of my life. And no one talked about it.”
“Did you dig it?”
He sipped his drink. “I’m trying to remember. My recollection is pretty vague. I didn’t get high the first time, I
remember that. The other times I did, and I think I remember what it was like. I believe I enjoyed it well enough.”
“Would you try it again ever?”
“I wonder,” he said. “I suppose I might. You know, I’ve never really thought about this, but it’s surprising I
haven’t tried it again in all these years. At least since, oh, at least in the past few years.”
“Since the divorce? Is that what you were going to say? Anita smokes.”
“Your mother?”
“That’s weird, isn’t it? All their friends do, which is probably why she does. But I’m not supposed to.” She told
him of the conversation they had had on the subject. He laughed, thinking how typical it was of Anita in recent
years. He supposed it was typical parental hypocrisy and was oddly pleased that he was not hypocritical in that sort
of way.
“Daddy? Would you like to get stoned?”
“Why, I suppose I’d try it again,” he said. “Why not?”
“’Cause I could really dig smoking together. The two of us, I could dig that.”
“I’m afraid I don’t have a connection in the area. Is that word still current? I could probably get some in New
York.”
“You wouldn’t have to go that far.”
“I gather there’s some in New Hope, but I wouldn’t know who to ask.”
“Oh, you could say there’s some in New Hope. If Mechanic Street ever caught fire, the whole county would be
stoned for a week.” She drank some more of her drink. Her face was thoughtful. At length she said, “You wouldn’t
have to leave the house.”
“Ah, so.”
“Well, I have this one jay that somebody laid on me a while ago. I didn’t know how you would react so I never
said anything about it. I could get it.”
“How does it mix with liquor?”
“I don’t know. I never used to drink. One joint between the two of us can’t do too much anyway. Should I get it?”
He grinned. “Mrs. Kleinschmidt wouldn’t approve,” he said.
“I’ll be back in a minute.”
He had not been able to remember the feeling. But now he was able to recognize it, just as he had recognized the smell the instant she lit the misshapen little cigarette. And he remembered the elaborate ritual of dumping half the tobacco from a regular cigarette and dropping the roach in so that not a crumb of the marijuana would be wasted. They had called it tea then, and the cigarettes were called reefers, or sticks if you were especially hep. He couldn’t remember any special name for the butts. A roach, in those years, was something that crawled around the bathroom.

He sat back on the couch and closed his eyes. Yes, he remembered the feeling. How could he have forgotten the feeling? For that matter, how could he have gone smugly without it all these years? It did feel nice. There was no getting away from it—it felt very nice indeed.

"Daddy?" Her voice was so soft and lazy. "How are you feeling?"
"Far-out," he said, and laughed.
"Let me look at your face. That’s such good dope. Oh, you’re so stoned!"
"Far-out." "Oh, wow."
"Where are you going?"
"Get more drinks. Throat’s dry."
"You didn’t take the glasses."
"How can I get the drinks without glasses?"
"That’s what I said."
"So did I."
"So did you what?"
"Huh?"

They both started to giggle. It was funny, he thought. You would get into a sentence and your mind was doing such interesting things and doing them so quickly that you forgot what the sentence was about before you could get to the end of it. He pursued this thought, considering all its implications, following them through to wherever they led him and then trying to remember what he had just thought of. One connection in particular struck him as meaningful, and he decided to tell Karen about it when she got back. Then he realized she was sitting beside him.

"I thought you were going to get the drinks."
"Oh, man, are you wrecked!"
"Huh?"
"What have you got in your hand?"

He looked. He had a glass of scotch in his hand and no idea on earth how it got there.

He said, "I’m not stoned at all."
"Right."
"It’s a magic trick. A power I have. Whenever I want a drink I just wish for it and a glass turns up in my hand."
"You silly Daddy."

Later she said, "I’ve been wanting to ask all day. I read the, uh, the dedication page."
"And you don’t want it dedicated to you."
"Don’t even say it. I guess I was wondering what made you decide to dedicate it to me."

He put his hand on her knee, squeezed. The disorientation of the marijuana high had abated now. He was still stoned, but in a way that did not interfere with linear thought. He just felt very good, very happy, utterly relaxed.

He said, "Do you remember when I was stuck on the book and then in the middle of a conversation with you I went in there and started writing like a maniac?"
"Of course I remember. I brought you coffee and you didn’t even know I was there."
"Well, that same day I typed out the dedication page. You gave me the help I needed. I don’t even remember what it was you said, what we were talking about, but before then the book was all from the wife’s viewpoint."
"And you got the idea from me of bringing in the daughter?"
"She would have been a character anyway. But now it’s a whole different book." He explained to her some of the ways the book had developed. "I shouldn’t be telling you all this," he added.

"You mean like trade secrets?"
"Hardly. No, I mean a reader should be able to think that a book happened in one particular way because it couldn’t have happened in any other way."
"It couldn’t have."

He had just been thinking that himself. In this book, more than any other he had written, the characters had insisted upon speaking their own lines.

"So that’s why you dedicated it to me. I was wondering."
"Why did you think?"
“I don’t know.”
“It would have wound up dedicated to you anyway. The way it turned out.”
“It’s about me, isn’t it?”
“Did you feel that?”
“Only on every fucking page. It was almost scary.”
“She’s not precisely you.”
“An awful lot of her is. To me, anyway.”
“Yes, a great deal of her. The relationship.”
“Right.”
“Having you here has taught me a lot about fathers and daughters, Karen. Any honest book has to grow out of what a man knows.”
“I was so proud of her.”
“Were you? So was I.”
“I was so proud that you, that you felt, that the way you think of me—I don’t know how to say it.”
He put his arm around her. Her head settled on his shoulder.
At one point he stacked some records on the record player. At another point he went into the kitchen and came back with bottles of scotch and soda and a bowl of ice cubes. “It’s the running around that gets to you,” he said then. “A person can stand a long night of drinking, but all that walking back and forth is bad for the legs.”
And it was shaping up as a long night of drinking. They were talking less now that the music was playing, frequently lapsing into long silences with her head on his shoulder and his arm around her. He would think now and then that it was late, that they had already done more than enough drinking, that they ought to go to sleep. But it was too perfect a night to end, and neither of them ever suggested ending it.
Eventually they were talking again about the book. He said that he would have to proofread it soon, and how he hated proofreading. She offered to do it for him.
“‘I’ll have to do it myself,’” he said. “‘So I can see what has to be revised.’”
“Nothing has to be revised.”
“Well, I’ll have to go through it anyway and make sure.”
“But I’ll proofread the galleys,” she said.
“Oh, that won’t be for almost a year. That’s a long ways off.” She stiffened. “Kitten? What’s the matter?”
“Nothing.”
“Did I say something?”
“No,” she said. But her face was troubled. “I just—”
“Tell me.”
“You mean I won’t be here then.”
“I didn’t mean that.”
“But I won’t, will I?”
“Where are you off to?”
“Do you mean I can stay?”
“Of course you can stay. This is—”
“I’m not in the way?” There were tears in her eyes. “I just don’t want to go anywhere,” she said. “I just feel so good here. I feel guilty about it.”
“Guilty?”
“I just love being with you,” she said. “I don’t ever want to go away.”
“Oh, kitten.”
“Look at me, I’m shaking. I’m all funny inside. Oh, please hold me.” He said, “Easy, baby. Easy now.” He held her close and stroked her hair while she wept against his shirt. “Easy,” he said, touching her hair, rubbing the back of her neck. “Oh, stay forever,” he said. “Don’t ever go. Don’t ever leave me.”
“Oh—”
He tipped up her chin and kissed her. He kissed her, and she was his daughter, his flesh, and he loved her. He kissed her and she was every woman he had ever wanted, all he had ever wanted, and her arms were around his neck and her lips were parted and he was kissing her now with his heart pounding and his tongue in her mouth and his hands on her back, feeling her, caressing her, and her flesh trembled in response, and—
He broke the kiss. He stared at her and saw himself reflected in her eyes. Her eyes bored into his for a long moment during which he was conscious of nothing else. Then, without breaking the stare, she nodded her head.
He could not move.
“Yes,” she said.
He could not close his eyes. He could not move.

“Yes.”

It was very like a dream. He had the sort of awareness one has in dreams when one wants to change his course but is powerless to do so. He took her clothes off piece by piece. He kissed her and stroked her body. He removed his own clothing and lay full length on the couch with her and felt her flesh against his own.

He seemed to know her body. His hands knew how and where to touch her, and he sensed what her responses would be before she could make them. As if this were not merely a dream but one he had dreamed before.

When he entered her, she reached orgasm immediately. Her parts rippled in climax before he was fully inside of her. Her eyes were closed at that moment, but then she opened them and did not close them again.

He moved in and out of her slowly, lazily, entering her and leaving her in long liquid strokes, as if to make this last forever as he had wished to make the night last forever. He was lost, lost, drowned in her eyes, her mouth, her young warmth.

Until at last he came, and all his being spurted into all of hers.

Walking, pacing, his hand a vise on his forehead, pacing back and forth.

How? How?

“Daddy!”

How could this have happened? How could he have allowed this to happen?

“Daddy—”

How could he have done this to her?

“Daddy, look at me. Daddy, please, look at me.”

But he couldn’t. He felt her hands on his arm and he stopped but could not make himself look down at her. She put her arms around his waist and hugged him and his body went cold and stiff.

“Daddy, don’t hate me.”

He stared at her.

“Please,” she said.

“Hate you?”

“Please don’t.”

He stood there.

“I was the one who wanted it. I said yes.”

“Karen—”

“I knew what I was saying. I said it twice. Don’t you understand? I wanted it to happen.”

A wave of dizziness struck him. He got to a chair and collapsed into it. She stood at the side of the chair looking down at him and all he could think of was how beautiful she was. He had never seen her look so beautiful. He had never seen anyone look so beautiful.

“Daddy, I wanted this to happen. Oh, God. Not just tonight. I’ve always wanted it. I didn’t know it. I swear I didn’t know it. It was in my mind and I didn’t know it was there. It was out there on—” her voice broke—“on the edge of thought.”

Out on the edge of thought. And had he wanted it all along as well? And was that what the book was about? Had he written into it yearnings for her that he had not known he possessed?

God.

She said, “I’m going to have some coffee. Do you want some?”

“Coffee?”

“Don’t you want any?”

“All right.”

While she made the coffee he did not move from the chair. He thought of putting his clothes on but it did not seem worth the effort.

She had wanted him and he had wanted her. He could try to blame the liquor, the marijuana, the mad exhilaration of the mood they had shared. He could blame all these things, but none of them could alter the simple fact that both of them had wanted this to happen. She brought two cups of coffee. They sat in separate chairs and drank it.

“Can I say something?”

He nodded.

“Look, it happened. But what did we do? I mean it, what did we do? We love each other, and we made love. We didn’t hurt anybody. We didn’t do anything to anybody. We just made love.”

He tried a smile. “It’s supposed to be a sin.”

“Why?”

“Sins don’t have reasons. I don’t know why it’s a sin. I know I’m ashamed of myself.”
“I’m not.”
“There’s no reason for you to be. But I—”
“You keep acting as though you’re the one who did it. We both did it, and I was the one who—”
“I was the one who should have been able not to do it, kitten.”
She thought it over, shrugged. “Well, the thing is, I don’t think we have to put out our eyes and break our legs or anything.”
“‘Put out our—’ Oh, Oedipus. It was ankles, not legs.”
“Whatever it was. It happened. That’s all.”
He looked at her sharply. “Are you still—”
“Taking the pill? Is that what you were going to ask? Yes, I am.” She walked across the room and stood in front of him. “And do you want to know something? Do you really want to know something? I wish I stopped taking the pills. I really wish that. I wish I was pregnant, that’s how I feel about what we did.”
He drew her down to him. She sat in his lap with her arms around his neck and she wept, and he held her as he had held her before and stroked her hair and told her that it was all right, that everything was going to be all right. They both were still naked, and she was still the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life, but he held her now with no passion whatsoever. He laughed, and she asked why.
“The glass in the fireplace. I was just looking at it. Once again Mrs. Kleinschmidt wouldn’t approve.”
“Screw Mrs. Kleinschmidt.”
He held her close as they laughed together, held her now with no passion at all, but with all the love he had in the world.
There had been passion, but there would not be passion between them again. Mrs. Kleinschmidt would not approve, but Mrs. Kleinschmidt would not know, nor would anyone else. He did not have to put out his eyes.
On the ninth day following his admission, Clement McIntyre was discharged from Doylestown General. Olive wrote a check while he sat in a wheelchair grumbling that he could walk as well as the next man.

“It’s a regulation,” the nurse’s aide said.

“Silly damned regulation,” he said. “She was a patient, too. Paid full rates for the privilege of lying in one of your lumpy beds and listening to me use a bedpan. Doesn’t she rate a wheelchair ride?”

“Don’t mind him,” Olive advised. “He doesn’t mean anything by it. He’s sad to be leaving and this is his way of masking his sentiment.”

“Who would have guessed years ago that you’d turn out to be such a sarcastic bitch?”

“You see? That’s his way of telling me he loves me. You sit back and enjoy your ride, Clem. Enjoy the luxury. You won’t be pampered this way at home.”

She drove home and parked the car in the driveway. He got out unassisted and walked into the house and up the stairs without her help. He was short of breath by the time he reached their bedroom, and his face was pale.

“Sit down,” she said. “You’ll be more comfortable in bed, darling. Do you want help with your clothes?”

“Don’t need it.”

“I’ll get your pajamas.”

He sat up in bed, propped up with three pillows. He said, “It’s a hell of a thing. A man’s a man all his life and then he’s barely got enough of himself to walk a flight of stairs.”

“Climbing is hard exercise. I understand it’s more tiring than sawing wood.”

“What a mine of information you are.”

“Remarkable, isn’t it?”

“It truly is. But what I was saying. It’s a hell of a life when a man can’t live the way he’s used to living. You hear about these people they keep alive in hospitals for months or years, machines hooked up to them and tubes running in and out of them. Can’t make ’em better and won’t let ’em die, and what sense is there in that?”

“Some people just want to go on.”

“Some people don’t.”

She walked to the window. “It’s so close in here,” she said. “I should have told the Robshaw girl to open a window while she was here. It feels like rain, doesn’t it? We could use a little rain. This summer I never thought I’d hear myself say that again. The silver maple’s starting to turn. It’s early this year. Does that mean a hard winter or a mild one?”

“I can never remember. I think it means an early winter, doesn’t it?”

“That sounds right.”

“Never did like winter. Didn’t mind the cold. Always the damned inconvenience of it. Slopping around through snow and slush, shoveling cars loose, skidding around on the roads. Cold never bothered me because I always had enough antifreeze in my radiator. A man would sure feel the cold without it.”

“Can I get you anything, Clem?”

“Well, that depends. Do we put on an act for each other or don’t we?”

“It’s a little late in life for that.”

“Yes, it’s late in life, and I never did like winter. You know what I want, Olive.”

She went downstairs. There were blank spots on some of the walls. She looked at each spot and remembered immediately the picture that had hung there.

She came upstairs with a bottle and a glass. He filled the glass to the brim and held it to the light, admiring its color. “All due success to temperance,” he pronounced.

“I wonder how long you’ve been saying that.”

“Seems as good a toast as any.” He drained the glass in two long swallows. “Well, I needed that,” he said. “They can poke all the needles in the world into you and it’s not the same thing. By God I needed that. I was cold sober for over a week and I can’t remember the last time I could have made that statement. You rarely saw me drunk but did you ever see me sober? Well, once or twice, I suppose.”

“Nobody’s perfect.”

He poured another drink but sipped this one. “You know, I’ve got to be the luckiest son of a bitch who ever drew breath. Never been much good at or for anything—”

“I could dispute that.”

“Oh, maybe I was all right at that, but not much else. But what did I ever do to deserve you? All the hours I’ve spent sitting around and wondering about that.”
If I have to listen to much more of this I’ll have to start drinking myself.”

“Try to make me out a saint and I’ll take your bottle away,” she said. “Understand?”

He grinned. “But God knows you’re an ornery bitch under it all.”

“That’s better,” she said.

On good days they would go out in the garden together. He would sit in a canvas chair with a glass in his hand while she readied the flower beds for winter, pulling the late weeds, cutting back roses and perennials, spreading a mulch of peat moss. Often they would go for hours without either of them speaking a word.

On other days, when the weather was bad or when he was not feeling well enough to go downstairs, she spent long hours in the bedroom with him. Sometimes she read poetry to him. He liked to sit with his eyes closed and hear her read poems he had read long ago. Sometimes they talked. Sometimes they merely sat together.

Just before dawn on November’s first Thursday she awoke to hear him coughing beside her. She switched on the light. He was lying on his side and his pillow was dark with blood.

He said, “This is it, kid. No, don’t call anyone. They can’t do anything now and if they could I wouldn’t go through all of that again. Just give me your hand.”

“Oh, my darling.”

“What a good month this was. Best one of my life. I wanted to last until Halloween. Always liked Halloween. Never cared much about Christmas but I always liked Halloween. Wonder why that is…. ‘It’s coming along nicely.’ First words you ever said to me.”

“I remember.”

“ ‘It’s coming along nicely. Is it for sale?’ I thought, by God, that’s a woman, and I never met one before … It hurts but not so bad now …. I never gave you enough.”

“You gave me everything.”

“Tired and took and gave you nothing. Always loved you, though. Hope you get a better one next time round …. I want to hold your hand. I can’t feel your hand, I want to hold it …. .”

But she was holding his hand.

The funeral was far better attended than she had thought it would be. She hadn’t realized how many friends Clem had had. She remained dry-eyed throughout the service and the burial, accepting sympathy gracefully however awkwardly it was extended. After the service was concluded she managed to get rid of the minster’s company without offending him. She went home and sat in the living room until it was late enough to go to bed.

Three days after the funeral she called Henry Biedemeyer. She had seen him at the services and he had said then what a good man Clem had been. Now he made the same little speech. It was tiresome enough hearing that sort of thing once, but she heard him out politely.

“I’ll want to have a new will drawn,” she said. “Do you think you could see me today?”

He said that he could, and offered to come to her house.

“No, I’d as soon get out of the house myself. An hour from now? Will that be all right?”

An hour later she was sitting in his office. Her will was a simple one, essentially the same document Oscar Biedemeyer had drawn shortly after her marriage. All of her estate was to be placed in trust, with the entire income payable to her husband. Upon his decease the principal was to be divided among various charitable institutions. The only changes she had seen fit to make over the years had been related to the ultimate bequests.

“This should be simple enough,” Henry said. “We’ll just eliminate the trust and make the dispersal immediate. Unless you had other changes in mind?”

“Nothing earthshaking. Just let me look at that list now and see who I’m mad at. I used to drive your father crazy. There was a time when I was in this office every few months cutting off one outfit and adding another. Let’s see now. These look all right. Doylestown General. How do I feel about Doylestown General? Oh, I guess we can leave them in. Hold on, now. Why in pure hell is the March of Dimes still here? Didn’t Salk put them out of business?”

“They’re working on other crippling diseases now.”

“Might have known they wouldn’t put a going operation like that on the shelf. No, let’s cross them out of there. Now there’s an organization dedicated to saving wild horses and ponies from extinction, here’s a circular I got from them, and they can have the March of Dimes share.”

“You seriously want to give that much money to wild horses and ponies?”

“If I didn’t know some fool would contest it, I’d be strongly tempted to give the whole shooting match to wild horses and ponies.”

“Well, you’re the boss.”

And don’t forget it, she thought. She said, “One other thing. There’s a young girl who works for me, Linda Robshaw. She’s been a great help to me all year and I know she’s at loose ends. I think it would do her good to have
the shop, and I’d like to see the Lemon Tree stay in operation after I’m gone. God knows it’s little enough in the
way of a monument. Can you add a codicil to that effect?”
“That’s easy enough. I can also make it contingent upon her operating the business for a specified length of time.”
“Oh, the hell with that. I don’t put strings on things, Henry. She won’t have a problem with inheritance tax, will
she?”
“On the shop and the inventory? You rent the store, so all that’s involved is fixtures and stock. What’s that
worth?”
“Damn near nothing.”
“Under fifty thousand dollars?”
“So far under you couldn’t see it from there.”
“Then you can forget inheritance taxes.”
“She might need money for cash flow, though. I wonder if I shouldn’t give her a few thousand dollars free and
clear?”
“You could,” he said. “There’s an easier way. Just set a higher balance in the Lemon Tree checking account
You’ll lose a few dollars’ interest every year but that’s no hardship in your position. And it simplifies things.”
“I should have thought of that myself.” They went over a few details and were finished. She got to her feet “When
can you have that for me, Henry?”
“Let me see. Today is Wednesday. How would Monday be?”
“Monday?”
“Monday, Tuesday at the latest. I’ll give you a call.”
“I’m certainly glad we simplified things.”
“I beg your pardon?”
“I think you’re stalling me, Henry, and I think I know why you’re stalling me. And I don’t think I like it”
“I’m not sure I understand.”
“I’m sure you do.”
“These things take time, Olive. Even a relatively simple matter—”
“You could dictate the whole damned document in fifteen minutes and we both know it, and even in this day and
age it shouldn’t take your girl the better part of a week to type it. You’re implying something and I do not care for
it.”
He sighed heavily. “Force of habit,” he said.
“I still don’t like it”
“It’s not what you think. I know you well enough, I know you wouldn’t—we do this frequently, Olive. People can
change their minds. And signing a will is a depressing thing, and—”
“It’s a sight more depressing to know you have a will in force that’s not as you want it. I expect to live a good
many years, Henry, and I’ll get off to a better start when I know my property will go where I want it to go. It’s
eleven o’clock. I’ll be back at four this afternoon to sign it. I hope it will be ready.”
“Oh, it’ll be ready.”
“Is something funny?”
“I was just thinking of something my dad used to say. Excuse the language, but he said you’ve got more balls than
a bowling alley.”
“He told me as much to my face once. I always took it a compliment.”
“You were right to. That’s how he meant it.”
She crossed the street to the bank. Standing in line she thought about Oscar Biedemeyer. How long had it been
since she’d gone to his funeral? Ten years in the spring, and it didn’t seem that long. He had been a good man. Well,
Henry was a good man himself. A decent lawyer always tried to tug you along on a leash. You couldn’t hold it
against him. But you had to know how to stand up to him.
She transferred six thousand dollars from her personal account to the Lemon Tree account. She filled out some
forms and was given a signature card to take along with her. On her way out the bank manager headed her way,
obviously intent on expressing his feelings for her loss. She pretended not to notice him and managed to dodge the
encounter.
It had been raining off and on all morning. Now it was clear and the sun was shining as she walked down Main to
the Mall. “I may be taking a trip,” she told Linda. “A couple of weeks away from here would probably do me good.
I haven’t made any plans yet, but I’ve arranged with the bank so that you can pay any bills that start to pile up. They
need to have your signature on file.”
She returned the signed card to her purse, lit a cigarette, walked idly around the little shop. She said, “I don’t
suppose I have to tell you you’ve been a godsend to me. I’d have just closed up. I’d close now if I didn’t have you to
run it for me.” She picked a poorly carved giraffe from a shelf, clucked at it, put it down again. “But you enjoy it, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And you like the town.”

“Yes, I do like it here. I’m just beginning to realize how much I like it here. As a matter of fact, I was thinking about finding an apartment.”

“It’s pointless to stay in that tenement for any length of time.”

“It is, and I’m willing to commit myself to a lease. To the idea of spending the next year here.”

“And not getting married in the meantime?”

“Oh, that’s over. That’s been over for awhile.”

“I think that’s as well.”

“Do you?”

“I think a woman’s better off waiting for the right one. Even if he never comes along.”

“And he wasn’t the right one?”

“No. Or you wouldn’t be looking for an apartment, would you?”

She lunched on a sandwich and a cup of coffee. It was raining when she left the lunchroom, a soft and tentative rain. She walked quickly to George Perlmutter’s house on Ferry Street. There were patients in his waiting room but he took her ahead of them. “I could have waited,” she said. “It’s nothing all that urgent.”

“I never thought it was. Does the others good to wait a little longer. Improves my image. What can I do for you, Olive?”

“I haven’t slept well since Clem went to the hospital. I haven’t slept at all since he died.”

“I see. Well, that’s one thing we’ve got a cure for.” He looked at her thoughtfully. “Don’t tell the AMA I brought it up, but have you tried any of the nonprescription items? They work for most people, and I like to stay away from the stronger drugs when I can avoid it.”

She said, “I went through the same sort of thing when my father died. I had to take Seconal every day for a month and it worked like a charm.”

“Yes, if does that. I gather you’d like me to prescribe Seconal.”

“Please.”

“Simple enough. Every case should be so simple.” He wrote rapidly on a pad of prescription blanks, tore off the top sheet and handed it to her. “Anything else troubling you? Headaches? Depression?”

“No headaches. Depression? Well, I haven’t been doing handsprings.”

“But nothing you can’t handle on your own?”

“No. George, I’ve never understood why doctors can’t write like everyone else. It’s incomprehensible to me. I can make out your numbers, though. I’m sure it will be more than a week before I can sleep without help.”

“No point in buying more pills than you need.”

“And when these are used up?”

“Just call me and I’ll renew the prescription.”

“That seems like a nuisance.”

“Does it?”

“I’d say so.”

“You’re still a young woman, Olive. You’re attractive, you’re healthy, you have no financial worries—”

“And I’m in good spirits. Four excellent reasons why you can prescribe a larger quantity of sleeping pills with a clear conscience.”

He got to his feet and paced back and forth between his desk and the window. He said, “We’re talking about something without mentioning it, aren’t we, Olive?”

“Then shall I mention it? We’re talking about suicide.”

“Yes, we are. And that’s not the only reason for giving you Seconal in small amounts. It’s a dangerous drug to possess in lethal quantities. It’s very possible to take pills and forget you’ve taken them; that sort of mental haziness is an effect of the drug. There have been so many cases of genuinely involuntary overdoses—”

“I can promise you I won’t take an involuntary overdose, George.”

“Well, that spells it out, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does.” She closed her eyes for a moment. “I sent a check a few months ago to an abortion reform movement. Their main argument is that a woman should have the right to do as she wishes with her own body. I see no reason why that right is the exclusive province of pregnant women.”

“I’m not sure how much of that I agree with. In any event, there’s a difference between acknowledging your right
“And making it less of an ordeal for me? Oh, I’m not going to do away with myself, George. There—I’ve stated that categorically. But if I were, do you seriously think you could stop me? I could go to a half dozen doctors and take their prescriptions to a half dozen pharmacists.”

“I could make that difficult for you.”

“But not impossible. I could take these seven pills you’ve prescribed and wash them down with a quart of iron. That’s supposed to do the job. I could put my head in the gas oven. If I made up my mind to do what I’ve been talking about, I could hardly be prevented, but I would want to do it with the least pain and fuss and aggravation.”

“I’m supposed to prolong life, Olive, and you’re asking me to help shorten it.”

“You’ve done that before.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, and I’ll forget you ever said it.”

“I could name names. I could mention a man who took an overdose of chloral hydrate. He got out of bed and walked to the medicine chest for it, I understand, and I also understand that was the first he’d walked in almost three years.”

“Is there anything that happens in this town that you don’t know? That was a terminal case, we couldn’t even reduce the pain anymore.”

“Oh, is that so. And don’t you recognize a terminal case when you see one, George Perlmutter? And do you think you can do anything about my pain? Do you think you can do anything on earth about my pain?”

At four o’clock she signed her will. She did not walk directly home. Instead she wandered slowly around town, taking her time. Autumn was beautiful here, here in this town to which she so completely belonged. Spring has a joy, an affirmation, a rebirth, but autumn had a slendor that no other season could match. Never did like winter.

You didn’t have to wait for winter. You could make it come to you on your own terms. You had that right. Clem had had the right. He had had a decision to make, and he made it and she never considered interfering with it. She happened to feel it was the correct decision, but even if she had felt otherwise she would have acted no differently. She had never dictated the terms of his life; she could hardly have presumed to dictate the terms of his death.

She walked to her house almost without realizing it. She looked at it from the outside, walked up the driveway to the backyard. The garden was not at its best now. The mums were in bloom and did not look as good this year as they usually did. Someone ought to divide and reset them in the spring.

And no doubt someone would. The house had long ago been bequeathed to her church, and the minister who conducted her funeral service would probably take it over as a rectory; it was a better and more spacious house than he presently occupied. And his wife was a responsible gardener.

Should she have left the house to Linda? She had not even considered it, but now she found herself wondering. It would surely have complicated things for Henry Biedemeyer, but that was not what decided her against it. No, you could not force another person into your own life. The shop, yes, but not the house as well.

She went inside, wandered through the rooms of the large old house. She locked the outside doors. George Perlmutter would call her in the morning. When she did not answer he would grow apprehensive and come over to make sure she was all right. She had left a key under the mat for him.

He hadn’t liked that. No, he hadn’t liked that at all, but that was just too bad. No law said he had to like it. No law said she had to care what he liked or didn’t like.

She sat for an hour or so in the living room, thinking some thoughts in silence and saying others aloud. People who lived alone generally talked to themselves, she knew. Well, she would never be an old lady who talked to herself. Nor was she talking to herself now.

She said, “Well, I guess it’s time, darling. Do you know something? I always hoped you would be the first of us to go. Always. Of the two of us I thought I would be better at getting on. But I’m not so damned great at it, after all, am I?”

She climbed the stairs. She said, “Strange to be doing things for the last time. The last look at the garden, the last trip up the stairs. What’s strange is the knowledge. Do you remember the last time we made love? I can’t remember it. Every time merges into one. We made love once, and it lasted all our lives.”

In their bedroom she undressed and hung up her clothes. She put on a nightgown and went to the bathroom and filled a glass with water and swallowed thirty-six Seconal capsules. After she had swallowed first handful she stopped and studied herself in the mirror. If she was going to change her mind, now was the time. If she felt the slightest hesitation, now was the time to realize it.

“Not for a minute,” she said aloud. “Not for an instant.”

She carried the empty glass back into the bedroom. A half-finished bottle of whiskey was on his bedside table. She poured herself a strong drink and sniffed it.
“I never could abide the smell,” she said. “I always wondered how you managed to like it. All due success to temperance.”

She drank the glass down. She felt a rush of warmth in her middle but nothing else.

“Nope,” she said, “I can’t see I missed anything all these years. Never knew what you saw in it, but then I never knew what you saw in me, either.”

She sat down on the edge of the bed. “George Perlmutter says I’m young and attractive and healthy and rich. Somehow I wasn’t moved. Oh, darling, it’s no good when it’s no fun anymore. It was always so damned fascinating to watch how things turned out. And to laugh at all the fools. I don’t know how to laugh, Clem. I can’t do it anymore.”

She looked at the blank canvas hung over the bed. It was the only picture remaining in the house.

“Now there’s an example,” she said. “That’s going to be hanging on that wall after I’m gone, and no one alive will have the slightest idea why it’s there, and sooner or later some damn fool will take it out of here and some other damn fool will think it’s a blank canvas and paint some damn fool picture on it. Now that’s as funny a thing as I’ve thought of in I don’t know how long, Clem, and I ought to be laughing. But I’m not. I’m not laughing at all.”

The pills were starting to work. She could feel her tongue thickening in her mouth, could sense the beginnings of fuzziness in her mind. She pulled back the covers and got into bed. She lay on her side of the bed and turned toward his side.

“Now isn’t that better? Oh, of course it is. Do you remember, Clem? Oh, I wanted you to be the first but I wish you were with me now. How I wish you were with me now. Hold my hand, Clem. Hold my hand. Yes, that’s right. Oh, that’s right. I’m all right now, Clem. I’m all right.”
And so it was over. A man had died, and living men had opened the earth for him and closed it over him. A life which had begun at one specific point in time had ended now at another specific point in time. Lives, like books, have beginnings and endings, first chapters and last chapters.

But the endings of human lives lack the precision of the endings of books. If death is a last chapter, there is still an epilogue to come.

—Hugh Markarian, *The Edge of Thought*
THE END
In late 1968 or early 1969, I moved with my wife and daughters from a house in the center of New Brunswick, New Jersey, to an eighteenth century farmhouse on twelve rolling acres a mile from the Delaware River. We kept a variety of animals and grew things in the garden, and this was as I’d expected. But there were two things I did not anticipate. One was that I would have to go away from there, all the way back to New York City, to get any work done. The other was that I’d open an art gallery to give myself something to do in my rural paradise.

The art gallery was in New Hope, Pennsylvania, right across the river from Lambertville. New Hope, in Bucks County, had had a reputation as an artists’ colony for a few generations and boasted a little theater and a batch of art galleries, along with bookstores and antique dealers and cute little shops to sell cute little things to tourists, most of whom were neither cute nor little.

I found a store for rent in an enclosed shopping mall and signed a year’s lease. I’m damned if I know what led me to think this was a good idea. I knew a batch of artists and figured I could get them to give me things to hang on the walls, and—oh, never mind. Nowadays it’s hard to get me to go see a movie or buy a new shirt, but back then I’d embark on the wildest kind of adventure on not much more than a whim.

I knew nothing about business, but that was okay, because the gallery didn’t do any. Whenever I went into the city to write a book, I closed up shop while I was gone. When I was home, I’d open up and sit there until it was time to go across the street and have a drink at the Logan Inn. That was the best part of the operation, that and hanging out with Jim and Flory Toney, who did my custom framing whenever I managed to sell something.

After a year, my lease was up and I was out of there. It was a learning experience, and I learned not to make that particular mistake again. And I did meet some interesting people, and hear some interesting stories.

And, when it came time to write a big trashy commercial novel, I knew right where to set it.

By this time I’d written three erotic novels for Berkley Books as Jill Emerson; a fourth, *Ronald Rabbit Is a Dirty Old Man*, wound up in hardcover with Bernard Geis. Now I don’t know who thought that Jill ought to write a big, juicy, trashy *Peyton Place*–type of book, but Henry brought the idea to me, and I thought Bucks Country would provide a good setting.

The deal was an attractive one, with a hefty advance. Berkley was a division of G. P. Putnam’s Sons, and the deal was hard/soft; the book would be first a Berkley hardcover, then a paperback.

I wrote most of it in an apartment at 235 West End Avenue. When we first moved to the country, and I found I couldn’t get any writing done there, I went into the city, took a room at the Hotel Royalton—then a modestly priced family-run establishment, before some genius took it over and tarted it up—and wrote a book in a week. Soon after that I leased a studio apartment on West Thirty-Fifth Street, and then Brian Garfield and I took a place together, holding a weekly poker game there, staying over whenever one or the other of us had a late night in the city, and getting some writing done. I believe Brian wrote most of *Kolchak’s Gold* there. I wrote a batch of things, too, and one of them was *The Trouble with Eden*.

Some of the characters were based to one degree or another on some of the people I’d known in and around New Hope, and one at least recognized himself. He was an actor and a partner in the mall bookstore, and he did in fact greatly resemble Benjamin Franklin. “Larry put me in a book,” he told people. “But he’s made me bisexual, for God’s sake, and everybody knows I’m a plain and simple faggot. Do you think I could sue his publisher? Would I get anything, do you suppose? And would the publicity be good for the book? Because I wouldn’t want to do it if it would get Larry in any kind of trouble …”

Well, he didn’t sue, which was probably just as well. Would the publicity of a lawsuit have helped? I don’t think anything would have helped. Berkley had commissioned the book with the intention of making a big fat bestseller out of it, but they never put any muscle into it and didn’t sell many copies.

There’d been a big fat bestseller a few years earlier called *The Devil in Bucks County*, and I’m sure the Berkley folks were aware of it. They probably had it in mind when they made the deal. The title I suggested was *The Trouble with Bucks County*, and they used half of it. *The Trouble with Eden*—well, it’s not a bad title.

Reviewers overlooked it completely as far as I can tell, with a single curious exception. In a long article about books in *Esquire*, a reviewer whose name I’ve long since forgotten launched into a discussion of a book that he (or maybe she) had picked up a week ago without great expectations. It looked like trash but turned out to be far more gripping and involving than he or she anticipated. Well-wrought characters, interesting plot developments—really pretty good.

And then suddenly the review hung a U-turn, and its author said that further on the book turned out to be trash
after all and, on balance, a big disappointment. I’ll tell you, it was as though the reviewer read half the book, wrote half the review, ate something that turned his stomach, finished the book, and went on to finish the review. I can’t say I minded—it was, as they say at the Oscars, victory enough merely to be nominated—and I can’t say I disagreed with its conclusion. But it was damn strange.

Ah well. It’s probably not a good book, but I have a warm spot for Eden. Like the curate’s egg, I think parts of it are very good indeed.

—Lawrence Block
Greenwich Village

Lawrence Block (lawbloc@gmail.com) welcomes your email responses; he reads them all, and replies when he can.
Lawrence Block (b. 1938) is the recipient of a Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America and an internationally renowned bestselling author. His prolific career spans over one hundred books, including four bestselling series as well as dozens of short stories, articles, and books on writing. He has won four Edgar and Shamus Awards, two Falcon Awards from the Maltese Falcon Society of Japan, the Nero and Philip Marlowe Awards, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Private Eye Writers of America, and the Cartier Diamond Dagger from the Crime Writers Association of the United Kingdom. In France, he has been awarded the title Grand Maitre du Roman Noir and has twice received the Societe 813 trophy.

Born in Buffalo, New York, Block attended Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Leaving school before graduation, he moved to New York City, a locale that features prominently in most of his works. His earliest published writing appeared in the 1950s, frequently under pseudonyms, and many of these novels are now considered classics of the pulp fiction genre. During his early writing years, Block also worked in the mailroom of a publishing house and reviewed the submission slush pile for a literary agency. He has cited the latter experience as a valuable lesson for a beginning writer.

Block’s first short story, “You Can’t Lose,” was published in 1957 in *Manhunt*, the first of dozens of short stories and articles that he would publish over the years in publications including *American Heritage*, *Redbook*, *Playboy*, *Cosmopolitan*, *GQ*, and the *New York Times*. His short fiction has been featured and reprinted in over eleven collections including *Enough Rope* (2002), which is comprised of eighty-four of his short stories.

In 1966, Block introduced the insomniac protagonist Evan Tanner in the novel *The Thief Who Couldn’t Sleep*. Block’s diverse heroes also include the urbane and witty bookseller—and thief-on-the-side—Bernie Rhodenbarr; the gritty recovering alcoholic and private investigator Matthew Scudder; and Chip Harrison, the comical assistant to a private investigator with a Nero Wolfe fixation who appears in *No Score*, *Chip Harrison Scores Again*, *Make Out with Murder*, and *The Topless Tulip Caper*. Block has also written several short stories and novels featuring Keller, a professional hit man. Block’s work is praised for his richly imagined and varied characters and frequent use of humor.

A father of three daughters, Block lives in New York City with his second wife, Lynne. When he isn’t touring or attending mystery conventions, he and Lynne are frequent travelers, as members of the Travelers’ Century Club for nearly a decade now, and have visited about 150 countries.
A four-year-old Block in 1942.

Block during the summer of 1944, with his baby sister, Betsy.

Block’s 1955 yearbook picture from Bennett High School in Buffalo, New York.
Block in 1983, in a cap and leather jacket. Block says that he “later lost the cap, and some son of a bitch stole the jacket. Don’t even ask about the hair.”

Block with his eldest daughter, Amy, at her wedding in October 1984.
Seen here around 1990, Block works in his office on New York’s West 13th Street with, he says, “a bad haircut, an ugly shirt, and a few extra pounds.”

Block at a bookstore appearance in support of A Walk Among the Tombstones, his tenth Matthew Scudder novel, on Veterans Day, 1992.
Block and his wife, Lynne.

Block and Lynne on vacation “someplace exotic.”
Block race walking in an international marathon in Niagara Falls in 2005. He got the John Deere cap at the John Deere Museum in Grand Detour, Illinois, and still has it today.